
THE CHRONICLE OF
NEBAMUN

Hem-netjer of Aegyptus

10 days in the Roman world

In the reign of Augustus

Legio Aeterna



The sun has barely cleared the eastern cliffs, but the limestone of the great avenue is already warm underfoot. The scent of dust, dung, and frying fish oil rises from the popinae lining the processional way to Karnak. A knot of Roman soldiers in lorica segmentata stands near a public notice board freshly plastered to a wall, arguing with a local scribe in stilted Latin about ferry tolls. One legionary jabs a finger at a papyrus sheet among the edicts, a plea for a reliable courier to carry sealed temple correspondence to Alexandria before the next Ides. The scribe, an Egyptian named Petosiris with ink-stained fingers, looks harried.



You step forward, raising your hand in greeting. “Petosiris,” you say, your voice cutting through the soldiers’ complaints. “Peace be upon you. This courier task, what does it require?”

He turns, the tension in his shoulders easing slightly at the sound of Egyptian speech. “Ah, a servant of the god,” he says, noting your robes. “It is a simple matter, but urgent. The High Priest of the Temple of Isis here in Thebes has finished his monthly report to the archpriest in Alexandria. The scroll is sealed with the temple’s mark. It must reach the Serapeum before the Ides, when the accounts are reconciled.” He lowers his voice, glancing at the soldiers. “The usual runner fell ill. The pay is fifteen denarii upon delivery, and a letter of passage for the river ferries.” From within his linen satchel, he produces a slender, cylindrical leather case sealed with red wax impressed with the knot of Isis. “Will you take it?”

A sudden, sharp cry rings out from the stone tiers of the nearby theater. A large, iridescent scarab beetle, the size of a man's fist, zips through the air like a misplaced jewel. It strikes the cheek of a Roman optio standing with his men, then tumbles into the dust, where it begins to methodically roll a ball of dung twice its own size toward the theater's drainage channel. The optio swats at his face, swearing in Latin. His men stare, then one shrugs. "It's just a beetle," he says, as if giant, flying dung-balls were a typical morning nuisance.



You murmur a quiet blessing to Khepri, your eyes lingering on the sacred scarab carved into the wax seal of the leather case Petosiris now holds. You turn back to him. "And the river? What should a courier be watchful for?" Petosiris's expression grows serious. "The Nile herself is mostly calm this season. But the docks at Coptos and the canals near Bubastis... bandits sometimes prey on solitary travelers there. Roman patrols are thin. And the river guards, some are honest, others will invent a 'tax' on sealed temple goods if they think you are alone and unprotected."

He presses the leather case into your hands. It is heavier than it looks, the scroll inside thick with papyrus. "The High Priest offers twenty denarii upon delivery to the archpriest at the Serapeum in Alexandria. He has included a letter of passage bearing the temple seal. It may convince a greedy official to look the other way." He glances past you toward the grand stone theater that rises beyond the avenue, its tiered seats baking in the sun. "If you wish to set out today, the fastest route is to take a ferry from the docks just east of the theater. The boatmen there know the schedules."



Four days passed, the river's presence dwindling to a memory as the landscape shifted. The dusty track gave way to the clang of hammers and the smell of hot metal. The roofs of Piraeus rose above the trees, terracotta tiles glinting like scattered shards of pottery in the late afternoon sun.



The road north from Thebes is a pale, dusty ribbon between fields of emmer wheat and the green fringe of the Nile. You walk for days, the sun a weight on your shoulders, your sandals scuffing the packed earth. You pass caravans of donkeys laden with linen, a legionary patrol marching south with dust-caked caligae, and at night you sleep in the lee of a mud-brick wall or under the stars. On the fourth morning, a scent of wild thyme and decay pulls your eyes from the road. There, set back behind a collapsed drystone wall and a grove of gnarled olive trees, stands the shell of a Roman villa. Its red-tiled roof has caved in over the atrium, and dark ivy claws up its plastered walls, but the stone foundation is solid, untouched by flood or fire. Only the skitter of lizards breaks the silence.

You leave the road and push through the dry grass to the villa's entrance. The wooden door hangs askew on rusted iron hinges, opening into a shadowed vestibule. The air inside is cool and smells of old mortar and bird droppings. A mosaic floor, cracked and missing tiles, depicts Neptune riding a sea-chariot, now half-buried in wind-blown dust. Through a collapsed ceiling beam, a shaft of sunlight falls on a broken amphora in the corner. The place is utterly still, a hollow monument to some long-departed owner.



You leave the main track, pushing through a screen of dry, rustling tamarisk. The ground slopes gently up to a low terrace of cracked limestone. A weathered wooden gate hangs askew from a single rusted hinge, and beyond it, the villa's courtyard opens like a forgotten hand.

The peristyle garden is a riot of unchecked growth, wild mint and thyme choke the paths where rosemary once grew in neat rows. A dry impluvium in the center holds a scum of green water and dead leaves. The colonnade that once shaded the walkway has partially collapsed; one marble column lies broken like a bone across the threshold of what must have been the triclinium. The air is still and thick with the smell of damp earth and decay. At the far end of the courtyard, a stone wellhead stands intact, its rope long since rotted away.



Your eyes, trained by years of temple service to notice the subtle and the sacred, go immediately to the wellhead at the courtyard's edge. It is a simple stone cylinder, half-buried in creeping ivy. You brush the vines aside and find the iron ring set into its lid is not rusted shut; it moves with a grating scrape. The well below is not dry. The water is deep and clear, smelling of cool stone, and a small, glazed ceramic jug sits wedged in a crevice just below the rim. You pull it out. It is sealed with wax and surprisingly heavy.

You prise the wax free and tip the jug. A cascade of silver denarii spills into your palm, twenty-seven coins, by quick count. They are old, worn smooth, and bear the profile of Augustus from a decade past. Tucked among them is a thin bronze plaque, engraved with a single word: *Salus*. Health. A votive offering, perhaps, hidden here for safekeeping during some long-forgotten trouble. The sound of distant shouting drifts from the road, a reminder that the world outside these walls is restless.



You set the jug aside, its weight promising coin, and your gaze lifts to the small, crumbling lararium shrine in the far corner of the courtyard. A terracotta relief of the Lares, the household gods, is cracked but still discernible. The offering shelf is thick with dust and dead insects. Your fingers, probing the dust behind the little altar, close on something cool and metallic. You draw out three silver denarii, tarnished but whole, left as a final offering by whoever last tended this place.

A sharp crack of splintering wood echoes from the direction of the road, followed by the low, guttural curses of men. You peer through the broken gate. Three rough-looking men, their tunics stained and their faces hard, are wrestling a mule laden with sacks of grain away from a cart whose axle has snapped. One of them looks up, his eyes meeting yours across the overgrown courtyard. "Well, look here," he calls, releasing the mule's bridle. "The squatter's come home. Maybe he's got something to share." He starts toward the gate, his two companions turning to follow, their hands dropping to the clubs at their belts.



You stand, your linen robes settling around you. You raise the ankh amulet, letting the midday sun glint off its polished bronze. "Peace, friends," you call out in clear Greek, your voice calm but carrying. "I am a hem-netjer of Khonsu, traveling on temple business. I am no," The words die in your throat. The three figures who step from the shadow of the portico are not bandits. They wear the simple, undyed linen of temple servants, and one, a woman with a severe face and her hair bound in a plain cloth, carries a sistrum identical to your own. She looks from your amulet to your face, her expression unreadable.

"A servant of Khonsu," she says, her voice flat. "So far from Thebes. And in a place the gods have clearly abandoned." Her companions, a young man and an older woman, watch you warily. The woman with the sistrum takes a step closer. "The Temple of Isis in Piraeus sends us to gather herbs. This villa was once under the protection of our Lady. What business does a priest of Khonsu have in a place sacred to Isis?"



"I bear a sealed dispatch from Petosiris, scribe to the High Priest of Isis in Thebes, bound for the Serapeum in Alexandria," you say, lowering the ankh but keeping your posture open. The woman with the sistrum, whose name you learn is Tamonthis, nods slowly, her severe expression softening into one of weary recognition. "A Theban mission," she says. "We are of the temple here in Piraeus, or what remains of it." She gestures to the overgrown courtyard. "We come to gather what herbs we can. The riots have driven the price of everything, even mint and rue, beyond our means. Our stores are empty."

Her companion, a younger man named Pamonth, steps forward, his hands empty. "We heard a noise and thought it might be looters," he explains. "Forgive our intrusion, brother.

The times make everyone jump at shadows.” He glances at the small jug you’d pulled from the well, then away, as if embarrassed by his own curiosity.



“What of the riots here?” you ask, your voice low. Tamonthis glances toward the distant rooftops of the port, her face tightening. “The grain ships are late,” she says. “The docks are restless. The vigiles keep order, but the air tastes of vinegar and anger.” She pauses, then her eyes sharpen on you. “But you serve Khonsu. You know the old ways. There is a matter... miners working for the Legion broke through into a chamber near Mount Parnes. The walls are covered in frescoes, strange gods, older than our temples. The centurion in charge has sealed it, but he seeks someone who can read the signs, to know if it is sacred ground or just an old tomb before they dig further. It would be a service to the gods... and to the Legion.”



The sun beat down on the dusty road as it unwound towards the sea. Piraeus unfolded before you, its warehouses and docks a testament to the city's mercantile might, the smell of salt and pitch hanging heavy.

You part ways with Tamonthis and her companions, the promise to examine the miners’ frescoes settling in your mind like a votive weight. The road descends, and the scent of salt and pitch grows strong. The gates of Piraeus loom ahead, two great towers of honey-colored stone, their shadow cool and deep. You pass beneath them, the noise of the

city washing over you, the ring of hammers from the shipyards, the shouts of stevedores, the lowing of oxen dragging timbers over cobbles slick with fish brine and donkey dung.

The street opens into a broad agora. To your left, the Long Stoa stretches, its colonnade crowded with merchants and their wares. To your right, a fountain spills into a stone basin where women fill amphorae, their chatter sharp and quick. The air is thick with the smell of baking bread, roasting meat, and the underlying tang of the sea. You adjust the strap of your pack, the ankh amulet cool against your chest.



You shoulder your way through the press of bodies toward the Long Stoa, its roofed colonnade offering shade from the midday sun. The air under the stone vaults is thick with the smells of dried fish, leather, and cumin. Stall keepers call out prices in a mix of Greek and Latin, their voices bouncing off the marble. A woman selling oil lamps gives you a long look, taking in your Egyptian robes, then turns back to haggling with a soldier. Near a stall stacked with amphorae, you catch sight of a familiar severe face, Tamonthis, the temple servant you met on the road. She is counting coins into a merchant's palm, her expression pinched.

She glances up as you approach. "Hem-netjer," she says, her voice flat but not unfriendly. "You found the city. The miners' camp lies a day's walk north along the coastal track." She tucks a small linen bag of herbs into her basket. "If you go, tell the centurion the Temple of Isis in Piraeus asks that any sacred objects be returned. We have little enough left." She gives a curt nod, then melts back into the crowd.





You leave the stifling market and turn down a side street where the scent of roasting meat and cheap wine hangs in the air. A faded wooden sign swings from a bracket, bearing a painted cockerel and the name *Ad Gallum*. The taberna is dim inside, the floor covered in sawdust. A handful of men sit at rough tables, hunched over cups and bowls. Behind the counter, a bald man with thick forearms wipes a clay jug clean with a rag. He looks up as you enter, his eyes narrowing slightly at your foreign dress.

As you step inside, a hand touches your elbow. You turn. It's Tamonthis, her face still marked with road dust. "I thought I saw you in the market," she says, her voice low. "I've sent word to the centurion at the mining camp. He expects you. But before you go... our temple here is poor. We have a shipment of incense, true frankincense, coming from Alexandria. The customs officer, Syntrophus, is holding it. He claims the seals are improper." She leans closer. "He likes to hear himself talk. If you could... persuade him to release it, the temple would be grateful. And there would be a reward."

A man at a nearby table, who had been quietly nursing his wine, suddenly stands up, his face pale. He stares at the empty space beside him, then at his own hands. "My chicken," he declares to the room, his voice trembling with genuine horror. "I was eating a roast chicken. I had a leg in my hand. I looked away for one heartbeat to watch the foreigner come in, and... it's gone. The leg is just gone." He pats the table, then the floor around his feet. The other patrons glance over, shrug, and return to their drinks. The bald innkeeper doesn't even look up from his jug.



You drop a denarius onto the counter and ask for bread, wine, and a place to sit. The innkeeper grunts, slides a coarse loaf and a clay cup of sour red wine toward you, and gestures to an empty bench in the corner. You take your seat, tearing the bread with your hands and washing the dust of the road from your throat. The wine is thin and sharp, but it warms your stomach. Around you, the low murmur of the other drinkers blends with the distant clatter of the street outside, a steady hum like a hive.

As you finish the last of the bread, your eye catches a gleam of polished bronze beneath the bench opposite. Leaning down, you see a small, finely-made fibula, a cloak pin, lodged between the floorboards. Its design is not Greek or Roman, but something older, with a stylised sun-disc chased into the metal. Someone lost it here, perhaps days ago. You slip it into your palm; it's cool and smooth.



You finish the last of the bread and approach the counter again, placing another coin beside your empty cup. "Another," you say, and then lower your voice. "And perhaps you could point me toward the customs house. I'm looking for Syntrophus."

The innkeeper refills your cup, his thick fingers moving slowly. He glances toward the door, then back at you. "Syntrophus? The customs man? He's at the statio near the eastern docks, where the grain ships unload. But you might have trouble getting him to listen." He leans in slightly, his breath smelling of onions. "He's been in a foul temper for days, something about shipments from Alexandria being held up. Grain prices are climbing, and everyone's on edge because of the news from Hispania. Soldiers are watching the docks now."

You follow his gaze to the open doorway, where a pair of legionaries in polished segmentata stand talking, their hands resting on the pommels of their gladii. The usual dockyard clamor outside seems sharper, threaded with tension.





You slide a second coin across the worn wood and step back out into the sharp light of the street. The way to the eastern docks is a tangle of alleys crowded with handcarts and porters carrying sacks. The air smells of salt, rot, and the peculiar, sweetish scent of grain dust. You notice a pair of legionaries standing watch near a granary entrance, their expressions taut; one of them is scanning the faces in the crowd with a hard, assessing look. Rumors of bread riots in far-off Corduba have made everyone guarding the grain supply a little more tense.

The statio is a squat, whitewashed building facing the quay, its door propped open with a stone. Inside, a clerk is bent over a wax tablet, muttering numbers. A burly man in a tunic with the stripe of a centurio stands beside a tall, barrel-chested man who is waving his hands as he speaks. ", and the seal was broken, I tell you, broken! It's not about the incense, it's about the procedure!" the big man booms. This must be Syntrophus.



You stand there, listening as Syntrophus launches into a winding complaint about the new imperial directives and the endless paperwork. Your mind, perhaps fatigued from the journey, wanders at the wrong moment. You miss a crucial shift in his tone and fail to nod at a key point where he expects affirmation. His jovial demeanor hardens. "You are not listening," he says, his voice losing its rambling warmth. "This is a serious matter. The seals were broken. The shipment is irregular. I have a duty." He turns his shoulder to you slightly, a clear dismissal, and begins sorting through wax tablets on his desk as if you are no longer there.

Just then, the door behind you opens and a centurion of the urban cohort steps in, his helmet under his arm. Syntrophus looks past you, his face lighting up with recognition. “Ah, Marcus! Excellent timing. We were just discussing the importance of proper procedure.” The centurion’s eyes settle on you, your Egyptian robes, and the ankh amulet at your chest. His gaze is cool, appraising, and utterly uninterested in any priestly excuse.



You bow your head respectfully. “Forgive me, sir. Your duty is sacred to Caesar, and I meant no slight. I am a hem-netjer trained to read seals and sacred marks. If you would let me examine the seals in question, I may be able to clarify their origin.” Syntrophus’s expression shifts from annoyance to consideration. He strokes his chin, then gestures for you to follow him into a back room stacked with crates and amphorae. He points to a small, sealed chest resting on a table. “There. The seal is from Memphis, but the wax is cracked. The temple servant claimed it was broken in transit, but procedure is procedure.”

You lean close, your fingers hovering over the hardened wax. The imprint is indeed that of the temple at Memphis, a scarab beetle encircled by hieroglyphs. But your trained eye catches what a Roman clerk would miss: the fracture is clean, not jagged, and the wax beneath is a slightly different color. It was broken intentionally after setting, then carefully re-joined. This was no accident of travel; someone opened this chest between Memphis and Piraeus.



You lean over the chest, your fingers tracing the bronze lockplate. It’s a standard Egyptian

tumbler lock, but your eyes, trained to see what others miss, spot the fine, fresh scratches around the keyhole, scratches that don't match the wear on the surrounding wood. "The lock has been tampered with," you say, pointing to the marks. "But not in Memphis. The wax was intact when it left; this damage happened here, in the port. Someone tried to force it open after it was already sealed."

Syntrophus's jovial face goes still, then tightens with anger. He calls over another clerk, a woman with a weary, monotone voice, Chryseis. "This shipment was in the secure hold," he says to her. "Who had access?" Chryseis glances at you, her gaze lingering on your Egyptian robes before she answers. "Only the night watch, and the quaestor's men did an inspection two days ago. They were looking for contraband because of the trouble in Corduba." She says the last word quietly, as if the grain riots across the sea have made every official jumpy.



You meet Syntrophus's hardened gaze and speak plainly. "The fault lies not with the temple, but with the port. The incense should be released to the Temple of Isis now, with a note of the tampering recorded in your ledger." He stares at you a moment longer, then lets out a sharp breath. "Perhaps," he says, his voice low. "But I cannot simply release it. Not on my authority alone. There is a procedure. The quaestor's office must be notified of a theft attempt. My colleague, Chryseis, handles such investigations. She is... thorough."

He turns and calls out into the main office. A woman with a tired, pinched face and hair pulled tight under a simple cloth steps into the doorway. She looks from Syntrophus to you, her eyes flat and assessing. "This is the priest from the temple," Syntrophus explains. "He says the seal was tampered with here. You will need to take his statement."



You tell Syntrophus you will give your full statement to Chryseis. He nods, some of the tension leaving his shoulders. "She's in the next hall. The one with the lamp and the piles of papyrus. Tell her I sent you." You find the customs officer Chryseis seated at a small desk, a single oil lamp casting a weary glow over stacks of manifests. She looks up, her face flat and impassive. "Syntrophus sent you? About the Isis shipment." It isn't a question. She gestures to a stool. "Sit. Tell me everything you observed. In order."





You sit on the stool and, in a calm, deliberate voice, state your findings. You describe the intact Memphis seal, the later cracking of the wax, and the fresh tool marks around the lockplate that speak of an attempt here in Piraeus. Chryseis listens without interruption, her stylus scratching notes onto a wax tablet. When you finish, she sets the stylus down. “Your account is clear. It matches the physical evidence.” She sighs, a sound of administrative exhaustion. “The temple is not at fault. But my investigation is not complete. I must file a report. The quaestor will want to know who tried to steal from the port’s custody.”

The door to the hall opens, and Tamonthis, the temple servant, slips inside. Her weary eyes find you, and she gives a slight, grateful nod before turning to Chryseis. “Officer. I came to see if there was news. The festival of the Navigium Isidis is in three days. We need the incense.”



You lean forward, your voice carrying the quiet authority of one who serves a higher power. “Then let us go to the quaestor together. My testimony is ready, and the temple’s incense is needed for the rites.” Chryseis studies you for a long moment, then gives a single, slow nod. “Very well. The quaestor’s office is upstairs. He is a busy man, but he respects directness.” She stands, gathering her tablet. “Follow me.”

The corridor outside is bustling with clerks and porters, the air thick with the smell of ink and sweat. As you turn a corner toward a stone staircase, you nearly collide with Tamonthis. The temple servant is carrying a small amphora of oil, her face etched with the

same weary pragmatism you remember. She stops short, recognition flashing in her eyes. “You,” she says, her tone not unkind. “I heard you were speaking with the customs people. Is there news?” Her gaze flicks toward Chryseis, then back to you, waiting.



You follow Chryseis up the worn stone steps, your sandals scuffing on the smooth grooves worn by generations of officials. The air grows cooler, the clamor of the main hall fading to a distant murmur. At the top, she pauses before a heavy oak door banded with iron. “Wait here,” she says, then knocks twice and enters without waiting for a reply.

You hear the low murmur of voices from within. A moment later, the door opens wider and Chryseis beckons you inside. The quaestor’s office is spare: a wide desk, a shelf of ledgers, and a single high window letting in a shaft of dusty afternoon light. The man behind the desk is older, his face lined with the weight of accounts. He looks up from a papyrus scroll. “Chryseis tells me you have clarity on a tampered seal,” he says, his voice dry as parchment.



You step into the quaestor’s office. The room is small but orderly, with a single high window casting a beam of dust-filled light across a wide desk. The quaestor, a man named Aulus Caecilius Rufus, looks up from a scroll, his expression one of practiced neutrality. Without preamble, you place your hand flat on the desk, tracing an invisible line with your finger. “The seal from Memphis was intact,” you say, your voice steady. “But here, at the lockplate, fresh tool marks, shallow and hurried. The tampering happened here, in your

port, after the cargo was unloaded.” You meet his gaze. “The fault lies with the dock, not the temple.”

Rufus leans back, steepling his fingers. He looks from you to Chryseis, who gives a slight confirming nod. “Officer Chryseis concurs with your assessment,” he says finally. “Very well. The temple’s goods are cleared of suspicion.” He dips his pen in ink and scratches a few lines onto a small square of papyrus. “Take this to Syntrophus. He will release the shipment.” He hands you the chit. It bears his seal and a brief, clear order.



You take the sealed order from the quaestor’s hand, feeling the crisp papyrus and the weight of the official stamp. With a respectful nod to both men, you turn and stride from the office, the wooden stairs groaning under your quick descent. The lower hall is still a river of clerks and porters, but the mood has shifted slightly; a pair of legionaries in lorica segmentata stand by the main doors, their presence a silent reminder of the unrest rumored in distant Corduba.

You find Syntrophus at his usual post by the records table, recounting a long-winded story about a shipment of Sardinian cheese to a bored-looking junior clerk. He sees you approaching, and his jovial expression falters for just a heartbeat before he spreads his hands in a welcoming gesture. “Hem-netjer! Back so soon? I trust your investigation bore fruit?” His eyes drop to the papyrus scroll in your hand.



You find Syntrophus at his usual post by the warehouse ledgers, his broad face creased in a smile as he recounts a story to a junior clerk. You approach and present the quaestor’s order. His smile doesn’t fade, but it becomes fixed, like a mask. He takes the papyrus, his eyes scanning the script. “Ah,” he says, his jovial tone now tight. “The quaestor’s seal. Impressive.” He doesn’t look up at you. “But you see, priest, this order is for the release of ‘the held shipment.’ My records show no shipment currently held under that description. It must have been... mislaid.” He taps the ledger before him, a thick bound codex. “A bureaucratic error, I’m sure. These things happen, especially with all this... unrest elsewhere distracting everyone.”

His hand rests on the ledger, fingers splayed. You notice, beneath the edge of his desk, the toe of his sandal is pressed firmly against a loose floorboard. A faint, resinous scent, frankincense, lingers in the air here, stronger than anywhere else in the hall.





You shift your weight subtly, your foot pressing down on a loose floorboard near Syntrophus's desk. It gives a soft, hollow creak. His eyes dart to the sound, then back to your face, his jovial mask slipping for an instant into something sharper. "The boards are old," he says, too quickly. "This whole warehouse is settling." But your eyes, trained to see what others overlook, catch the faintest shimmer of dust disturbed in a precise rectangular pattern beside his stool, the outline of a recently moved crate. The air carries the distant, sweet resinous scent of frankincense, unmistakable to one who tends the temple censers. It's here.



You step back, breaking eye contact. Without another word to Syntrophus, you turn and walk briskly back toward the main hall. The two legionaries are still posted by the doors, their eyes scanning the flow of clerks. You approach them, your voice low but urgent. "The quaestor's order is being obstructed by the customs officer Syntrophus," you say, gesturing toward the ledger room. "He has concealed the shipment in question. Your authority is required."

One of the soldiers, a grizzled veteran with a scar across his cheek, nods curtly. "Lead on." They fall into step behind you, their heavy caligae echoing on the stone floor.

Back in the ledger room, Syntrophus has not moved. His face pales at the sight of the legionaries. "There's been a misunderstanding," he begins, his rambling tone gone. The scarred soldier cuts him off. "Move the crate, officer." Syntrophus hesitates, then with a defeated sigh, he drags his stool aside and pulls up the loose floorboard you had pressed.

Beneath it is a shallow compartment, and inside rests a small, sealed amphora bearing the lotus-and-ankh mark of the Temple of Isis. The scent of frankincense, rich and resinous, fills the air.

The legionary takes the amphora and hands it to you. “The quaestor’s order stands,” he says to Syntrophus, his voice flat. “Consider this a warning.” Syntrophus says nothing, his jovial facade utterly collapsed.



You accept the small, heavy amphora from the legionary's hands, the terra cotta warm from the sun through the high warehouse windows. The frankincense resin inside shifts with a dry, whispering sound. Syntrophus stands silent, watched by the other soldier, his face pale and his stories finally spent. You tuck the amphora into the fold of your robe and walk out into the afternoon glare of the port.

The walk to the Temple of Isis in Piraeus is short but steep, the whitewashed walls of the precinct rising above the crowded lanes. Tamonthis is waiting in the shaded portico, her weary eyes widening as she sees the amphora in your hands. “You have it,” she says, her voice a mix of relief and something harder. “Syntrophus did not make it easy.” She takes the vessel, her fingers tracing the seal. “The quaestor’s order was enough? Or did you have to... persuade him further?”



You shake your head. “I am a servant of the gods, not a spy,” you tell Tamonthis. Her

weary expression doesn't change, but a flicker of something like disappointment passes behind her eyes. She nods once, a curt, practical motion. "As you wish," she says, her voice flat. "The temple's thanks are yours, regardless." She counts out twenty-five denarii from a small leather pouch and places them on the offering table between you. The silver coins gleam dully in the lamplight.

You step back out into the portside lanes. The mood of Piraeus has shifted since the morning. A grain ship from Hispania is tied up at the wharf, and a cluster of dockworkers and sailors stand arguing in low, tense voices near its gangplank. You catch fragments: "...Corduba's burning..." and "...double the price for Egyptian wheat..." A pair of vigiles watch from the shade of a warehouse, hands resting on their clubs.



You bow your head in gratitude, a formal gesture of respect to the temple servant, and gather the twenty-five denarii from the stone table. The coins are cool and heavy in your palm. "The road north, toward Mount Parnes," you ask. "Where does it begin?" Tamonthis points a calloused finger toward the northern edge of the port. "Follow the Sacred Way until it leaves the city. The military road branches off there, marked with a legionary standard carved into a milestone. It's two days' hard walk to the mining camp." She pauses, then adds, "The centurion there is named Drusus. He pays in silver, not promises."

You find a quiet corner of the portico to sleep, wrapped in your robe, the sistrum tucked close to your chest. At first light, the gulls are already crying over the harbour. You shoulder your small pack, feeling the weight of the denarii and the amphora of frankincense, and set out through the waking city. The streets are strangely tense; you pass a grain warehouse where a small crowd has gathered, their voices a low, anxious murmur. A mounted patrol of legionaries clatters past, their faces set. The unrest in Corduba, it seems, is making everyone nervous.



You turn from the temple precinct and walk through the winding streets of Piraeus, following the Sacred Way as it climbs away from the harbor's salt smell and toward the city gates. The crowds thin as you leave the merchant quarter behind. At the northern gate, a simple stone archway, you find the milestone Tamonthis described. The carving of the legionary standard is weathered but clear, the eagle's wings spread against a chiseled sun. The road beyond is packed earth, wide enough for two wagons to pass, and it stretches north between olive groves and low hills.

The sun is high and hot. You walk for hours, the rhythm of your sandals on the hard-packed earth the only sound besides the cicadas. The olive groves give way to rocky scrubland. Late in the afternoon, you round a bend and see a small fortified outpost ahead,

a wooden watchtower beside the road, a flag with the red-and-gold standard of Legio II Augusta snapping in the dry wind. A single legionary stands guard at a timber barricade, his helmet glinting. He watches your approach, one hand resting on the pommel of his gladius.



You step off the packed earth of the military road and approach the barricade, a makeshift line of sharpened stakes and a single overturned cart. The legionary standing watch is a young man with a clean-shaven jaw and the sunburned neck of a recent recruit. He holds his hasta loosely, but his eyes are sharp. “Halt,” he calls out, his Latin accent thick with a rural inflection. “This road is for military traffic only. State your business.”

Before you can answer, a familiar, jovial voice cuts through from behind the cart. “Ah, the Hem-netjer of Piraeus! Come to inspect our fortifications?” Syntrophus steps into view, his customs-officer’s tunic replaced by a simple military cloak. The scar on his cheek seems to catch the light. He smiles, but it doesn’t reach his eyes. “The centurion Drusus is expecting a priest, I hear. But the road north is... unsettled today. Bandits, they say. Or something worse.”

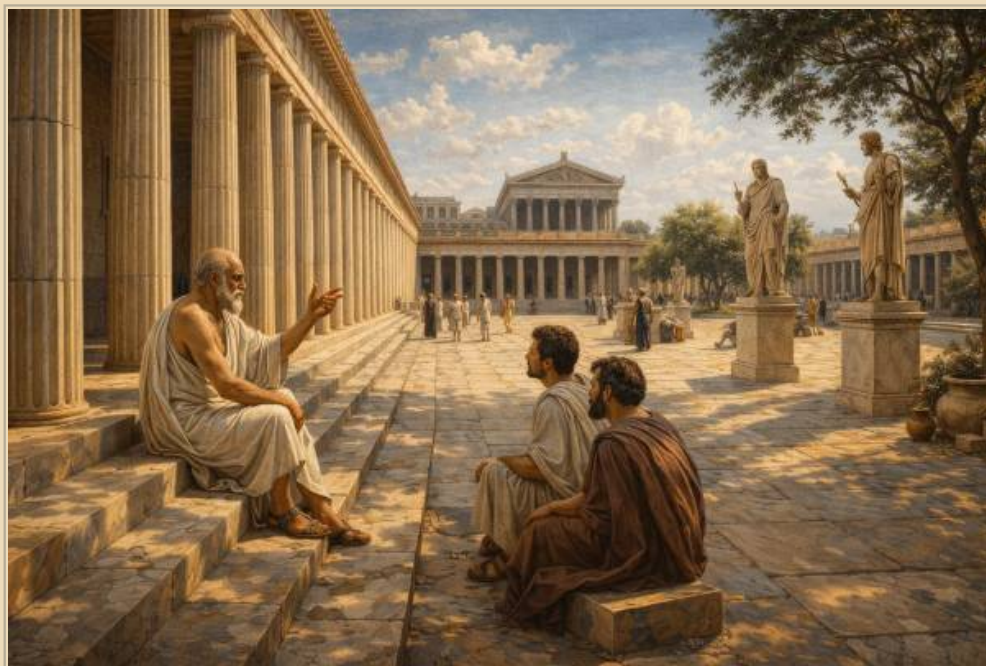
“What brings you to a military barricade, Syntrophus?” you ask, turning to face the customs officer. He emerges from behind the cart, his tunic dusty and his smile a thin, practiced line. He carries a wax tablet under one arm. “Duty, of course,” he says, his voice still carrying that false warmth. “The quaestor’s office is auditing supply movements,

grain, iron, timber. With the troubles in Hispania, everything leaving Attica gets a second look.” He gestures toward the young legionary, who shifts his weight uncomfortably. “This fine soldier is helping me inspect wagons. And you? Off to interpret frescoes for the legions, I hear.”



You turn toward the young legionary, intending to address him directly and perhaps find a path past Syntrophus’s interference. But your movement is too abrupt, your focus divided. The soldier stiffens, his grip tightening on the spear shaft. Syntrophus steps smoothly between you, his tablet held up like a shield. “The priest is weary from his temple duties,” he says to the legionary, his tone dismissive. “He doesn’t mean to approach a post under arms.” He looks back at you, the smile gone. “The road north is closed to civilian traffic today. A matter of security. You’ll have to return to the city.”

A wagon creaks to a halt nearby, its driver calling out to Syntrophus about a cracked axle. The distraction is brief, but it’s enough for Syntrophus to wave you back with a final, sharp gesture. The legionary watches, uncertain but obedient to the civilian authority. Your path is blocked, your energy spent in the fruitless approach.



You turn your back on Syntrophus and the watchful legionary, the heat of the midday sun now a weight on your shoulders as you retrace your steps through the gate and into the city. The streets of Piraeus feel tighter, the air thick with the smell of fish brine and dust. A line of people shuffles toward a public fountain, their clay amphorae clinking softly, and

you notice the price of grain chalked on a tavern wall has been scratched out and rewritten twice.

Your foot catches on a loose paving stone near the mouth of a narrow alleyway off the Sacred Way. You look down, and there, half-buried in the dirt and refuse, is a small, flat piece of polished black stone. It is carved with a symbol you know: the was-scepter of the god Set, but crossed with a stylized olive branch. The work is Egyptian in style but the material is local slate. It feels deliberate, not dropped by accident.



You skirt the main thoroughfare, moving west along a narrower lane where the shade of tall insulae offers some relief. The alley opens onto a small, dusty square dominated by a modest shrine to Neptune, a simple niche holding a water-stained terracotta statue. Leaning against the wall beside it, a woman in a simple linen stola watches you approach. Her hair is bound in the manner of the temple servants of Isis, a single silver disc gleaming at her brow. “You are the Hem-netjer who recovered the frankincense for Tamonthis,” she says, her voice low. “She spoke of you. The road north is watched, but the old coastal track beyond the salt pans is not. It is longer, and the ground is soft, but a man on foot could pass.”



“What is your name?” you ask, stopping before the shrine. She pushes off from the wall, brushing dust from her stola. “Senuris,” she says. “I serve at the temple near the Emporion. Tamonthis said you might be looking for another way north, since the quaestor’s men have shut the road.” She glances toward the mouth of the alley, where the distant sounds of the port market carry on the hot air. “There’s a coastal track used by the salt-fishers. It’s rough, but it bypasses the barricade. It would be a favor to the temple if you’d take a message to the shrine of Isis at Eleusis, they’ve had no word from us since the grain shipments were diverted to Corduba.”





“I will take it,” you say, your voice steady and clear. Senuris’s eyes soften with relief. She draws a small, sealed papyrus packet from a fold in her garment and presses it into your hand. “The priestess there is Tamenmes. She will know what it means. May the Lady of the Sea grant you safe passage.” She makes a quick gesture of blessing, fingers tracing the shape of a sistrum in the air.

You tuck the packet into your scroll case, feeling the weight of the trust placed in you. As you turn to go, Senuris adds one more thing. “Be careful on the track. The soldiers aren’t the only ones watching the roads lately. There are men who would pay well for a message meant for Eleusis.”



You follow Senuris’s directions, leaving the square and heading west along a narrow, crumbling path that hugs the coastline. The salt-fisher’s track is little more than a goat trail winding through sharp rocks and thorny scrub, and your exhaustion makes every step treacherous. Your sandal catches on a loose stone, and you stumble forward, your hands scraping against the rough ground as you fall. The scroll case strikes a rock with a sharp crack, and you feel a seam split along its side. When you push yourself up, you see the papyrus packet is intact, but the case is now damaged, no longer watertight.

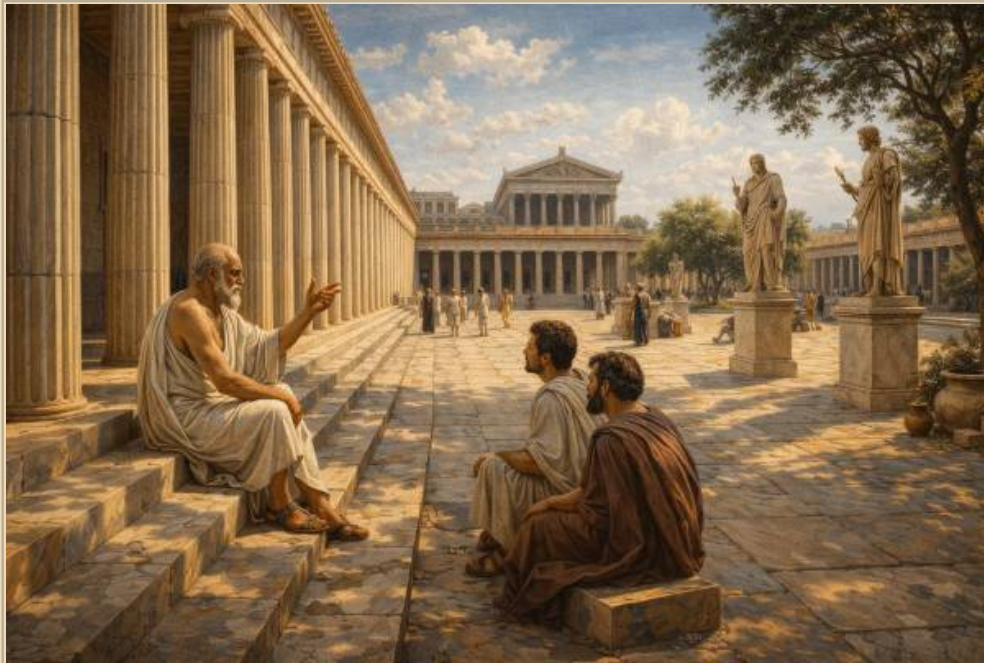
Looking up from your knees, you see the reason for the road closure. Spread across the coastal plain north of the city is a sprawling legionary encampment. Rows of tents stretch toward the horizon, and the air hums with the sound of hammers on tent pegs and the shouted orders of centurions. A column of soldiers, their shields slung, marches along the

main road you were barred from, heading north. A mounted officer in a red cloak watches from a low rise, his horse pawing the dust. This is no mere security check; Legio II Augusta is mobilizing.



You find a shallow alcove in the rocky shoreline, sheltered from the wind. You wedge yourself into the hollow, pulling your linen robes tight against the chill that rises off the sea. The scroll case, its crack running along one side, you hold close to your chest, feeling the sealed packet inside press against your ribs.

The sound of the surf is a steady breath, and overhead the stars sharpen in the blackening sky. You close your eyes, and sleep comes like a stone dropped into deep water.



At dawn you walk back into Piraeus, the cracked scroll case in hand. The market is already loud, but the mood is different. Men argue over sacks of grain near the granaries, their voices edged with a new fear. A trader shouts that the price of Egyptian wheat has doubled because shipments from Hispania have stopped. You see a family sitting on their bundles near the docks, their faces hollowed by hunger and travel, refugees from Corduba, you hear someone mutter.

You find a leatherworker's stall near the Emporion, its awning stained dark by years of smoke and dye. The craftsman, a wiry man with fingers stained black, takes the case and turns it in the light. "A clean split along the seam," he says. "I can stitch it with sinew and

seal it with beeswax. It will hold.” He asks for two denarii for the work and the use of his good thread.



You place the two denarii on the workbench and step back to wait. The leatherworker, a wiry man named Apion with hands stained black, nods, takes the case, and begins to work. He cleans the split seam with a vinegar-soaked rag, then applies a thick paste of pine resin and beeswax, pressing a strip of new leather over it and binding it tight with sinew thread. As he works, he speaks without looking up. “You’re from the Isis temple, aren’t you? Strange days. My neighbor, Charition, the widow who sells garum, she started locking her door at the third hour a week ago. Haven’t seen her serving girls since. People whisper about new rites in the hills, but who listens?” He finishes the stitching, holds the case up to the light, and blows on the resin to set it. “There. It’ll hold. But if you’re carrying something for them, be careful. The vigiles are watching anyone who comes and goes from the Egyptian quarter now.”

He hands you the case, now sealed and sturdy. The packet inside is undisturbed. As you turn to leave, a man in a travel-stained tunic approaches Apion’s stall, his eyes scanning the crowd before he leans in close. “I need a message taken to Eleusis,” he says, his voice low. “Discreetly. The usual roads are being watched. Are you heading that way?” He looks directly at you, his expression one of weary urgency.



“What does the warning contain?” you ask. Apion finishes the last stitch and holds the case up to the light, testing the seal. “She doesn’t say. But her slaves have vanished. Two young Syrian boys she always sent to fetch water, gone. And she won’t open her shutters even to sell a jug of fish sauce. People are whispering about a new cult, one that meets in the old cisterns beneath the Hill of the Nymphs. They say they take offerings in kind, not coin, and promise protection from the coming hunger.” He sets the repaired case before you. “It’s none of my business. But if you’re carrying temple business, you should know the streets are watching.”

He wipes his hands on his apron and looks past you toward the harbor. A ship with a patched black sail is being unloaded by a crew that moves with a tense, hurried discipline. Its captain, a broad-shouldered man with a scar across his cheek, stands on the wharf mumbling orders to a scribe, his eyes never meeting anyone’s directly.





You take the repaired scroll case and make your way back through the crowded market toward the Temple of Isis. The precinct is quieter than the port, the air heavy with the scent of kyphi incense and myrrh. Inside the dim colonnade, you find Tamonthis, the temple servant you know, kneeling before a statue of the goddess, polishing the bronze feet with a soft cloth. She looks up as your shadow falls across the mosaic floor.

“The case is whole again,” you say, holding it out. “And there are rumors in the market, a new cult gathering in the cisterns beneath the Hill of the Nymphs. A widow has locked her door; her slaves have vanished.” Tamonthis sets her cloth aside and takes the case, her expression weary but sharp. “We have heard whispers,” she says quietly. “The vigiles have not acted, and the aediles are distracted by the grain shortage. But if they are taking slaves as offerings, that is not piety, it is theft of property. The temple cannot be seen to interfere... but a priest, acting alone, might learn the truth.”



You leave the temple precinct and head toward the customs house near the main quay. Chryseis is at her usual table, a stack of wax tablets before her, her stylus moving slowly across one as she tallies figures. She does not look up until you stand directly before her. “You,” she says, her voice flat. “I’ve had no time to process your temple’s incense. The port is in an uproar.” She gestures toward the harbor with her stylus. “Three grain ships from Alexandria were seized yesterday by the vigiles. Rumor says the crews were smuggling more than wheat. A boy at the public well told me his father is coming home with a sword and I am to keep silent. It’s the same all over.”

She sets the stylus down and finally meets your gaze, her weariness deeper than before. “The grain meant for Eleusis? It wasn’t lost. It was diverted. And someone doesn’t want that known. If you are carrying messages for the Sanctuary, be careful. The road to Eleusis is not safe for a lone traveler anymore.”



“The boy at the well,” you press, leaning closer over her table. “He said his father is coming home with a sword, and that I should keep silent. What does that mean?” Chryseis sets her stylus down with a soft click. For a moment, her weary monotone cracks. “The boy is the son of a freedman named Patroclus. He worked the docks. Last month, Patroclus took a contract to haul stone for a new villa up the coast. He came back yesterday, but not with his cart. He came on foot, with a gash on his arm and a legionary’s short sword tucked under his cloak. He told his son to say nothing to Romans or to anyone who serves them.”

She glances toward the open door of the customs house, then back at you. “There are whispers of men gathering in the old cisterns. Not a cult. Men who are tired of the grain being diverted, tired of their sons being pressed into labor gangs for Roman projects while their families go hungry. Patroclus is one of them. If you go to Eleusis, you carry that sealed packet through their territory. They won’t care that you serve Isis. They’ll see the seal and assume you’re carrying word for the Romans.”



You turn from Chryseis and stride back toward the temple, the sun now high and hot on

your neck. Inside the colonnade, Tamonthis is still there, now stacking small clay lamps along a shelf. You tell her of the seized ships, the armed men on the road, and the boy's warning about his father and the sword. Her hands go still on the lamps. "Patroclus," she says quietly, as if naming a ghost. "He was a good man. If he has turned to the sword, then the trouble is not just on the road to Eleusis. It is here."

She wipes her hands on her linen apron. "The grain for our temple was diverted. The message you carry for the priestess in Eleusis explains this, and asks for her aid. But if men are watching the road to stop such messages, then the one who diverted the grain has friends with blades." She looks at you, her weariness now edged with fear. "You must still go. But you cannot go as a priest of Isis. They will be watching for that."



"Do you have a plain tunic, a cloak, anything that does not mark me as a servant of the temple?" you ask, your voice low. Tamonthis considers you for a moment, then nods. She disappears into a side chamber and returns with a worn, undyed woolen cloak and a simple tunic of coarse linen. "These belonged to a porter who served here," she says, handing them over. "They carry no insignia. But be swift. The hour grows late, and eyes are upon this place."

As you take the garments, your fingers brush against something stiff sewn into the cloak's inner hem. Tamonthis sees your questioning look. "A little extra," she murmurs. "For the road. The temple's gratitude." Tucked inside is a small leather purse, its weight promising a few denarii, and a wrapped portion of hard bread and cheese.



"Where would Patroclus be now?" you ask, holding the cloak. Tamonthis's gaze shifts toward the temple entrance, as if she can see the docks beyond the walls. "If he is back and has taken up a sword, he will not be at his home," she says. "He will be where the anger gathers. The warehouse of Menekrates, near the fish market. It has been empty since the last grain ship sailed."

Outside, the mood of the port has soured. The air smells of salt and anxiety. A group of sailors stands arguing beside a dry fountain, their voices sharp over the price of barley meal. A single legionary watches them from the shade of a colonnade, his hand resting on the pommel of his gladius. The bread riots in Corduba are a week's sail away, but their shadow has stretched across the sea.





You slip out through the side gate into a narrow alleyway choked with the smell of drying fish and old urine. You shrug off your fine chiton and wolfskin cloak, folding them hastily, and pull on the coarse tunic and worn woolen cloak. As you tie the cord at your waist, you feel the stiff, hidden object in the hem shift against your thigh, a small, flat packet of papyrus or perhaps a thin wooden tablet.

From the mouth of the alley, a man in a simple linen tunic stained with ochre watches you. He carries a basket of votive lamps. “You are the one Tamonthis spoke of,” he says, his voice low. “The Hem-netjer from Thebes. She said you might need a guide to the warehouse. The temple watches, even when its servants cannot walk openly.”



“What is your name, and why do you watch?” you ask, your voice quiet but firm in the narrow alley. The man does not startle. He sets his basket down, the clay lamps clinking softly. “I am Hor,” he says. “I serve the temple, as you did before you changed your skin. Tamonthis sent me to ensure you were not followed from the side gate.” He glances toward the street. “There is talk in the port. The men who watch for temple messengers grow impatient. They have doubled their patrols near the road to Eleusis.”



The dusty track unwound before you, the Saronic Gulf glinting on your left. Eleusis rose in the distance, its temple precinct a jumble of columns and terracotta roofs against the hillside.

You nod to Hor and slip past him, blending into the flow of dockworkers and fish-sellers. The road to Eleusis unfurls from the edge of the port, a dusty track hugging the rocky coastline. The sea glitters to your left, a deep Aegean blue under the midday sun, and the salt-scrub hills rise steeply to your right. After a few miles, the sounds of the city fade, replaced by the sigh of the surf and the cry of gulls. The road here is rutted and worn, and ahead you see a cluster of men at work.

A crew of slaves, their backs glistening with sweat, are breaking stones and tamping gravel into the deep ruts. A Roman overseer in a stained tunic stands above them on a small rise, a vine staff in his hand. He spots you and calls out, his voice carrying over the clink of hammers. “You there! Traveler. The road is closed for repairs. You’ll have to wait your turn or take the high path.” He gestures vaguely toward a steep, goat-track that climbs the hillside, winding through thorny brush.



You step forward, the dust of the road coating your sandals. “I can swing a hammer,” you say to the overseer, raising your voice over the clink of tools. “I offer a day’s labor for passage past your work.” The man looks you up and down, his eyes lingering on the worn wool of your disguise. He spits into the dirt. “This isn’t a public works project you can volunteer for. This is Legio II Augusta making the road ready for the supply wagons. We don’t take pilgrims.” He gestures with his staff toward the hills. “If you’re heading to Eleusis, take the high path. It’s longer, but it’s open.”

A low rumble echoes from the north, like distant thunder, but the sky is clear. Along the

horizon, a column of dust rises, and you see the glint of spearpoints and the slow, deliberate movement of many men. The legion is on the march, coming down from the mining camp at Parnes. The overseer follows your gaze and his stern expression tightens. “They’re moving south to form up near Thria. The tribune is paying good silver to any local who can wield a spear or tend a wound. They say there’s a band of Thracian raiders dug in near the pass, and the legate wants them cleared before the supply line is cut.” He studies you again, as if reassessing. “A priest of your kind might be worth something to them. They always need someone to read the omens before a fight.”



You shake your head and turn to skirt the work crew, aiming for the scrub-covered slope above the road. The overseer calls after you, “You there! Hold!” A younger soldier, his helmet crest marking him as an optio, steps into your path, blocking the way up the hill. “The road is closed to all but authorized personnel. The legate’s orders. You’re either with the army or you’re not on this stretch.”

He studies your face, his gaze sharp. “We’re mustering auxiliaries. The pay’s good, better than walking to Eleusis with nothing but dust in your purse. There’s a fight coming up north. A real one.” He gestures with his chin toward a cluster of tents and wagons visible further along the coast. “Or you can turn back to Piraeus. Your choice.”

