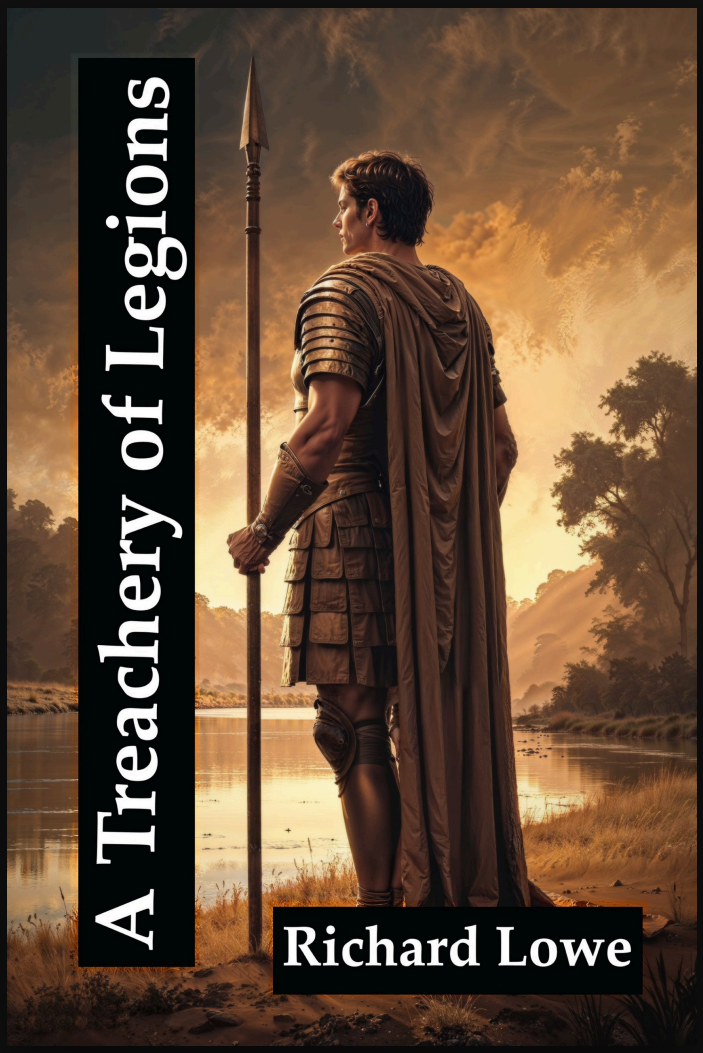
A FREE COMPANION TO A TREACHERY OF LEGIONS

The Winter the River Froze

Thirteen years before a new legate walks his bank, Brunhild's mother walks across the frozen Danube alone.



RICHARD LOWE

The Winter the River Froze

The ice talked all night.

Gerlind lay awake in the longhouse and listened to it. A long groan came up from the middle of the river, then a crack like a green branch breaking, then nothing for the space of fifty breaths.

Her husband slept beside her with his back to the fire. The cold came in under the door and lay along the floor with the dogs, and not one of the dogs would get up for it.

On the fourth night of the hard freeze the sound changed. She knew it at once, the way she knew her children's coughs apart in the dark. The groaning stopped, and the quiet that came after it meant the ice had closed from bank to bank.

She got up without waking Aldric and took her cloak from the peg. Brunhild was sitting up on her pallet with the blanket around her shoulders and her eyes open. The small brother slept against the wall with his mouth open and one fist in his hair.

"You heard it," Gerlind said.

"It stopped talking."

"Get your boots."

They went down through the oaks with no torch. The snow had a crust that broke under each step and held the foot a moment before it let go. Brunhild walked in her mother's prints because her legs were long for twelve winters but not long enough for this snow.

At the bank the river was white and flat and wrong. Every winter of her life Gerlind had watched it freeze at the edges, shelves of ice reaching out from both banks with the black water still moving between them. She had seen it close all the way across twice: once when she was a girl, and once the winter Brunhild was born.

Across the white the Roman fort sat on its rise. Three torches burned on the wall where there were usually twelve.

"They have pulled in," Brunhild said.

"Count the walkers."

Brunhild counted. The torches did not move and no shadow crossed them. "Nobody is walking," she said.

"Their sentries are inside by the fires," Gerlind said, with her eyes on the wall. "The trader says four of them have died since midwinter, from the chest fever and the cold together."

She crouched and put her palm flat on the ice at the edge. It was dry and hard and so cold it burned. She left her hand there until the burn turned into nothing, and the river under it said nothing at all.

"Can you walk on it?" Brunhild said.

"A man could walk on it tonight. Tomorrow a cow could."

"Will the Romans come across?"

Gerlind took her hand off the ice and rubbed it against her cloak. That was the question every house beyond the second bend had been asking for four days, and the old men at her husband's fire had asked it loudest. Four summers ago the garrison over there had burned the southern settlement over a boundary quarrel its own commander had stirred up, and the old men had long memories and short tempers about it.

"Not while they are dying in their beds," she said. "In the spring, maybe. If somebody hands them a reason."

They stood a while and watched the dark fort. Then Brunhild pointed downstream.

There were marks on the ice. Even by starlight Gerlind could see them: a scuffed gray line in the crust running out from the willows, straight across the white toward the Roman side. Three sets of feet going out, close together, the way young men walk when they are frightened and pretending otherwise.

None of the prints came back.

Gerlind looked at them for a long time. Her heart had begun to go hard against her ribs and she let it go, because there was nothing on the bank to do with it.

"Who?" Brunhild said.

"Go back to the house and wake your father. Tell him three went across and none have come home."

Brunhild ran. Gerlind stayed on the bank with her hands in her armpits, watching the Roman side.

She was still standing there when the shouting started over by the vicus. The three torches on the wall became nine, and then the nine began to move.

* * *

Two of them came back before the light, driving four Roman cows across the ice with sticks.

They were Wilmar, who was nineteen, and Sigi, who was a year younger and had a cut over his eye that had bled into his collar and frozen there. The cows were red and thin and frightened.

One of them wore a bell on a leather strap. The bell rang the whole way across the river, and every house along the bank was awake and at its door before the boys reached the willows.

Hrodo was not with them.

They told it in the longhouse with the whole settlement packed in behind them, and they told it badly. Sigi kept starting a sentence and Wilmar kept finishing it wrong. Gerlind stood by the fire pit with a pot of broth heating on the stones and listened to what they were not saying more carefully than to what they were.

They had gone for the byres at the edge of the vicus. Everybody knew the vicus cattle were fat on Roman fodder while the cattle beyond the second bend were down to bones, and everybody knew the grain pits would not reach the thaw. That much they said out loud, and nobody in the hall argued with it.

"A man came out of the house," Wilmar said. "With a lamp. And a stick, a big stick..."

"A club," Sigi said.

"He had a club and a lamp and he was shouting. Hrodo hit the lamp out of his hand. Then it was dark."

"Then he fell down," Sigi said.

"Did you kill him?" Aldric said.

"No." Both of them at once.

"Then why did he fall?"

Wilmar opened his mouth and shut it. Sigi looked at the floor.

"We were running with the cows," Sigi said. "We heard him fall and we heard Hrodo shout. Then there were torches on the wall and men at the gate, and we ran."

"You left him," Brennos said.

It was the first thing the old man had said since the boys came in. He was sitting on the bench nearest the fire with his hands on his knees, and he had been old for as long as Gerlind had been alive. Hrodo was his son's son, the last one living.

Nobody answered him.

Gerlind ladled broth into a bowl and gave it to Sigi, because his hands were shaking. Then she gave one to Wilmar, because it would be cruel to feed one and not the other.

Wilmar's mother was standing three rows back with her arms folded tight across her chest. She did not come forward.

* * *

The Roman message came across the ice at midmorning.

It came in the shape of a short man in a heavy cloak, walking alone with a green branch held up over his head. He stopped at the middle of the river where the current had been and stood there with the branch up until Aldric went down through the oaks with four men behind him and stopped at the edge of the ice.

Gerlind went too. She stood at the back, behind the men, with her hood up.

The short man was Dasas, the Pannonian who talked for the fort. She had seen him at the summer market across the river for three years, haggling over cloth in four languages and lying in all of them. He lowered the branch and called across the ice in their tongue, which he spoke with the flat vowels of the people downstream.

The legate held the boy, he said. A man of the vicus was dead, a citizen, a veteran of twenty-two years under the standards, killed in his own byre. The legate's name was Avidius Nepos and he required three things.

The two who had run were to be delivered to the fort. The four cattle were to come back with ten more beside them. And the chieftain's daughter was to live in the fort until the river ran again, as a pledge that the people beyond the second bend could be trusted to keep to their own side.

“If not,” Dasas called, “the boy goes on a cross on the bank where you can watch him. And when the ice goes out, the legate comes over.”

The men behind Aldric made a noise low in their chests. Aldric made no noise at all.

“Tell your legate I heard him,” he said.

Dasas waited, the branch hanging at his side, to see if there was more. There was not.

He turned and walked back across the white toward the fort, small and dark and unhurried. Gerlind watched him the whole way, because a man walks differently toward his master than away from him.

He walked faster going back.

* * *

The council went on until dark.

The hall was hot with bodies. The smoke would not rise in the cold, and it hung under the roof beams and made everybody's eyes run.

Gerlind kept the fire and the pots and said nothing. Women did not speak in council unless they were asked, and she was not asked, and she listened.

Two of the elders wanted to fight. Wilmar's father wanted the legate to take the cattle and choke on them, and nobody wanted to hand his son over, least of all Wilmar's father.

Brennos sat on his bench with his hands on his knees and said nothing. The less he said, the more the others looked at him and then away.

The daughter they did not discuss. Nobody would say Brunhild's name in front of her father.

“I will go,” Aldric said finally.

“They will keep you,” said Odo, who was the oldest after Brennos. “Then they have a chieftain on their cross in place of a boy, and we have nobody to talk for us when the ice goes.”

“They would not dare.”

“They burned the southern settlement over a ditch,” Odo said. “They will dare.”

Aldric had no answer to that. He sat with his elbows on his knees and looked into the fire, and Gerlind looked at the back of his neck, where the hair was going gray in a patch the size of her palm.

He had been managing the Romans since he was a young man, with patience and a long face. In all those years she had never seen him without an answer.

She set down the ladle.

“I will go,” she said.

The hall went quiet in the way a hall goes quiet when a dog walks across the council floor. Odo turned on his bench to look at her. A few of the younger men laughed, short and embarrassed, and stopped when nobody laughed with them.

“A woman,” Odo said.

“If they refuse a woman, nobody's name is shamed, because it was only the chieftain's wife.” She wiped her hands on her apron. “If they keep a woman, they gain nothing worth keeping, and they will not be careful in front of me.”

“Why would they not be careful?”

“Because I am a woman, Odo,” she said, “and to them we are all cows.”

Somebody at the back did laugh then, a real laugh, and the room let out its breath. Odo glared at the laugh. Then he looked at Aldric.

Aldric was still looking at the fire. He knew what she had not said in front of the council, and he was deciding whether to say it himself. She watched him decide not to.

“My wife will go,” he said.

* * *

Later, when the hall had emptied and the fire was low, he sat on the edge of their pallet with a knife and a whetstone and drew the blade along the stone in long slow strokes. He did this when he wanted to talk and did not want to begin.

Gerlind sat beside him and unbraided her hair.

“You will tell them no about the girl,” he said.

“Yes.”

“And if no is the price of the boy?”

“Then I will find another price.”

The stone went along the blade. The small brother turned over in his sleep and said a word that was not a word and was quiet again.

“Six summers at their market,” Aldric said, low enough that the children would not hear. “Six summers buying cloth you did not need.”

“I needed some of it.”

“You came home with your mouth tired from keeping shut.” He turned the knife and started on the other edge. “You know how much of their tongue?”

“Enough to follow a man who is not trying to be followed. Not enough to make speeches.”

“Good. Don't make speeches.”

She laughed, and he did not. She put her hand on his back between the shoulder blades and felt how hard he was holding himself there.

He kept sharpening. The knife did not need it.

“The ice is thin by the willows,” he said. “Where the spring comes up under the bank. Go out from the big rock.”

“I know where the spring is.”

“I know you know.” He set the knife and the stone on the floor. “I am telling you anyway.”

On the girls' pallet across the fire, Brunhild lay on her side with her eyes shut, breathing slow and even. Gerlind had performed that sleep herself at twelve and knew exactly what it sounded like.

“Come here,” she said.

Brunhild opened her eyes, which was an answer. She came around the fire and sat between them with her knees drawn up.

“The pledge they want,” Brunhild said. “That is me.”

“Yes.”

“Would I have to go?”

“No.”

“If it would bring Hrodo home…”

“No,” her father said, and the word came out of him so hard that the dogs lifted their heads.

Brunhild looked from one to the other. She had her father's long face and her mother's way of not letting go of a question, and she held this one for a while before she asked the next.

“When will you know?” she said. “If they say yes.”

“When they decide.”

“I want to know now.”

“So do I.” Gerlind took a strand of her daughter's hair and began to braid it, because her hands wanted work.

“Listen,” she said. “Patience is not the absence of desire. It is the decision to let desire work at the speed of the thing you desire, and not at the speed of the wanting.”

Brunhild thought about that. Gerlind could see her turn it over and test it, the way she tested a new knife on her thumb.

“That is a hard thing,” Brunhild said.

“Yes,” said her mother. “Go to sleep. Really sleep, this time.”

* * *

In the morning she walked down to the river alone.

That was the agreement in the hall. No men behind her, no spears in the oaks, nothing the Romans could count and call a threat. Aldric stood at the edge of the trees with his arms folded and Brennos beside him.

Brunhild was supposed to be in the longhouse with her brother. She was not, and Gerlind let her be wherever she was.

She stopped at the waterline beside the big rock.

The river was gray-white under a low sky. Cold came off it in a slow breath that went through her cloak and the wool wrapped around her legs, and settled on her skin as if it meant to stay.

She had brought nothing except the clothes she wore and the silver ring on her upper arm. The ring had been her mother's, and she had worn it every day since her mother went into the ground.

She spoke to the river first, because her mother had taught her that.

The river carries words between the worlds, her mother used to say, and what you say at the waterline the gods below hear as clearly as the gods above. Gerlind said plainly what she was going to

do, what she would not do, and what she was willing to pay. She said it in a voice that would not carry to the trees.

Then she stepped from the rock onto the ice.

It held.

The first part was easy. The ice near the bank was thick and white, full of trapped bubbles and old reeds.

Her boots found purchase in the crust of snow on top of it. She walked the way her father had taught her to walk on ice when she was a girl, feet apart, knees soft, weight low, never hurrying.

The middle was different.

The snow thinned out there and the ice went dark under it, gray and then nearly black. She could see down into it a hand's depth before the seeing stopped. Under her feet the river was still moving, and she felt it through her soles more than she heard it, a faint steady pull like a hand on her ankle.

The ice spoke once while she was on the dark part. It was a sharp crack that ran away from her in both directions, upstream and down, faster than a bird could fly, and her whole body went still before her mind had any say in it.

She stood there and breathed.

Her mouth tasted of iron. Her knees had locked, and she unlocked them one at a time, and she did not look down. She looked at the far bank, at the low flat stretch below the fort where the parleys were held in summer, and she saw that they had carried a table out onto it.

An actual table, with four legs pushed into the snow. A brazier beside it, glowing. A man sitting in a folding chair behind it with a heavy cloak over his shoulders.

She started walking again.

* * *

Nobody stood up when she came off the ice.

There were six of them. The man in the chair had to be the legate, and Dasas stood beside him with the green branch propped against the table leg. A centurion with a raw red face coughed into his fist, wet and deep.

Two soldiers held spears, and between them, sitting in the snow with his hands tied behind his back, was Hrodo.

His face was swollen on one side and the eye on that side was shut. He saw her and tried to get up.

One of the soldiers put a hand on his shoulder and sat him down again, not hard. Hrodo stayed down.

Gerlind did not look at him long. She looked at the legate.

Avidius Nepos was a man of perhaps forty-five, heavy through the shoulders, with a long nose gone red at the end from the cold and pale clean hands folded on the table in front of him. There was a gold ring on one of the fingers. His cheeks were shaved so close they shone, and she thought that somebody in that freezing fort had heated water for it this morning, before dawn, in a winter when sentries were dying in their beds.

The brazier was on his side of the table. Its heat went to him.

He looked at her and said, in Latin, to Dasas: “They sent a woman.”

“The chieftain's wife, sir,” Dasas said.

“Is it an insult or a surrender?”

“With these people, sir,” Dasas said, “sometimes it is neither.”

Gerlind stood in the snow with her hands folded inside her sleeves and kept her face exactly as it was. She had practiced this face for six summers at the market, the face of a woman waiting patiently for men to finish a conversation that did not concern her. It was a good face and she trusted it.

The legate gestured at Dasas to begin.

She gave him the words through the interpreter, in her own tongue, plainly and in order. The four cattle would come back today, and four more after the thaw, from her husband's own herd.

The two boys who had run would be judged by her husband, as men of the second bend were always judged. The judgment would be carried out on this bank, where the vicus could watch it.

"And the boy here goes home with me," she said. "And my daughter stays where she is."

Dasas put it into Latin, and he put it in accurately. She liked him a little better for that.

Nepos listened with his eyes on her face. When Dasas finished, he looked down at his clean hands for a while.

"Tell her a citizen is dead," he said. "Tell her he carried a shield for Rome for twenty-two years and survived every war they sent him to, and he died in his own byre at the hands of barbari who wanted his cows. Tell her that."

Dasas told her that. The centurion coughed until he bent over.

"I want to speak to the boy," Gerlind said.

"Let her," Nepos said, before Dasas had finished. "It changes nothing."

She went and crouched in the snow in front of Hrodo. The soldiers let her. Up close he smelled of piss and fear and old smoke.

There was dried blood in the hair above his ear. He was trying hard not to cry in front of the Romans, and he was going to lose.

"Look at me," she said in their tongue. "Not at them. Your grandfather is on the bank."

His good eye came to her face and held there.

"Tell me what happened in the byre. Only the true part."

"I hit his lamp," Hrodo said. His voice cracked in the middle, and he waited and started again.

"He swung his club at me, and I hit the lamp out of his other hand so he could not see us. Then it was dark, and the thing came down off the wall."

"What thing?"

"I heard it in the air, like a big bird." His throat moved. "It went into his back."

He tried to move his shoulder to show her where, and the bonds stopped him.

"He fell on me," Hrodo said. "I was trying to pull it out of him when they came with the torches."

"Why were you pulling it out?"

Hrodo looked at her as if she had asked him why water was wet. "He was making a noise," he said.

Gerlind put her bare hand against the side of his face, the good side, for the space of one breath. His skin was so cold it felt like the river ice. Then she stood up and turned back to the table.

"I want to see the dead man," she said to Dasas, "before I pay for him."

Dasas put it into Latin. Nepos frowned. He did not answer Dasas; he turned his head and spoke to the centurion, low, the way a man speaks to the dog at his feet in front of a guest who has no Latin.

"Where is he?"

"Shed by the gate, sir," the centurion said, and coughed. "The pilum's still in him. Nobody wanted to pull it with the wife standing there screaming."

“Then she does not see him.” Nepos turned back. “Tell her he was burned at first light, according to our custom.”

Dasas opened his mouth to tell her.

“Then your custom is very quick,” Gerlind said in Latin. “Your sentry's spear is still in his back.”

* * *

She would tell her daughter about that face for the rest of her life, which turned out to be shorter than anybody expected. She would tell it well.

The legate's mouth stayed a little open on whatever he had been going to say next. His eyes went to Dasas, and Dasas was looking at the table, and the centurion had stopped coughing in the middle of a cough. The clean hands on the table came apart.

Then Avidius Nepos looked at her again, and it was not the same look.

He had been looking at a chieftain's wife sent over the ice with cattle, a problem the gods had put in front of his table to be settled before his dinner. Now he was looking at a person across a table. She watched the change go through his face from the top down, the eyebrows first, then the mouth, then the jaw setting into a line she had seen on her husband's face over a gaming board when he could not read the other man's hand.

“You speak Latin,” he said.

“Market Latin,” she said. “Enough to buy cloth. Enough to hear.”

“How long?”

“Six summers. Your men talk a great deal when they think the woman counting her coins is a cow.”

The centurion made a sound that might have been a laugh or the cough coming back. Nepos did not look at him.

“Sit down,” Nepos said.

There was no second chair. She watched him look at the table and understand why there was none, and she watched it embarrass him.

She had not expected that, and she kept it. He snapped an order at one of the spearmen, and the spearman went up the slope at a run toward the fort gate.

She stayed standing until the chair came. It was a plain camp stool with a leather seat that had been sat on by a great many soldiers. She sat on it and put her hands in her lap and waited.

“Your boy brought him out into the dark,” Nepos said.

“Yes.”

“If your boys had stayed on their own bank, my man would be alive.”

“Yes,” she said. “That is why I came and not my husband. My husband would argue it, and I will not.”

He had not expected that either. She saw him put it away somewhere.

She went on slowly, because the Latin had to be built one piece at a time and she did not want any piece to fall.

“Your sentry threw at a lamp that went out,” she said. “Four of your men have died since midwinter. You have three torches on a wall that wants twelve, and your patrols have not walked the bank in nine days, because you do not have the men to send.”

The legate's face did not change now. He had learned already.

“The man you answer to is a long way off, and he is warm,” she said. “If you write him that you burned a village for a man your own wall killed, he will ask about your wall. If you write that the

barbarians paid for their night and the river is quiet, he will ask you nothing at all."

Nepos was quiet for a long time. The brazier ticked. Up on the wall of the fort a single sentry had appeared and was standing still, looking down at the table, and Gerlind suspected the whole garrison was finding reasons to be near the wall this morning.

"Who taught you to think like that?" Nepos said.

"A river," she said, "and a husband who has been talking to you people since before you came."

He breathed out through his nose, which was as close to a laugh as he was going to come in front of his centurion. Then he leaned forward and put his elbows on the table, and they began.

* * *

It took most of the morning.

He wanted the two boys, and she would not give them. He wanted twenty cattle, then fifteen. She offered eight, and they settled on ten, six of them after the thaw.

He wanted the girl, and she said no. An hour later he asked again in different words, and she said no in the same words. He did not ask a third time.

"Then what holds your people to their bank," he said, "if not a pledge?"

She had thought about that on the pallet in the dark, with Aldric breathing beside her, and she had the answer ready.

"Fire," she said.

He waited.

"While the ice holds, one fire burns on your bank, here, and one on ours at the big rock, all night, every night. Nobody crosses except between the two fires, by daylight, one person with a branch. Any man of ours found on the ice anywhere else is yours, and I will not come asking for him, and any man of yours on our side is ours."

"And in the spring?"

"In the spring the river runs and there is no ice to cross. You keep your side and we keep ours, and the fires go out, and nobody burns anything."

Nepos turned that over. She watched him look for the place where it gave him less than it promised, and she let him look, because there was no such place.

It gave both sides the same thing.

"My men will want the two boys," he said. "The vicus will want them."

"Your men will watch them flogged on this bank, below your wall, and my husband does not do it gently." She paused to find the next words. "And I will pay the widow myself, today, with my own hand, not through Dasas and not through you."

"Why yourself?"

"Because our boys were in her byre."

"My sentry threw the spear," he said. He said it to her, quietly, without looking at the centurion. It was the first true thing he had given her across the table.

"Your sentry would not have had anything to throw at," she said, "if our boys had stayed home."

He looked at her for a while. Then he nodded once, took a wax tablet and a stylus from inside his cloak, and began to write.

She watched the stylus move. She could not read what it made, and he saw that she could not. When he was done he read it aloud to her in plain slow Latin, every word.

It was what they had said. Nothing added.

* * *

The widow came down from the vicus with two women holding her arms.

She was younger than Gerlind had expected, thirty perhaps, a broad Pannonian woman with her hair uncombed and her hands raw and red. There was flour in the creases of her knuckles. She had been making bread, Gerlind thought, this morning, with her husband lying in a shed by the gate with a spear in his back, because there were children in the house and children eat.

Dasas told her who Gerlind was. The widow looked at her and her mouth worked.

Gerlind stood up from the stool. She pushed back the sleeve of her dress and worked the ring off her upper arm. It was heavy twisted silver, made by a smith beyond the hills when her mother was a girl, and it came off hard because her arm had grown into it.

It left a pale band on the skin, pressed and ridged. The cold went straight into the band.

She held it out.

The widow did not take it. She looked from the ring to Gerlind's face and said a few words in the Pannonian tongue, low and fast. Dasas did not translate them, and Gerlind did not ask him to.

She set the ring on the table instead.

"Will it plow?" the widow said in Latin. Her voice was raw from the screaming the centurion had talked about.

"It will buy an ox when the thaw comes," Gerlind said. "A good one."

"Which of them hit him? Which one?"

Gerlind looked at her. There was a version of this she could give, a softer one, and she could feel Nepos beside her waiting to see if she would give it.

"None of ours," she said. "The spear came from your wall, and ours brought him out into the dark to meet it. That is why I am paying."

The widow turned her head and looked up at the fort. At the wall. At the single sentry who still stood up there in the cold, watching the table, and who stepped back out of sight when she looked at him.

She looked at the wall a long time. Then she picked the ring up off the table and closed her floury hand around it.

She turned without another word and went back up the slope toward the vicus. The two women hurried to catch her arms again, and she shook them off.

Nobody at the table said anything. The centurion had stopped coughing.

* * *

They cut Hrodo's hands free.

He tried to stand and his legs would not do it. Gerlind got her shoulder under his arm and lifted him.

He was taller than she was and all bones. He leaned on her and she took the weight and did not let him see it cost anything.

"Gerlind," the legate said.

It was the first time he had used her name. She had given it to Dasas at the start, and Dasas had given it to him, and he had not used it all morning. She turned with the boy hanging off her shoulder.

Avidius Nepos was standing.

He had not stood when she came off the ice. He stood now behind the table, with the brazier gone to ash beside him and his cloak hanging off one shoulder where he had pushed it back during the

bargaining.

He said nothing else. He stood there, and the standing was what he had to say.

She inclined her head to him, the way her husband did with the elders.

Then she turned and walked Hrodo down onto the ice.

* * *

Brunhild had been in the oaks the whole time.

She had gone up the big oak by the rock before light, the one with the low limb that made a seat, and nobody had looked for her there, or if her father had looked he had decided not to see. From the limb she could see the whole river and the whole far bank. She could not hear anything.

She had seen her mother stop at the waterline and speak to the river. She had seen her stop on the dark ice in the middle and stand still for a long time.

Brunhild had held on to the oak so hard that the bark left marks in her palms that lasted until evening. She had watched the table and the men around it, and her mother's back, straight in the snow, while nothing at all happened for most of the morning.

She had seen a soldier run up to the fort and come back down with a stool.

She had seen a woman come down from the vicus with her hair loose and go back up again alone. At the end she had seen the Roman in the chair stand up behind his table and stay standing, while her mother turned away from him with Hrodo hanging on her shoulder.

Brunhild did not know what it meant. She knew it meant a great deal. She had watched Romans across that river every day she could remember, and she had never once seen one of them stand up for anybody from this side.

Now her mother was halfway across with Hrodo, and they were coming slowly over the dark ice in the middle. Hrodo was dragging one foot. On the bank below the oak, Brennos had gone out onto the ice without waiting for anybody and was walking toward them, an old man on a white river with his arms held out from his sides for balance, and nobody tried to stop him.

He met them where the dark part ended. Brunhild saw him take Hrodo's face in both hands.

She saw Hrodo fold up against the old man's chest and Brennos hold him up. Her mother stepped back from them both and stood alone on the ice with her arms at her sides.

She let them have a while. Then the three of them came the rest of the way together.

Brunhild climbed down from the oak so fast she tore her dress on the low limb. She was at the waterline when her mother stepped off the ice onto the big rock.

Her mother's face was raw from the cold, red across the cheekbones and white around the mouth. She was not smiling. Her eyes were clear and tired, and she held her head the way she held it at the end of a long day when the work had been done properly.

She looked like nobody Brunhild had ever seen, and like herself.

Brunhild did not understand it. She would understand it later, a long time later, on another bank, in front of another Roman. That day she only looked.

Her mother's left sleeve was pushed up. There was a pale ridged band around her upper arm where the ring had always been, and the skin of the band had gone blue with cold.

“Where is your ring?”

“I paid with it.”

“For Hrodo?”

“For a man in a byre,” her mother said, and pulled her sleeve down over the band. “Come. Your father has stood at those trees since morning, and his feet are frozen to the ground, and he will never admit it.”

* * *

That night the whole settlement was in the longhouse, and there was meat, because Aldric had killed one of the four Roman cows. The other three were going back across the ice in the morning, he said. A cow that had been run across the river in the dark would not give milk again, and the Romans could have the hide and the head and a better cow in the spring.

Nobody argued. Everybody ate.

Wilmar and Sigi sat at the far end of the hall with their backs to the wall and did not eat much. In two days, when the cut over Sigi's eye had closed, Aldric would take them down onto the far bank between the fires and do what had been promised, with the vicus watching from the slope.

Both boys knew it. Wilmar's mother sat between them with a hand on each of their knees.

Hrodo slept on a pallet by the fire with his grandfather sitting beside him. Brennos had not moved from that spot since they came up from the river. Every so often he put his hand on the boy's chest to feel it go up and down.

Gerlind sat by the fire with Brunhild against her side and told her about it.

She did not tell her what was said. She told her about the cold on the dark ice, and the crack that had run away from her feet faster than a bird. She told her about the Roman's clean hands, and the gold ring, and the brazier he had kept on his side of the table.

Then she told her about his face.

“He thought I was a cow until he found out I could hear him,” she said. “Then he had to send for a stool.” She smiled for the first time all day, a short one, mostly at the fire.

“Why did he stand up?”

“Because I was his equal at that table,” her mother said, “and he knew it, and he is a better man than his clean hands.”

Brunhild thought about that for a long time.

Her father was sitting across the fire with his knife and his whetstone, drawing the blade along the stone. He had been listening without looking at them, which was how he listened to everything that mattered. He stopped and looked at his daughter over the fire.

“In the spring,” he said, “the trader from downstream comes back. You will sit with him and learn their tongue.”

“Mother already knows it.”

“Your mother learned it at the market with her mouth shut for six summers,” he said. “You will learn it faster and better, and you will keep your mouth shut too.”

He drew the blade down the stone once.

“Know what they are saying,” he said, “when they think you cannot understand them.”

“Yes,” Brunhild said.

He went back to the knife. Her mother's arm was around her, and the bare place where the ring had been was warm now against Brunhild's shoulder through the wool.

Later, when the hall was asleep, Brunhild got up and went to the door and pushed it open a crack. The cold came in like water. She looked down through the dark oaks to the river.

There was a fire burning at the big rock on their side, where her father had sent two men to build it at dusk. And across the white ice, on the flat stretch of bank below the Roman fort, there was another fire, small and orange and steady.

Somebody over there had built it. Somebody was keeping it lit.

She stood in the doorway with the cold on her face and watched the two fires look at each other across the river until her mother called her back to bed.

The World of A Treachery of Legions

The People

The main characters of the novel, as the reader first meets them.

NAME	WHO THEY ARE
Marcus Antonius Primus	The narrator, a real figure of 69 AD. Born in Toulouse around 20 AD to a tenant farming family, first language Gaulish. Talked his way into a Roman levy at thirteen by insisting he was large for his age, and spent twenty-five years on the Danube frontier.
Julia Petronia	His wife, from a Roman family of standing with long ties to senatorial politics. Educated and methodical. She wants the real information, never the summary, and her own interest in the machinery of Rome runs deeper than her husband knows.
Demetrios	A Greek freedman of about fifty who has been with Julia's household since before she was born. Runs the house and the correspondence, and says everything he thinks through the careful neutrality of his face.
Gaius Petronius Quietus	A senator of old family who has spent forty years building a network of favor through the management of promising men. Not unkind, and not much interested in the difference.
Calvus	Primus's first centurion. Eleven years on the Rhine, a broken nose healed sideways, and the best soldier Primus ever knew.
Crassianus	The legate Primus replaces in Pannonia. A good administrator who knows he is not a good soldier, and says so.
Decimus Macrinus	Centurion of the Third Century at the Pannonian fort, called “complex” by his last commander. Says exactly what is required and nothing more.
Sosias	The fort's interpreter, a Pannonian Greek with eleven years in the work. Speaks Latin, Greek and the Germanic dialects of the Quadi country.
Brunhild	Daughter of Aldric the Elder. Speaks Latin with no accent and has watched the Roman fort across the river since she was a child.
Aldric the Elder	Her father, a Quadi chieftain who holds the land beyond the second bend. A patient man who has managed his people's dealings with Rome for thirty years.
Brennos	An elder of Aldric's village, old for as long as Brunhild can remember.
Quintus Petillius Cerialis	Historical. Legate of the Sixth Victrix and son-in-law of Vespasian, with the air of a man who has already decided.

Vespasian	Historical. A career soldier from a family of no great distinction, commanding in Judaea when the civil war begins.

Gerlind, Wilmar, Sigi, Hrodo, Odo, Avidius Nepos, Dasas and the widow appear only in this story. The novel never names Brunhild's mother.

Timeline

WHEN	WHAT HAPPENS
9 AD	Varus loses three legions, about seventeen thousand men, in the Teutoburg Forest.
About 20 AD	Marcus Antonius Primus is born in Toulouse.
31 AD	At eleven he forgets the water jars to watch a legion march by. A cavalryman laughs at him.
33 AD	He volunteers for the levy at thirteen and marches north under Calvus.
His third year	His first battle on the Danube, at sixteen. He is promoted two grades.
His eighth year	A neighbor writes that his father has died in Toulouse.
A winter in the mid-50s	**The river freezes and the patrols stop. Brunhild's mother goes to the bank alone and comes back with terms that hold for four years. Brunhild is twelve. This story.**
The next summer	Brunhild's mother dies of a fever.
58 AD	Primus comes to Rome after twenty-five years on the frontier, meets Quietus, and marries Julia in November.
62 AD	Recalled to Rome, eight years into Nero's reign.
His fifth year in Rome	A forgery charge and fourteen months of exile in Interamna.
68 AD	Nero falls and Galba takes the throne. Primus is restored and given a legion in Pannonia. In November he walks the bank alone before dawn, and someone in the oaks watches him do it.
69 AD, January	The Rhine legions acclaim Vitellius. Galba is killed in the Forum on the fifteenth, and Otho takes the throne.
69 AD, April	Vitellius's army defeats Otho at First Bedriacum.
69 AD, July	Egypt declares for Vespasian on the first of the month.
69 AD, October	The night battle on the Via Postumia, on the twenty-fourth.
69 AD, December	The Temple of Jupiter on the Capitoline burns.

Places

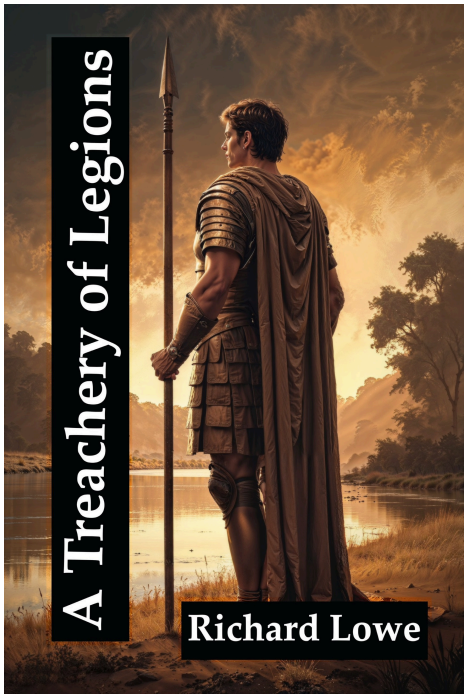
PLACE	WHAT IT IS
Toulouse	Primus's home in Gaul, where his father worked land owned by a senator who was always in Rome.
The Danube	Rome's northern frontier river. Fast, cold, flooding in spring, frozen in hard winters.
Pannonia	The Roman province south of the middle Danube, cold from October to April.
The fort and the vicus	The Roman fort on its low rise above the river, and the civilian village outside its walls: a grain merchant, a wine dealer, Livia's cookhouse, a cave shrine to Mithras, and the soldiers' unofficial families.
The second bend	The land Aldric the Elder holds north of the river.
The third set of oaks from the bend	Where the Quadi watch the fort from the far bank.
Rome	A million people in a city built for far fewer. It smells of smoke and the fulleries.
Interamna	The quiet town three days from Rome where Primus waits out his exile.
Verona, Cremona, the Via Postumia	The river city, the Po valley city and the road between them where the war of 69 AD is settled.

Words from the Frontier

WORD	MEANING
Legion	Rome's main fighting unit, five to six thousand men in ten cohorts.
Cohort	Six centuries.
Century	Eighty men in practice, commanded by a centurion.
Contubernium	Eight men who share a tent, a mule, a hand mill and a calo.
Calo	The slave attached to each tent group, who grinds the grain each evening. Without him the army stops.
Vine staff	The cut of vinestock a centurion carries as the mark of his authority.
Vicus	The civilian settlement outside a permanent fort.
Barbari	What Roman officers call the peoples beyond the frontier.
Lares	The household gods, fed and acknowledged at a family shrine.
Donar's tree	The oak, sacred to Brunhild's people, the wood that holds the sky.

Read the Novel

Brunhild was twelve the winter her mother crossed the ice. Thirteen years later she is in the oaks before dawn, watching a Roman commander find the exact tree where she stands. A Treachery of Legions is the story of that commander, Marcus Antonius Primus, and the year four men held the throne of Rome.



A Treachery of Legions

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