



"I think a Roman mother is supposed to send her son off to the army with the admonition to be brave, never bring shame on the gods, the nation, or his family ... and this is where I fail as a Roman mother. I just want you to come home to me, my child. Come home safe."

With these words, Valeria Helvetia Minor bid farewell to her younger son, Gai, off to join Caesar's growing army in order to escape the murderous vengeance of the Roman consul, Aulus Gabinius.

The Gabinian Affair is the first book of the Gaius Marius Chronicle, the memoir of a retired Roman soldier, Gaius Marius Insubrecus, a legionary who fought with Caesar throughout his Gallic campaigns and the Roman civil wars, and who then supported Caesar's son and heir, Octavius, in his struggle against Caesar's murderers and finally against Antonius and Cleopatra.

The Gabinian Affair recounts the events leading up to Insubrecus' decision to join the Roman Tenth Legion at the age of sixteen, immediately before Caesar's Helvetian campaign. The narrative recreates a colorful and culturally complex portrait of ancient northern Italy, the Po Valley and the city of Mediolanum, whose Celtic population is struggling with its own identity after more than a hundred years of Roman rule.

Through the well-meaning machinations of his mother, Gai is thrust into the maelstrom of Roman politics, corruption and murderous vengeance of the late Republic.

An Excerpt from *The Gabinian Affair*

From Chapter 7. "Between the Iliad and the Brothel:

My Final Lessons in Being Roman"

We remained silent for a while, basking in the warmth of the *trepidarium*. Time is difficult to measure in silence. Finally, Macro poured his third cup of wine, and said, "Maariam ... her name was Maariam."

"What?" I responded, returning abruptly from my own reveries.

"My woman ... my *mulier castrorum* ... her name was Maariam. I saw the way you looked at me when we were talking about Galenus' woman, Dora. My woman was Maariam."

I noticed his use of *was*. "What ... what happened?" I asked, not sure I wanted to know or wanted to encourage Macro to talk about it.

Macro took another long drink. "Dead," he said into his cup, "dead some ten years now ... her and our child."

I looked up at him. His eyes were unfocused, more from the memories than the wine.

"She showed up in the *vicus*, the civilian settlement that grows up around the legionary camps, outside of Nicomedia. She was starving ... all eyes and bones. Dora took her under her wing. It was when Mithridates swept down on the city and chased Cotta's boys down the coast. A riot broke out in the town. Supposedly the natives, the Greeks, were murdering everyone Roman ... some sort of victory celebration. But there were always a few private feuds to settle. Maariam's father was a banker ... wasn't Roman at all ... not even a Greek. Came from some fly-speck of a place in Asia down near Egypt. The Greeks called it *Ioudaia*, or something like that. A lot of people in the town owed him money ... so they decided to settle their debts the easy way. They killed the old man, his wife, his sons. They raped Maariam until they thought she was dead. Then they tried to burn the house down over the bodies ... *irrumantes Graeci* ... prick-suckin' Greeks. But she wasn't dead and managed to crawl out of house before it burned down on top of her ... eventually found her way to our camps. Dora found her living in a hole she had dug near the *vicus* ... starving. Dora always had a good heart ... took her in ... fed her."

Macro finished off the cup of wine, then poured another.

He continued, "I was Galenus' *optio* ... Lucullus' Third Legion ... Second Century, Third Cohort ... left flank of the first battle line. Dora took care of my cleaning and mending for me ... so, of course, I met Maariam. Soon, after she got stronger, she was doing my cleaning and mending. Then she was keeping me warm at night, when I didn't have to sleep in camp."

Macro seemed to be staring up toward the ceiling of the *trepidarium*. Somewhere up there, his memories were alive again for him.

"Maariaam had a strange god. She clung to him despite what he allowed *ist' pedicantes* ... those ass-loving Greeks ... to do to her and her family. He had no name ... strange ... but she prayed to him ... for her family every evening ... like they were still alive somewhere ... every evening. How'd it go again?" Macro began to chant, "*Yit gadal vyit kadash shmei raba balma di vra khirutei ... amain ... amain ... amain.*"

I looked over at Macro. In the dim light of the *trepidarium*, I could hear him chanting repeatedly that strange word: *amain*. Still staring up at something only he could see hovering above us in the shadows, tears were forming in his eyes. He seemed to be chanting a prayer for his lost Maariam.

Macro caught me looking at him. Quickly, he wiped his eyes and poured out some more wine, muttering something about the smoke from the lamps.

Then, he continued, "We were pushing up into the mountains, chasing Tigranes, the king of a shithole called Armenia. We had just dug our marching camps near some mountain river we had been following up into a valley ... the Aratsani, I think it was called ... something like that. We were pushing some recon units up the valley when Tigranes jumped us ... came rolling down the valley like an avalanche. There must have been thousands of them. They pushed us back into our camps. Right then, our baggage train came up the valley. When those *cunni* saw that, they broke off and went after the loot. There was nothing we could do but hold our walls and watch. There were three cohorts with the baggage ... the tenth out of each of our legions. They tried to form a battle line, but they didn't stand a chance. Tigranes' infantry hit them straight on, and his cavalry went around their flanks and right up their asses. The whole thing was over in less than half an hour. Then they went after the *impedimenta*, the supplies and equipment. As far as we were concerned, they could have that shit ... but our people from the *vicus* were with the train. We heard the screams all night. There was nothing we could do. In

the morning, Tigranes' people were gone. They knew without our supplies we'd have to retreat back down the valley. When we looked where the baggage train had been, we could see nothing but columns of smoke and the vultures. Galenus was lucky. We found Dora and a few other survivors hiding in a narrow side valley the bastards had overlooked. Dora said that they were being chased by cavalry—Greeks by their armor—when she and Maariam got separated. We found Maariam's group about an hour later. The Greeks had trapped them against the river. The lucky ones drowned."

There were no tears in Macro's eyes now. They were still seeing something, but they were alight with murderous hatred.

"I buried what was left of her. That's the custom of her people, so I honored it. I piled flat slabs of rock over her grave so the animals couldn't dig her up. Her god had no name, no symbol, so I didn't know what to carve on the rocks to protect her spirit. So I just carved, *MARIAM VX MACRONIS OPT LEGIII*, Maariam, wife of Macro, Optio, Third Legion. I realized then I didn't even know how old she was. When we were retreating back down the valley, toward the plain where we could resupply, Galenus told me that Maariam was carrying a child ... my child. Dora had told him. Maariam wanted to be sure before she said anything to me. She told Dora if it was a boy, she was going to name it after one of the great heroes of her people ... Ioshue ... Ioshue Ben Macro ... Ioshue, *filius Macronis*."

Macro put down his wine cup as if the taste suddenly revolted him. Abruptly, he announced, "I've had enough of this place. Let's get out of here before these bastards steal our underwear and sell it for towels." He got up and left the *cubiculum*.