

EAGLES IN THE DESERT

A prequel to the Legionary series



360 AD, Bezabde, The Roman-Persian Frontier....

The River Tigris sparkled in the blistering morning sun, wending like a great teal ribbon through an ancient land of dunes, dust and golden rocks. Searing emptiness stretched for miles in almost every direction. Alone in this wilderness stood the Roman border citadel of Bezabde, a loam-coloured fortress perched upon a low scarp mound, guarding the river's western banks. Up on the circular roof of the southeastern corner turret, two legionaries of the Second Parthica rested their weight on their spears and shields – painted blood-red, emblazoned with golden centaurs. Their ridge-topped helmets and ring mail shirts glittered like jewels in the sunlight.

Falco listened to the playful babble of the water, and every so often he caught a trace of the damp-silt scent rising from the river's edge. A glorious contrast to the desert's dry, dusty odour. These simple things took him away from this place, from the dust and sand, from the chimeral infinity on every horizon, from all the warnings about what was out there and coming this way. For a glorious moment he sank into the welcome halls of memory, his hawk-like face spreading in a half-smile.

Arius noticed and gave him an arch look. 'What's that strange thing on your face? You've done nothing but sulk for the last month!'

'I'm thinking about home,' Falco said with a fond sigh. 'About the last time I took my boy, Pavo, fishing.' There was something about the word *last* that caused the conversation to fall into a short lull. Both men avoided each other's gaze, choosing to look out over the sands again. 'We would walk through the wards of Constantinople,' Falco eventually resumed, 'buy hot loaves and a pot of honey from the bread market at the Forum of Constantine, then leave through the Adrianople Gate. I'd give Pavo some coins to buy fruit from the smallholdings outside the city walls. Strawberries... he loves

strawberries. Just a mile up the Golden Horn there is a pleasant bay – a sickle of white sand edged with smooth rocks. We'd fish for mackerel there, watching the dolphins leaping further out, feeling the hot summer wind in our hair and the sun on our faces.' He took off his helm as he spoke, cupping it underarm and letting his loose chestnut locks catch a little of the desert breeze. He closed his eyes and, for just a trice, it felt like he was truly home and with young Pavo.

The anxious wails of a baby pulled Falco from his thoughts. He looked over his shoulder into Bezabde's interior. Palms sprouted here and there amidst the warren of mud brick and marble homes. Green vines tumbled lazily from rooftop gardens. Vibrant fabrics and silks still hung in the market ward – and when they fluttered in the occasional desert breeze, it often tricked the eye, making one think there were local people there, going about their daily business. But there were no citizens at the market, and none in the streets either. Those who had not fled the city were now barricaded inside their homes, fearing what was to come. He caught sight of a gaunt mother and the crying babe in the window of a nearby terraced home. *Gods be with you*, she mouthed at him. There were others too, all looking out with that same fearful mien. The emperor had declared that Bezabde had to be defended for the glory of Rome and that the Persians had to be repelled to maintain the empire's status. But Falco knew why he stood here on the walls: for the mothers, the children, for those here who could not defend themselves. Reassured, he made to turn his eyes back to the desert outside, when he noticed something odd. A figure standing on a flat rooftop. An old woman, hunched, white-haired. She was blind, he reckoned, going by her eyes – like milky orbs. It was strange that she was up there in the open and not huddled away like the others. Stranger still was the way her blind eyes seemed to be trained... upon him.

Unnerved, he switched his gaze to the city's outer wards, where steel flashed and blinked every so often. The three legions sent here to defend the place were at work along the fortifications, in the open squares and on strategic rooftops. Furthest away, in the city's western forum, the Second Armenian Legion were but a distant glimmer, and so thinly spread upon the battlements there. A band of Zabdiceni desert archers were busy at the practice range near those western ramparts, loosing arrow after arrow into painted targets. Two days ago, these dark-skinned local tribesmen had poured into the city in support of the imperial defence. A welcome reinforcement.

In the city's central wards, horsemen from the Second Flavian Legion cantered to and fro, carrying scrolls, capes flailing in their wake as they relayed instructions to each part of the northern and western walls from *Magister Militum* Sabinianus – the commander of the defence, stationed in the palace at the heart of the city where he had set up a war room.

‘Must be a fine thing to fight a battle from a couch,’ Arius grunted, eyeing the palace. ‘In the eight days since we got here, that fat bastard has never once set foot outside until the coolness of night, and even then its only to ride the two streets to the wine house.’

‘Aye, Generals make wars,’ Falco mused wryly, ‘then leave their soldiers to wage them.’ As he said this, his gaze fell down to the nearby southern drill compound, where his and Arius’ own Second Parthica comrades were busy sharpening their *spatha* blades, polishing their armour and the famous Parthica eagle standard, all to the tune of their chief centurion’s hectoring cries. A proud legion... but a thin reserve for these southern walls, Falco thought. His eyes slid down to the stonework under his boots. This southeastern corner turret was thought a secret weak-spot – for the scarp mound was less steep here, though that much was not obvious to one looking upon the city from outside. More, the stonework was badly in need of repair. He stamped his feet on the pale flagstones as if testing their soundness. *If the Persian storm hits here...* he mused darkly.

‘The chaplain asked me why us Parthica men were so uneasy,’ Arius said, reading Falco’s disquiet. ‘I told him it was because we were not sure of this section of the defences. He said God would strengthen the rocks under our feet.’

Falco barked once with laughter. ‘The Christian Priest? He’s a sly one – I don’t trust a word that passes his lips. You may as well have spoken to a desert hound. Put your hopes in *Mithras*, old friend. The God of the Soldiers will see us right.’

‘Pah!’ Arius swept a hand in the air. ‘I’ll bet you a skin of wine that-’

The rest of his sentence died, crushed under a distant *boom!* that burst across the land from the southern horizon, shaking Bezabde then dying with a strange crackle. Falco and Arius looked at one another, then looked south, faces draining of colour. *Boom!* the noise came again. For all the world Falco wished it was just faraway thunder, but he knew, to his marrow, that it was in fact the sound of Persian war drums. He slowly lifted his helm from the parapet and place it back on his head. As he tied

his chin strap, annoyed by the trembling of his fingers, his mouth drained of moisture. All the while his eyes stared, unblinking, at the south. Nothing. Then... the heat haze flickered and a silvery dot appeared like a needle piercing through cloth, before slowly widening to fill the horizon. Now the drums throbbed in an eager rhythm. *Boom! Boom! Boom!*

Clang! A bell tolled from Bezabde's streets in a weak riposte. 'To the walls!' A tribune bellowed in between peals. Roman horns blared from every ward in the city. Behind him, the yells of officers rose in a clamour. Men shouted, footsteps clattered on flagstones and hooves clopped – now at a gallop. Falco heard the clap of many shutters in the terrace behind him closing over and the thick, heavy clunk of timber locking bars slotting into bronze brackets as the city's four gatehouses were secured. He shot a look backwards. The streets were bare apart from the centuries of soldiers in the city's inner parts streaming towards the walls. Oddly, the blind old woman was still there on the nearby rooftop, silent... watching.

The drumming of boots intensified, then a score of legionaries rose onto the curtain wall either side of Falco's corner turret, filing along the battlements, one legionary for every crenel-gap. Three more rose onto the turret roof to reinforce Falco and Arius, bringing with them the odour of sweat and half-eaten wheat porridge. Slaves scurried along the walls, bringing bundles of *spiculae* javelins and leather buckets of slingshot. Some brought burning braziers too, and a few man-sized spherical cages of dried willow. Artillery crews hobbled up the stony steps of the city's eight gate turrets, taking bundles of iron-headed bolts to the *ballistae* perched up there – the bolt-throwers resembling great iron eagles, beaks pointing proudly at the desert. The Zabdiceni archers split into small groups, each assigned to a turret. A squadron of six arrived beside Falco and Arius, each man with two quivers strapped to their back in an X shape. They jabbered in their desert tongue, staring south. Falco and Arius had only learned a few words of their tongue, but they needed no translator when the tribesmen wailed 'The *Shahanshah* is coming. The King of Kings is here!'

Falco and Arius watched in silence as the silvery mass on the horizon drew to within a mile of Bezabde in a bull-horn formation, casting up a huge wall of dust in its wake. Even the rumours had not predicted such might. The *Savaran* cavalry, Shahanshah Shapur's finest, seemed to stretch for miles: lancers, mounted upon tall, strong warhorses, the riders wearing jackets of iron scale and pointed helms

topped with jostling, balled plumes. Either side of the mighty cavalry wing marched two vast infantry divisions: a sea of spear tips, wicker screens, headscarves and bronze, leather and iron helms. Each unit within carried a *drafsh* banner – poles draped with vibrant sheets of red, green, gold and blue depicting bears, deer, asps and lions, fluttering like the sails of ships on this silvery tide. Last to slip from the heat haze was a line of colossal creatures, the likes of which Falco had never before set eyes upon; beasts with swishing, armour-plated trunks, bronze-coated tusks and archer-packed cabins strapped to their broad backs. The elephants trumpeted angrily in the gaps between the drumbeats. At the heart of all this, Zoroastrian Magi carried the most magnificent *drafsh kavian* banner – tall as a tree – topped with a gold effigy of a soaring guardian angel, half-eagle, half-man.

Falco tried to dampen his lips with his tongue but found that it was stuck to the roof of his mouth. How many Persians were out there? Forty thousand? More? He cast a look back around Bezabde's walls. These three legions and the local archers numbered no more than six thousand. Yet even as he tried to make the imbalance seem less absurd, the Persian army wrapped around Bezabde like a strangler's hands. He noticed how they brought hundreds of ladders and artillery too – stone-throwers, wooden war-towers and rams. One ram was enormous, with a bronze beak and a pitched defensive roof, and required a team of over one hundred sweating and shackled slaves to move it. Now, faint shadows passed over the land. Falco knew without looking up that it was not cloud but carrion birds, coming to see what treats might be left come the end of the day.

'But damn,' Arius said rocking on the balls of his feet. 'My mouth is dry as sand and my bladder has swollen to the size of a watermelon. Why does it always happen on the cusp of battle?'

'Ah, the old "Soldier's Curse",' Falco said, trying to sound relaxed but failing. He noticed how Arius' eyes were trained on the giant ram, but every so often he would glance down at the stonework under their feet. 'Don't worry: look where that monstrosity is headed – to the western walls. The scarp is steep there and the walls strong. It will never make it up there.'

Even as he said this, he felt a cold hand grip and twist his guts. How, how could they prevail today? He thought of little Pavo, and suddenly felt like a fool for having left the boy on his own. With a shaking hand, he lifted one of the leather twines hanging round his neck. From it hung a bronze *phalera* – a thin bronze disc issued as a military reward, smaller than a coin. He had earned it after a battle against the

Marcomanni in the distant northern woods. Embossed text ran around the edge: *Legio II Parthica*, it read. He stretched his arm out towards Arius.

‘Take it,’ he said.

Arius frowned. ‘Why? You earned it. They called you a fool when you charged and a hero when your charge won the day!’

‘If I die here,’ Falco said quietly so the men nearby wouldn’t hear, ‘then Pavo will have nobody.’ He stopped, gulping, achingly sad for the past, for the days just before his son’s birth, the last few times he had held his wife. It had been a traumatic labour, but a blessing that at least Pavo had survived. ‘Take this. If you make it through this and I don’t – get this to him. There is so much I should have told him, so much he needs to know. At the very least I want him to know that I was thinking about him... at the last.’

Arius looked haunted for a moment, then he forced a comrade’s smile and snatched the phalera. ‘You always get maudlin before battle,’ he said with a gruff chuckle. ‘Those skins of wine we set aside for later, I’ll bet you mine we’re both still alive to enjoy them come dusk tonight, and I’ll be giving you this back.’

Falco returned his grin. It was the soldier’s way, to mask white-hot fear behind humour.

Just then, the Persian lines halted in a thick ring around the city, and the thunder of drums stopped. Silence bar the hot breeze, the croak of cicadas and the shuffling and snorting of horses. A small party rolled forth: a quartet of ironclad and masked *pushtigban* royal guardsmen carrying a rush throne, the backrest a panoply of peacock feathers. Shapur, King of Kings, sat upon it, draped in saffron and purple robes, soft calfskin slippers and a tall, purple hat. His magnificent beard and long hair hung in dark, oiled curls across his chest and shoulders. A sweating, bare-chested and shaven-headed lackey moved out before the enemy king, stopped and addressed the walls. ‘Citizens and soldiers of Bezabde, rejoice!’ he cried. ‘You should be honoured, for you are in the presence of greatness. Shapur, the Conqueror of Nations, the King of Kings, the lord of all Persia... is here! Feast your eyes on his mighty war machine. Ask yourself: is it not fitting that you should bow down to him and submit to his greatness? Do you not know of his magnanimity? So I intreat you, Romans, throw open your gates, come forth, give Bezabde to its rightful owner, and in return you can enjoy... his mercy.’

A horrible silence hung in the air. Falco and Arius looked at one another. Both had heard tales of this ‘mercy’: entire cohorts of captured legionaries buried to their necks in the sand and left there for their skulls to bake in the desert heat; wretches pierced through the shoulder and linked together through those festering holes with chains, driven like cattle to work in the foul underground salt mines; and Valerian, an Emperor of Rome who, some one hundred years ago had been captured out in these parts – rumour was he had been kept alive for years, used as a footstool for the Shahanshah to step upon when mounting his horse, before finally the King of Kings became bored of his toy and had Valerian peeled of his skin. Falco heard some distant squabbling from the heart of the city – the sound of that irritating chaplain’s voice, arguing in favour of the terms. But not a soul within Bezabde moved to open the gates.

‘Very well,’ the sweaty Persian orator said after a short wait and a conference with his master.

Shapur was carried backwards, into the shade of a grand pavilion tent. Just before he slipped from view, he clapped his hands once.

In response to this, a coal-skinned *mahout* elephant rider, naked bar a cape and a loincloth and with bulbous weights hanging from his earlobes, read this signal. He stood up on the elephant’s neck, put a giant ibex horn to his lips, tilted his head back and let his chest swell with breath. A horrible, baritone moan crawled across the land, infiltrating every space within Bezabde. The moan rose suddenly into a high-pitched eerie wail. Then, with a mighty cry and a thunder of boots, hooves and wheels, the Persian war machine burst into life. Dust rose from every direction as the noose around Bezabde began to contract. Falco saw a great mass of infantry – one of the four armies out there – coming for their section. War towers, ladders, spears and curved *shamshir* swords swished and glinted and the many soldiers howled and chanted.

‘Be ready,’ Falco shouted over the din, attempting to fortify the hearts of the small knot of men up here with him. He was not an officer, but he was more experienced than most of the legionaries with him. He braced near one crenel-gap, using his shield to fill it, levelling the tip of his spear near the top. Arius did likewise by his left. But he saw the three other legionaries on the turret trembling, teeth chattering. One’s face was wet with tears pouring from wide eyes.

‘How long have we fought alongside one another? How long?’ Falco bawled at the three. ‘We have faced forest tribes in the north who outnumbered us like ants. Did we not spend that night by the

fire, toasting a great victory? Drusus,’ he called to the tearful one, ‘you fought using the eagle standard in place of a spear or a sword. You were like an animal, sweeping the enemy away in droves. Pulso, it was you – *you* – who matched the tribal chief in combat and knocked him to his knees. Latro, you gave chase alone to ride down the enemy scouts who sped away to rouse reinforcements – had you not we would have been overwhelmed by them. All of you, you have proved yourself before. Do not fear the swarming hawks out there – for we... we are *eagles!* And each of us is worth one hundred of them.’

Pulso straightened up, Drusus wiped his face and turned a rictus-glare out upon the advancing enemy, Latro falling into a similar stance beside him. Reassured, Falco turned his attentions back to the wall of Persians rumbling closer and closer. Only two hundred paces away. The Zabdiceni archers behind him began showering a thin rain of shafts down at the enemy front. A few dozen enemy were struck, shafts plunging into their eye sockets, necks and shoulders. Puffs and goutts of blood shot up and these stricken ones halted as if they had forgotten something, before they sank from sight. In reply, a storm of enemy arrows, slingshot and javelins clattered and whacked against the parapets. Chunks of pale stone flew in every direction, dust exploded in choking bursts, Falco’s shield bucked and shuddered as scores of missiles battered against it. Arius yelped as a javelin skated from the tip of his helm, denting the fin-ridge.

‘Hold steady,’ Falco bellowed, seeing that all along the walls, just a handful of legionaries had fallen, peppered with arrows, crumpling where they stood or folding over the parapet. The thin Roman defence was weathering this opening storm well. But then he heard a groan of timber and strained ropes. He saw the catapults amidst the Persian lines buck, shudder and settle, saw something whoosh through the air towards the walls. With a great crash and an explosion of dust and thrown rocks, almost a score of legionaries by the southern gatehouse were cast backwards like toys, screaming, one man half-torn at the waist, his guts trailing behind him like wet, red ribbons. More catapults loosed. *Crash!* Another section of the wall top ripped away.

Falco saw the men beside him pale with shock. Now he was lost for words. Worse, he spotted the fleet of smaller rams rolling proud of the closing Persian noose, being guided up the scarp near the beset southern gatehouse. The rams were little more than sharpened pine trunks housed under protective roofs of hide and wicker, being pushed forward by teams of twelve. In response, the two ballistae on the

gatehouse turret tilted, bucked and spat forth a pair of great iron bolts. These, aimed at the foremost ram, ripped it to shreds, tearing through the protective roof and skewering three of the team through their chests. But the other rams rolled on up the slope, closer to the walls. Roman *spiculae* and arrows poured down on these ones, but these missiles were too light to penetrate the defensive roofs. The first ram reached and struck the base of the southern defences, sending a stark shudder around the entire circuit of the curtain wall, so much so that the merlons against which Falco was braced shivered madly. The second ram smashed against the bronze-banded southern gates. The third and fourth too – a rapid assault.

‘Bring the urns!’ an officer cried from the battlements above the beset gates.

An acrid stink floated through the baking air. Pitch, Falco realised, shooting a look along the defences to see the men there heaving great urns of boiling black liquid. Others carried buckets of glowing sand – heated in the city kilns and so hot they could only carry the buckets on poles. In one graceless heave, they emptied the contents of these vessels down upon the rams. Falco witnessed the fate of one of the ram squadrons. The leather-armoured man at the head of the device was doubled over as he worked the ram, but when glowing sand hit him like a sudden shower, he stood bolt upright and unleashed the most inhuman scream, clawing at his face, wrenching at his armour where the sand had slid inside to burn like brands all across his torso. Worse for the ones who were doused with the bubbling pitch – they fell and rolled, coated in the unctuous filth. One man sat up on his knees, hands outspread, the skin on his face sloughing away like well-cooked meat from a bone. Zabdiceni archers loosed fire arrows into this sweltering chaos and, vitally, every one of the smaller rams went up in flames. The crews fled, some ablaze and flailing like human torches. The defenders cheered, but within a heartbeat, the commander, the fire archers and the men who had brought the buckets and urns to the walls disappeared in an explosion of rock and dust as another catapult rock struck home. When the dust began to clear, all that was left was a crazy pattern of red blotches, limbs and crushed armour. Runnels of blood rolled down the stonework towards the broken rams – a crumpled heap of burning wreckage and smoking bodies.

‘Falco – they’re almost upon us!’ Arius wailed.

Falco twisted away from the horrible scene at the southern gates and peered over the rim of his shield. The infantry mass coming for their turret were but a hundred paces away now. He could see the bulging whites of the enemy eyes, the feral sneers, the sharpness of their blades. Fearsome Median spearmen, Kurdish javelin brigades, masses of *paighan* – lightly armed but fanatical fighters. They surged up the low scarp, closer, closer, ladders held overhead. Behind them a high war tower rocked and swayed, the man perched on top of the timber device shouting to the ones steering it down on the ground.

Falco knew which order he had to give. The words rose onto his tongue and they tasted like ashes. But they *had* to be spoken. For the mothers and children within the city. For little Pavo, back in Constantinople. ‘Ignite!’ he called to the Zabdiceni men behind him. He heard the striking of flint hooks, smelt the tang of smoke, saw the orange glow rise behind him.

‘Ready,’ they barked.

As one, Falco, Arius and the other three legionaries guarding the turret top stepped back. The Zabdiceni six rushed to fill those spots, three pairs each carrying one of the wicker balls, now ablaze, on the ends of poles. With a jerk of the poles they sent the blazing orbs toppling over the wall’s edge. The three fiery cages bounced on the scarp, dust puffing up, then rolled towards the upcoming Persian infantry mass. Persian attackers scrambled and fell as they tried to get out of the way, parting like the waters of a river hitting three piers of a bridge. But two of the fiery spheres plunged into the Persian ranks before the men down there could get out of the way, bowling dozens from their feet, searing others, setting light to the clothing of more. The stink of smoke now became streaked with the stench of burning meat and hair. The Persian mass on the slope swirled and staggered. Eighty or so had fallen – the rest were dazed, delayed, but not for long.

‘Archers, step back. Legionaries, back to your defensive positions,’ Falco brayed to the few legionaries, waving them back towards the crenelations. He had taken but one step in that direction when he heard the buck and shudder of a catapult somewhere outside. A heartbeat later, the world before him burst in a golden storm and a thunderous boom, throwing him backwards in a gale of blinding grit and a thick rain of something wet. For a moment he was lost, confused, deafened, blinking, his face coated in dust and... blood? *Where are the archers?* he mouthed, staring at the spot on the

turret's edge where the Zabdiceni six had been. They were gone. The crenelations too. The ramshackle turret had withstood the strike, but, like a boxer whose front teeth have been punched out, the stretch of turret top facing the Persian siege was a ragged, wide gap. From the corner of his eye he saw the strips of skin and smears of red, all that remained of the poor Zabdiceni six.

His head pounded with shock, staring at the strange wooden shapes appearing all along the broken edge of the defences. Now his hearing returned. *Clack, clack, clack*, more ladders swung up to rest against the ruined section of parapet. The same noise rang out all around Bezabde's fortifications.

Falco staggered over to the smashed section of turret defences and stared down the array of ladders, seeing myriad twisted, baleful faces glaring back as they scrambled upwards like spiders, dripping with steel. He felt Arius arrive by his side. 'Fill the gap!' Arius howled to the other three stunned, dust-coated legionaries. The three shambled over and helped form a basic line – just wide enough to plug the shattered section of parapet like human merlons.

A Persian champion with bloodshot eyes and a feral look led the way, surging up the central ladder, others competing to beat him to the top.

'*Ready!*' Falco bawled. The champion drew a shamshir from his back-scabbard, bounding up the last few steps of the ladder one-handed, swinging the blade for a low strike at Falco's legs. Falco dropped his shield just as the strike came. The shamshir bit deep into the leather and wood, sending splinters flying. The champion's rictus became a wicked grin... until he tried to withdraw the sword, and realised it was stuck. Falco braced his body, lifted his spear overhand and lanced downwards, sending the tip plunging into the man's shoulder, deep into his chest. A gout of blood pumped into the air and a light mist of it wafted over Falco's helm, face and shoulders, the metallic stink unbearable. Falco wrenched his spear back and the foe fell away from the ladder, his face now blank and lost. The falling corpse caused Falco's mind to flash with a thousand imaginings. What had he done? Who had he killed? A man. A father? A husband? A son? Remorse rose within him like a whip of fire. It was the bane that every legionary – every soldier – endured, yet few spoke of. In rapid succession, he speared again and again, two more swift deaths. Either side of him Arius and the other three worked in the same way, arms jerking, spears punching down. Within moments, the stonework of the turret was glistening with blood.

A shrill scream sounded when one climbing Persian grabbed Latro's shin, hauling him from his place at the turret's broken edge. The Roman fell in a flurry of thrashing limbs, landing on the scarp below with a *whump* of many breaking bones and a star of redness. Falco stared at the corpse numbly. A military brother of many years, gone in a heartbeat.

From the corner of his eye he saw the assault all along the southern walls, swells of Persians swarming up the ladders, two war towers reaching the defences as well – scores of enemy soldiers pouring out over the drawbridges at the tops to surge into the legionary defenders there. Flashes of steel and puffs of red rose all along the battlements. Horns blared, voices swung between proud cries and wet death screams. His spear arm grew numb as he worked. Pulso, by his side suddenly let his shield go, the screen toppling away over the drop.

'What are you doi-' Falco started, but then he saw that the legionary had somehow lost his helm and now a Persian shamshir rested in the crest of his skull, wedged deep like a knife in a block of fat. The legionary staggered and swayed, arms like limp ribbons, sword dropping too. Pulso stared at Falco, eyes wide like moons, as a soup of dark blood and pieces of brain matter sheeted down his face, before he crumpled where he stood, one arm hanging out over the drop. In Pulso's place stood the killer, who wrenched the sword free and drew back to strike at Falco. Without a moment of thought, Falco dropped into a crouch and speared up into his belly. The blow was ruinous, snapping his spear and bursting from the foe's back. The stink of torn bowels hit him like a slap as the man's blue-grey gut ropes sped free like a knot of snakes. As the foe fell to his knees, vomiting blood, Falco realised it was over. Just three legionaries left up here. Not enough to hold this turret. Not with thousands of Persians vying to climb up here and...

A shadow rose over him. The war tower rocked up like a Kraken's head emerging from the waves at a boat's edge. Falco stared at the wild-eyed man perched on the war tower roof, heard the thunderous shouts of the ones behind the closed timber drawbridge on its upper floor. With a whack of timber hitting stone, the drawbridge fell down, and a dozen Persian warriors surged across for the turret roof.

'Get back!' Falco cried to his comrades. He, Arius and Drusus retracted like claws, backstepping rapidly to come together in a tiny defensive knot near the city-edge of the turret.

'Shields, together!' Falco boomed. 'Shoulder-to-shoulder!'

The three legionaries clacked their shields into place in a mini-wall as more and more Persians poured out from the war tower and more still clambered up from the ladders and across the turret roof. They came at the trio with a shared war-cry. Spearless, he ripped his spatha from its scabbard. A spear strike came at him and he could only block with his sword, sending up a shower of sparks. When a second man swished a death-strike at Arius, he swung his blade up and into that one's armpit, saving his comrade. As they fought, he felt Arius and Drusus jolt and shudder, heard them croak and cry, grunt and swear. The stonework underfoot grew wet and slippery with blood, and he felt the Persians press ever harder upon them. Drusus died first, shield pulled away and his head staved in by a mace.

Now the Persians swamped Falco and Arius. Each was driven onto one knee in their tiny shield shell, a brutal rain of swords and spears battering at them, one ripping across Falco's bicep, another slashing his ear, a third piercing his leg near the knee.

'Mithras, hear us!' Falco cried as his shield began to dissolve like kindling.

The reply came in the form of a silvery flash and a baritone cry. Sixteen Parthica legionaries scrambled up the steps onto the turret top and crashed into the flank of the Persians. They barrelled some over, hacked many down and drove the remainder back to the ladders, bowling a few from the edge and to their deaths.

Shaking, panting, Falco and Arius lowered their shields, watching at the sixteen reinforcement legionaries used long poles to force the Persian ladders away from the walls. The tall ladders swayed and teetered as they were pushed almost vertical – each still with a handful of men mid-climb – before they toppled backwards with a chorus of wails as the higher climbers were dashed on the ground. Likewise, a storm of blazing arrows hammered into the wooden war tower docked against the turret. The great device went up like a torch, and when the men in the lower floors fled, the weight of others still in the upper floors sent it pitching over. It fell like a beaten giant, exploding on the scarp slope in a storm of timber and fire.

Falco and Arius shared a look, then rose from their knees, seeing the Persian assault being repelled like this all along the curtain wall. The Shahanshah's armies streamed back down the city scarp mound in disorder. The sixteen who had saved them had come from a section nearby where the besiegers had already been repulsed.

‘We did it? We won?’ Arius croaked.

The centurion amongst the sixteen reinforcements – face striped with sweat and blood – gave him a grave look. ‘We repelled them, but that was just the first wave.’

Indeed, Falco noticed how the retreating Persian soldiers were merely settling back into their original siege circle. He glanced across the city’s defences: the catapult-battered parapets were now like a motley collection of broken teeth, sections glistening wet with blood or draped with spear and arrow-studded bodies. Many hundreds, maybe more than two thousand legionaries dead, he estimated. Just as many Persians had perished, but that was merely a dent in their huge numbers. He stepped over close to the centurion, so nobody else would hear. ‘Sir... the *first* wave? Can we weather a second?’

The centurion’s mouth moved as if to rebuke him, but his lips settled into a tight line and he merely nodded. ‘It will not be easy, but,’ he scanned along the dusty land outside the walls, nodding to the giant bronze-beaked ram near the southwestern section, ‘as long as that monstrosity stays away from this turret. We have enough men still to hold out,’ the man assured him.

Falco gazed along the walls again, unconvinced. From the edges of his vision, he noticed that the strange old crone was still up on that rooftop, sentinel-like through all that had gone on. *Who are you?* he mouthed, staring back at her.

But then a cry rose from the streets. Both turned to see a messenger boy running towards the southern gatehouse from the war room at the heart of the city. ‘Open the gates,’ he cried. ‘Magister Militum Sabinianus wants to send an envoy to the Persian siege lines.’

Falco, Arius and the centurion all bristled.

‘What?’ the centurion gasped.

‘He’s seeking terms? Has the fat bastard lost his mind?’ Arius growled.

‘Lost control of his bowels, more like,’ Falco said, ‘one sight of battle from his palace rooftop has been enough to break his famous “courage”.’

A few of the nearby legionaries laughed wryly at this. But Falco’s attentions had moved on, gaze snagged by the diplomacy party Sabinianus had chosen, moving through the streets. A knot of four slaves, two legionaries and one man in a long, trailing white robe and a soldier’s belt and red cloak. The chaplain.

‘Set aside your fears,’ the chaplain called up to the walls as he neared the gates, holding up his gold *Chi-Rho* staff. ‘I will do what is right to see that this day ends well.’

Falco groaned. ‘Of all the negotiators to choose...’

‘Pah,’ Arius croaked. ‘I told you already, he said God would save us today.’

Falco gave him a wry look. ‘I’d say it was our legionary brothers who did that.’

Powerless, they watched as the small party departed through the battered but intact southern gates, and trooped out to the Shahanshah’s grand pavilion.

An hour passed; an hour of men sitting with their backs to the parapets where they were intact, drinking, faces burnt and blistered and caked in dust and gore. Many remained transfixed upon the Shahanshah’s tent, waiting for movement or signs of agreement. A *medicus* moved around the men, tending to their wounds, bandaging Falco’s gashed knee and bicep. Flies began to gather in black clouds, droning over the bloodied sections of the walls, laying eggs in the ripped bodies. Vultures too, perching on the defences, pecking and wrenching innards from corpses. One pulled and pulled at the eye of a dead man near Falco until the sinew stretched and snapped. He swished his arm to scare the bird off, then he and Arius sat to drink a full water skin each, but neither touched the hard tack or salted beef in the small ration bag a slave brought to them. Food was the furthest thing from both men’s minds.

‘He’s done it!’ one legionary called.

Falco and Arius’ heads shot up, seeing almost every other defender rising to look. He and Arius stood too and saw the chaplain emerge from the Shahanshah’s tent.

‘He’s made a bargain,’ Arius whispered in relief. ‘He’s saved us.’

But as Falco watched, a terrible sense of something askew crept over him. The slaves and two soldiers of the Roman embassy stood in a line beside the chaplain, but their heads hung low, dejected. One by one they were forced to their knees. Next, a bare-chested brute of a man walked along the back of the line, carefully placing an iron bolt above the vertex of each skull then pounding down upon it with a hammer. Each kneeling man spasmed and blood leapt up, before the body slid to one side, twitching. Soon, only the chaplain remained.

‘But... but he said God was with him,’ Arius whispered. ‘That he would do whatever it took to see that the day ended well.’

Falco watched as the hammer and bolt man walked behind the chaplain... then walked on by. A Persian general bedecked in bronze scale moved over to the chaplain's side. They seemed to be talking. Then, with a deliberate slowness, the chaplain raised one arm, pointing across to the city... right at the southeastern corner turret.

'He has,' Falco burred. 'He has done *exactly* what he needed to do to see that today ends well... for him.'

The Persian horns blew once more and a great wail of dismay rose from all around the Roman defences as, in the afternoon sunlight, the entire Persian force rolled forth once more, converging on Falco's turret. The gargantuan ram rocked and swayed amidst it all.

'Together,' the centurion croaked.

Falco heard the blood crash in his ears as he once again stepped over numbly to the blown-apart stretch of parapet, squaring his shoulders, holding his shield firmly, his spatha resting on the upper edge. Arius and a dozen others gathered with him, shield-to-shield, shoulder-to-shoulder, standing once more like human merlons. A handful of the men to the rear began to yammer in panic as the assault force rolled closer. Three staggered backwards, then threw down their shields and scrambled down from the walls, fleeing to the inner city, hearts and heads filled with fear.

Falco, Arius, the centurion and the others knew that same fear but stood firm, all realising that if this turret fell, then Bezabde would too.

'Remember what I told you,' Falco snarled in Arius' direction. 'Should the will of the soldier-god be thwarted today... you must get the phalera to Pavo... aye?'

'No,' Arius croaked, voice tight with battle-nerves. He stuffed the phalera into the collar of Falco's mail shirt. 'Fight... live! We can still win this day. You *will* see Pavo again!'

Falco half-laughed, half-growled, then stared along the length of his spear. 'Wine tonight, aye?'

'Aye!' Arius cackled in reply.

Boom! Boom! Boom! The Persian war drums struck up a rapid rhythm as the swells of ironclad infantry converged like a river of molten silver, rolling towards the turret and carrying hundreds of ladders. Trumpeting elephants stomped along with them, backs packed with archers. Worst of all, the

huge ram cut through the midst of this tide like a galley and was first to roll up the scarp mound, leading the assault.

‘Rain fire on that ram!’ the centurion howled. A squadron of Zabdiceni loosed a hail of blazing missiles, but they thocked onto the vinegar and water-soaked bull-hides draped over the great device and fizzled out. Men brought fresh urns of sand and bubbling pitch, but the ram’s stout roof sluiced the searing mixtures away from the men driving the device. The giant ram slowed by the foot of the turret, the top of it nearly level with the turret roof. The great ram groaned as the mighty bronze-beaked log within swung backwards. Falco, Arius and every legionary threw their spears at the device in a desperate effort to find some weakness, to sever some vital rope or break a load-bearing length of timber. But the retracted ram weathered it all.

The log whooshed back towards the turret, the bronze beak hammering into the lower stonework with a deafening crunch. Falco felt the world under him shake and shift. There was an odd moment of silence, the Persian clamour of war cries and the storm of horns and elephant roars fading in gleeful anticipation... before the turret growled like a woken bear and the flagstones under his feet shifted violently. White-hot fear rose up through him. The legionaries around him erupted in a terrified wail. With a rolling thunder of disintegrating wood and stone, the turret collapsed underneath their feet, the wretched song of destruction and screaming rolling out across skies above Bezabde.

In those moments, Falco knew chaos, falling, grievous blows to every part of his body. Crushing pain. A landing that cast the air from his lungs and the light from his mind. Half-buried, broken. With his last traces of strength he managed to clasp the phalera. Somewhere outside this tomb of rubble, he heard the triumphant cries of the Persian masses, the drums, the enemy horns, the crunch of their boots and hooves as they spilled over the remains of the fallen turret and into Bezabde. The very final sound was the most terrible of all – the panicked screams of the mothers and wailing of their babes as the pillage and slaughter began.

Come dusk, when the Persians had sacked Bezabde and gloried in their victory, when the Shahanshah had gleefully discussed what horrors he might subject the wounded and captive legionaries to, when almost all earthly senses were gone from the shell of Falco the legionary, a shadow fell over

his prone, motionless form. The shadow of a withered old woman. The shadow crouched by his outstretched, scraped and dust-covered hand and took the phalera from it.

‘You could have run like the others, but you chose to stand against it all,’ she said respectfully. ‘Pavo will know what you did here, and he too will know greatness.’ With that, she rose and turned away, her shadow fading into the dusk, changing shape, rising towards the sky like a bird.

Somewhere high above, an eagle screamed. It was the sound of destiny.

And so the [Legionary series](#) begins! All eight books so far are available from all good online bookstores in eBook, paperback and audiobook formats.



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