

The Judean Terror

For one-hundreth of the price that had been paid by the freeman Atilus to bring this gladiator into his *ludi*, another man would fatally betray him...

Yet, this time was still to come--in another land, far away from this amphitheater, filled with *munera* fans having made the short journey from Rome to see the games the Emporer Tiberius had neglected.

As he wrapped the long linen straps to pad his ankles and calves, the other's of his *ludi* watched. In a very short time this one had become the featured performer. Outside, up the dreaded ramp to the hot, shifting sands of the arena--always burning the soles of one's feet at contest's beginning--cries of impatience jeered the preliminary event's contestants.

This one's tenure had almost been short-lived; in his very first victory he'd refused the crowd's insistent *iugula!, iugula!, iugula!*

The *editor* had been furious, standing upon his seat he'd repeated the dreaded *thumbs up!* In all directions the crowd continued to respond. This one, billed as *The Judean Terror*, had just delivered what looked like *the death blow!* The stacked rings of the wooden scaffoldings--weaving and shaking with the surges of the tightly packed crowd--had oo'ed *habet!, habet!*, then shrieked with displeasure when they realized that he'd not jammed his trident into the neck of his fallen foe, but had merely pinned his right sword arm to the sand instead.

The man had stood, calmly gazing upon the waves of spectators groaning

the stands this way, then that, the faces in the crowd one blur of bloodlusting froth, then had dropped to his knees and bowed his head. There he'd remained, awaiting the *editor's* hand to motion the stadium guards to behead him. Yet the *editor* had feared this one. Not only was his prowess supernatural but too many stories had accompanied him. He'd sat in his box, trembling, not wishing to upset Atilius but aware as well that the freedman's greed too often clouded his wisdom. Then, as if the gods really existed, the crowd had settled into silence. The murmurs of *missum, missum*, had rippled here and there. Soon all were waving their hems of togas and cloaks in approval. At this call for mercy the editor jumped to his feet again and gave the *thumb's down* signal to have the contest ended, both gladiators escorted back to their barracks. Thus had this man become their leader. Though his face held the features of a Roman patrician he indeed was from Judea. He'd grown up with his brothers, family and friends as a Jew under Roman rule. Sometimes the centurians and other Roman soldiers could be cruel--treating the Jews as dogs, donkeys, beasts of burden. A childhood game they'd played with the fishermen's nets had turned into more--together with tridents, an unusual form of self-defense. When their mother Mary--cursed with gleaming cheeks of beauty--had been insulted by a particularly savage centurian, they had hunted him down, and, crafty as foxes, had awaited him to be alone. Their nets and tridents were already making their presence felt among the occupying army--whose soldier's issue of shield and short sword proved no match for the swirling skills of distracting nets, the sharp swing of a blow to the helmet by the trident's butt leaving the transgressor's head ringing for days.

That night, though, James, his brother, had gone too far. He'd pierced the cringing fool's throat with his trident and left it as a warning. As they'd rushed back into Heaven's protection of night, his own objections were hushed

The slain soldier's commander was a shrewd military man. Bribery had gotten him the identity of the renegade young men; he'd had them all rounded up and threatened with execution unless the one who'd done the deed identified himself.

The man now known as *The Judean Terror* had stepped forward, said, "I am the one you seek."

Seeking to make him an object lesson, the commander had sentenced him

ad gladium. He'd arrived in Rome, and the fat jolly man running the gladiator school had given him net and trident, as a jest, and pitted him against one of Rome's best. Though later the *ludi*-master would claim that the sun had gotten in his man's eyes--perhaps Rome's gods wished to humble his prize gladiator a bit, as well, for his recent boastful behavior--those in the stands that day saw a man enchant another with jaguar-like stealth and suddenness, the swirls of the net hypnotic before an unseen swoop and capture of the feet, sudden tumble into the burning sand. Rome's fans had whooped with laughter, the Judean had stood upon his foe's chest, awaiting his instructions. The fat jolly man had squealed in protest and managed to save his best. When the profitable sum was offered for the Judean he was only too glad to be rid of him...

Now *The Judean Terror* picked up each greave, fastened tight the criss-crosses of leather behind his calves and ankles. He hooked the leather-lined, broad strip of bronze around his corded-muscle mid-section. Massaging his torso with his fingers he breathed deeply, let his eyes soft gaze. Past the wooden ceiling--already acrid with dry rot. Past the guards at the square of light at the entrance to the arena...

One day soon--unknown to him, unknown to all--disaster would strike here. The slapdashed together amphitheater--overfilled for the sake of profits to Atilius and his backers--would collapse one sultry dog day of summer and leave 50,000 bodies lying dead, gape-mouthed in astonishment. He, too, in the arena, would drop his shield and sword to the sand in amazement. The Senate in Rome would investigate, Atilius would be put into exile. The mysterious gladiator known as *The Judean Terror* would be sent back to Judea. Though a patrician benefactor would purchase his wooden sword of freedom the man would never receive it; his skill had earned him enemies, as a final joke from Rome's hidden quarters he'd be sent to Judea as a war-galley slave.

Still, the very network that had gotten him into this matter would get him out. His mentor, a white-haired man from the Essene *Therapeut* colony in Alexandria known as Philo, would arrange a surprise freeing of him when the galley reached Judea. Not hard, as the guards, glad to be ashore again, were soused to the gills.

After some time in retreat at their desert fortress at Qumran, where the aches and wounds and memories of savage blows landed, endless pulling of drum-cadenced oars, would be washed away beneath the hidden spring's

waterworks cascading upon him, he would be safely able to reenter day-to-day Judean life. And for a time the news of the amphitheater's collapse--a fear that the Jew's god had caused it--would keep the Roman jackals at bay. When mysterious mishaps would happen, he would be the first interrogated. Raising his palms to the centurians, he would tell them that he *was a man of peace now, surely they've heard that he'd retired?* Grunting, they'd insist that he help them--reminding him of the official favor he'd once received in Rome. He'd roll his eyes heavenward, sigh in his act of exasperation, and tell them that *it must be my kid brother Philo*. A description of Philo as a wild-eyed, dark-haired irrepressible youth would follow, with the man's confession that he'd been unable to restrain him of late and that he'd slipped somewhere into the desert, avoiding the man's admonition to become--as himself-- peaceful, a man of Heaven.

With all the sincerity he could muster he would assure the centurions that once he caught up with him he would indeed turn him over to their custody. Eyes glinting at him, mistrusting, but not really having anything to use against him, they would disperse to his *goodbyes* of friendship...

All this, and, sad to say, too much more, still awaited the *Judean Terror* as he readied himself for combat. They'd told him today he'd be atop a bridge, to be attacked from each end by *threax*. As he'd refused to fight his own school, barbarians--from lands where he'd not yet been heard about--were imported.

Heavy footsteps came down the ramp towards him. "Now Jew!" the guard barked. "Remember, no net and trident until you knock each one off the

bridge first with swordplay."

He signaled his acknowledgement, reached down for his helmet. A fierce griffin rose in a crest from the bronze bowl, white feathers adorned each side--at the hinges for the cheek-guards, a primary target, yet, in his case, the feathers never touched. He put it on, swung down from the sides the cheek-guards, fastened the metal latch tightly. The soft gaze of his eyes vanished as they adjusted to the metal grates prisoning and protecting his eyeholes. With one long exhale his visage became as rock-solid as his muscled mid-section.

Vir fortis! He turned to acknowledge the salute of his school--each pounding right fist of combat to heart. One day one had ventured forth to ask the source of his mysterious strength, as his body, though supple, seemingly was no match for some of the hulks thrown at him. He'd rolled eyes and pointed to Heaven, saying his God was a merciful one, that no matter what was taken from him or done to him, all that was ever asked of him was never to lose heart. *Dignity*, he'd explained, can never be taken from one, only surrendered. *Die upright*, he'd said, *like a man*.

He raised himself to full height, bowed his head in gratitude to his comrades, turned and walked up, into the light.

