

I



GET UP AND FIGHT!

The sun would soon rise over the body-strewn battlefield, and victory looked no closer than it had when the fighting had begun seventeen hours before. Two Roman armies made up of thirteen legions, plus cohorts of the Praetorian Guard, numerous auxiliary units, and thousands of cavalry, had fought each other to a standstill through half the previous day and all through the night. The soldiers of the 3rd Gallica Legion were covered in blood. From head to toe, their muscles and joints ached. They were hungry, thirsty, utterly wearied, and frustrated after being repelled time and again by the other side. Losing heart, legionaries of the 3rd Gallica began to flop on the ground alongside the equally exhausted troops of the Praetorian Guard and other units that had withdrawn from the battle. And they refused to return to the fight.

The year is A.D. 69. The month is October. In little more than twelve tumultuous months, Rome has had four emperors. Nero, who disappeared and is presumed dead. Galba, assassinated in the Roman Forum. Otho, who committed suicide after his army was defeated. And Vitellius, current emperor, who deposed Otho after a bloody battle at Bedriacum—not far from this very spot where these thirty-five hundred soldiers of the 3rd Gallica Legion are sprawling on the grass and sitting on low stone fences that border roads, fields, and vineyards. Now there is a new contender for the throne, Lieutenant General Titus Flavius Vespasian, military commander in the Roman East. The legionaries of the 3rd Gallica, who previously served under General Vespasian, have led an army into Italy to overthrow Vitellius and install Vespasian on the throne of the Caesars in his place.

The men of the 3rd Gallica, veterans of the Jewish Revolt, famous overnight for wiping out thousands of invading Sarmatian cavalry on the Danube the previous year, had fought skirmishes on their march down to

the wealthy northern Italian city of Cremona. But here, outside Cremona, Vitellius's army has stopped them in their tracks. Here, after hours of fruitless struggle, the 3rd Gallica and its fellow Vespasianist legions are ready to quit. Even the 3rd Gallica's influential chief centurion, Arrius Varus, who had assumed the role of second in command of the Vespasianist army, had been unable to motivate his men to throw themselves back into the fray. Now, fatigued 3rd Gallica soldiers such as Legionary Gaius Volusius look up as the army's commander comes striding purposefully toward them in the moonlight.

Brigadier General Marcus Antonius Primus is a notorious figure, a courageous rogue described by the Roman historian Tacitus as the worst of citizens during peacetime but the best of allies in war. Ten years back, during the reign of Nero, Primus had been convicted of fraud and sent into exile. Nero's successor as emperor, Sulpicius Galba, had recalled Primus and given him his first military command, that of a new legion raised by Galba in Spain on his way to claiming Nero's throne for himself—the 7th Galbiana Legion, or Galba's 7th. Historian Tacitus seems to have met Primus when in his youth. Considering him audacious in the extreme, he would describe the general as “brave in battle, a ready speaker, talented at generating hatred against other men, powerful in the middle of civil strife and rebellion,” yet also “greedy, a spendthrift.”

This was the general who now climbed onto a mound and looked around at the men of the 3rd Gallica Legion and the Praetorian Guard who lounged before him. Tall, well built, in his early forties, Primus had already moved among the men of the legions that had followed him from their bases in Pannonia to invade Italy. The men of the 3rd Gallica have heard those troops respond to the words of General Primus with shouts and cheers. Those legions had failed to keep the previous emperor, Otho, on his throne; Primus has goaded them with that failure. And they roared and came to their feet as Primus pointed the way back to the battlefield. The general had then turned to the legionaries who have marched from their bases in the province of Moesia, modern Bulgaria, and scoffed at their boasts just the previous day that they would whip Vitellius's legions. Stung by his rhetoric, the men of these legions had risen to prove to the general that they could fight as well as boast.

Now, from his elevated position, Primus looked at the troops of the Praetorian Guard as they mingled with the 3rd Gallica. These guardsmen had been dismissed from service by the new emperor, Vitellius, because they had loyally served his predecessor Otho. They had flooded to Vespasian's banner, declaring they wanted to get even with Vitellius. Now,

with hands on hips, Primus glared at the Praetorians. He'd had enough of them, these elite Italian troops who had the best pay and best conditions in the Roman army, troops who boasted of their superiority over common legionaries.

"Clowns!" Primus called to the Praetorians, according to Tacitus. He pointed to the standards of the Praetorian cohorts planted in the earth, and the shields and javelins stacked untidily all around, and told them where their honor and their future lay—out there on the battlefield. Angrily, the Praetorians declared that they would show the general that they have yet to finish the fight.

But for the soldiers of the 3rd Gallica, his most elite legion, General Primus took a different approach. These men had been recruited in the Roman province of Syria. All were Roman citizens, and some were descendants of legionaries from Spain, Italy, and France who had settled in Syria over the past hundred years or so after retiring from the Roman army. Their legion had gained fame when, a century before, in 36 B.C., it had saved Mark Antony from defeat and death in a bloody campaign against the Parthian Empire in the East. As the legion's "Gallica" title implied, back then the men of the 3rd Gallica had been recruited in Gaul. Under Antony, when the legion's Gallic veterans had retired in Syria, the unit had subsequently been filled with local Syrian recruits, as it had been ever since. Irrespective of that change in recruiting ground, down through the decades the reputation gained by the original 3rd Gallica as the saviors of Mark Antony marched with the unit wherever it had taken the field.

"Under Mark Antony, you defeated the Parthians," Tacitus says General Primus declared, looking now at the men of the Gallica. "Under General Corbulo you whipped the Armenians. And lately, you have discomfited the Sarmatians."

"Discomfited" the Sarmatians? This latter comment would have brought a wry smile to the lips of many a 3rd Gallica legionary. As Primus knew, the Gallicans had slaughtered the Sarmatians in their thousands, with hardly a casualty of their own.

Now, Primus urged the 3rd Gallica to live up to its fearsome reputation, to go against the enemy one more time, to show the remainder of the army how to fight, and to lead the way to victory for Vespasian. On the 3rd Gallica hinged the outcome of the battle, and the civil war. Would they rise to their general's challenge?