

Centurion

Saxa's Journey – Book One

By

Pasha Baker

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Chapter One

"Saxa! Follow me!" Sister Emtraut ordered as the elder priestess hustled through the temple's doors. Her skirts whisked the wooden floors as she swept past the worshipers and by Sister Saxa who stood at the foot of the great gilded statue of Freyr, the temple's deity, polishing its surface with a leather cloth. Saxa frowned watching as the other priestess disappeared into the doors that led to the back of the temple.

With a quick request to be blessed with a respectful bow, Saxa picked up her skirts and followed.

"I heard it from Clemmons Swiegson. He and his children had been hunting in the hills near the Springlands when they saw them. The great Roman army has seized more land in the south and is working their way here." Sister Emtraut's voice shook, its volume increasing with the amount of priests and priestesses filing into the back room.

"That is impossible." Cedric, the highest and oldest of the elders shook his head, the strands of his white hair fanning out wildly about his mostly naked pink head as he stumped his walking staff on the wood floor. "The clans of the southern lands have agreed to join together to fight the Romans, their numbers should overpower them!"

"I know, wise brother, I thought so too. But Clemmons claims their armies are made solely of men who wear colors of blood and the sun, and many metals and they do not battle singularly as true warriors, but cower together in groups then cover themselves with scales as if they were a single, great monster. They then act as one beast with many arms coming from beneath their scales that stab and cut through our men like a tortoise against a fox, but with many knives for its hands and feet." Sister Emtraut's cheeks and eyes were bright as Saxa, her apprentice priestess, stood beside her, her own eyes wide with the idea of a huge, dark monster writhing about, cutting down their men as it left a long, bloody path in its wake. "According to Clemmons they will be here by tomorrow."

Brother Cedric's scraggly beard wriggled as he chewed his knuckle. "There is no time then to fortify ourselves and our temple from them so we must head to the caves near the giant gray pine. Sister Emtraut, you will take the young ones to gather anything precious from the temple rooms and to make sure to give any of our people food or clothing if they ask. There is so little

with the end of winter, but give as much as we can. The rest of you will head to the nearby villages to warn the people and to help in gathering the livestock. Now be off all of you so that we may come together once again when this is past!"

"Come, Sister Saxa." Sister Emtraut grabbed her arm.

"But I am not a young one!" Saxa glowered as she yanked her arm away.

"Saxa, please. I need your help with the children!" Saxa sighed and relented at her mentor's desperation.

Sisters Brunhilde and Emtraut, along with Saxa and a few other younger priestesses, herded the orphans down the hillside and through the woods behind the temple down the slopes as a deceitfully, beautiful day formed around them. The villagers, mostly women and children, raced around them on their hasty journey towards the Blue hills and the rough camps being set up there, each adult carrying at least a large basket as they scrambled through the brush.

"Wait!" Saxa stopped, grabbing at her throat. "I forgot Sister Isolde's necklace!"

"Saxa, leave it. There is no stopping!" Sister Brunhilde ordered as she continued running.

"No, I must have it." Saxa shoved her basket at Sister Emtraut, shaking her head at the older woman's exasperated look, unable to leave behind the one possession she had of her best friend who had died the summer last. "I'll be quick, go on ahead. The Romans haven't even gotten to our villages yet so I have time. I'll be with you before nightfall, I promise." Saxa grabbed up her skirts, ignoring her mentor's orders and pleas as she scabbled back up the bank she'd come down in the direction of the stony temple that stood at the peak of the highest hill in order to take in the full glory of the sun.

I am young, I'm sure I can make it in enough time.

She scrambled through the temple's back rooms, overturning every basket in her quest to find the simple amulet. Opening the hatch in the wood floor, she used the ladder partway then jumped down the rest to the lower chambers, forgetting about the urgency of the moment as she became obsessive in her quest. She searched through clay amphoras, reed baskets and sewn satchels that hung from the walls, all of them shoved about and left a mess in the priests' and priestesses' rush to save what they could, but her precious necklace was gone. *I will do one last scan of the upper halls then I shall leave.*

Climbing up the ladder, she had just returned the cover to the hatch when she halted. The

outline of a large man was standing in the main doorway to the temple. She could tell by the crude, sharp angles of his outfit that he was not a simple villager. He seemed to be waiting, looking out over the hillside while sounds of shouting and the clanging of many metal weapons drifted through the doorway to her, announcing that the battle had breached the great hill. The dankness of the back room air grew even thicker, making it difficult for Saxa to get a full breath. Trying to keep her gulping silent, she carefully made her way back to the door at the rear of the temple peering out only to see the way she had come spotted with men battling among the brush and rocks. Scared and bewildered, she sank down amid the huge reed baskets of a back room.

Rustling and scraping noises brought her to attention and she ordered her heart to quiet and her bladder not to release as the man came closer, knocking his way about the back rooms; lifting pot lids, tipping over bushels, kicking at shelves. She could hear the scuffling of his shoes on the hewn floor and knew he was near. She looked down when something wet hit her arm and realized it was a tear, her face slick as they slid unimpeded down her cheeks. *Why are they bothering with our temple? What are they going to achieve by capturing a bunch of helpless priests and priestesses?*

His footfalls moved away back towards the front of the temple and Saxa sidled quickly to the rug that hid the wooden door in the floor, throwing it open and, trying to move without making a sound, she clambered in and tried to maneuver the rug back in place behind her before she closed the door and climbed down once again. She hid among the huge oil and wine urns, barely breathing as she listened to the beats of the feet of more men joining with the first.

"I swear I saw a girl in these back rooms!" Adolphus waved for the two warriors who joined him.

"We are here for the emperor not your cock, fool." Septimus shoved a bushel aside causing dried berries to spill and roll across the floor in his haste to get to a gold ornament that hung on the wall behind it.

"I thought that's why you ran in here... to loot from the people's offerings," another soldier, Cadius, grumbled as he kicked over one of the bushels, adding his own cascade of millet to join in the mess covering the floor.

"Of course," Adolphus agreed, "but I've also a need to rut between the thighs of a barbarian woman."

"They wouldn't mind much, these women want a good rut by the looks of things..." Septimus motioned to the large, gold statue that stood in front of the main hall, the three men laughing and agreeing as they joked about how it stood proudly with its huge penis sticking straight out before it gleaming brightly from the sun slanting across it from a window high above.

Saxa could hear the soldiers' progress through the rooms overhead, the floor boards creaking as they scavenged the baskets and jars that crowded the storage rooms and apothecary. *Nooo!* She tried to make herself even smaller when she heard the hatch door scrape open. *Freyr! Please take pity on me! Please help me. I know I was impetuous, again, and made a mistake as I too often do, but please do not let them harm me overly much...* She kept the prayer repeating in her head as she crouched as low as she could go in an area filled with stacked baskets that had held fruit, vegetables and the last, few sad piles of tanned animal skins.

Saxa could tell by the sound of the men's voices they were getting closer. The dirt walls flickered with the light cast from torches they must have started before entering the lower rooms. Through the dimness, something glinted back at her from the far wall and she remembered that the items that hung from the series of pegs pounded deep into the packed soil included several knives to be used in the skinning and cutting of pelts. When the glow from their torches lessened, showing they had moved on, Saxa scuttled to a smaller grouping of baskets nearer the knives. She sat waiting for any sound of the soldiers and, hearing nothing, she made to crawl across the open floor to where the utensils were hanging. She leaned in but a pain in her upper arm stopped her, and she realized as she was pulled into the air, that someone had grabbed her.

"Ha!" The man grinned at her, untroubled by her screaming.

"Is est a bellator piscis!" Laughing, one of the other soldiers came to help his struggling brother in arms and together they fought Saxa's clawing hands and kicking feet.

"Solvo suos!" The first man tried to calm her and she noted how much bigger he was than the others even in the dimmed light. The man set her loose and she made to run only to be grabbed by a third. She squealed as he tossed her over his shoulder, carrying her into a larger room where the men had used their torches to light the oil lamps that hung about the room.

"Pulchra..." The leader stared at her hungrily, his hand clamping down upon her wrists, holding her still as they looked her over.

"Is est a veneficus! Inviso suos Vespasian." One of the warrior's eyes glimmered over the

intricate embroidery that edged the sleeves and neck of her finely woven gown.

"*Cultora...*" the leader replied in a reverent tone as his eyes scoured her while she was held tight in another soldier's grasp. "*Quisnam es vos, puella?*" The man's questioning was in a voice used to commanding men.

"Sons of pigs!" Saxa's face changed to a mask of hatred as she spat, knowing they would kill her or worse. She watched the large man warily, waiting for his reply, looking at his craggy, blunt features as a light scar along his brow grew whiter. She jolted when his hand lifted, thinking he would hit her, but he only used it to wipe her spittle from his chin.

"*Ut eram a erroris, puella...*" The largest warrior's eyes had a deadly glint as his grasp grew even tighter.

The other men laughed as the leader jerked her to him, crushing her against his broad chest.

"*Bardus puella! Operor vos ignoro a roman bellator coitum vox?*" one of the other men teased as her proximity forced her to stare into the largest man's intense gaze.

Even in her innocence, Saxa could see it was not just anger snaking about the huge man's face. She cried out as he grabbed her by her tangled hair and yanked her up to him, the sound stifled as his lips crushed hers. Dumbfounded beneath the man's weighty caress, she remained lax to his hunger, her body shaking uncontrollably beneath his heavy embrace, her hands slackly gripping the wrist of the hand he clutched her hair with.

He released her as quickly as he had grabbed her, so that she stumbled while the men laughed and joked at her reaction.

"No man dares to touch a priestess of Freyr without her permission!" She slapped her marauder, realizing afterwards it might have been a hasty mistake when something even more sinister rose from behind his eyes. She was limp and numb, too shocked to fight when the brute grabbed her and tossed her over his shoulder to carry her deeper into the dark chambers.

* * *

"Hold your position! Keep the line!" Centurion Equitates Gaius swiped and jabbed his sword, pounding and fending the many blows and arrows directed at him as he shouted orders to his men.

His horse lumbered through the crowds of bodies, both alive and dead, as the Roman urged it up the hillside towards the building at the top; a building made of stone, larger and more solid than any of the mud and wattle huts that peppered the landscape. *The temple*, he announced to

himself, a grin of victory sliding its way across his handsome features as he slashed his broad sword through the continuing barrage.

As the crowd gave way and grew less, he turned his mount about to view the battle from the top of the hillside where he could see more clearly the gleam of his metal helmeted warriors amid the defending tribes and knew they were many. *And so we conquer another people.* Across the valley, spotting a far hillside, he saw what he assumed were some of the tribal leaders.

"Heed me leaders of these barbaric hills!" he shouted over the din. "Here is your great temple! Now... know that you are beaten!" His smile was a sneer as he brandished his sword high, announcing his plan. It didn't matter if they understood or even heard him because he could feel their anguish at seeing him, a giant stranger, spurring his big roan stallion on towards their great temple. His smile became a grimace, his horse stumbling with exhaustion and pain but it too had a desire for blood and a lust for winning.

Chuckling, he savored the thought of the heathen warrior leaders balking as they saw him, the large, dark Roman interloper, with the blood red horse tail brush that arched atop his bright helmet, the same color of his cloak that showed him to be a son of the Roman gods and a leader of their armies, as they watched him enter one of their most sacred places.

Now they know that they are conquered. Gaius was the leader of the greatest of Rome's warriors. The tip of the spear; his men were to take the first line of opposition by surprise, and the rest of the Roman might would then follow in his wake.

He closed the door and stood for a moment inside the stone walled temple. He was alone. While the sound of the battle raged on behind him, he felt time stop, caught in the dank air of the wood and stone made room. Glittering motes of dust filtered through the shafts of light that came in from the brilliance of the sun outside and, for once in what seemed a lifetime, he could smell no blood nor sweat—just the sweet musk of incense the local priests must have burned to honor their god mixed in with the savory scent of foods cooking. The gentle sensations overwhelmed him and his heavy, exhausted body slumped while his brain seemed unable to quit cycling and roiling after the almost constant barrage of death, so that the heady stillness of the great room collapsed in on him making him nauseous and he vomited. He was done. He could go no further; his body quaking, his legs weak, the air crushing him so that he sank to the wooden plank floor. Leaning his head back, he opened his eyes and a brilliance of light seeped into them,

coming from a high window at the temple roof's peak. It was one of the few moments where he could think, and his head went immediately to what he often pondered in such a situation, why had he enlisted? He knew. He had been young and stupid, so excited to join that he had done it four years before the legal age. It had helped that he was already six foot and shaving by the time he was thirteen. Had it been worth it?

A sharp cry broke through his moment of revelation. By the brief sound, he could tell it had come from a woman and that she was either in pain or terrified. He made himself rise and chucked off his helmet, scratching the sweaty shorn curls that hugged his skull. He stared about the rough hewn building, his eyes adjusting to the dimness, settling on a statue of the local people's god. Their buildings were nothing like the huge, marble buildings and statues of his homeland, but he could tell that this also was a sacred place.

Through the haze of dust and sunlight, he walked into the back rooms finding chambers that branched off to the right and left. He walked through overturned baskets and broken vases, looking over shelves filled with miniature pots and baskets that scented the air with their pungent herbs and drafts. He followed the sounds through the abandoned halls, seeking out the men whose laughter echoed through the building, his curiosity further insisting he heed the call of the squealing and pleading woman they were obviously accosting. He stopped a moment and closed his eyes. *Turn away. This is just another part of war.*

A forlorn sob rankled his resolve and he continued deeper into the bowels of the temple where he found a hole in the floor glowing from below with torchlight making it look like the restless mouth of a great dragon. He climbed down the ladder to the rooms beneath the temple floors, following the lamplight until he was brought to a room where he found the Roman warriors gathered in a group, too focused on what they were doing to notice him. Through the din between the grouping of the three large men, Gaius caught glimpses of soft, pale flesh emerging from the edges of torn cloth. He cleared his throat. The men turned.

"Centurion Gaius?" said a voice beside him. The young warrior saluted as the centurion scanned him. Gaius nodded and did a brief salute in return but his focus was on the group. Amidst the leather and furs of the scuffle, his eyes stopped on the lush shape of a woman's breast. A very ample breast, naked from the tearing and pulling of clothing as the men fought the woman it belonged to. Though she was cowering and obviously quite distraught, Gaius could see the men had not yet achieved rape.

"Stupid wench, quit fighting!" A loud slap caused a muffled cry. "Soon I'll relieve you of your life!"

The words set something loose inside Gaius. "Enough!" He glared at the group. "All of you leave. OUT!"

One man looked at him perplexed, another annoyed, but fearing the notorious leader's wrath, they all began to do as ordered, the largest one using a hand fisted in her hair to drag the ravaged woman behind him.

"Leave the girl." Gaius stood rooted in place, hands on his hips, resolute as the men walked up to him.

"My lord, the girl is ours by all rights!" The man with the struggling woman stopped.

"Yes, sir! Under Roman decree, we found her. So spoils go to us!" The shorter soldier nodded to his buddy.

"I'm sure you can find another. You will leave this girl." The centurion's unfaltering tone lowered warningly.

The men searched each other for an ounce more bravery or certainty but, finding none, they only grumbled and the large one shoved the woman away.

"Fine. She'll be your trouble then."

Gaius knew that if he were a less respected leader who didn't have a nasty reputation for his ability to kill, the rough soldiers would probably have had no problem turning on him and claiming they had found his body in the temple cellar or otherwise. One of the soldiers glared up until he got to the centurion, but when Gaius glared back, his eyes dropped away as he scuffled by the calmer, cooler silvery green gaze of the huge centurion. The men continued to complain as they made their way back up the ladder to the main floor.

"You stay." Centurion Equitates Gaius halted the last soldier, the young man who had greeted him. "You will help me. Tie her up and make sure she cannot run off."

The young man nodded eagerly, his grin showing his pleasure in helping the notorious leader, then lunged to grab the woman as she tried to bolt through the space between the centurion and the door frame. When the woman began to battle the two men, obviously angry that she had been caught again, Centurion Gaius grabbed a length of sinew from a nearby peg and used it to wrap her wrists behind her. Gaius shook her then left a sound smack across her cheek which stopped her.

"You will have me..." The centurion pointed to himself, speaking in bit of her language mixed with his own. "Or them!" he motioned to where the soldiers had exited the temple. Gaius was a bit surprised that neither his slap nor his words seemed to have any effect as the woman, obviously not caring what the two military men said or did, continued to fight with her new captors to which the large leader shoved her to the ground. He kept his gaze on her terrified eyes as he pulled away from her lifting his hands in a show of not going any further which finally seem to calm her a little as she stilled.

She watched warily as Centurion Gaius took out his sword while the other soldier kept a tight grip on her and shoved the long blade deep into the packed dirt that was the basement floor, tamping it hard in place with his foot until it was deep and secure. He then pulled her to sit with her back against the hilt of the sword and he tied her bindings about it, leaving her fastened tightly to the spot.

As the centurion and his helper searched for any valuables, including foods, in the underground storage room, the woman jerked hard at the sword's handle only to find it unmoving forcing her to sit and wait for the two men to finish, listening to the toppling of baskets and the spilling and breaking of amphoras. Finally finished, the two returned to the woman who sat glaring up at them from beneath a mess of hair. The centurion squatted before her to further inspect the large bruises forming on her pale skin and the blood caking her lips.

"You're all right, pretty one... let me look at you." He brushed the hair from her face, the woman pulling away from his renewed interest. "No one is going to hurt you..." Gaius felt a strange hunger, some sort of desire to please this captive, to show her he was not like the others.

Saxa watched the man warily, beginning to understand that strange look in his eyes.

"*Adveho iam.*" He untied the tether to his sword, having her rise and handing her off to the soldier before he pulled his sword from the dirt floor. The other soldier was busy, trying to tell his leader something and feeling his grip loosen, Saxa yanked herself free to scurry into the shadows.

She ducked between some large vases. *Please Freyr! Make them go. Have them leave this temple, now that they've broken and torn it to pieces. There is still enough here to worship our beloved god in peace. Beloved Freyr, have you forsaken us? Do you not care for me any longer? Is this your sign that you have left?* Saxa tucked her head and stifled a sob.

"Block the exit!" Centurion Gaius strode through the lower rooms, his head moving side to side as he searched the darkness. *Now I am angry. Perhaps she'd rather have my sword through her belly than my kindness. Ah... there she is.* Beneath the wavering torchlight he found her trying to shove herself into a corner where there was a grouping of large clay urns, her riotous hair making her look more beast than human.

Gaius stood looking down at the woman a moment before he lowered to his haunches, sitting between her and the way out, motioning for the other man to do the same.

"I can wait, beauty." *Why do I even care whether or not she trusts me? Is it solely that she is lovely and I have a hunger to see what more lies beneath those rags? It has been too long since I have seen a woman who fits my tastes; not a limp-limbed wealthy man's daughter or hunter's wife with skin toughened to look like the leather she creates.* He salivated at the plumpness of the woman as if she were a ripe peach. Her well-formed breasts were made even more enticing due to their being shoved up by her torn collar from one of the other soldier's obviously trying to force it beneath the large pair, which had left her nipples exposed. Apparently unbeknownst to the woman, the two puffy, rosy points beckoned through the hanks of her dark hair while her well-rounded hips and buttocks were also accentuated by the torn remnants of her once sacred robes. He tugged open his bag as he crawled towards her. "Here. Have something to eat." He sat within a few feet of her, his hand outstretched as he offered some bread he'd pilfered. She stared back like a half starved pup; half crazed yet innocent from beneath her wild hair. *Remember your rank. Remember your duties. This temple should have been set ablaze hours ago, damning any who choose to remain within its flaming walls.* He could hear his fellow leaders chastising him even now. *The Mighty Centurion Gaius rankled by a pretty northern bitch? Have you truly come this far; a man who rose to centurion equitates by twenty-four reduced to a salivating boy, besotted by his desire to please a beauty for want of a saucy ride? No. You must put aside your urges and focus on continuing to rise in rank for soon you will be a legatus, commanding ten thousand men. Then you can have your choice of women; perhaps even a wealthy senator's daughter who comes with a fine dowry. Do not let a beautiful woman destroy all that you have carefully built. The fates have chosen for you to have this girl in order to fetch a heavy purse at the slave auctions, and that is all.*

Her new captor seemed relatively harmless though he looked otherwise. He was very tall and broad shouldered and he prowled about her temple home with long, fearless strides as if he

owned every part of it. The shape of his head and his general demeanor further gave off the impression of an alpha wolf; quick, intelligent close-set eyes, a long, sculpted nose that met with a wide sensually curving mouth above a heavy, cleft chin. She could feel his too intense gaze on her now, breaking her out of her complacency a moment as he squatted nearby. His pulling out a piece of bread from a little pouch at his waist and waving it at her only causing her more embarrassment when her stomach grumbled despite her shaking her head no. He grinned at her lie as he kept the bread poised and waited. In her mad rush to help her village uproot itself, she had forgotten to eat. His deep voice was not unpleasant as he tried to woo her out of her clammy corner of the storage area in his strange tongue. He furthered the offer by lifting up his drink bag, making Saxa realize how thirsty she actually was. She closed her eyes trying to stifle the now incessant clawing inside her belly and the desert that covered her tongue but her resistance was feeble and she nodded.

She hated how his grin widened in triumph as he moved in closer until he knelt beside her. He spoke to her gently as his long fingers carefully touched her arm, encouraging her to come out a bit so that he could untie her hands and he handed her the bladder of watered wine. Saxa grabbed it and drank gulp after gulp, feeling her stomach lurch at the vinegary substance until she gagged. Living within the temple had made her spoiled to the sensations of hunger and thirst, she not having felt such pangs since she was a very small child when her mother had first brought her to the temple of Freyr. She lowered her gaze and blushed from the intensity of his stare as well as her belly's revolting while he chuckled and took the bag from her. It was that small sound that helped her decide to leave her corner. He moved back to let her trundle forward, still squatting and watching him.

He stood up to his full height and she followed, her hands trying to catch up the pieces of her shredded dress, noting how his gaze now seemed more intent on catching any bared swelling areas rather than meeting her eyes. *So, he's not completely unlike the other men... But at least he keeps his hands away.* He fished out another hunk of bread from the bag slung on his hip and Saxa swallowed the stale bite. She pulled away with a small cry when she realized he had moved behind her and was touching her shoulders.

"Is est tutus." His voice was gentle as he moved away after draping his cloak about her. Saxa touched the dark red garment, adjusting its heavy fabrics so that it covered her better, feeling his heat and masculine scent of sweat and musk emanating from the well-worn fabrics further

giving her the impression of his forced dominion. *What do you want?* Her brain shouted when the man remained standing before her and the way out, clearly inspecting her shape beneath his cloak.

"I am a sacred bride of Freyr, impudent idiot. I am not the type of woman you are seeking!" He stared in surprise and she wondered if she was wrong in assuming he didn't understand her language as he handed her a metal object. Gingerly she handled the item, turning it about to realize it was a large brass clasp, meant for clasping the front of his cloak, and when she looked down to do so, she realized why his attentions kept returning to her front. The front of her gown was so ravaged it left her breasts very much on display. Saxa readjusted the cloak and placed the pin carefully so that she was completely covered. Catching the man's hungry gaze as she finished, she made a small growl in annoyance at his continued perusal to which he scowled as he raised his chin and, with a sneer and a sharp order, he shoved her to move ahead of him and up the ladder.

"Mercury!" Gaius shouted to his absent horse as he kept a hold on his captive and came out into lessening daylight. Glancing at the woman, he was startled by the brilliance of her hair as it seemed to catch a dark fire beneath the cloudless sun. In the darkness he had thought it was as black as his, but the sun set it into a gilded burgundy glow. As the horse trotted up nickering fondly at the sight of its owner, the woman made a squeaking sound and pulled back causing Gaius to grab her tighter and his fingers encircling her wrist alerted him to her trembling. He clucked his tongue, trying to quiet her but refusing to let her pull away. When he found she would not stop, he lifted her up and made her straddle the patient horse, seating himself behind her before she could think about getting off.

"Set it ablaze," he shouted to the young soldier who stood at the temple entrance. The man nodded. "Relax, beauty," Gaius murmured to her hair, as he urged the horse down the mountain. With his arm circling her and his body pressed tightly to hers, he could still feel her tremble and stiffen, even letting out a cry as he pressed his heels to Mercury's flanks and set him to gallop. He could take it slower, allow her time to adjust but he was tired and wanted to get back to the temporary camp before it was too dark. At the bottom of the hill before the grassy slope became the forest, he made a quick glance behind them, trying not to alert the woman as he assessed his work. Finding the bright flames and thick smoke at the top of the hill satisfactory, he dug in his heels causing his horse to lunge into the trees.