

OCTOBER - A.D. 8

"Hear us, great Father of Light! Receive our thanks for delivering us from the dark."

The words echoed off of the white-washed walls of the cave. All seventy men were silent upon their benches in that dark place, their heads bowed as they listened to the words. They had been eighty at one point but now ten walked in the light. Not bad, losing only ten.

Gaius Justus Vitalis spoke the words their Pater should have been speaking as their Saturn in the rites, but as he was away with the commander, it fell to the Heliodromus, the Sun Runner, to perform the ritual. The dark was lit only by two licks of flame behind him, on either side of the image of the tauroctony in which Mithras, Lord of Light, slew the great bull.

To the Heliodromus, the cave seemed smaller than usual, no doubt because of the size of the beast above him. He hoped the handlers had drugged it sufficiently. It was time.

"What time is it?" he called the question.

"It is the time of the season's death!" the men answered solemnly.

"Where are we going?"

"Into darkness!"

"What are you?"

"The Light! The Light! The Light!"

"And who are you?"

"Mithras! Mithras! Mithras!"

"Accept our offering..." he whispered as he thrust the gladius directly above his head into the soft flesh of the bull's belly. He sliced in four directions and the blood of the beast broke forth as water from a burst dam.

His arms held wide, eyes and mouth closed, Gaius Justus Vitalis, Optio of the third century of Legio V Macedonica, let the hot blood of the sacrifice wash over his entire person, staining his pure white robes crimson. He felt the power of his god in that sacrifice, as though he absorbed both light and blood in the ritual.

So this is what it feels like... he thought.

He then fought down the urge to vomit as the stink of the bull's punctured intestine spread. When the offal stopped falling, he stepped clear to accept a white towel from one of the Miles, his soldiers. The men began to file out of the cave, solemn, grateful to be alive as the sunlight that burned the fringes of some scattered clouds warmed their bodies.

"Vitellius," Gaius called to one of his men. "You and two others start cutting up the offering. Our century will dine on it tonight."

"Yes, Heliodromus," the man answered as they were still inside the sacred speleum, the cave.

"Be sure to wrap the thigh bones in the fat and offer them to Saturn."

"Yes, sir."

Gaius left the men to it and made his way out of the cave into the fresh October air. He closed his eyes when the sun touched his face. *One...two...three breaths...* When he opened his eyes he took in the expanse of the Danuvius and Porata rivers where the

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water fowl skirted their rippled surfaces in the morning breeze. The bald, grassy plains on either side of the rivers stretched on and on, greener now that the heat of summer had subsided. In the far northern distance, he observed the clouds where they clung to the Carpathian mountains, the slopes now awash with patches of green, gold and red.

"Better hurry, lads," he called into the cave. "The next century's going to be using the Mithraeum soon."

"Yes, sir," the three men answered in unison.

Gaius wrapped his gladius in the soiled towel and began making his way up the path to the legion's base, his bloody footprints fading as he got farther from the cave.