

The Seven Stars

by Simon Leighton-Porter

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The logo for Mauve Square Publishing features a solid mauve square on the left. To its right, the words "Mauve", "Square", and "Publishing" are stacked vertically in a black, sans-serif font.

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This book is dedicated to my dear wife, Wendy.

Chapter One

Patras, Greece. AD 60

Gasping for breath, the Galilean dashed between the market stalls, pulling down awnings, lines of washing and baskets of produce as he ran. Anything to buy time, anything to slow them down. To the left a narrow opening between the mud-brick walls, partially hidden by a curtain: he pulled it aside, moving from bright sunshine into the cool depths of the passageway beyond. Now in his fifties and overweight, he knew he couldn't out-run them; he would just have to try and lose them in the warren of lanes and alleys surrounding the port. As he ran, lungs bursting, he heard once more the sound of pursuit closing in: they had seen him. A bend in the passage hid him from sight and at the end, emerging into the sunlight once more, he turned right and forced his unwilling legs uphill towards the acropolis. It would take him away from the port, in completely the wrong direction, but perhaps they might not expect him to head that way. Perhaps.

Glancing behind, he never saw the outstretched arm which caught him across the throat like a rope, slamming him down onto his back. Winded and in pain, he tried to ward off the kicks that seemed to be coming from all directions: a vicious blow to the ribs and then rough hands pulling him upright. 'Not planning on leaving us so soon, Andreas?' said a short, wiry young man who had pushed himself to the front of the crowd. 'Aegeas would like a little word with you first.' A fist caught him flush on the side of the head.

He struggled but there were too many of them; thirty or more, the usual band of dockside toughs, marshalled by five Roman soldiers who looked on in contempt as more blows rained down.

The soldiers dragged him, bloodied and groaning, into the presence of Aegeas. Tertiary syphilis had rendered the Roman governor of Achaea's face a hideous mask and had twisted his mouth into a permanent rictus grin. He stood up from behind his desk and, using his cane for support, hobbled round to Andreas. 'Release him,' he said.

The soldiers obeyed but the Galilean's feet went from under him and he slumped down onto the cold marble floor. He looked up at Aegeas in supplication and through lips swollen from his beating, tried to speak. 'I can explain -'

The Roman moved closer and one of the soldiers bent to pick

Andreas up. 'Leave him,' said Aegeas, gesturing them away. They stepped back at once: Obedience to Aegeas was instinctive; a life-preserving reaction. For a moment he stood over Andreas, saying nothing and then struck him across the face with the heavy cane, causing his victim's hands to come up in an effort to protect himself. After ten, maybe a dozen blows he stopped, caught his breath and then spoke as though they were discussing the price of olive oil.

'If there's one thing I cannot abide, it's disrespect, Andreas.'

'Please sir, let me explain –'

'No, please, kindly allow me. Interrupt again, Andreas,' he said without a trace of emotion, 'and I'll have your tongue cut out. Now, talking of tongues, it's your stupid tongue that's landed you in this mess, isn't it? Answer me, man.' As his voice rose, his disfigurement caused the words to run into a menacing cobra's hiss.

'Yes, sir, it has.' Andreas spoke as though every word was an agony.

'Yes.' Another venom-laden hiss. 'I very politely asked you to stop preaching sedition. Nero himself has made it clear that filling the plebeians' heads with nonsense about your imaginary Jewish god and about Christ and his stupid conjuring tricks, is punishable by death. I've been lenient with you, Andreas, I could've had you crucified but I gave you a chance, didn't I?'

Andreas tried to shift position, but the pain from a broken rib caused him to cry out. 'But you don't understand, sir. I serve a higher authority –'

'A loose tongue and a disrespectful one. You disobeyed an order from the Emperor, you turned down a polite invitation to come and speak to me and then had the discourtesy to try and leave my province without permission. And then when you are brought before me, you fail to remain standing in my presence.' He gestured once more to the guards. 'Pick him up. I want to make sure he hears this.' They heaved Andreas to his feet and Aegeas hobbled towards him, so close that the Galilean could almost taste the foul odour from the governor's rotting gums. 'Together with your friends, the boatmen, you will be scourged and crucified tomorrow on the beach. For you, however, we have a little treat. No nails, just ropes. And before you thank me, understand that it will take you twice as long to die. Get him out of my sight.'

Expressionless, Aegeas watched the soldiers drag him away, his pleas for mercy echoing down the corridor. Once they were out of sight he returned to his desk and picked up a folding bronze frame no bigger than a man's hand. On each interior face was a layer of hardened beeswax. With a stylus he carved two simple figures: A.X. Pulling the

leather strap tight around the frame, he applied his wax seal and shouted for his personal slave. ‘Tell the captain of the guard,’ said Aegeas, ‘that he is to deliver this into the hand of the emperor himself. He will be expecting it.’

The slave disappeared at a trot down the same corridor, closing the door at the end. A few moments later, Aegeas was joined by the young man who had spoken to Andreas from the crowd. The governor turned to greet the new arrival. ‘You did well, Josephus.’ he said. ‘The emperor will be most grateful.’

‘A pleasure as always, sir.’ he replied, his slightly accented Latin betraying his Judean origins.

Andreas’ fate was sealed and with his execution, the newly-fledged Christian church would have its first martyr – Saint Andrew. Few but Josephus knew the crimes of which Andreas was guilty: and for Josephus this was personal.

Chapter Two

Oxford University, the present day.

Flora Kemble glared at the ringing telephone. The evening out with her girlfriends had already been organised so this had to mean work and more delays. Who else but a fellow academic – and probably one of the many at the university without a social life – would call at six o'clock on a Friday?

At twenty seven she was the youngest member of the department and Friday had been an eternity in coming. After a long week teaching a summer school class whose members made up for their lack of knowledge by an overdose of enthusiasm, she was tired, hot and wanted to go home. With a sigh she put down her briefcase, pulling her long dark hair away from her face, first into a pony-tail then away from her left shoulder as she put the receiver to her ear. 'Department of palaeography, Dr Kemble.' In response, a man's voice greeted her in Italian, a language she spoke fluently, but none the less, it took her a few seconds to work out who was speaking. Then she recognised the voice and a tiny but palpable frisson ran through her, something she couldn't define, a spontaneous warmth that caused her attractive, heart-shaped face to break into a smile. Flora hadn't spoken to Dr Francesco Moretti for nearly a year and the pleasure at hearing the handsome archaeologist's voice put aside all thoughts of leaving the office. 'What a lovely surprise, Francesco. Not like you to be working so late on a Friday,' she said, gently teasing.

'That's why I'm calling. It's so good I don't want to go home.'

Flora smiled again and looked at her watch: six o'clock in the UK meant seven in Naples. 'For you to be at work at this hour on a Friday, it must be good. What have you found?'

'Well, it's not 100% certain, but we've found a villa at Pompeii....a villa that looks like it belonged to Josephus.'

'Josephus!' Flora sat upright and almost dropped the phone in shock. 'There's no evidence of his ever having set foot in Pompeii. Are you sure?' she asked, her hands trembling with excitement.

'Pretty sure, but we're going to need your help,' said Moretti. 'How quickly can you get here?'

'Well, I'll have to check with the Dean but tell me what you've got and I'll call him.'

'What we've got is the ground floor and cellar of a villa, about three

hundred metres south of the main site, just off the Via Tenente Ravallese. They're redeveloping some flats and the guys putting in the foundations hit archaeology.'

'Hardly surprising.'

'No, and we thought it was going to be a routine conservation job too. But then we found a lintel with "*T. Fl. Ios fecit.*" on it.'

'Come on, Francesco, don't tease. That's not conclusive, you know as well as I do. What else have you got?'

She heard him laughing down the line at her impatience. 'Are you sitting down, Flora?' he said.

'Yes, I'm in my office. Come on, this isn't fair,' she laughed. 'What've you got? Tell me.'

He paused for effect. 'A largely intact codex on parchment of *The Wars of the Jews* and plenty of fragments from *The Antiquities of the Jews*: we may even have enough to put together a full copy, we're keeping our fingers crossed.' A piercing squeal of excitement forced him to hold the phone away from his ear.

Flora could barely contain herself. 'But that means –'

'Yes,' continued Moretti, 'They predate the Martial codex by at least twenty years, maybe more, because although most of them are in Greek, some are written in Aramaic.' Once again, he moved the phone away a few inches. It was a wise precaution.

'But that's unbelievable,' said Flora, unable to control her excitement. 'Has anyone made a start on translating them? Any textual validation?'

'Yes. I was waiting for the results before I called you. They've just come in. Donald Sumter got here three weeks ago and he's positive about the date – he says they were written within ten years of the eruption – but he's still hedging his bets on the authorship.' The line went quiet. 'Flora, are you still there?'

'Yes. I'm here,' she said, all the enthusiasm gone from her voice. Donald Sumter, professor of ancient history at William Sunday University, Alabama: world authority on ancient Aramaic and Coptic, Bible scholar, TV evangelist and full-time pain in the neck: that's all I bloody need, she thought. 'Nothing like Donald to take the shine off things, is there?'

'Look, I know you two don't get on –'

'Don't get on?' said Flora. 'The man's a bigot, a misogynist and a religious maniac. Why on earth did you use him of all people?'

'Because he was available at short notice, he self-funds and he's good.'

‘Does he know I’m coming?’ she heard Moretti’s voice catch and pause. ‘Well? Does he know or not?’

‘Yes.’

‘And what did he say?’

‘Look, Flora, we can talk about that once you’re here.’

Flora sighed. ‘OK, Francesco, it’s your dig, I’m sorry. I didn’t mean to be rude. Now, come on, this is better than Christmas: tell me what else you’ve found.’

‘It’s simple,’ he replied. ‘As well as a domestic occupation layer we’ve got a scriptorium. Nearly everything in it looks like original texts by Josephus: some in Aramaic, others in Greek and a big heap of letters in Latin, but those are on papyrus and in a pretty poor state so the conservators are nervous about letting us near them yet.’

‘That’s brilliant,’ she said, all thoughts of the odious Sumter banished from her mind. The questions tumbled out. ‘What about the other finds, the codices, what’s the state of conservation like?’

‘Much of it’s in poor condition but some of the parchments are fabulously preserved – almost up to Egyptian standards. The roof of the building stayed in one piece when it came down. It obviously gave way early on during the eruption and there was a good thick layer of dry, compacted pumice and ash around everything. The pyroclastic surge doesn’t seem to have had much effect on the finds: too much insulation and too little oxygen at a guess, and the concretion layer has done an excellent job of keeping the humidity constant.’

‘Francesco, I’ll be there,’ she said. ‘Even if I have to pay my own way, I’ll come. Let me call the Dean.’

When at last she tracked him down, the Dean of the faculty agreed to the trip at once such was the importance of finding new work by one of the few known eye-witnesses to the tumultuous history of first century Galilee and Judea.

She phoned around her friends to let them know she wouldn’t be coming out that evening. But despite her excitement over the coming trip to Italy, she couldn’t help having slightly mixed feelings on what she would be missing. One of her old girlfriends from undergraduate days, who, after a long period of singledom, punctuated only by a succession of unsuitable men, had finally found what promised to be “the one” and so Flora and the rest of the gang were going along to give him the once-over. Herself recently single, at least she could savour the vicarious enjoyment of seeing a dear friend happily paired off. But instead, she was packing for at least two weeks in Italy, jumping up and down on her suitcase, trying to get the lid down on a several “just in case” items she

knew she'd never need but would feel lost without.

Next, she phoned her parents and then set off in search of the cat which was sunning himself in the small courtyard garden at the back of her two-up, two-down Victorian cottage just off the Iffley Road. It was her little refuge against the world: safe behind its shiny blue front door, she felt nothing unpleasant could ever reach her, and to leave it, even for something that promised to be the highlight of her professional year, was still a wrench.

She bundled the protesting cat into his carrying box and put it into the back of her elderly Toyota before heading out of town towards her parents' house which stood at the head of a wooded valley just outside the Oxfordshire village of Shipton-under-Wychwood. Despite her good intentions to return to Oxford straight away and spend the evening finishing off all the loose odds and ends of work, the prospect of cold poached salmon with her mother's home-made mayonnaise for supper was just too tempting. She put up a brave fight, but then when her father brought her one of his eye-wateringly strong gin-and-tonics for "sundowners" she realised that resistance was futile and she'd be spending the night in her old bed.

The main course was nearing its end when Flora's father got up from the table. 'I don't know what it is about Chablis, but one bottle between three is never enough.' Her mother pretended to disapprove but did nothing to prevent him reappearing with the slim green bottle, its sides dripping with condensation.

'So what's the hurry?' her mother asked as the cork popped open. 'You said you had to go to Pompeii, but why?'

Flora took a sip of the cool, golden-green wine. 'Well, I still can't bring myself to believe it, but Francesco Moretti – I've told you about him before haven't I –?'

'I think so, dear,' said her mother absent-mindedly.

'Anyway, Francesco's people have uncovered a villa that looks as though it belonged to Josephus.'

'Is that good?' her father asked.

'Good? It's better than that. Josephus is one of the only reliable – well reliable-ish – eye-witnesses to what happened in Israel during the second half of the first century. He was a Jewish priest who was very pally with Nero at one stage but then ended up as a rebel commander during the war against Rome in AD 66.'

'So what did they do? Feed him to the lions?'

'No, that's the funny thing. They captured him in AD 67 and somehow he talked Vespasian round into believing that he, Vespasian

that is, would fulfil a religious prophecy by becoming a great leader and in the end they let him go.'

Her father shook his head in disbelief. 'Amazing what people will believe. Nothing changes, does it?'

'It gets better,' said Flora. 'A few years later he went to Rome and became a protégé of the Flavians – that's Vespasian, Titus and Domitian – and he didn't do badly out of it financially either. And if Francesco's right, at some stage he was given a house at Pompeii. Up till today there's no record of his ever going there. What we do know, or thought we knew, is that he did most of his writing in Rome for a Roman audience, trying to spin the history of the Jews to make them seem a more significant civilization.'

'He seems to have had a happy knack of changing sides when it suited him,' her father said. 'He'd have made a good spin-doctor.'

'Let's put it this way,' said Flora. 'History hasn't been very kind to him and he doesn't get a good press. But to answer your question, mum, the reason they've asked me to go is that they've found what look like original writings by him. Isn't that wonderful?'

Her mother's eyebrows rose. 'Well I hope it keeps fine for them, but if these bits of paper –'

'Papyrus and parchment actually, mum.'

'Well whatever they are, if they've been in the ground since Vesuvius erupted, why the rush?'

The logic was inescapable and Flora smiled. Good old mum, she thought, sensible to the last: good job one of us is. 'Well it's a rush for us. It may not sound much, but for me it's a bit like finding the Holy Grail. You see, not only is it some of the earliest ever surviving writing on parchment – it has to be AD 79 or before because that's when Pompeii was buried – but it throws the chronology of Josephus' writing up in the air. Plus there are some unidentified works which I'm hoping might give us some clues about *The Seven Stars*.'

'And what's that?' asked her father.

'It's a work attributed to Josephus that's mentioned in passing by Suetonius, the Roman historian. Supposedly it's a major demolition job on the early Christian Church but no copies survive.'

'So what happened to it?'

'The smoking gun suggests it was suppressed by Eusebius, one of the church fathers who edited the Bible to suit the status quo of the time.'

'I think we did something about him at school – can't remember much about it though, rather a long time ago.'

Flora smiled at him indulgently: playing the old buffer again. She

continued. 'A few of the writings that got kicked out of what became the New Testament have turned up in places like Qumran and Nag Hammadi, some have been lost forever. Other works Eusebius and his chums didn't like got the chop too.'

'Like *The Seven Stars*, you mean?' said her father, taking a sip of his wine and settling back in his seat with a contented sigh.

'Precisely. And if Francesco's people have found even a fragment from it, well,' she paused. 'It would be too wonderful for words.'

'Well I think that sounds like cause for celebration,' he said, pouring the last of the wine into their glasses. 'I'll open another bottle.'

Flora's mother turned a beady eye on him. 'No you won't,' she said. 'Flora's got things to do tomorrow and besides, it'll make you snore.'

And so the following Monday, with most of her last-minute good intentions for the weekend still pending, Dr Flora Kemble, head of Oxford University's palaeography department, set off to catch the 10:55 flight from Heathrow to Naples.

As the door swung open and Flora stepped onto the air-bridge the heat at Capodichino airport hit her like the blast from a jet engine. From the controlled chaos of Naples station she took a *Circumvesuviana* train to *Pompei Santuario*.

By the time she arrived her t-shirt was clinging to her back and she could feel beads of sweat gathering under her thick hair starting to trickle down her back. The reality of seeing modern Pompeii for the first time came as a shock. Even on a hot summer's afternoon the dirty streets wore a sombre air of menace: two prostitutes lounged semi-naked on a bench under a tree, indifferent to the disapproving looks of an elderly *nonna* who scuttled past like a black beetle; stray dogs squabbled over the contents of shredded bin-bags in the streets which were criss-crossed by a web of wires providing illegal electrical connections to the tenements on either side.

Pulling the bag behind her, she trudged the few hundred metres to the hotel Sorrento which was in a side-street just off the *Via Sacra*. After what seemed like an eternity, her ring on the reception counter bell produced a surly young woman whose tousled appearance suggested she'd just got out of bed. On hearing Flora's fluent Italian, she became more welcoming and even offered a better room at no additional charge. The room itself was clean, basic and to her surprise, not only did the air conditioning work but the small en-suite bathroom looked as though it had been refurbished by someone fully-sighted and was devoid of live bare wires.

The following morning dawned cloudless and, fortified by almost ten hours' sleep and an industrial-strength coffee with breakfast, Flora, clad in shorts and t-shirt, a pair of stout boots and wearing a broad-brimmed hat to keep off the sun, slung her bag over her shoulder and set off to walk the few hundred metres to the dig site. The local policeman at the entrance was reluctant to let her in, but over his shoulder, she saw a familiar tall, angular figure striding towards her, arms outstretched. His, angular, high-cheekboned face creased into a boyish, lop-sided grin. She subconsciously rebuked herself for the reaction it caused: unbidden and unexpected, that same indefinable sensation that she'd felt when he had phoned her in Oxford was back.

Moretti greeted her with a hug and a smacking kiss on both cheeks: the policeman shrugged and without further comment let her pass. Moretti's words tumbled out in an excited rush as they walked across the sun-baked patch of waste-ground that had once been the communal gardens of the flats. 'We've found more this morning,' he said. 'It just keeps coming.'

'No problems with the *Soprintendenza Archaeologica* wanting you to conserve rather than dig?' she asked. The administrative body charged with overseeing Herculaneum, Pompeii and the other Roman sites in the shadow of Vesuvius, had decided a few years earlier to concentrate on conserving and protecting what had already been found, rather than adding to the problem by allowing new excavations. As they neared the dig site, Flora recognized several familiar faces from the *Soprintendenza Archaeologica di Pompei* and from the National Archaeological Museum in Naples, for whom Francesco Moretti worked.

'They were as keen as we were to dig this site and to get it as much publicity as possible,' he said, stopping a few paces short of the trench.

'That's not like them,' said Flora. 'Pompeii's falling apart faster than they can conserve it.'

'Local politics,' said Moretti, with a shrug.

'But I thought you were part of the Ministry of Culture, what's local politics got to do with it?'

'The land has been bought by local businessmen, the building company is owned by local businessmen, the same local businessmen who also own the demolition company and same ones whose company is putting in the drains. Now do you understand?'

'The Mafia, you mean?' asked Flora.

'Shh, not so loud. Anyway, they're called the *Camorra* round here. But yes, them. They usually have no cause to bother us but it's easier to stay on good terms.'

‘What? Even the *Soprintendenza*?’ she asked.

He gestured for her to follow him, away from where the diggers were working. ‘You don’t know how this place works, and it’s not just Pompeii and Naples, it’s the whole Campania region.’

‘What is?’

‘The Camorra. Everything that moves, anything that’s sold, every contract that’s signed, they’re involved. If we upset them over this dig another Roman pillar will just happen to fall down at the ruins or another restored building will catch fire. Tomorrow I’ll show you all the illegal restaurants and souvenir stalls – in fact on second thoughts, I’ll show you the legal ones, there are fewer of them.’

Flora looked at him aghast. ‘D’you really mean they’d damage Roman Pompeii itself? Surely, not even the Mafia –’

‘Camorra. Yes, they do when it suits them or they’ve got a bone to pick. To them, it’s theirs, their livelihood to exploit as they see fit: the *Soprintendenza* is nothing more than a minor irritation if they feel like digging up something valuable and clearing off with it. Just remember, Flora, they’re everywhere.’

‘It just seems so unfair,’ she said.

‘I sometimes think God has a sick sense of humour,’ said Moretti. ‘Look at the countries that’ve got all the oil and if that wasn’t bad enough look where he left Pompeii for us to find: Campania. Great eh? So please, for my sake, watch what you say and who you say it to.’

She nodded. ‘Understood. Can we take a look? I’m dying to get started.’ Donning a hard hat, she accepted the invitation of Moretti’s archaeologists and climbed down the ladder into their trench. Patiently and with the finesse of a watch-maker, one of the diggers, a young woman about the same age as Flora, was using a dental pick and an artist’s brush to remove two-thousand-year-old solidified ash from around what had once been a wooden box.

‘It’s a difficult balance,’ she explained to Flora. ‘We have to work quickly because the wood has already started to deteriorate in contact with the atmosphere, but if we go too fast, we risk destroying the archaeology.’

‘Is the wood carbonised?’ Flora asked.

‘Amazingly enough, no. There was enough depth of pumice to protect it.’

‘Any idea what’s likely to be inside?’

‘More of the same at a guess. Parchment, papyrus, writing tablets.’

‘Any dating evidence?’ asked Flora, eyes wide with excitement.

‘Not yet. I don’t know whether Francesco told you but we found a

box like this containing letters, but they're too delicate for us to handle.' She stopped scraping at the concretion for a moment and turned to Flora. 'I suppose that's why you're here, isn't it?' she said with a smile.

'It is. And I can't wait to get started,' she replied, getting to her feet and brushing the grit from her knees.

'Oh, I nearly forgot,' said the digger. 'There were some other finds and they've been taken back to the Applied Research Laboratory: an astrolabe and several sheets of what we think is copper, but nothing datable. They're covered in some sort of grid and there are a few letters: it looks like some kind of board game.'

'Like you said, that's why I'm here. And thanks for letting me look in your trench.' Flora climbed the ladder back up to ground level and exchanged hard hat for sun-hat.

She found Moretti, chatting to another group of archaeologists working on a section of painted Roman wall plaster. He broke off to join her. 'Exciting, isn't it?' he said.

'It's great, but I won't be happy until I've seen the documents themselves.'

Moretti laughed. 'Come on, I'll drive you over to the lab and you can take a look. You can say hello to your old friend, professor Sumter, too.'

Flora pulled a face at him. 'Yeah, great. I can hardly wait.'

They pulled up outside the modern, single-storey building and Moretti led the way into the air-conditioned cool of the conservation lab. The clinical silence together with the white coats of the technicians gave it the air of a medical facility rather than anything connected to archaeology. He introduced Flora to his staff and then took her to a smaller room where a tweed-coated back greeted them as they opened the door. Even at the height of summer, Professor Donald Sumter always wore a jacket and tie. He looked up from a series of fragments of *The Wars of the Jews* codex, turned and rose to greet them. Although he was in his mid sixties, the American academic looked younger: a full head of snow-white hair topped a suntanned and artificially lifted face. He flashed them his well-practised and artificially whitened TV evangelist's smile. 'Good morning, Francesco, and good morning, Flora. How nice to see you again.' He took off one of his white cotton gloves and extended a hand which she shook, doing her best to return the smile. She already felt ill-at-ease in his presence and was aware of how scruffy she looked in her digging clothes.

'So you've come to help me out?' he asked. The smile had already been turned off and with his back turned once more; the question was

addressed to the window opposite. She assumed it was meant for her.

Flora searched for a diplomatic response. ‘Francesco asked me to come over. I’ll give the project any help I can.’

‘I think you may’ve had a wasted journey,’ said Sumter. ‘Based on the content and linguistic style, I think they’re either copies or earlier source texts. Maybe even doctored versions by an unknown scribe – fakes in other words – but I don’t think they’re by Josephus.’

Moretti, who didn’t speak English well, looked at Flora with a puzzled expression on his face. She switched into Italian. ‘He thinks they’re not Josephus’ work.’

He shook his head and rolled his eyes. ‘So he’s been saying for the last few days. Can you give us a second opinion?’

‘I’d be delighted,’ said Flora.

‘I don’t think that’ll be necessary,’ said Sumter in English, still facing away from them, hunched over the precious texts. Flora had forgotten that Sumter had a few words of Italian.

She turned once more to Moretti, ignoring Sumter’s remarks. ‘Where do you want me to start?’

‘You can give me a hand indexing the –’

‘I was talking to Francesco, thanks, Donald.’ He’s started, she thought: treating me like his graduate assistant already.

Sumter harrumphed, the mask of affability abandoned as quickly as he had donned it. Without speaking, Moretti indicated for her to follow him. ‘There’s something I’d like you to take a look at,’ he said as they headed for the door. ‘Something odd.’

‘You’re wasting your time,’ said Sumter, once more without looking up. ‘I’ve told you, it’s some form of board game like a larger-scale version of *latrunculi* or *pessoi*. Interesting archaeology, but not what either of us is here for, Flora.’

They returned to Moretti’s office. ‘Do you think he’s serious about the codices not being by Josephus?’ asked Flora.

‘He seems to be. When he first started he was convinced they were the real thing, but over the last few days he’s started to voice doubts.’

‘I think I can guess why.’

‘So do you think Donald’s wrong?’ he asked.

‘Not necessarily,’ said Flora. ‘I won’t know for sure for days – weeks maybe – but given the cut-off date of August AD 79, even without looking at any of the codex fragments or having the precise archaeological context, I’d say they’re earlier, that’s all. And that could mean your team’s found one of the missing originals. Now the question is, which one?’

‘What do you mean?’

‘Well, in the preamble to the *Wars of the Jews* – the version he presented to the emperor Vespasian just before his death in 79 AD – Josephus mentions an earlier version, written in Aramaic, but that of course never survived.’

Moretti’s face lit up. ‘Some of the fragments we’ve found are in Aramaic so do you think we’ve got a copy of the early version? That would be wonderful.’

Flora smile back. ‘I don’t see why not. What a brilliant find.’

‘It’s incomplete and much of it’s damaged but we’ve done some digital imagery. Do you want to look at the scans?’

‘I’d love to,’ she replied. ‘I’m sure Donald will take his time with the originals: especially now I’m here.’

‘Look, Flora, I know he’s difficult, but he is thorough and he’s good at what he does.’

She laughed and held up her hands in surrender. Yes, I know, and I realise I’m a guest here too, but I just have a feeling he’ll be twice as thorough as he needs to be if he thinks it’ll hold me up.’

‘Perhaps, perhaps not,’ said Moretti, flashing a smile at her. ‘The conservators have said we can have more of the originals to work with tomorrow and then you can get started on dating them properly.’

‘This is worse than looking at your presents under the tree but knowing you’ve got to wait till Christmas Day,’ said Flora, melting slightly under the spell of that smile.

‘I know how you feel, but if it helps, there are other finds you can work with right now. Here, take a look at this.’ Moretti opened a climate-controlled document safe the size of a small filing cabinet and removed a clear Perspex box about a foot square by a couple of inches deep, containing a flat black slab. ‘It’s what Donald thinks is a board game. We’ve found six of them so far and this is the best preserved. Tell me what you think.’

Flora took it from him and laid it flat on the desk. She swept a loose strand of hair from her eyes and, using a strong oblique light and a magnifying glass, started to examine the pitted metal surface. After a few minutes, she put the glass down and looked at Moretti intently. ‘I’m not sure what it is, but it’s definitely not a board game,’ she said. ‘Every square has a letter or character in it.’

‘That’s what I thought. Now look at this,’ he said, handing her a piece of paper. ‘It’s a digitally enhanced scan of the surface.’

Flora pored over the scan for a few moments. ‘Have you found any documents in the same trench, clay or wax tablets, anything that follows

the format of the Devil's Codex?' she asked.

Moretti looked puzzled, 'Is that the same as the Devil's Bible?'

'No, you're thinking of the *Codex Gigas* which is much later – thirteenth century I think. The Devil's Codex is a bit of a misnomer, really because it's not one document but lots of fragments, all of which date from the early first century to the beginning of the second.'

'You mean the code thing? I thought it was dismissed as a fake long ago.'

Flora sighed. 'Dismissed by Donald Sumter, yes, but he's a linguist, not a palaeographer and given that no one's managed to decode any of it, it's hard to see his point.'

'So you think it's genuine after all?' said Moretti.

'Maybe, maybe not. There are literally thousands of individual sheets and fragments in circulation, some of which are certainly fakes, but I'm still convinced some of them are genuine. Have you found anything written in what look like random pairs of letters in this dig?'

An expression of suspicion crossed Moretti's angular features. 'Yes. We found two incomplete fragments on papyrus. But how did you know?'

'Because of the copper sheets.'

'I'm still not with you.'

Flora picked up a marker pen and walked over to the whiteboard where she drew a five by five grid and then turning back to Moretti, said, 'Francesco, have you ever heard of Polybius?'

'Vaguely. You mean the Greek historian?'

'That's him. Now look at this.' She filled in the grid with the letters of the modern alphabet:

	1	2	3	4	5
1	A	B	C	D	E
2	F	G	H	I/J	K
3	L	M	N	O	P
4	Q	R	S	T	U
5	V	W	X	Y	Z

Flora continued. 'Polybius invented a way of creating a substitution cipher, so if you stick to a "row-then-column" rule, then "BELLUM" becomes 12 15 31 31 45 35. You don't have to use numbers for the row and column headings, letters or symbols will do just as well. It's not a sophisticated code and was easy to break even then because the same

letter is always represented by the same pair of figures.’

Moretti nodded. ‘But presumably, if you increased the size of the grid you could have the same letter represented in multiple different ways.’

‘Exactly. Which brings us back to the copper sheet,’ said Flora. ‘It has a grid which is twenty three by twenty three, giving you over five hundred ways of representing the twenty three letters in the Latin alphabet. If you use Greek, then you’ve got twenty four letters and Coptic has thirty two.’

‘But that’s fantastic,’ he said, eyes wide with excitement. ‘If what we’ve found is in code, then the sheet could be the key.’

‘It could, but before we get carried away, even a cipher using a big grid backed up with an additional text key can be cracked. Charles Babbage was doing it in the mid-nineteenth century.’

‘So why has nobody deciphered it?’ he asked

‘Probably because there are multiple layers of encryption or it has a very long text key like the Beale Ciphers use.’

‘But you think these copper sheets can help?’

‘They could. Especially if trying to be too clever has stopped us seeing the obvious.’

He looked at her with his head cocked to one side and a half smile on his lips. ‘Obvious to you maybe. And do you really think you can solve something that no one else has been able to crack?’

‘No promises, Francesco, but I’ve got a couple of ideas. If you can let me have copies of the scans from all the copper sheets and a copy of the encoded text, I’ll let you know within the hour.’

Moretti made a gesture of surrender. ‘OK, you’re on. I’ll get you set up with an office and a PC but I’ll bet you fifty euros you don’t find anything.’

‘I haven’t got fifty euros,’ said Flora with a laugh. ‘And besides, I wouldn’t want to take your money.’

Chapter Three

The Ionian Sea, September AD 62

For a moment the *Cygnus* hung motionless before pitching into the trough of the next wave. For thirty hours they had been trying to make way against the combined effects of the current and a violent *Euroquilo*, blowing from the north-east and pushing them ever closer to the lee shore of Sicily.

Below decks it was pitch dark. The cooking stove, a fire hazard in seas like these, had been extinguished. The few remaining oil lamps that hadn't been jolted from their mountings and smashed on the deck had long ago burned out. The air was foul with the reek of unwashed bodies, fear, vomit and the stench from the overturned lavatory bucket. Ninety six passengers and crew were all consumed by the same thought and the young Judean was not alone in praying to his god for salvation. To his right he could hear prayers being said in Greek, to his left, others sought the mercy of Lord Neptune in Latin, offering to make extravagant sacrifices should the supplicant come safe home. The ship rolled once more and the noisome slurry received a top-up as seawater cascaded down the companionway, swilling the jumbled collection of flotsam towards where he was sitting. He pulled his knees up to his chest in a futile attempt to avoid another drenching by the revolting cocktail. This time it splashed against the sides of the rough wooden platform on which he sat, perched on a drenched linen palliasse, shivering and soaked. In the darkness, he heard the man to his right being sick again and felt the warmth of the vomit as it hit his leg. He had to get out into the fresh air.

Swaying and cursing, he lurched towards the glimmer of light coming from above. At the bottom of the steep wooden steps he stumbled as the ship pitched forwards and broached hard left. He grasped for the rope that he knew ran either side of the steps but found only thin air and crashed face-first into the ankle-deep slurry. From somewhere above came the sound of splintering wood. He'd heard a similar sound about an hour ago but this was louder: as one who understood nothing of ships, even he knew it wasn't a good sign. Anything, even being wrecked, must be better than this he thought, pulling himself to his feet and bracing himself against the lower rungs.

Pushing open the hatchway, he crawled and half fell onto the heaving deck. Night was over and from ahead, the first grey streaks of dawn lit the eastern sky. Astern lay the jagged teeth of the rocky

shoreline. Despite the efforts of the crew, the ship was making no way against the storm – they'd lowered the mainsail long ago to prevent it being shredded by the wind, and with only a shallow keel and just the *supparum*, the small triangular topsail rigged above the yard, the only realistic thing for them to do was to keep the ship's head up into wind and hope the storm would blow itself out before it drove them ashore. He stood, clutching the mast and looked, mesmerised, as the coastline grew closer and more distinct with each passing moment. Timing his rushes, he made his way aft towards the stern-castle and the helmsman's post where the crew were clustered around one of the steering oars. He let go his hold and, profiting from a brief moment when the deck wasn't perpendicular, slithered across to join them. He spotted the helmsman, a man with whom he'd struck up a friendship. He was known as "Gubs" the standard nickname for a ship's *gubernator*. 'Come for a ringside seat then, Josephus?' he yelled, his voice only just audible above the wind screaming through the rigging.

'Is there anything I can do to help?'

'You could try praying.'

'No, I meant to help with the ship.'

'That's what I mean, lad. The *clavus* has broken.'

'Is that bad?'

Gubs ducked as a wall of green water broke over the bow and rushed along the deck at them. 'If it wasn't bad I wouldn't be asking you to pray. The *clavus* controls the steering oars, so it's a toss-up whether we go beam-on and capsize or whether we stay afloat long enough to be driven on to the rocks.'

'And there's nothing I can do?'

'Learn to swim.'

'I know how to swim but in that sea? None of us would last five minutes.'

'Well, you won't have long to wait. Look.' He pointed towards the thin black line of coast. The rain had stopped and as the ship crested another wave, Josephus saw the flickering pinprick of light on the horizon.

'What is it?'

Gubs shielded his eyes against the flying spray. 'It's the *pharos* at Syracuse.'

Josephus moved closer so he could shout into the man's ear. 'Is there any chance we can make harbour there?'

'None,' he yelled back. 'We're already too far south and we'll be on

the Siren's Daughters soon.' Josephus looked at him blankly. 'They're a group of rocks and shoals and we're no more than twenty stadia from hitting them.'

'What can we do?'

'I told you. Get ready to swim,' shouted Gubs. 'And watch out for *Lamia*.'

'I don't believe those fairy stories,' Josephus shouted back.

'It's not a fairy story, she's a bloody great fish and I've seen her with her snout out of the water – twenty feet long with horrible, dead black eyes, a big triangular fin and a mouth full of daggers. Jumped clean out of the water with a full-grown seal in her mouth she did. Seen her take dolphins and tuna too off the coast of Malta. If we go down, *Lamia* won't be far away. She never is when there's a wreck.' Gubs peered into the distance once more. 'There, look!'

'Not *Lamia*?' Even Josephus, who held the Jewish disdain for what he saw as barbarian superstitions, was beginning to have doubts. Weather this bad had to be supernatural.

'No,' Gubs shouted in his ear. 'See that line of white?'

'Yes.'

'That's the sea breaking over the Siren's Daughters.'

'Can't we go round them?'

'If we can get steerage I think I can get our course close enough up to the wind to get round to the north. Stand aside and we'll have a try.'

Josephus moved away to shelter behind the cabin leaving Gubs swearing at his green-faced and terrified seamen as they tried to jury-rig a system to give them at least some control over the ship's massive steering oars. He crouched down out of the wind which howled through the rigging as though the entire barbarian pantheon of monsters was mocking their fate. The clouds parted and the grey early-morning monochrome was replaced by low, raking light, showing the sea boiling over the flat rocks which stretched like a wall behind them. He watched, transfixed, unable to take his eyes off the seething cauldron into which the wind was driving their ship. At over one hundred feet long, when viewed at her moorings, the *Cygnus* had seemed vast, impregnable, a force of nature, but now it was being tossed like a cork, a plaything for the angry elements.

A shiver ran the length of the vessel as it grazed against the outliers of the Siren's Daughters and Josephus watched in horrified fascination as weed-encrusted rocks seemed to grasp at the hull as they drifted past, almost touching distance from where he crouched. Any hopes of divine intervention were now long past: the God of the Children of Israel was

either angry or too preoccupied to bother with the plight of the handful of Jews on board.

The end, when it came, was not what he'd been expecting: the *Cygnus* checked in the water and with a shudder, came to a halt. Is that it? He wondered. Maybe the stout wooden planking that had looked so solid from the quayside would show that Roman shipwrights were more than a match for anything the seas could do, but another sound, more worrying than the grinding and splintering, jolted him back to reality. Audible, even over the roaring of the seas, came a high-pitched keening, a Babel of screaming, prayers and imprecations: the hull had been breached and the ship was taking on water. Below decks, people were clawing at each other, screaming, gouging and trampling – parents fighting to be ahead of their children, husbands and wives careless of everything save the will to live; those who had already drowned now stepping stones for the living. Josephus peered round the side of the deck-house and watched, horrified, as by ones and by small groups, the survivors tried to run away from their fate by clustering at the bow of the ship which was already beginning to rise as the vessel settled by the stern.

A swell floated the ship off one rock but the next collision turned it broadside onto the sea. With a shudder, its port side was forced against a flat shoal, and now, exposed to a beam sea, it lurched to leeward and the mast gave way, snapping the rigging and pulling its mountings clear out of the deck. A small group of survivors who had just emerged blinking into the daylight from the hatch were caught up in the tangle of rope and timber and swept over the side, their heads bobbing for a moment above the waves before disappearing. Josephus braced himself against the rail and looked down into the water, now barely feet below him, wondering whether it was better to get it over with and choose his moment of dying or to cling to what remained of the ship. Nature took the decision for him as a massive wave smashed through the deck-house, splintering the door and carrying the roof away.

Then everything went green and he tumbled forward, pulled down by invisible hands and so disorientated that he couldn't even tell in which direction the surface lay.