

The World of Roman Provinces: Nikopolis in Moesia Inferior

In the reign of Geta, 209-211 CE

<<http://aeratvs.com/provincial/images/Geta016.jpg>>

As above, so below: the winking star that made its home in the pitch-black surface of the heavens reflected back in the lapping waves of the (surprisingly calm) river. The breeze carried the salty and damp air to his nose, and although it stung slightly, there was also a great feeling of home in that sharp air. For quite some time now he had been watching the reflection of the star in the water; the lower star, unlike its heavenly brother, had been distorted by the water to look like it had eight distinct rays, each ending with a pellet.

Eight rays. He felt as if he should remember that for some reason.

Now was not the time to ponder over such trivialities such as how many rays a watery star possessed. He had already wasted far too much time on the shore as it was. With a sigh, he turned his back on the River Istrus and slowly made his way into the city proper.

Despite the sun had gone down an hour ago, the city was still fairly abuzz with life and would remain so for at least a little while longer. As he passed, the smell of fresh wine replaced the hard smell of the sea's salt and immediately his mouth began to water... the grapes of Moesia produced some of the finest wines he had ever tasted, but perhaps that was his own bias from being raised in the area. On second thought, it was probably his bias and had nothing to do with the actual quality.

His innate familiarity with his surroundings quickly led him to the wine vendor right before he was going to close up for the night.

"Wait! How much for a wineskin?"

"Eight."

Afraid that the vendor would grow impatient and leave, he shoved his hand in his coin purse and took out everything he was carrying. With a kind of impassioned fervor- who knew that such a small thing as a taste of wine could throw him into such a loop?- he quickly counted out his earnings... and paused.

One of the coins had an eight-pointed star in the exact likeness of the one he had seen in the ocean not too long before. Out of pure instinct, he pocketed the coin again and handed the merchant the remainder which happened to be just enough. With a curt nod, he thanked the peddler and took his skin, hurrying off down the road once again. Perhaps it was not the most wise decision- wasting his time with stars and wine- but what's done is done. And he sincerely doubted he would have done it any differently if he had the last hour to live over. After all, the place he was in such a rush to get to was the last place in the entire Empire he wanted to be.

He had no choice in the matter. Well, it was possible that he did, he could have just ignored the letter and continued as he had been, but there seemed to be something deeply wrong about doing such a thing. No... his father needed him, and what's more... what's more, Octavius needed him. As he walked, he sipped idly from the wineskin, truly happy he had purchased it.

It was far too soon that he reached the doors to his childhood home. *Home...* what an odd word to associate with dead bricks and dirt and dust! This was no longer his home and he knew it, but there was no other word in his vocabulary that explained the utter loving revulsion he felt for

the land and the building which stood on it. For a moment he hesitated, some great urge in him to run and never look back flooding his ever sense, but he resisted it... and knocked.

Within an instant the door was flung wide open, a man that looked as ancient as time itself and just as tired as one would imagine Time to be stood in the doorway. A small smile spread across the man's haggard lips.

"Caius... you came home."

Slowly, as if he was reluctant to admit it, Caius nodded. "You asked me to come."

At his words, the man's eyes suddenly filled with tears and he pulled his son into an embrace, holding him for a good long while as he would a bird that might fly off if he let go.

"Thank the Gods you're here... I don't know how much longer I could have survived without you here to help me. Caius, Octavius... Octavius..." But the old man was cut short by an exhausted sob.

Ever so gently, Caius returned the embrace. "It's all right, Father. I'm here now, and you know Octavius listens to me."

"Yes, yes... you're right. Please, come inside, my son." He pulled away from Caius as he spoke, looking down from shame. Caius pretended not to notice so as his father could keep his dignity and entered the apartment. Although their family had been far from wealthy, their abode wasn't the pit that many called home; no, it was plenty large enough and always clean, and always quite at night (away from the hustle and bustle of the inner city) but yet only a ten minute walk to anywhere that you'd need to go. If it wasn't for the... memories... perhaps Caius would feel more love toward the walls.

"Caius? Caius! You're home!" It was the moment that he had both been looking forward to and dreading, and that somewhat shrill voice punctuated both his fears and his adorations. From the far room, a young boy of no more than fifteen years came bounding out and threw his arms around Caius' neck.

Although five minutes ago Caius would have thought such a thing would have been impossible, he smiled, burying his nose in his younger brother's long, unkempt hair. "I'm home, Octavius. I'm home."

"Oh, did you bring me something, Caius? From your travels?" Octavius squirmed out of his older brother's grasp, again bounding about the room as if he were a deer. "And did you ask Jupiter where he gets his lightning? And if stars are holes to eternity? And..."

"No, no- I didn't get a chance to talk to Jupiter. He's very busy being King of the Gods, you know."

"Oh." For a moment, the boy looked crestfallen, but his mood immediately brightened. "Did you bring me something? Surely you did! You've been gone for three years!"

Caius hesitated; all the time he had spent on merchant ships, finding his true home was the ocean, he had given no thought at all to his family... and now, confronted with his little brother's joy, he thought furiously for an impromptu gift. "Of course I did, little one. Here- calm down!- close your eyes and hold out your hands."

With the promise of a gift, Octavius did as he was told and Caius produced his last coin, placing it in his little brother's outspread hands.

"There you go, little one. It's a coin, but it has an eight-pointed star on it. I know how much you like the number eight, and you don't see many of that coin."

Again the boy's prancing resumed. "Oh-oh! Thank you, Caius! What a shiny coin- I'll keep it forever!"

"Octavius, I think you're brother's had a long journey. We should let him rest." Although the boys' father had never left the room, it was the first time he had spoken since Caius' arrival, so both the sons nearly jumped out of their skin from surprise.

Immediately the young boy stopped- actually, his entire demeanor stopped. No longer was he the rambunctious youth, but suddenly he had become an emotionless statue, a carving, with only a monotone voice. "Yes, Father." And with nothing else, Octavius turned and disappeared into the room which he had originally come.

The old man looked at Caius, his eyes pleading for an explanation, but the elder son only shook his head. There was no explanation... only... only...

With a heavy sigh, Caius followed his little brother into the room.

Immediately, their father was on his feet again. "Caius-!"

"I know." He continued into the room, closing the door behind him and ignoring the now inaudible pleas of his father.

As he had expected, Octavius was sitting on his bed, as still as stone, staring into nothingness. Very quietly Caius sat next to him, placing an arm affectionately around the boy's shoulders.

As if that touch had reanimated the dead, Octavius was "himself" once again. "Caius!" Once again, Caius found himself with his little brother just about hanging off of him. He returned the desperate hug, but even as he did, he let his eyes wander.

The room was bare except for the bed, but almost every surface was covered with "VIII", or occasionally "IIX", carved into the walls or the bed or anything else. Weaving in between the numbers were lines upon lines of shapes, shapes that he had known for the last five years as written *Octavianian*.

Caius idly stroked Octavius' arm as he held the younger boy, but he suddenly felt the boy flinch and he felt a wetness under his fingers. He hesitated, and then pulled his brother away from him, looking at his arm.

Through the thin and dirty material of his clothing, a little dash of red was beginning to seep through.

"The *bad thing* happened again, didn't it, Octavius?"

The boy nodded, a few tears (half from pain, half from fear) began to leak from his eyes. "I was bad, and then the *bad thing* made me do it."

Caius pulled the boy's sleeve up, revealing a mass of shallow cuts, again many of them forming "VIII".

Octavianian, his own language, the *bad thing*, his curse... after their mother died, Caius had lost the brother he had known and had gained the greatest burden (of love) he had ever known or would ever know.

Almost impulsively, Caius pulled Octavius back to him tightly and looked out the window. It seemed as if it had been raining for quite a few minutes, but Caius hadn't noticed until just then. A small pool of water had formed on the windowsill, and in it was reflected...

... an eight-rayed star, ending with a pellet on each ray. As above, so below.

Against his will, tears fell from Caius' eyes. Again on an impulse, his hand went to Octavius', and as he knew he would be, the boy was still clutching the coin he had given him moments before.

"This coin is a special coin, Octavius. It's a key. I saw an eight-pointed star in the ocean tonight, and I plucked that star from the water and it turned into this coin. Some day you'll meet Jupiter yourself, and then you can buy back what he stole from you... you can buy back your animus. You can buy back your mind, and return to me."

"And then will Father stop locking me in my room?" Octavius' voice was so low Caius could barely hear it.

“Yes, and then Father will stop locking you up.” Tears were now falling freely from Caius’ eyes, and both were silent. Outside, the storm brought the sharp smell of the river (and beyond that, the ocean) with it, the great drops falling like tears from the heavens.

As above, so below... as we cry, the Gods cry.