

***Brass Legionnaire***

First Book in the Steam Empire Chronicles

Brass Legionnaire

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## **Chapter 1**

Working his wrench with the deftness of long experience, Julius Brutus Caesar tightened the bolt on the exposed sprocket. When it was connected to the rest of the engine, the engineers could begin the final assembly of yet another mechaniphant. Not for the first time, Julius wondered why on earth someone had the desire to invent such a mechanical monstrosity in the first place. Although, he had to admit, it was impressive. Standing over fifteen imperial feet tall, with a protected driver's seat and razor-sharp chain tusks, it was perfect for crashing through the center of an enemy's battle line, especially when combined with other mechaniphants.

Julius shook his head to clear his wandering mind and studied his work in the light from the gas lanterns burning all around the factory. He wiped a sheen of sweat from his forehead with the back of his hand, product of his exertion despite the large open windows far above his head, just below the steam pipes haphazardly crisscrossing near the ceiling amidst spindly gantries and support struts. The whole factory was a safety inspector's nightmare, but of course the inspector had been bribed, so the whole situation was swept under the rug, so to speak.

"Much better," he thought as he carefully cleaned his wrench with a dirty rag pulled from a pouch on his utility belt. A loud whistle sounded. Tucking the rag back into his belt, Julius trudged across the factory floor toward the massive steel doors, their paint peeling around splotches of rust. The air smelled of bitter industrial coolants, welding smoke, and various other chemicals despite the fresh air that carried the sounds and smells of Brittenburg through the windows. Julius nodded greetings to several other

workers as they all moved toward the pay office. Being Friday, it was payday. He hoped the overtime he'd been working would make a difference on his check.

Julius's father had been injured several years ago in the same factory, when part of a mechanism collapsed during construction. Marcus Caesar had required hospitalization as well as a complete leg replacement. The medical bills continued to pile up, and it was all Julius could do, as the main family breadwinner now, to stave off eviction from their small Sludge Bottom apartment. With three other family members to support, Julius had thrown himself into his job at the factory, hoping to impress his supervisors enough to be promoted and get a raise.

The workers quietly queued up before the office window, waiting while the paymaster carefully checked his charts and notes before grudgingly handing over a small handful of copper and silver coins to each worker. "Caesar, Julius B.," Julius told the attendant as he stepped up to the window.

"Here you go, Julius, and don't bother counting; I added in what you earned in overtime. So no complaining!" The paymaster's gruff rumble contrasted with his thin, weedy appearance. His lips, nearly concealed by a thin, droopy mustache, barely moved as he talked.

Ignoring him, Julius did a quick count of the coins. "That's all?" he asked incredulously. It was barely more than he had earned in the last period. "I was here for thirty extra hours this week!"

"Oh, yeah?" the older man sneered. "Well, money don't grow on trees, you know. Since you're our resident emperor, how about you just command money to appear? Ha! Ha-ha-hah!" He doubled over, his laughter mingled with coughing.

Julius glared. “You’re a real Plato, aren’t you?” he mumbled as he scooped up his denarii and walked through the steel factory doors into the murky sunlight of a Brittenburg afternoon, once again cursing his family for naming him after the founder of the empire.

Outside, the cobblestone streets of Brittenburg, otherwise known as Majoris Brittenburgia, factory city and capital of the Imperial Roman Province of Germania Inferior, were filled with people, machines, and animals. Julius navigated past booksellers, out-of-town merchants, a pair of barbarians with matching trousers and face tattoos standing next to an aviator in a long leather flying jacket, goggles hanging around his neck, and a group of school children being herded along by a matronly woman and a portly teacher. Julius’ home was on the west side of town, almost right against the massive curtain wall that was both defensive fortification and bay dike. The area was dark, dank, and affectionately known as Sludge Bottom to the rest of the city.

On a whim, Julius stepped over the electrified rails of the motortrollies and entered a bakery, the opening door triggering a mechanical bird in the corner squawk, “Customer! Customer!” An older woman wearing a smock over her gray dress walked out of the back.

Recognizing him, she waved a greeting. “Hello, Julius! Picking up groceries for the family?”

“Naw, just grabbing a snack.” He looked carefully through the clouded glass display windows. “Are those honey nut tarts?” he asked excitedly. The heavily glazed treats were a traditional Brittenburg desert and snack food, popular from the lowest plebian to the governor himself, who was rumored to have devoured trays of them on his

own.

“Absolutely! You know how hard they are to keep in stock. Ignacious is starting another batch to make sure we have enough for tomorrow.” She handed him the bread with one hand and a small, delicate box with the other. “Take the runt of the batch for free, it will go stale, otherwise. And make sure your sister gets at least a bite!” she shouted at him as his smile went from overjoyed to smirk in a heartbeat.

“Crumbs count as a bite, don’t they?” he quipped as he paid for the loaf of bread. It was still warm and he wrapped it in paper against the chill in the air. Fall was coming to the city, and with it, the rainy season that made living in Brittenburg all the more challenging.

A horn called nearby as he paused at a street corner to tear off a chunk of bread, and he found himself wandering closer to see what the fuss was about.

A short, stocky man with an amplification device stood on a raised platform, haranguing the crowd. “Patricians and plebeians, servants and republicans, my countrymen! The Imperial Army is recruiting! We have need of good, strapping young men to join our army. Join the newest, most extraordinary legion, the XIII Germania! The Imperial Senate clamors for war. Will you join your countrymen to bring punishment and pain to these barbarians and bloodthirsty raiders? Those dastardly pillagers and savages who steal children, destroy livelihoods, enslave our women, and kill our men! Will you join with me?” His voice echoed around the square as the crowd cheered.

A throng of young men rushed to the smoking steam wagons to sign up for enlistment. Although the Empire had long ago eliminated the compulsory military service for all male citizens, many families continued to see military service as a constant,

required duty. The military paid well and consistently, no small feat for an empire stretching over half the known world.

For a moment Julius considered enlisting. He was the right age and was in great shape, both mentally and physically, but he doubted his ability to complete training and earn a place as a legionary in the Imperial Legions. He watched as, one by one, the men were led into an enclosed steam wagon where, presumably, they would be examined to see if they were fit for duty. He walked closer, and suddenly the speech-giving legionnaire was right in front of him.

“Good day, son; looking for a little excitement and a chance to see the world?” he asked.

Julius considered. Although that did sound fun and exciting, he had more practical things to worry about. “I’d love to, but I’ve got to take care of my family here.”

The legionary smiled knowingly and scanned Julius top to bottom with his eyes. Apparently Julius passed muster, because he said, “Do you know about the signing bonus? And the monthly paychecks? We can have them deposited straight to your bank account here. If your parents have telecom service, you can even hear them over the wireless when at base.”

Julius was intrigued. “How much is the signing bonus?”

The legionnaire named a figure. Julius’s eyebrows rose.

“I can tell you need some time to think about it. But don’t take too long, and miss out on this chance. The army offers mobility, a chance to improve your life. Don’t stay here and be a slave cog in some factory for the rest of your life. That’s not much to tell your grandkids about.”

The man's eyes met Julius's, eyes that had seen way too much in this world. "I wouldn't trade my experiences for anything." He seemed to have read Julius's mind. "We'll be here for three more days. Simply ask for us at the Auxilia barracks. Then we march for Camp Titus, near the Black Forest. You get the signing bonus the moment you sign on the dotted line and receive the tin *Aquila*, the symbol of being a legionnaire in training. I'm Duplicarius Apollonius, head recruiter." The soldier shook his hand and moved off into the crowd. Julius resumed his walk home, his heart seemed to beat a bit fast as he envisioned himself proudly wearing the uniform of the legion. His only worry was how he would convince his parents.

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Marius Caesar's well-calloused fist slammed onto the scuffed dinner table.

"NO. No. No. No. No son of mine is going to join the legions. You are this" he held up his thumb and forefinger nearly touching "close to getting that promotion. I can feel it in my bones. Even my metal ones." He quipped, slapping his hand on his brass replacement leg, making a hollow sound.

Two pairs of brown eyes stared at each other across the table. A few years ago, Julius would not have been able to keep that stare for long. His father's eyes had seen much in the last few years. Living in one of the poorest areas of the city had been a drain on his father both mentally and physically. The lines on his face were deeper, and black and curly hair was now peppered with grey hairs that hadn't been there recently. He cracked a nut in his hand and popped it into his mouth. "Aurelia, give me a hand here."

“Now Marcus” said a soft voice from the sink. Aurelia Marcia stood at the sink, washing dishes. Ever since they been unable to pay for household help, Aurelia had been forced to pick up much of the slack. Her slender, narrow boned figure moved slightly as her hands used the dishrag to wash the dirty plates and cups. “He’s old enough to make his own decisions. I don’t want him joining the Legions either. But we’re at peace. You know a peacetime army does little more than march in circles and look nice for the Praetors.” Marius look peeved.

“I am still the *paterfamilias* of this household and I say you will not be joining the Legions.” His voice was actually louder now. Julius had never heard his father yell before. He preferred to convince his children to follow a certain path, rather than simply demand that they follow his will. The creaking sounds of floorboards and the pitter-patter of small feet indicated that seven-year-old Marciena had entered the room.

“Momma, why is Papa yelling?” the thin child asked, her brown curls jostling as she moved to her mother’s side.

Aurelia gave her husband a tired look as she dried her hands on her apron. She placed the last of the dishes into the autodrier, turned the crank and walked away as the machine began to emit the low pitch whine. Marcus pushed his chair back and stood up, leaning heavily on his cane. His mechanical leg squealed and hissed, finally settling into the grove of walking as his leg bent and flexed at the knee joint. He walked over to the autodrier and smacked it on the side.

“Holy Emperor, this stupid piece of scrap metal never seems to work.” He smacked it again for good measure and the machine’s whine turned into a low, steady hum. “I’m amazed it’s kept together this long. Gonna have to break out the wrench-

spanner tomorrow and take this thing apart to see where that wire's crossed." He turned to look at Julius.

"You'll help me right?" His voice almost seemed to plead.

Julius mustered his courage. "Father, I know it's been hard for us, but this is our way out. The army pays better than the factory does. They also offer a signing bonus. Twenty five denarii! That will pay off our loans and you'll own this place. I'll even have my pay sent back here, so Marciena can go to school and you and Momma won't have to worry."

Julius set his mug down on the table. His hands felt the cracks in the mug, repaired again and again by his mother to stretch every coin they had.

"We need the money. It's the only thing we can do."

His father was staring out the window over the kitchen sink, gazing at the sparkling glass and gas lights of the city around them. A clattering steamwagon chugged through the streets below them, metal wheels scratching against the street surface.

"Looks like fog tonight" his voice rumbled low. He turned to give one brief glance at his only son, still sitting on the three-legged stool at the table. Julius could see the old man's eyes partially glazed over as he looked at his son. *I wonder what he is seeing.* With a small jerk of his head, Marius' attention came back to the present.

"You cannot leave. You do not have my blessing." He managed to say, voice choked with emotion. He stumped out of the room. Julius sighed. While he had known it would be a challenge to bring his father around, he hadn't anticipated the extreme opposition. He had hoped his father would support him.

His mother walked back into the kitchen. She put her arm around his shoulder and gave it a tight squeeze. His mother was a gentle soul. Rarely did she ever express anger or frustration. She worked as a weaver, weaving and selling basic tunics for the poor people of the slums. Aurelia was similar to the clothing she made. Simple and plain, but tough and strong, too. Not flashy or rich but dependable and long lasting. His mother had made a life for herself here in the slums. She sat down next to Julius.

“Your father is not angry at you. He’s angry that you are leaving your family. You have responsibilities here to your community, to the factory, and to your sister and father and I.” Her voice was low, almost a whisper now. The sounds of the city crept into the quiet kitchen. The clanking and whirring of a nearby patrol walker. The occasional screech of metal against rusted metal. The faint sound of waves hitting the city wall behind them.

“Can you bring Papa around? I have to go. This is about my only chance out of here. To see the Empire. Can you imagine Mother? There is a world beyond these black iron walls, beyond this stinking slum. I can’t stay here. I’ll leave without his blessing, but leave I will.” He promised his mother.

She smiled wanly at her only son. “Sometimes I think it’s hard for your father to see how much of him there is in you. I’ll do my best to bring him around. You know how he needs time to adjust. Now you get some sleep. We’ll discuss this more in the morning.”

She stood up and moved quietly from the room. Julius gathered his thoughts and left the table. The gears in his head were turning full blast. As he lay in his bed close to

falling asleep, he heard the sounds of his mother's whispered prayers to the gods for his safety. The soft murmur of her voice lulled him to sleep.

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A few blocks away, the constabulary auxilia walker *Maxentius III* slogged its way through the darkened streets of Sludge Bottom. Traditionally, Sludge Bottom was not a bastion of law and order in the vibrant mechanical city of Brittenburg. The Governor, under pressure from various city council members, merchants and the province senators, had agreed to send the patrols in during both day and nighttime. The constable auxiliary forces were, understandably, not pleased by this turn of events. After all, they reasoned, the auxiliaries were the ones putting their necks on the line in old and jury-rigged equipment. Not the Governor or his flunkies.

The four-man patrol were stationed at various points on the walker. With four legs and a flat top, it looked as though a giant beetle was crawling its way around Sludge Bottom. The vehicle was about ten feet tall, with a low railing around the edges, which was strengthened with the addition of a more fortified like 'nest' in the front and rear of the patrol walker. The under-officer in charge of the patrol stood on at the front tip of the walker, the best vantage point on the machine. A lantern just below the protruding horn-like gantry illuminated the area in front of the walker. Several searchlights swept back and forth, running off power supplied by the clanking steam engine.

Moving through Sludge Bottom was always risky late at night, so they had both running lights and security lights on, temporarily brightening the narrow alleyways and

side streets, washing over piles of debris and catching the scurrying movement of rats and *larger* things in the darkness. Although it wasn't exceptionally late, there were almost no citizens about.

An odd feeling tingled at the back of Under-Officer Hakia's weathered and wrinkly neck. Twenty years of constable instinct were telling him that something was not right. The streets shouldn't be quite this silent, especially in the Sludge Bottom quarter. Where were the bar patrons? The loitering drunks and rabble from the downtrodden masses? It was still early into the evening watch. So where were the people?

A clattering of shingles on the roof of a nearby building caught his attention. He turned towards the sound. Grasping at the control panel in front of him, he slung the front searchlight towards the dark shingled roof on his right. The blazing light caught a flurry of movement, then nothing.

Hakai's turned slowly to face the other auxiliaries in his patrol. One man stood at the rear post, watching behind the patrol. His attention had also been caught by the noise on the roof. The helmsman and wireless operator sat at their controls under a small canvas canopy rigged in the middle of the deck. It was just big enough to provide cover for the temperamental wireless equipment from the occasional rain shower. They remained focused on their jobs, ignorant of the sudden unease that permeated the soupy evening air.

Hakai's eyes scanned the rooftops. Suddenly, he saw a shadow peek out from behind a chimney. Hakai pointed and called out.

"You there! Identify --" His voice cut off as a crossbow bolt tore through his neck, sending him over the side of the walkway. Blood sprayed through the air and

spattered the rust streaked side of the walker on the way down. One sickening thud later and Hakai's body was splayed all over the cobblestone street.

At this point the helmsman made a grave error. Instead of continuing on at full speed to escape the ambush, his hands left the controls of the walker to reach for his weapons.

The walker lurched to a stop, one leg raised precariously a foot or so off the ground. The auxiliary next to the helmsman looked surprised. Helmsman Gravous smacked him in the head.

“Quick, boy, get a message off that we are under attack!” If the operator could get a message off, help would arrive quickly. From behind him came the sounds of combat.

The last member of the patrol was fighting for his life. A cloaked figure had jumped the imposing gap between the walker and the nearby slate roof. The auxiliary barely had a chance to lift his spatha up against the figure and avert immediate death.

His feet stumbled as he was pushed back towards the center of the walker, boots clanking on the gantry as he fought against the daggers wielded by the cloaked figure. Unable to truly make out even the gender of the person he was fighting, the half-trained constable could barely do more than parry and retreat again and again.

His footgear caught on a protruding screw. His sword wavered for a moment as his head instinctively turned to look behind him.

That one moment of hesitation was all the shadow figure needed. A silvery dagger shot out, quickly jabbing into his leg, then arm, then neck. Blood spurted from the body as the luckless auxiliary slumped to the deck, his armor proving useless against the

weapons. A powerful kick by the cloaked figure sent his lifeless body under the railing and over the side of the gantry.

Seeing this, the helmsman drew his sword and battered shield from the rack and charged. He knew it was only a matter of time until they were overrun, as he heard the sounds of men climbing the walker and saw several grappling hooks arc over the sides and attach to the railings.

He stalled for time, keeping himself between the shadow at the rear and the young auxiliary manning the radio. Seeing Gravous suitably prepared, the shadow bent down and picked up a broken piece of piping railing as an improvised weapon.

“Hurry! Get that signal off!” Gravous cried out, seeing the young operator seemingly frozen in fear. A flurry of impacts hit his shield. The helmsman backed off, then, whirling his sword, pressed forward, attacking. For a moment or so, it appeared that momentum was on his side. He closed in, trusting his fighting instincts would help him carry the day. He stabbed low at the figure.

The shadow warrior seemed to flow to one side. Gravous’ eyes widened in surprise. His sword clanged loudly off the metal decking, sparks flying.

In response, the figure swept the piece of railing overhead and smashed it sideways into Gravous’ head. His body lifted off the deck plating to fall with a thud and clank of gear. The auxiliary at the radio turned around, grasping at his sword still in the scabbard.

The shadow figure approached, dropping the improvised bludgeon and drawing close to the auxiliary, dagger in hand. An arm snapped out impossibly fast...

...and severed the wireless’ power cable.

“Hello, Mother.”

The figure in the cloak nodded imperceptibly at the auxiliary, placing one hand on his shoulder before moving away. She gave quiet directions to the rest of the boarders, who swiftly moved to hide all evidence of their ambush. Another man walked to the control console and activated the steam engines, propelling the *Maxentius III* forward. Seeing the helmsman still breathing, the traitorous auxiliary walked over, placing his sword over the downed man’s neck.

“You never were a very good driver.”

The sword stabbed down.