



33 AND A HALF

A VAMPIRE NOVEL

DAVID MCAFEE

"...A WILDLY ORIGINAL
PULSE POUNDER!"
— JEREMY ROBINSON, AUTHOR
OF *INSTINCT* AND *PULSE*



33 A.D.

By

David McAfee

Kindle Edition

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"33 A.D. by David McAfee is a wildly original, non-stop pulse pounder that tells the story of a vampire assassin whose mission is to kill Jesus of Nazareth. In a genre mired by cliché stories, this stands out as something bold and new."
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Jon F. Merz, author of the *Lawson Vampire* novels & *Parallax*

This book is lovingly dedicated to my wife, Heather, for all the love and support she has shown me over the years.

I love you, Hon.

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Excerpt from [TORMENT](#), by Jeremy Bishop

PART I

Chapter One

Jerusalem, 33A.D.

Ephraim darted around his modest wood-and-mortar home in the Upper City, grabbing as many of his possessions as he could carry – mostly clothing and a few personal items – and shoving them into a large burlap pack. Every now and then his brown eyes shifted to the door, waiting for a knock. Or worse, no sound whatsoever. The latter worried him the most because it would mean the servants of the Council had found him. A Psalm of Silence only carried for about twenty paces, so if the world around him went suddenly quiet, he would know those who hunted him were very, very close.

As an Enforcer, or at least a former Enforcer, Ephraim knew the inevitable result of breaking the laws of his people, a race not known for mercy. Now, as he packed, he couldn't help but wonder why he'd felt the need to tell the Council about his indiscretions. Bad enough he'd defied them, but he also gave them all the information they needed to punish him. And for what? A strange feeling in his heart? A pang of conscience? Was he mad? In retrospect, it seemed possible, but he couldn't do anything about it now. His elders wanted him dead, and unless he hurried they would get their way.

A worn, woolen tunic hung halfway off his bed. *I'll need that*, he thought as he reached for it. He couldn't afford to leave a single piece of clothing behind. He stuffed the tunic into his bag and turned to regard a large chest on the wall opposite the bed. He reached down and flung the lid open, breaking one of the hinges in the process, and started grabbing more clothes. *I'll need that. And that.*

Then his fingers closed on something small and hard. He didn't have to look at it to know it was his ceramic wolf's head figurine, a symbol of his former rank. *I won't need that.* Ephraim tossed it over his shoulder, where it shattered on the hard floor. He didn't pay it any attention as he picked up a short, fat bladed knife. *I'll need that, too.* It joined the many tunics in his bag. Just as he picked up a pair of worn breeches, a noise outside his door caught his attention.

What was that? Ephraim froze, craning his ears and trying desperately to catch the elusive sound. He stood silent and still for sixty long seconds, muscles tense and booted feet nailed to the floor. The breeches hung from his fingers like a mouse in a raptor's claw. He eyed the sickle-shaped sword on the opposite wall, ready to spring over and grab it if necessary. Although the sword was very old, he kept it sharp and in perfect balance, not easy to do with a *khopesh*.

When the noise didn't return, he shook his head. *The wind*, he told himself, and returned to the task at hand. He had to hurry. They were coming.

He couldn't allow himself to be captured by the Council's minions. They would make him talk, and that would be bad. Not just for himself, but for his newfound friends, as well. The elders of the *Bachiyr* race had many methods by which to extract information, even from one of their own. All of them brutally effective. If they caught

him, they would find a way to make him talk. Sooner or later Ephraim would tell them anything they wanted to know, the only real question was how long would it take to break him.

As he packed, his hand brushed against a small figurine of a lamb from the shelf above his bed, knocking it off and sending it toppling through the air. “Damn!” He reached out to catch it and missed, but his fingertips brushed the delicate figurine just enough to alter its course so that, instead of following the wolf’s head to the hard floor, the lamb plopped down amidst the soft linens on the bed. Ephraim breathed a sigh of relief when the delicate figure didn’t break, and reached down gently to pick it up. He didn’t miss the irony that he, the predator, had thrown away the wolf figurine and kept the lamb.

Former predator, he amended, shaking his head. *I am not like that anymore*. He stared at the lamb for several precious seconds, remembering what it symbolized and making sure, in his heart, he’d made the right decision. Satisfied, he placed the tiny item into a small velvet bag and tied it shut, then placed the bag into his pack, stuffing it between the folds of a coarse brown tunic. He tied the pack closed and set it on the floor in front of him.

Ephraim then stepped over to the far wall and eyed his ancient *khopesh*, which he had wielded for over a thousand years, though the style of blade had largely gone out of use eight centuries ago. He reached a tentative hand up to the sword, but his fingers froze before they touched the handle. Ashamed, he pictured the faces of his many victims, heard again their anguished screams, and saw their mouths stretched wide in agony. The smell of their blood returned to him, sending an unwelcome rumble through his belly. Far from the pleasure these memories once brought, Ephraim now felt only shame. *How many?* He wondered. *How many have I killed with this very blade?* He had no idea, but the number must surely be huge.

“So great is my sin,” he whispered. He could not shed tears, none of his race could, but his face felt hot and flushed, nonetheless. He drew his hand back, unwilling to touch the ancient sword, his most trusted companion for centuries, now too poignant a reminder of who he used to be. With a sigh, he turned from the wall and walked over to the bed, determined to leave his past at his back.

Now ready to go, he just had to wait for his friend to come and help sneak him out of the city. Ephraim sat on the edge of his bed, waiting for Malachi’s knock. He hoped it would not take long.

Please hurry, Malachi, he thought. *Time is running out. They are coming*.

* * *

Above Ephraim, crouched amidst the pressed oak beams that supported the structure’s ceiling, a single pair of eyes looked down at the one-time Enforcer. The Council’s agents were not *coming*, as Ephraim feared. They – or rather, *he* – had already arrived. If he had looked up, he might have seen the dark shadow hiding among the lighter ones in his ceiling, but he never so much as glanced upward. His visitor thought lack of sustenance to be the cause of Ephraim’s inattentiveness, and he shook his head in disbelief. From his dark vantage point, he watched the scene unfold, memorizing the layout of the room for future reference.

Earlier that evening, before he had left the Halls, the Council told him what to expect. Even so, he hadn't wanted to believe that one of their own, particularly one with as glorious and faithful a history as Ephraim, could be capable of such treachery. Until he witnessed Ephraim's hurried packing and the incident with the wolf's head – an article of rank sacred to the *Bachiyir* – he'd hoped to discover his superiors mistaken. The longer he waited on high, however, the more he came to realize they were right.

They are always right, he thought to himself. *I should have known better than to doubt. Just because he's a friend*— he stopped himself there, not wanting to diminish his readiness. He couldn't waste time thinking of past friendships and obligations. He had a job to do, and reminiscing would only make it harder and might even cloud his judgment, which could not be allowed. He had to be clearheaded and alert for the next few minutes.

Long enough to kill Ephraim.

First, however, he had to wait and observe a short while longer. The treacherous dog would die, certainly, but not before his visitor discovered who he'd betrayed them to. Ephraim's message to the Council had been vague in that regard; most likely a deliberate omission. To that end the watcher held himself in check through his growing anger while his thick, sharp nails dug furrows into the wooden beams. He held still, relishing the tantalizing scent of fear that emanated from his former friend, and waited for the knock that would signal Ephraim's allies had come to save him. On that, the Council's orders were very clear. *We must know who the traitor is in league with. That is of utmost importance, Theron.*

Theron had never failed the Council before, not once in over nine hundred years, and he didn't intend to start now. As much as he wanted to drop from the shadows like an evil beast from a child's tale, he waited. *Patience*, he counseled himself. *Not yet.* Waiting was the essence of his craft. He was a professional. If you wanted to put a fine point on it, he was *the* professional. The Lead Enforcer for the Council of Thirteen, albeit newly appointed. These days, that mostly meant he acted as their primary assassin, although every now and then the Council sent him for capture rather than elimination. But those occasions were few.

And this wasn't one of them.

So until Ephraim received his visitor, Theron would sit, out of sight, and wait for the sound of knuckles on the door. However long it took. But once he had his information, then... well, *then* the fun would begin.

He didn't have to wait long. About five minutes after Ephraim finished packing a loud knock thundered through the house, violating the silence with a hollow boom. Ephraim jumped at the sudden sound, but Theron had heard the visitor's boots crunch on Ephraim's gravel walkway and was expecting it. He smiled as he watched his intended victim's face go from terror to joy.

"At last!" Ephraim said. "You certainly took enough time to get here." He walked over to the door and grasped the handle. Then, just as he was about to raise the wooden latch, the relief fled his face, replaced by a look of wariness and renewed fear. "Who's there?"

"Ephraim, you dog. Open the blasted door. We don't have time for this."

"Malachi! Thank the Father you've come." He released the latch on the door and

swung it inward.

Malachi the butcher? A human? Theron had expected another *Bachiyr* to be behind Ephraim's treachery. But a human? What in the Father's Name was going on?

Malachi stepped in, ducking his head and twisting a bit to the side in order to maneuver his broad shoulders through the doorway. He wore his shoulder-length brown hair tied back with a leather thong, leaving his craggy, olive-skinned face exposed from forehead to chin, and he didn't look pleased. He fixed his stern features squarely on the much smaller Ephraim. "Thank 'the Father,' Ephraim? Why would you offer thanks to a demon? Have you learned nothing these last few weeks?"

"My apologies, my friend. Old habits can be difficult to break."

"Indeed, they can," Malachi said. "That you are trying at all says much about your progress." The butcher's face relaxed. He reached his hand out and clasped Ephraim's. "So what is the news?" Malachi looked around the room at the mess of Ephraim's frantic packing. "Are they coming?"

"Yes." Ephraim sprang into motion, grabbing his pack off the bed and hoisting it over his shoulder. "I'm sure of it. We have to leave."

"How did they find out?"

"You want to waste time on explanations? Didn't you hear? They are coming. Let's go and I'll explain on the way." He started to go around the larger man, and Theron tensed. He could not allow the pair to leave, which meant he would have to kill the human first and deal with Ephraim, by far the more dangerous of the two, afterward. He readied himself to spring as Ephraim tried to squirm his way around the huge man.

But Malachi would have none of it. He reached down and grabbed hold of Ephraim's shoulder. The thick, corded muscles on his arm twitched as he casually tossed the smaller man back into the room. He then placed his bulky frame between Ephraim and the door, folding his thick arms across his chest.

"How did they know, Ephraim?" Malachi asked again.

Ephraim glared at the human and chewed his lip, as though trying to decide how much to tell. It surprised Theron that the man handled Ephraim with so little trouble. Either Ephraim's lack of feeding weakened him more than Theron had expected or the butcher was extremely strong. Probably a bit of both. He made a mental note of Malachi's strength; he'd need to be wary of it soon enough.

After a moment or two spent in tense silence, Malachi spoke. "If you don't trust us by now, Ephraim, I can't help you." With that, the giant turned his back to Ephraim and started to walk out of the house.

"I told them!" Ephraim cried. "I'm sorry. I told them. I thought they would be pleased, I... I thought they would see as I have seen. I wanted them to know the truth."

Malachi turned to face him, his face a mask of rage and disbelief. "You *told* them, Ephraim? Dear God, what were you thinking?"

"I didn't tell them everything. Just that I couldn't serve them any more. I thought they would understand." Ephraim's voice cracked on the last syllable. "I thought I could *make* them understand."

Malachi closed his eyes. His massive chest swelled as he took a deep breath. The look of anger washed away from his face, replaced by one of sorrow. When he opened his eyes Theron noted a hint of moisture around the edges. "They do understand, my

friend. They understand all too well. That's why they will kill you now, and him too."

"No," Ephraim shook his head, his eyes wide. "No, Malachi. Me, certainly. But him? Why? He's done nothing to them."

"Do you truly think they will care?"

Ephraim didn't answer, but he didn't need to. In the shadows above, Theron could have answered the question for him. Of course the Council wouldn't care. The Council *never* cared. One of their own had betrayed them, and thus he must die. Ephraim would be executed, along with any co-conspirators, be they human or otherwise. Theron's very existence proved that. After all, why would a forgiving Council need Enforcers?

Malachi sighed, his face troubled but resolute. "We must get you out of here, Ephraim. There's a merchant caravan going out with the first light. We can put you in a strong box so the sun will not touch you. The driver's name is Paul. They are heading west to Lydda. There you will find shelter and solace, as much as can be given one of your kind."

Ephraim stood, his face brightening with renewed hope. "Thank you, Malachi. I can never repay you."

Theron had heard enough. "I can," he said as he dropped from the rafters. He positioned himself between the entrance and the room's two surprised occupants. In one fluid motion, he kicked the door shut behind him and pulled his sword from his sheath. Not a *khopesh* like Ephraim's, Theron's sword was of a more modern, almost Roman design. The straight, thick blade, relatively short for a sword, was designed more for piercing than cutting, though it was certainly capable of both. He hadn't planned on using it when he left the Halls earlier, but Malachi's strength and size presented a very real threat. Since he would need to face Ephraim, as well, speed was a primary concern. That meant using the blade. Theron hadn't become Lead Enforcer by taking chances. The human would die first, then he would deal with the traitor.

Malachi reached for the hammer at his belt, but although large and strong, he was not fast. By the time he got his fingers around the handle, Theron had already spun a circle in front of him, blade first, and cut open his throat in a precise line from one side of his jaw to the other. Malachi sputtered and tried to speak, but his severed vocal chords failed him. The fingers on his right hand started to twitch, and the hammer fell from them and hit the floor with a dull thump. He brought his left hand up to his neck in a futile attempt to stem the flow of his life's blood, then he followed his weapon to the floor. The big human didn't seem angry or bewildered, as Theron might have expected, but content. His face softened into a peaceful expression the Enforcer found somewhat odd. Before he could puzzle it out, however, he would have to deal with Ephraim.

Theron whirled to face him, fully expecting to be bowled over in a mass of teeth and claws. But Ephraim stood in the same spot as before. He hadn't moved at all during Malachi's death, and had not plucked his infamous *khopesh* from the wall. Theron thought he knew the reason. *He knows it won't help. He already knows how this must end.* He stepped closer. Malachi's blood dripped from his blade, leaving a thin trail of small red puddles on the floorboards.

"Theron," Ephraim said. "They sent you?"

"I'm the best. Of course they sent me." Theron gave a mocking bow.

“Are you the Lead Enforcer now, my old friend?”

“Someone had to take your place. Who better than me? But you are no friend of mine, traitor.” He spat at the other’s feet, barely missing Ephraim’s dusty leather boot.

“Don’t be so quick to choose, Theron. You should hear what he has to say.”

“I don’t need to hear what he has to say. I still serve our people. The rambling words of a deranged rabbi will not show me my path. The Council’s laws have protected our people for over four thousand years. You,” he pointed an accusing finger, “have violated them.”

“His words would save you, my friend,” Ephraim said, so softly Theron almost didn’t hear him.

Theron laughed. “Save me? As they saved you? You are a handful of seconds away from Hell, and you would presume to save *me*?” In that instant, Theron determined he would make Ephraim’s death as unpleasant as he could manage. He threw his sword to the floor and willed his claws to grow. In a few moments his fingernails grew long and thick. The brief but intense pain in his fingertips was worth it. He would rip the traitor’s head from his shoulders. “You should worry about saving yourself, *old friend*.”

“I did,” Ephraim replied, just before Theron leapt at him.

It was over quickly; Ephraim didn’t fight back. When Theron grabbed Ephraim’s head between his clawed hands, the traitor only stared at him with a sad, wistful expression on his face. He didn’t speak, not even to beg for his life, which was a bit disappointing. Ephraim didn’t flinch at Theron’s touch, and he didn’t scream, not even when Theron drove his clawed fingers through the flesh of his throat and began to twist, rending tendons, tearing muscle, and sending a spray of blood all over the wall. Once the head rolled off onto the floor, it was over. Theron felt let down. It was too easy.

A quick search of Ephraim’s body turned up a rolled piece of parchment. Theron noted the red wax seal, which matched the *E* on Ephraim’s ring, and snapped it in two. He unrolled the letter and read every word, but it didn’t tell him anything he hadn’t already surmised. It was only a letter to Malachi. Apparently Ephraim had wanted the butcher to be prepared in the event of his death, but in the end it proved too little, too late. Now both lay dead, and Theron had his answers. He dropped the paper onto Ephraim’s headless torso and went to the back of the house to find a shovel. He would need to bury the bodies so they would not be found, at least not before he completed his business in Jerusalem.

* * *

It took a long time to bury Ephraim and Malachi. The hole had to be deep enough to keep any stray dogs from smelling the bodies and digging them up. Due to Malachi’s tremendous girth, it also had to be wide and tall. Theron spent the better part of four hours digging the hole, rolling the bodies into it, and covering them up. He also tossed in Ephraim’s last letter to Malachi. He wouldn’t need it to convince the Council; he had proof enough already.

Afterward, he carefully replaced the layer of grass and sod to better hide the corpses, though the telltale bulge of the earth would be a dead giveaway if anyone

came looking. By the time Theron finished the arduous task, dawn loomed a mere two hours away. That didn't leave much time to make his way through the city, but he thought he could manage it.

He walked away from the house, carrying his macabre prize in Ephraim's burlap sack, which he carried slung over his shoulder. Ephraim's head, which bounced and jostled along inside the bag, wore neither fear nor malice on its lifeless features, instead the dead vampire's expression seemed... peaceful. Theron didn't care. The job was done; the Council would be pleased. What's more, he had the information they sought, for Theron now knew the identity of the person to whom Ephraim had betrayed his people. It could only be one man, the same man who'd acquired followers from all across Israel over the last few years. The very man Malachi swore his life to protect only a month ago.

Jesus, they called him. Jesus of Nazareth.

Chapter Two

Theron walked the dusty streets of Jerusalem with his sack slung over his shoulder. His sandals whispered against the cobbles, making no more noise than air passing over an owl's wing. The wood and stone buildings on either side of the street faded to the same dirty gray in the dim light of pre-dawn. At this hour, they all looked the same.

He had to be careful to steer clear of any legionaries. Theron didn't fear them, but if any soldiers found him walking the streets they might mistake him for a thief and question him, perhaps even demand to look into his bag. He couldn't allow that to happen, of course, because then he would have to kill them. Although it would be easy enough to do, he ran the risk they might raise an alarm before he could finish. A contingent of Roman soldiers scouring the city would hamper his movement, and thus his ability to report back to the Council. Better not to be noticed at all.

Theron kept his eyes and ears trained on his surroundings. He could not afford any surprises this close to his goal. He slipped from shadow to shadow, as one with the night blanketing the city, and managed to keep out of sight of any legionaries. The few patrols he saw were too far away to notice him, and the clip of their sandaled feet on the cobblestones revealed their presence long before they came into view.

He'd been traversing the Upper City, where Ephraim kept his home, but his way to the Council lay through the New City, which required him to pass through the Middle Gate. He threaded his way softly through the darkened streets, passing the massive Palace of Solomon and the Temple, neither of which impressed him in the least. As he approached the gate he heard voices, and swore under his breath. He stopped at the edge of a potter's shop and peered around the corner. Sure enough, two red cloaked legionaries stood watch at the gate, their steel breastplates glinting dully in the moonlight. Theron couldn't tell if they were posted there or if they just happened to stop for a break. Either way, their presence was damned inconvenient. The threat of dawn lingered less than an hour away, which meant he didn't have much time to wait for them to move on.

As the two legionaries settled into a comfortable conversation, one of them produced a set of dice, much to the delight of the other. They soon hunkered down in front of the gate and lost themselves in a game. Several times Theron heard one of the men whisper a harsh curse when the roll didn't go in his favor.

He huddled back into the shadows to consider his options. He could circle back and try another route, but he didn't know the city very well and worried he might get lost. If that happened he would be forced to take shelter from the day in a stranger's house. Since killing the stranger in his bed might rouse the neighbors, it was not an ideal prospect. The thought of lying helpless in bed while a group of armed Roman soldiers surrounded him didn't appeal to Theron. As such, he would wait a while and see if the two patrolmen moved along on their own.

Twenty minutes later, the first light of day threatened to break over the horizon, and the soldiers still hadn't moved. Theron could wait no longer. He checked his attire to make sure everything looked fine, even retrieving fresh dirt from the street and smudging it into his face. The peasant who had "donated" his clothes earlier in the

evening hadn't gotten any blood on them, so he felt optimistic his disguise would hold. If the guards questioned him, he would tell them he was on his way to one of the wheat fields outside the city to begin the workday. If they believed him and let him go, good. If not he would have to kill them fast and run like the devil. His path set and his list of options short, he strode from the shadows and walked toward the legionaries, trying to look as though he belonged there.

He was only ten feet away when one of the men looked up from the dice and spotted him. The soldier nudged his fellow on the arm and they both stood to face the newcomer.

"Hold," one of them commanded, and Theron, remembering he was supposed to be a peasant, stopped in his tracks.

"Yes?" He asked.

The soldier looked him up and down, taking in his clothes, his face, and the bag he carried over his shoulder. "A bit early to be going to the fields, isn't it, friend?"

"Begging your pardon, sir, but it's never too early to start an honest day's work, is it?"

"Indeed," the soldier fixed him with a doubtful gaze. "Which of the landowners do you tend for?"

"Jared," Theron pulled the name from memory. Jared owned several fields just outside the city, and was well known in Jerusalem for his high quality wheat and barley. "For ten years now. You can ask him, if you like."

"Don't be flippant. There's been a great deal of zealot activity of late, and the centurion has ordered us to keep the streets safe for the law-abiding citizens of Jerusalem."

"No offense meant," Theron bowed his head in respect. "It's just that I'll be leaving the field early today on account of a personal matter, and I thought to go in early so as to not miss my wages."

The soldier gave him a second look, taking in his posture and his stance, both of which Theron had worked hard to cultivate in order to portray himself as nothing more than he appeared; a poor farm hand, beaten down by the life of a peasant and tired with age. After a cursory examination, the legionary waved him through the gate.

"Thank you," Theron said, and proceeded to walk through. Just as he exited, he felt a strong hand grip his shoulder.

"Do all Jared's hands wear a sword to work?"

Damn! Theron looked at his waist, where the hilt of his sword poked from a flap of coarse brown cloth. He'd done his best to hide it in the folds of his clothing, but the peasant garb was not well suited to such a deception, consisting as it did of a simple coarse shirt and a pair of baggy trousers, and he'd been forced to make do. The large ruby and trio of emeralds mounted in the hilt didn't help. His mind raced frantically for a suitable lie. All was not lost; he might still be able to—

"Claudius, look at his bag. It's spotted with blood," the other soldier said.

Claudius and Theron both looked at the bag. It was true. Theron had spent too much time waiting for the soldiers to disperse, and Ephraim's blood – which, like that of all *Bachiyr*, didn't coagulate – soaked through in places. He scrambled to think of a suitable excuse. A sheep, maybe, or something for Passover.

But with his very next breath, Claudius ended any chance of avoiding a fight.

“Open the bag.”

Theron's shoulders slumped. So much for discretion. “No,” he said. “I don't think I will.”

Claudius's eyes narrowed to slits. “I knew it. He's a zealot. Take him!” Both soldiers drew their swords and the masquerade was over. *Fools*, Theron thought. If only they'd let him pass unmolested through the Middle Gate. Now he had to kill them, and fast.

He didn't have time to reach for his sword, so he swung the bag containing Ephraim's head with all his strength. As Claudius swung for Theron's shoulder, the bag slammed into the legionary's face. Theron smiled at the satisfying crunch of bone as the soldier's nose shattered.

Claudius fell backward into the street, but he was only stunned. Soon enough he would scream for reinforcements. That meant Theron had only a few seconds to kill the other soldier and then turn his attention back to Claudius. He spun to face his other opponent just in time to avoid a roundhouse swing that would have severed his head had it connected. He ducked under the blade, but not before it opened a gash on his shoulder. Theron kicked out with his left foot, connecting solidly on the soldier's torso and sending him crashing into the dusty stone wall behind him.

Theron took a second to examine his wound, noting the lazy flow of blood. He scowled and returned his attention to the legionary. This time, he didn't feel the sting as the nails on his hands grew longer and thicker. In half a heartbeat they were three inches long and strong as bone. He threw the bag to the side and leapt at the horrified legionary, who pressed his back into the wall and watched, eyes wide as dates, as death found him.

“What are you?” the Roman asked.

In answer, Theron struck the unfortunate soldier in the throat with both hands, letting his fingers sink all the way through until the newly lengthened nails poked out the other side. He then turned his palms outward, curling his fingers before spreading his arms wide. The sound of rending flesh and the spray of blood in the air invigorated him as he tore the head from the legionary's body. Theron's eyes followed it as it flew through the air to land a few inches from Claudius's left foot.

Theron turned to face Claudius, a smile on his lips. He raised his right hand to his face and ran his tongue along the length of his bloody index finger. The dead soldier's blood covered his face and his clothes. The smell of it filled the air and assaulted his senses. He felt the familiar hunger building inside him, burning his discipline away with the promise of more. Theron forced himself to remain in control, promising his primal side he would feed when he returned to the Halls.

Behind him, he heard the sound of the body as it hit the ground. He feared he'd waited too long; that Claudius would scream the alarm to every Roman Soldier in the city, and Theron would be forced to run into someone's house for the day.

But the injured legionary said nothing, perhaps *could* say nothing. Claudius's eyes never left Theron's claws as he approached. The man tried to speak, but no sound came from his lips. Theron's nose wrinkled as he caught the acrid odor of urine, and noted the puddle spreading beneath the fallen legionary. He would have to make this quick. Theron started to use his claws again, but thought better of it. It would be best for the Romans to blame this on the zealots. He willed the nails back into his hands

and instead pulled out his sword.

The sound of metal sliding against leather and the sight of the claws disappearing seemed to wake Claudius from his stupor. The legionary drew in a breath, perhaps to scream, but Theron was too fast.

He drove the point of his sword through the soldier's breastplate, piercing the man's heart and silencing him. As Claudius looked down at his ruined chest, he brought one hand up and clutched the sword in a feeble attempt to pull it out. Theron twisted the sword in his hand and watched as Claudius grimaced. The sharp crack of the man's sternum and his sudden intake of breath were the only sounds to be heard.

The dying legionary looked up at Theron from the dirt, his eyes squeezed nearly shut and his lips peeled back from his teeth. The ruin of his nose painted the lower half of his face the same color as his bloodied chest. A single tear formed in his right eye and rolled down his cheek as he shuddered his way through his final breaths.

"You should have just let me through," Theron said.

Claudius slumped over, and Theron pulled out his sword. The whole encounter had taken less than two minutes, and neither of the men made a sound louder than a whisper. He wiped the blade on the dead man's uniform before putting it away, not having time to give it a more thorough cleaning. The sight and smell of so much blood made Theron's hunger bubble to the surface, but he could not indulge it. If he fed now, it would leave an empty body in the streets of Jerusalem for the next patrol to find. That, in turn, would raise questions; questions his superiors would not like raised. He turned his back on the men, shaking his head. He would just have to wait.

He picked up his bag and noted a great deal more blood on it than before. Theron recalled the sound Claudius's nose made when it cracked and his smile returned. He was glad he'd come this way and run into the two soldiers, after all.

On this mission alone he killed a traitor and three humans, four if you count the peasant from whom he'd taken the clothes. *It's been a good night*, he thought as he set out once again for the New City.

Chapter Three

At that same moment, half a city away in an alley between a tailor's shop and a butcher's, another meeting was taking place. While significantly less violent than either of Theron's encounters, it was just as secret. A tall Roman legionary with an uncommon mane of shoulder-length blond hair and the raven haired daughter of a middle class Jewish merchant met in the inky darkness between the two buildings. They embraced, and shared the stolen pleasure of a kiss which would be denied them any other time of day.

"I missed you, Taras," the woman said when she finally pulled away.

"I missed you, too," he replied. He reached up with his right hand and twined his fingers through her hair, staring into her olive-skinned face. "I haven't seen you on my patrols the last few days, though I look for you every day."

She looked away from him, hiding her face in his shoulder. "My father has been keeping me too busy during the day to get out much."

"Do you think he suspects?"

She nodded. "I'm sure of it. Two days ago I left the house to run an errand at the market, and he insisted Zechariah accompany me. He's never done that before."

He continued to stroke her hair, which slid through his fingers like strands of satin. "It could be due to the recent increase in zealot activity. Last week, Prefect Pilate ordered every legionary in the city placed on extra alert. With the coming of Passover and the greater numbers of people in Jerusalem, Pilate fears the zealots will become even more aggressive."

She looked at him then, and he noted the moisture rimming her eyes. "No, I don't think that's it."

"But you don't know for sure."

"Yes I do," she said firmly, and pushed him back to arm's length. "He knows you by sight, somehow. I see the way he looks at you when your patrol goes by. He watches you, and his face... I've never seen it like that. It's like he's made of stone."

"He is probably just watching the patrol. Your father, as I recall, is none too fond of Rome and her legionaries. I've had to step in on his behalf to prevent the Centurion from taking action against him several times already."

"I know." She smiled, and brushed the fingers of her right hand against his clean-shaven cheek. "But it isn't the patrol he watches when your unit walks by, it's you. I overheard him speaking to mother several nights ago. He even mentioned you by name."

"What did he say?" Taras asked.

Mary shook her head, and by her posture he knew she would never tell him. She could be very stubborn at times. But her hesitation did tell him one thing: whatever her father said about him, it was not good.

It didn't surprise him that her father would feel such animosity. Taras walked on dangerous ground by continuing to see her. Men in Jerusalem had been killed for less than the short kiss they shared only moments before. When Rome's forces took control of the city such executions became illegal, especially on a Roman soldier, but that didn't mean it never happened. The zealots loved any excuse to make the Romans'

lives miserable, and Taras knew for a fact Mary's father, Abraham, had strong connections to zealot circles. If Abraham took a mind to, it would be easy enough for him to try and have Taras killed in what would likely be seen as just another zealot uprising. The threat of her father's ire forced Taras to walk a very fine line with their budding relationship. For the time being, it could not become public knowledge.

Still, one look at her face, and he knew he would walk that line as long as it took. The risk was a small price to pay for the pleasure of her company. He longed for the day he could do better by her. Her father would never be persuaded to let him marry her by any normal means, of course. But there were always alternatives.

"Taras?" her voice was soft, hesitant, "What do you think of when your face gets that way?"

Taras shook his head, trying to clear his mind of the thoughts he'd been entertaining. "What do you mean?"

"Your eyes...sometimes when we talk, especially about father, they become so hard."

He pulled her close. "It's nothing. Just something I will need to discuss with the centurion later. As for your father, he is only trying to protect you from the great evils of the Roman Empire."

"Evils like you?" She asked.

"Exactly like me," he replied, unable to suppress a grin.

She returned his smile, and the two shared another kiss. This time it was Taras who broke it, albeit reluctantly. "I have something for you. A gift."

Her smile widened, and although she protested such a thing was unnecessary, he reached into his pocket and withdrew a small wooden box. "It's not much. Beautiful as Rome is, she does not pay her soldiers as well as I would like." He held it out to her.

Mary took the little box in both hands and gently opened the lid. Her eyes widened when she saw what lay inside. She reached her fingers into the box and came away with a gold ring. A single ruby sat inlaid into the gold, surrounded on either side by two triangular onyx panels. Taras had saved his salary for months to pay for it, but the delight in her deep brown eyes was worth every copper. She slipped it onto her finger and looked up at him, moisture brimming in her dark eyes.

"Do you like it?" He asked.

"I love it, Taras." Mary threw her arms around his neck. "And I love you."

Taras pressed his face into her dark, curly hair, reveling in the scent of her perfume and the soft feel of her skin. She shuddered in his arms, and he thought his heart would burst. "I love you, too."

They stood in the alley, locked in their embrace, for a span of several heartbeats. If he could have his way, they would have stayed there the whole night. But Taras knew if she didn't get home soon her father would discover her missing, and knowing Abraham, he would rouse half the city to look for her. With a sigh, he pulled away.

"You should go. It would not be good if you were caught out so late. Your servant might not be able to keep herself quiet if you are gone too long."

"Elizabeth will not say a word, of that I'm sure," Mary said. "But you are right. Father told all the servants he wanted to wake early to make the preparations for his trip to Bethlehem. If he rises and I'm not there, she will be hard pressed to find an excuse."

She leaned forward and gave Taras one last kiss. “Will I see you tomorrow evening? Father will be on the road and will not return for several days, and he will have to take Zechariah with him.”

“Of course. I will meet you at your front gate tomorrow evening after my patrol is finished.”

She favored him with a nod, then turned and walked away down the alley. He watched her go with a mixture of love and frustration. How he ached to share more than a kiss with her, and he knew she felt the same. He could feel it every time they were together in the shudder of her arms and quickening of her heartbeat. But her father hated him, and Jewish law forbade her to marry without her father’s blessing. Even if Abraham were more amenable, that same law would not allow a Jewish woman to marry a Roman. A Jewish man could marry anyone he wanted, but a Jewish woman must marry a Jewish man. Not even Pilate would dare to bend that rule, not for a single legionary of no discernable rank. The outcry of the locals would be incredible.

The only way to circumnavigate that law would be for Caiphas himself to authorize an exception, but the High Priest would never do such a thing, at least not without a very large donation to the Temple (or to Caiphas’ personal coffers). Taras didn’t know how large a sum it would take, but he did know it would be far more than he could offer on a legionary’s pay. He blew out a frustrated sigh as he fingered the hilt of his sword, wondering what sort of persuasion it would take to change the old man’s mind. He pictured himself standing over the portly priest, sword in hand. How long would it take for the man to give in? Would he ever? If it came to it, would Taras have to kill him?

He jerked his hand away from the sword, surprised at his own malice. As much as he would like to, killing the old Sanhedrin wouldn’t do him any good; he would just have to deal with the next High Priest, who would likely be every bit as stubborn as Caiphas. He sighed as he looked at the bronze hilt sticking out of his leather scabbard.

I’ll just have to find another way, he thought. Then he, too, left the alley, headed for the barracks and a few hours’ sleep before the morning report to Marcus, the Centurion.

Chapter Four

Theron carried his macabre burden through the streets of the New City. He walked with haste through the long shadows, his only refuge from the sun now that it had begun its ascent. He finally stopped in front of a small, unimpressive house not far from the Damascus Gate. There he dropped his burden to the cobbles and searched his pockets, taking from them a small gold key. He grabbed the bag containing Ephraim's dismembered head and lifted it over his shoulder, then inserted the key into the lock and stepped through the door.

Inside the house there was no light, but Theron didn't need any. His sharp eyes, more adapted to night than day, could make out the gradient walls in perfect detail in even the poorest illumination. In addition, he'd been here often enough in his long years that he could find his way blind. He walked down a narrow hallway to another door; a heavy oaken monstrosity adorned with a carving of a wolf, and pushed his way through. Light poured from the doorway and into the hall, casting aside the prior darkness and bathing the inside of the house in a soft glow, revealing numerous bas-relief images of wolves and the moon carved into the walls.

The carvings were exquisite; the work of true masters whose time and skill had been bought and paid for with their very lives centuries before. The poor souls worked diligently for years to bring this hallway into its present splendor, only for Theron to kill them when the work was complete so there would be no witnesses.

Theron chuckled at the memory. *How they begged me to spare them. How they cried and screamed.* He hadn't spared any. Not one. He couldn't. The Council ordered him to kill every last one of them. By that time Theron's hands were so covered in blood he no longer cared if he added more. He reached out with his right hand and traced the contours of a wolf's head carved into the wall, relishing the feel of the smooth stone beneath his fingertips.

A voice from the room interrupted his thoughts. "Don't linger in the doorway, Theron. Come inside and report."

Theron turned and entered the room, closing the door behind him. Inside, the stone walls gave way to a deep, varnished wood that glowed in the restless light of several lamps, which burned from all four sides of the room. Theron wrinkled his nose at the acrid scent of lamp oil. He'd never cared for lamplight, preferring the dancing light of a torch or, even better, his enhanced night vision.

On the walls, portraits of various sizes depicted the thirteen members of the Council. Small statues stood like miniature sentinels upon a shelf on the back wall. From Herris' brassy, chiseled features to Algor's twisted and misshapen profile, every member of the Council of Thirteen was represented here, in the Council's Jerusalem Receiving Room.

In the center of the room stood a large granite desk, the top of which lay strewn with sheaves of papyrus and various other writing materials, most notably a vial of human blood with a quill dipped into it. A psalm placed on the vial kept the blood from coagulating, making it perfectly suitable as ink for the Council's steward, who sat behind the desk eyeing Theron with curiosity and excitement.

“You’re a mess,” the clerk said.

Theron frowned and looked down at his clothing. Rust-colored splotches of dried blood stiffened the fabric and plastered his hair to his scalp. He could feel the stiffness around his face from the layer of dirt and yet more blood. His hands and arms, too, were covered with the stuff. All in all, he resembled the wall of a slaughter pen. He looked up from his torso and shrugged. “Sometimes my work is messy, Simon.”

“Did you get him?”

“That’s a foolish question.” Theron hefted the bag containing Ephraim’s head, making sure to point out the stains where the blood soaked through the burlap. “Of course I got him. I always do.”

“That you do, Theron. That you do. That’s marvelous. May I?” he stood and walked over to the Enforcer and pointed at the lip of the bag. Theron sighed and opened it so Simon could have a look.

“Dear Gods!” Simon said after he peeked inside. “Did you actually *rip* off his head? The wound is not from any sword.” He peered at the Enforcer, wearing an expression halfway between fear and envy.

“No, it’s not.”

Simon waited, obviously expecting more, but when Theron didn’t elaborate, he turned back to his desk and sat in his chair. He pulled a sheaf of parchment from a drawer on his right, took the blood-dipped quill from the vial and recorded the information. The sweet, heady scent of blood wafted up from the paper and teased Theron’s nostrils, giving him a pointed reminder that he needed to replenish himself as soon as possible. The quill moved across the parchment with an itchy sound that never failed to make Theron’s skin feel like it was being stretched over a washboard. The combination of smell and sound made him eager to leave the room and enter the Halls.

“Did you discover the identity of the person or persons assisting the traitor?” Simon asked without looking up.

“I did.”

“Who was it?”

“That information is for the Council, Simon, not you.”

Simon ceased writing and glared at Theron, who pretended not to notice as he examined several of the paintings in the room. Simon was just a steward, after all. Theron owed him no respect. Besides, he’d just killed one of his oldest friends for betraying his people. That, combined with his growing hunger, put him in a sour mood. He had no intention of catering to the inflated ego of a lowly clerk, who’d never done anything more strenuous or dangerous for the Council than drawing up a dissertation or penning a letter. “Are you going to announce me, Simon? Or should I stroll into the Council Chamber and hope they are all seated in their proper places when I arrive?”

Glowering at Theron, Simon reached behind him and pulled on a thin rope that hung from a hole in the ceiling. The faint peal of a bell sounded from somewhere in the Halls beyond, summoning whichever Lost One was assigned to assist Simon. Before the sound died away the door on the back wall opened.

The temperature of the room dropped twenty degrees before the Lost One even stepped through the doorway. Clad in the tattered black robes of its station, it floated