

The Sons of Mars

An Epic Tale of Ancient Rome

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Prologue

The scent of salt burnt in his nose, and he could almost feel the spray of the ocean against his skin. He closed his eyes, let it sink in; felt the cool sea breeze, the gentle breath of the sun upon his face. For a moment he forgot the armor upon his back, arms and legs; for a moment he did not remember the shield bracing his body, held in his left hand; he did not notice the clutch of javelins on his breast, shifting with each breath; and he did not heed any thought to the thrusting sword upon his right side. He closed his eyes and imagined his arms were free, and he wore nothing but a light tunic; he smelt the salt and felt the breeze, and remembered a better time. Walking down the sandy shores, his small hand in his father's, laughing as the seagulls spun in acrobatic dances overhead. His father and he had built a sand fortress and used short sticks to play war; he had been the Romans and his father had been the Gauls, and their sticks had gone together in fierce battles. The Romans always won. Now he knew the Romans did not always win; war was not based upon mere manpower alone, but also on the strength and skills, the talent and experience, of the Army. It was based on moral and strategy. And a great portion went out to the hand of chance. But back then, the victory always belonged to the Romans, simply because the Romans were *always* the victors. His father had rubbed his scraggly sandy-blonde hair, picked him up on his shoulders, and ran through the surf. He would raise his hands and look down at the water churning beneath and imagine he was one of those seagulls, completely free and unfettered, with the entire world a possible destination. He would smile and laugh and his father would dive into the waters, and they would tumble about. Those times were long gone; his father had gone back to the earth many years before. But now that young child stood again upon the beach; he heard the waves and the seagulls, smelt the ocean and felt the tingling of the morning sun.

His eyes opened. Everything came back to him again, so real. The sword upon his side, the shield before him, the javelins whose spear-tips glinted in the sun. He could *feel* the thousands of soldiers behind him, all wondering the same thing: *will we breathe another day?* He ached and longed for the good old days, when he did not worry about such things as death – he did not fear death, but knew that most of the men behind him were not men at all, but boys: sixteen and seventeen and eighteen years old, called upon by their native land to defend the gates of the city.

He knew many innocent boys would die this day; but he was determined that the enemy would suffer the same fate.

The hundreds of feet of rocky shoreline before them lay veiled in a mist of towering spikes sticking out of the ground and string wrapped between the spikes to trip up the enemy. Great masses of twisted wood had been thrown amongst the rocks to hinder the enemy's advance. The shore was silent. A few birds picked at crabs between the rocks, then flapped their wings and vanished towards the clouds. The man watched them go, then turned around, stepped back a few paces, and looked into thousands of pairs of eyes. The great walls of the city were barely visible in the distance, where women and children huddled together, praying to the gods for salvation, keeping their husbands, sons, brothers and boyfriends in their minds. Many women and children would weep for lost family this night, but nothing could be done about that. He looked over the thousands of soldiers and spoke loud, voice rising with the sea waves against his back, carrying his words over the ranks:

Friends of Rome! This will be a terrible day; not only for the Carthaginians, but for us as well! Do not be deceived: many shall die this day. Death comes to us all. What decides whether we are men or not is how we meet that death. We shall not fear death; we shall embrace it. We shall kiss it. We shall smile as we fall! Many of you will not walk back to your friends and families, but the stories of your valor and strength will! You who survive will be heroes; you who fall will be legends! Look forward! Grit your teeth! Take up your sword and shield! Remember who you are: Romans! And even more: you are the sons of Mars!"

Horrendous, thundering cheering washed over the ranks; the man turned, faced forward, face aglow with an unhindered lightning. Far across the breaking waters, spreading over the horizon, were hundreds – thousands – of slender enemy ships, heading straight for the shoreline. Each ship was loaded with a hundred soldiers or more. He felt the breeze and wished for better days, but knew they would not come. Not today. For today, many would die.

Book One

The Sword of Rome

Over hundreds of years, a small colony of shepherds and wheat farmers has evolved into the greatest world super-power the world has ever known. At the time of its greatest expanse, nearly a fourth of the world's population lived and died under the Roman Empire.

Yet the Roman Empire did not always exist. Before there was an Empire, there was a Republic. Before there was Caesar, there were the Houses of Rome: the House of Brutii, the House of Scipii, and the House of Julii. Before there was an Emperor deciding the day-to-day management of Rome, there was a Senate, a group of politicians controlling everything from the trade market to war.

It is during the Republic where we find ourselves. The Senate is thirsty to push Rome's borders, and does not turn to diplomacy to do it. The House of Brutii's armies are sent overseas to the great nation of Carthage; the House of Scipii marches east for the pine-covered slopes of Dacia; the House of Julii is ordered to march north into Gaul.

This war with the Gallic tribes is the third Gallic war Rome has known. The Gauls constantly harass Rome's borders, raping women and killing farmers on the edges of the Roman frontier. For too long Roman soldiers have resided in Rome and refused to return to their aide, perhaps in fear of living the old wars over again, wars marked with tragedy and defeat.

As the armies of Julii march into northern Gaul, a conspiracy unveils and all of Rome is deceived. Only one man has the power to rescue Rome from the hands of a traitor, and only one man can avenge the deaths of his loved ones and bring harmony back into the Senate.

Book One: The Sword of Rome

Chapter One: Darkness Descending

a few years earlier

I

He did not notice the gardeners walking hunched-back over the balcony, tending the potted and hanging plants, the ferns and flowers of all different shapes and sizes, a vast array of blues and yellows and oranges. Nor did he notice the pearl white marble, the magnificent columns; he did not taste the fresh air, the scent of salt from a distant ocean, hear the birds as they flapped about the roofs of the flat-topped buildings. He did not look down from the balcony and see the foot of the magnificent building, the marble steps and pillars; nor did he see the wide and narrow streets, packed with shopkeepers and children, teenagers running around in groups, playing their pranks and eating sweets from their mothers. He did not hear the din of the market, the yelling and shouting of the entrepreneurs; he did not even seem to notice the land being paved for a gigantic building known as the coliseum. His eyes didn't fall upon any of the eternal city of the seven hills; the giant gates of the city didn't even bring recognition, his eyes were so distant, so glazed, so lost. The roar of the city, the laughter of children, the sound of steam from the baths did not touch him. He only heard one thing, and that sound, although confined to his own thoughts and memories, took his eyes beyond the city, even beyond the cloistered villages where children played with dogs and ran through tilled fields that stretched into seeming oblivion. He stared, dim and unfeeling, over the city's walls, past the miles of green earth being tilled that autumn: he did not see it, but he knew it was there. The dark forest. The murky frontier. He closed his eyes, suddenly felt hot despite the cool Fall breeze blowing over the balcony.

The gardeners scurried about him. He didn't have to try to ignore them. His memories grew stronger, rising in intensity. Sweat beaded over his brow. His fists tightened into coiled knots. He gripped the railing, breathing deep, and he realized his eyes were closed. It all came back to him now; the memory shattered into a million pieces, lost in the wind; it would come again, this he knew. Nothing could

help that. It would come in the silence, in the joy; it would come as he lay down to sleep at night. It would come and he'd try to fight it off. He was never able to. "You're tired," she said. "Aren't you sleeping well?" She did not know. She did not need to know.

He turned from the railing and saw her coming towards him from the living quarters. Her white robe flowed about her. He imagined touching it, feeling the soft fiber, and pulling her close, tasting her sweet lips. He smiled at her, suddenly conscious of all about him. She took his hand, slid past him, and leaned against the railing. He moved behind her, feeling her braided hair. She yawned and looked down upon the city sprawling beneath them. A wonderful city. Unparalleled in its beauty and grandeur. Constant parties and festivals and celebrations. Any time of the day. The candles always burned. She took his hand, paused, said, "Your hands... They're cold."

He took them from her, cupped them together. "I have been out here a while."

She turned, resting her back against the railing, and smiled at him. He absorbed that smile, those deep eyes; they suffocated him. The moment he'd seen those eyes, he'd nearly cried out for air. They engulfed you and refused to let go, drawing you deeper and deeper into their sublime and exquisite mystery. He had the urge to explore her; wanted to order the gardeners from the villa, draw her into his quarters, take off the fine robe, and just let his fingers run over her, a latticework of discovery. Instead he leaned forward and kissed her forehead. As his lips touched her smooth skin, she breathed, "What have you been thinking about?"

"The Senate has called me to the floor this afternoon. I don't know what it's about."

"It makes you nervous."

"You know how things have been going for us. The House of Julii's been dodging Brutii and Scipii blows for months now. The Senate's been making harrowing advances on all the fronts. Our armies are being spread thin. Brutii's prepared to go to war with Carthage sometime next year—"

"Carthage?" she gasped.

"Not so loud," he scolded, glancing at his gardeners. He yelped at them, "Leave us!"

They scattered from the balcony, leaving their potting and watering equipment behind.

"Can Rome afford a war with Carthage?" she breathed under her breath.

“We shall discover it soon enough,” he said. “And Scipii has been ordered to move east.”

“East... Towards...”

“I don’t know. No one really knows. Macedon, the Greek Cities, Parthia, Dacia. Who knows?”

“You’re afraid they’ll send you off to war with them?”

“Me? No. They won’t send *me*. I’m just a politician.”

“You’re worried about *him*, aren’t you?”

He swallowed so hard he thought he might’ve taken his tongue. “He is a warrior. He has the heart of a warrior and the passion. But what does he know about fighting? He knows what he’s *trained* to know. He hasn’t actually experienced it. He’s been put in command of several cohorts. I’m just afraid... I’m afraid they’ll send him somewhere where the enemy has *experienced* the fighting. Where the enemy knows what they’re doing.”

“He can take care of himself. Maybe you can pull strings.”

“If I took him out of the Army, he’d have my head on a silver platter.”

“Not take him out of the Army. Why not relocate him? Promote him to Major or something and give him a job training other soldiers.”

“He’ll see through that. It’s still *my* head on a silver platter. Even *if* it’s your idea.”

She wrapped her arms around him and kissed him. “You’re not thinking straight. The Senate isn’t going to march you somewhere when they’re about to go against Carthage – *Carthage!* – and when the House of Scipii is sending troops out east somewhere. I don’t care who it is, Macedon or Greece or whoever, those western soldiers have been trained in war for centuries. Rome is new. We’re fragile in the big scheme of things. We’re just a few Latin states thrown together with houses selfishly vying for power; no offense to you, of course. I know you claim rights to Rome.”

“We all claim rights to Rome. We all have our part in it. The Senate keeps us from going to war with each other. And the consulate keeps his reigns tight on the Senate.” Though lately the consulate—the one who would like to think he were King, though he was checked by the Senate—did not make many appearances on the Senate floor, and many did not acknowledge his presence in day-to-day life. Odd times.

She pulled away and walked between the potted ferns, feeling the fronds on delicate fingers. “Do not be late. I’m not a politician like yourself, but I know that

it won't look good for you if you're late. And don't think about this too much. The members of the Senate may be dumb but they're not morons. They won't just throw you and your men away by sending you off to war in some god-forsaken land. Look at me." She walked up to him again, peered into his eyes. "Relax. Breathe. It's a beautiful day. Everyone's enjoying life. Everyone but *you*. You're blessed by the gods: you're the one who hasn't had to throw good men into harm's way. If we're fortunate, our curried favor will not change. Now go. You are going to be late. Dress quickly. I will be waiting for you upon your return. And you can tell me all about it, okay?"

II

The servant drew up beside him, bowed lightly, and set out his dish; upon it rested several glasses of ice-cold water. The men took up the glasses, nodded appreciation to the servant, and the servant slinked away, humbly disappearing into a nearby building. The four men stood together upon the lawn, surrounded by the scattered effects of a training camp: barracks, archery range, wooden poles for practicing cutting and thrusting, wooden obstacle courses set about in pits of mud. Trainees, some naked, spun about the encampment, covered with sweat and grime, panting and wondering if they could make it. The grueling atmosphere of the camp dispersed amongst gentle afternoon clouds, a brilliant azure sky, birds taking flight between the roosts in the tallest buildings. The air smelt crisp and wonderful, sending luminous pleasure through all who took a moment out of their day to simply *taste* it.

"We are the temptation of both the House of Brutii and Scipii," he told them, grinning as he sipped water from the cup. His eyes darted over their robes and beards and golden necklaces. He never appreciated fine jewelry, saw it as a waste. He had been born and raised amidst the mud and sweat of the Army, following the family's lineage. Now he stood proud, dressed in his blood-red undergarments, having tossed away his shield, armor and sword for but a moment. He could feel their envy drilling through him; all who looked upon him felt a curious wisp of jealousy, as he was a proud warrior from a proud family, skilled in the magnificent art of war. "Only the best Romans are allowed to train here. And this is not the half of it – we have training camps in Arretium and Ariminum as well. Thousands of troops are ushered under the command of the House of Julii, and we do not take that command lightly. Only the best soldiers

are appointed command positions, and we put our best soldiers on the front lines. Or plan to, anyway,” he added with a smirk, “if you guys ever decide to allow us to...” He searched for the right words... “Prove our worth.”

The men in togas glanced at one another and finally one spoke. “Your time of reckoning is at hand. Do not look down on us as dogs, as many of your kind do.” He wanted to ask what the man meant by ‘your kind’ but kept his mouth shut. “You parade about the streets of Rome in your red sashes and carrying your red shields and wearing your red horsehair helmets, but you have nothing to be proud about. You have not served Rome in anything important, only trivial matters – border disputes and patrols, the like. Your cockiness, your arrogance, it sickens me.”

The commander’s brow furrowed, but he released the heat by clenching his fists. “You do not speak well to someone who’s been given no chance. We are ready. I have trained this Army to the best of its capabilities, and my father before me was not lax in his title. Do not speak so low of these soldiers, unless you wish to dress up in uniform and walk onto the field of battle.” To make sure no rifts gouged the engagement, he leaned forward, eyes flashing red as crimson fire. “But I implore you: give us the chance! Call me cocky and arrogant and staple me with your pompous politician words, I don’t mind at all. I cannot sleep well knowing you guys have tossed the torches of glory to Brutii and Scipii and left us groveling in the dust, crying out and just coughing on our own spit. Look at this!” He spun around, waving to the hundreds of trainees filling the camp. “I have the men. I have the firepower. I have the might and the muscle! I know the musings of the Senate – Scipii is marching east. Where to, I dare ask? I do not expect an answer. I do not *need* an answer. You are determined to send Brutii against Carthage.” He saw their eyes widen. “There are leaks even in the Senate, friends. But that secret is safe with me.” He touched one on the shoulder. “Carthage is a mighty tyrant with a mighty army. Much blood will be spilled, both Carthaginian and Roman. Do not leave Brutii abandoned – I wish to help my fellow brothers-in-arms.”

One of the senators smirked. “Accuse us of lying through our teeth? Accuse us of throwing politician words left and right to peach up to the superiors? Look in the mirror, General. ‘Brothers-in-arms?’ You do not seek their benefit, but your own righteousness. You desire glory – and are determined to suffer for it. Is it suffering you want, General? You yourself have never seen the field of battle, except in stories. You’ve never seen it with your own eyes. The bodies, the

carnage. You've never heard the cries of the broken and the pitiful shrieks of the dying. And you've never smelt that horrible stench – the stench of blood and feces and mutilation all rubbed into one. Glory, *friend*, is a politician's word."

The General leaned close, almost to touching distance. "Have you seen the field of battle? Have you heard the wails of the wounded? Has your nose wrinkled at that awful smell? No? Tell me this: have you even picked up a sword and shield?" He let the silence rub in. "What I ask for is not unreasonable. It is not *meant* to be. Put us on the field of battle. Give us the chance to win a politician's word: *glory*. Isn't this the cry of the Roman Army, 'glory and honor'? We have the strength, the might, the determination. Let us carry our glory into foreign lands – and with it all of Rome shall be known forever."

"You do not know what you ask for."

"Yes, I do. It is what fills my dreams every night."

"It fills your father's dreams as well."

Engulfing silence. The General glared at the senator, then turned away, eyes downcast. The senator stepped forward to say something more, but another held him back. The General cast his eyes upon the archery grounds, watched as trainees fitted bows, aimed at targets distant, and released. He watched a volley of arrows scatter amongst the targets, most sticking into the soft bundles of wheat stalks.

Slowly he turned to the senators. "Do not insult my father to my face again. He has seen more of Hell than the fallen gods themselves."

The senator returned, "I was not insulting your father. He is a great and noble man. But I am wondering, perhaps it would be wise of you to invest time and energy into discovering what it is that fills his dreams at night? Or do you not know? No, you do not know. I see it in your eyes. You've heard him speaking to your mother, you've heard him awake in the middle of the night. Perhaps you should draw yourself enough quarter to simply ask *why*."

"I know why. Do not insult my intelligence, either. He has seen horrific things--"

"Do you know your grandfather?"

He shook his head. "I've never seen the man. He died when I was quite young. Memory sickness took him from us."

"Memory sickness?" the senator smirked. He looked to a flock of birds flying near the river, then set his befallen eyes upon a bewildered face. "My young General. You are brash and brave, a concoction worthy of disaster. But if it is glory you want, and you are determined to find such glory on the field, then do

not fret. Your destiny is sealed. Soon you shall have all the glory you could desire. And your nights, I assure you, will be spent walking down gloomy halls, feeling the pounding of a distraught heart. Perhaps your father dreams of the victories and walks the halls in remembrance. Maybe not. Soon, my friend, you shall see.”

III

The great room filled with the noise of a thousand elephants: laughter and jokes, gossip and lectures, a roar that bordered on chaotic thunder. The room held close and narrow, each side lined with marble seating, one line of benches higher than the one before it. At the end of the room stood a marble stage with several benches and a podium. Four flags draped beyond the stage: emblems of the Senate, the House of Brutii, House of Scipii, and House of Julii.

The roar died down as a man in fine robes stood behind the podium, cleared his throat, and announced, “As many of us know, we have been on the verge of spreading Roman glory and honor throughout our territories. To the east is Dacia—the House of Scipii marches even now! To the south is Carthage! The rumors are true, friends: we have decided that Carthage does not deserve such a worthy standing in our world, and our honorable family of Brutii stands determined to bring Roman justice and law into their lands!”

Many senators cheered; others looked at each other with hawkish stares imploring, *What have we gotten ourselves into now?* Carthage was perhaps the most hated of all the nations surrounding Rome – proud and boastful creatures, the inhabitants were, and their fine cities were mockeries of Roman ingenuity. The hatred for Carthage swelled into an abominable rage and many senators felt their blood rush at the sound of Carthaginian overthrow. Still others were not conceited to think Rome’s military was so strong as to render Carthage lame in a single throw. Carthaginians were proud, and for that were despised – but their pride rendered them strong warriors, and they would launch themselves at Rome with an insatiable malice. Senators closed their eyes and saw it now – gloom settling over Rome as the news of slaughter came over the seas, and finally the Roman ships returning to port, battered and broken; upon the decks would stand boys who had become men, stained with the blood of friends and foe and self. The cheers and the laughter made many of the senators want to vomit.

The speaker for the Senate waved his hands, ushering silence, and hid behind his faculty smile. He announced, "This day we bring forward Julius Antonius, the leader of the House of Julii!" Cheers spread through the room and a man dressed in beautiful robes and rings on his fingers, closely cropped and greased hair, stepped onto the stage, bowing in eloquence before the Senate, twisting his scowl into a smile. The speaker patted Antonius on the back and said, "After much deliberation, you have been elected, as a friend and protector of Rome, to bring Rome's ideals to those in greatest need of such!"

Shouts arose, bouncing off the walls, cries: *Carthage! Carthage! Carthage!*

Antonius did not move. He had not been told where he was going. He looked over the Senate, imagined sailing across that blue sea, landing upon the shores of Africa, being met with a swarming Carthaginian Army. He imagined the bloody defeat – and if victory, the drawn-out siege, where every night was spent wondering if reserves were coming upon them to wipe them out. The idea of being overseas, easy pickings for a large Carthaginian force, sent shivers up his spine. He would not be there. But in a foreign sense, he would.

The speaker tried to calm everyone down, and when it became silent, he said, "Carthage is a horrible foe! Carthage shall be destroyed!" The cheers burst like a dam again, and it took several moments of patient begging for civility for the speaker to continue. "Yes, my friends, Carthage shall fall. But not by the hands of the House of Julii. The House of Brutii is well-equipped to defeat Carthage single-handedly. We have full assurance that our Roman might – and let us not forget the favor of the gods – will bring us to a sweet and sure victory in the south. But as Brutii sacks Carthage, and Scipii turns the Greek fields red with blood, the House of Julii shall be bringing a long-deserved vengeance to the north. The Gauls shall feel the fury of our brutal strength!"

Screams of infernos rage, destitute on vengeance, shook the room. Gaul would fall. Gaul, the long-standing enemy, the impotent foe, the one responsible for invading villages, raping and murdering women and children, harassing the beautiful ideals of Roman prowess, would be humbled to their knees – and upon their knees, the great Roman sword would sever their head!

The joy did not meet Antonius. He closed his eyes. He had seen it before. His heart burst in sorrow and rage. He saw his son, wearing a banner of innocence, driving Roman forces into the wild and wooded frontier – and he saw his son falling, blood pouring from his wounds, eyes misting, reflecting the snows of a foreign winter, and pitching forward into the grass as the battle raged around him.

He noticed his hand was shaking and clenched it tight. No one noticed. The speaker of the Senate grabbed him by the shoulder, spun him around, and embraced him.

Antonius' eyes danced over the four flags – three Houses going into war by order of the Senate of Rome. Three houses, thousands of soldiers, thousands of lives torn apart. The innocence of Rome fell that very day amidst cheers of joy and happiness. The doors of the room burst open and couriers raced into the eternal city of the seven hills; celebration spread outwards from Rome in a rippling wave, engulfing the towns and villages and the great cities of Arretium, Tarentum, Croton, Capua, and Ariminum.

Antonius closed his eyes, tried to forget, but he could not. He heard it then, heard it so real.

IV

She did not have to wait for him to return home. She had been lying in the bed, awaiting his arrival, when the sounds of the city grew louder. Aroused, she did not rise for the longest time, thinking nothing of it: many celebrations ran throughout the city. Parades here and there jostling through the wide and narrow streets. But the noise grew louder and did not vanish: cheering and laughing and singing. She realized it was no passing parade, and crawling from the bed, glanced at the closed door to the outside corridor, quickly dressed herself in a robe, and walked onto the balcony, feeling the warmth of the sun and catching the vibrant flowers in her eye. She leaned over the railing and looked down to see people – men and women and children – dancing in the streets, joining arms, throwing around drinks and food at the storefronts. She looked over the run of low, flat-topped buildings to the training yards. She could see the blurred, tiny figures of men in groups, running around, moving this way and that. She saw more pour onto the training grounds and could almost feel the excitement.

Except this excitement did not run through her like warm wine, but like a cold sword. She turned from the balcony, closed her eyes as if it would do good, and returned to the bedroom, sitting on the bed. *Wait*, she told herself. Just wait. She knew nothing. They could be celebrating something else, something... worth celebrating.

She heard the door opening. She jumped off the bed and he entered, his face a mask of gloom and disposition. He stared down at the floor, and raised his eyes,

meeting hers. Eyes are the windows of the soul, hiding nothing, laying bare the most raw and untamed emotions. Nothing could hide behind the eyes – they peered into the deepest dungeons of human existence. She turned her shoulder to him, not in disgrace, but despair; and she looked out to the balcony, the flowers turning their stalks heavenward, and felt the shame of his being wash over her, a tidal wave of lunacy.

He grabbed her hand, having moved forward, and stroked her fingers. Tears billowed beneath her eyelids and she swung around, swinging her arms around him; he let her embrace, and even followed suit, felt her breathing against him, rough and ragged. He felt her holding back the tears, but whispered into her ear; the sobs came, strong and heavy, tears carving swaths of red down her cheeks, pooling upon his shoulders; her body vibrated as if caught in a thunderstorm, and he felt electricity shocking through her. She eventually went limp and he sat down on the bed; she leaned against him, sniffing, breathing into his calloused neck. He let one hand off her side and sent it through her hair, the strands running between embittered fingers.

“Is it true?” she asked, finally able to speak. The crowds celebrated without. “Please. Please tell me it’s not Carthage...”

“Not us,” he said to her. “Not him.”

She paused for a moment, and raised up. “They are celebrating.”

“The House of Scipii marches for Dacia. The House of Brutii goes south-“

“Carthage,” she breathed.

He nodded. “An invasion of Africa is being planned.”

She listened to the jubilation floating in from the balcony. “And what about our son? What about us? Tell me we are not to aide such a suicidal endeavor.”

“No,” he said, wondering how long he could hold it from her. “No.”

She thought she had made a fool for herself. And then told her how selfish she truly was. “We are not going to war.”

“No. We are not going to war. Not with Carthage.” *Not with Carthage.*

She felt the rage boiling within her; why wouldn’t he tell her? “If not Carthage... Whom?”

“The Senate of Rome,” he said slowly, as if picking his words from a briar patch, “has decided to honor me in sending my son and the noble soldiers of Rome to Gaul. He is to march in a few weeks’ time.” He felt her eyes boring into him, and then the feeling vanished; he felt her lean her head against him and she began to cry again. He stroked her bare arm, felt the goose-bumps sprouting upon

her skin. “It’ll be okay,” he said, in a low whisper. “It will be okay. All right? Don’t worry. He is a great warrior. A noble warrior. It’ll be okay.”

She shook her head, pulling away. “How could you say this? Do you not *remember?*”

He winced, the memories flooding back, a knife into his skull, searing agony. The memories, so painful—they physically hurt.

“You *do* remember,” she said. “The Gauls. Those barbarians.”

V

Many nights had passed. The celebrations had lasted nearly an entire week, culminating in completion as the House of Brutii boarded ships in Latium bound for the coast of Africa, where a few miles inland lay the magnificent Carthaginian city, Carthage itself. Antonius the First and Antonius the Second granted the Generals of Brutii the gods’ favor and watched the ships sail. That had only been but a few days ago. Antonius the Second had noticed a trance-like gaze in his father’s eye, as if he had been lost in some maze, confined to beg for mercy and guidance while trapped inside the confines of his own lucrative mind. Antonius the Second had felt his heart prodding him to ask why his father looked such, and the grim words of the senator continued to haunt his every footfall: *Did you know your grandfather?* He had died when young Antonius was just a little boy; his father told him he died of mental problems, slowly losing recognition of those around him, even recognition of his own family, before disappearing into the shallow shell of a man he was – and eventually passing on to the paradise of *Elysium*. So his father had said. And as his father walked the grand hallways of the manor at night, when Jr. heard him as he slept, his father would tell only tell him, “I have much work to do, Son. One day, when you are in my position, you will walk these halls, too.” The senator mocked him, saying he indeed would walk the halls – but for what end was to be seen, uncertain. He had disengaged from his father and returned to the camps; he had to make sure everything was in good working order for the move north. Many meetings were held, training time was increased, and moral boosted with lots of warm meals, wine, parties and women. Meanwhile Antonius the First groveled about in the Senate, vying with the senators and meager politicians, trying to scrape food on his plate. Antonius’ ‘adopted’ mother retired into secrecy, vanishing into the innards of his father’s manor.

The streets of Rome returned to normalcy as well. Shopkeepers bartering with customers, children running in the streets, teenagers being yelled at for messing around, women yelling at their children, telling them to clean up after their messes. The Senate resumed talks of sanitation and plague threats towards the north. It aggravated Antonius the First, waiting for news of the Carthaginian invasion to come over the sea. He awoke every morning, anxious and gut-ridden, and then was unable to sleep at night, the memories – those god-awful memories! He pondered whether or not the Carthaginian forces would be waiting on Africa's shores, prepared to dispel the Roman assault. How were things going to the east? Was Scipii meeting the spears of the Greek phalanxes yet? And his son. Oh, the thoughts of his son, blended with the memories. He prayed his son would not experience... family lineage.

Away from the splendor of the Senate, the stately marble-and-column buildings, the patios and gardens and courtyards ridden with trees shedding leaves in the late Fall, the roads became narrower and the buildings became more trodden. Butcheries, wineries, bakeries and black-smiths crowded the paved streets. Houses, with living areas smaller than the very rooms of the mansions in the center of Rome, stuck their patios and jaws out over the alleyways. At night the center of Rome would burn – torches lighting up the streets, casting fiery light against the polished marble, the trees dancing in shadow. But in the slums of Rome, candles burned inside the homes, children tried to sleep, sweating and jostling for position, while parents tried to make sure they had enough food to feed the family's mouths. They worked sixteen-hour days, oblivious to the radiance and parties of upscale Rome.

Within these homes, many would cough and sputter and spent the night scratching at lice. Eyes bloodshot from the fumes of the butchery crawling through open windows. If you closed the window, you would suffocate in the heat, even in the Fall. In a particular housing building, in a particular nest, several candles burned, and several men huddled around a table, listening to the rain patter on the roof. They looked at one another, as if they did not want to speak. The idea of a cross and nails did not appeal to any of the five innate senses.

A voice. "So everything is set."

"The die is cast," another said.

"There can be no mistakes. No flaws. It must be perfect. If it is not, we will be the scourge of Rome. We will be stripped naked, beaten, paraded through the streets, spit on and ridiculed, and finally condemned to horrible deaths. I say this

not to dishearten the soul, but to quicken the blood. *No mistakes*. There is no saying, ‘No pressure.’ Not here. Not now. The pressure is enormous. It is suffocating.” He let his words sink in. “I will not accept failure. And so I say now, and I shall not say again, that anyone refusing to take part in this must step down. They will not be branded cowards or gutless. They will be honorable, true to their word.” He looked around about the faces, his eagle eyes glowing under the candlelight. “Is there no one, then, who does not fear the plan? No one who is not sure?”

The rain tapped on the roof.

A quiet voice. “Might I speak?”

All eyes fell upon him. “You have the floor, Friend.”

The man looked about the table, into everyone’s dark and insidious eyes. “I have been having dreams. Horrible dreams. I dream that something goes wrong. I dream the woman escapes, and we cannot catch her. She goes over the balcony, and as she lands, several people see her. They panic and run upstairs. We complete the rest of the task, but as we are leaving, guards break into the room, and seeing the hideous acts our blood-stained hands have performed, slay us upon the spot. It is then that I awake.”

The silence smothers. He seeks pity, and finds... Something. The leader stands, walks around the table, the candlelight throwing his wonton shadow over the narrow walls. As he circumvents the table, he speaks: “You know I am not a superstitious man, Arminius. But I am a believer in the gods. Sometimes the gods deliver dreams to tell us something we need to know. They speak to us in the dreams, and the dreamer becomes a messenger. A holy messenger.” He kneels down next to his chair, looks into his eyes. His arm is moving in the shadows beyond the table. “Do you believe in the gods, Arminius?”

Arminius did not answer.

“The gods have chosen you as a messenger, and you profane their name by silence?”

“Yes,” Arminius breathed, the tension shattering. “I worship the gods. I sacrifice.”

“Sacrifice? Yes.” He nodded, breathing deep. “Sacrifice. Sacrifice to please the gods. I believe in the gods. I believe in sacrifice. I believe,” he said, looking up into Arminius’ eyes, “that the gods speak to us, and they show us their will. I believe they will show us... I believe they will show us what needs to be done. They bless us with a foretaste of the future, and give us allowance to change it.”

He spoke slower now, chewing on each and every verb. "I believe the gods are speaking to you, telling you what will happen if changes are not made. I believe the gods are calling for the strong to overcome the weak. And we must please the gods, don't you agree, Arminius?"

Arminius nodded, quietly: "Yes."

"We cannot have the gods angry at us on this one." His arm behind the chair shuddered.

Arminius' mouth dropped open and his eyes burned with sulfuric fire. His hand reached up, but the other man grabbed it, held it tight. The knuckles glowed white and the man sputtered, eyes cozing up into his skull. Blood dribbled from his mouth, dripping like saliva down to the table.

The man said, "No mistakes, right, Arminius?" He stood, and yanked his arm back. A sickening sound, the sound of flesh being ripped off a pig, slurped about the room. The man pitched forward onto the table; blood dripped down his back. The long knife in the murderer's hand glinted in the light, the blood growing a purplish black. The other men in the room sucked in their breath and said nothing. The killer wiped the blood on his brown pants, twisted the blade downward in his hand, and thrust it into the wooden table. It stuck. The others stared at the knife, blood dripping down the blade, and their friend who had collapsed upon the table, the skin turning a ghostly white, marred by blood-tinged lips.

"No mistakes," the man said again. "I hope by now this is understood." He walked around the table and knelt beside Arminius' corpse. He kissed the cold forehead and said, "I do pray the gods are pleased with this, your last sacrifice." A wicked smile crossed his face.

VI

News came at last, greeted by hundreds of Roman citizens upon the dockyards several miles from the great city of Rome. The news, heralded by three or four Roman triremes, tasted bitter-sweet in the mouths of the people. Several hundred wounded shoulders, prizing their sword and shield and battle wounds, descended from the ship. All their comrades who had fallen upon the shores of Africa were buried in unmarked graves within Carthaginian soil. The battered soldiers managed to smile, greeted by a host of hugs and kisses and cheers; they smiled, but standing aloof, Antonius the First could see their smiles were hollow, fakes; the eyes, ever windows of the soul, masked his own. He remembered smiling and

waving his hands and putting on a cheery accent for his family and friends upon his return from the north. But his body had ached, his heart had grown cold and lifeless, and all the joy of existence had devolved into rudimentary depression. He never knew the treasure of a good night's rest; he could not remember what a good dream felt like. While many Romans had fallen in a vicious battle on the shorelines, the Brutii command had been able to push the Carthaginians back, and when the wounded left bound back home, Brutii was camped many miles from the city of Carthage, under threat of a counter-attack by the Carthaginian Army.

The House of Brutii had not reached Carthage as soon as planned. The Senate gathered together, pondering what to do. They came to a decision: the House of Julii's march north would have to wait. Antonius the Second growled under his breath, fuming just beneath the skin, but his father drew a victorious sigh of relief. A temporary sigh, and this he knew so well. The leader of the House of Brutii declared that there was nothing wrong; they had sufficient numbers in enemy lands and excellent generals: they would sack Carthage. "Just give us some time!" The Senate took the bait, and issued reorders to Julii – come the first month in the new year, the Army's first and second legions would march out of Rome's gate and head north for the Gallic frontier, a campaign to bring justice to those barbarians who had so savagely molested Roman citizens for dozens of years.

Antonius the Second attended many meetings, all about the strategies for taking Gaul. Many plans surfaced, but they settled upon one plan in particular. While the second legion would stand guard against any northern invasion of Rome, the first legion – the *elite* Julii legion, led by Antonius the Second – would march into Gaul and seize the unprotected town of Segesta, just north of the Roman province Etruria, home to Arretium, the capitol of the House of Julii. A small band of rustic mountains protected the soon-to-be-taken Segesta from a counter-attack from the northern Gallic warbands. Any Gallic attempt to sneak around the mountains, at least in the way of passing through Rome, would be met with the second legion. Antonius the Second knew the Gauls could plan an assault from the west, towards Germania and Hispania and the like. He would have to take care of that as opportunities presented themselves.

But for now, he gave his stamp of approval on the plan and said, "We move out in two nights. There will be much partying and celebration in Rome. I want us to look our best. All the shields, armor and weapons must be polished. Every soldier will bathe – yes, thousands of soldiers. I don't care how you do it, just make sure it happens. I will be speaking with the Senate and making sure our plans float like

honey in their ears. Does this sound reasonable?" He looked at all the commanders and captains surrounding him and said, "Let us depart. Sleep well. Or don't sleep at all, if that's your thing. Enjoy these next few nights. We won't be home for a long while – and some of us will not be home at all!" Gentle laughter. He excused them. As they departed, he waved over his personal guard, Helonius. "How is your wife?"

Helonius looked taken aback by the question.

Antonius smiled. "Helonius? Your wife. What's her name?"

"Celesta," he said.

"It is a beautiful name. Listen to me. I want you to go home tonight."

"Sir–"

"Don't worry about me, okay? Spend these last two nights with your wife. Kiss her. Embrace her. Pleasure her. Make sure she knows everything will be fine, and you will return in a year or so. Tell her she has *my* word. You will be by my side the entire way – I will cover your back and you will cover mine. How does this sound?"

"I have your back, sir."

"Yes. I know. I'm talking about going home, Helonius."

He seemed at a loss for words. "Sir–"

"You are stubborn. That's why you are my guardian. But unless your destination is the front lines, I highly suggest you say, 'Thank you, Commander,' and go on your way." He patted the young man on the shoulder. "You are a fine soldier and a fine husband. Go make your wife happy tonight and tomorrow night. Return tomorrow morning at daybreak. We have much work to do. I am sure your wife will be very appreciative."

"Yes, sir." He turned to go, paused, turned around. "What are your plans for the night, sir?"

"My plans? I have none."

"As a gracious thank you for allowing me temporary leave, sir, might I ask you to join my wife and I for dinner tonight? She would be very honored to fix a meal for you, and she is a good cook. An okay cook, at least. But I would be deeply honored to have you in my home."

Antonius tried to hide back his smile but could not. "Helonius, *I'm* the one honored."

VII

Antonius had gotten used to sleeping in the officer's barracks with his men, and it turned into a rude shock as Helonius led him into their home. The walls were made of wood, inlaid with delicate carvings from an earlier resident. There were several rooms, including a resting area with several chairs, a board game set upon a low table, and pillars in the corners. Helonius' wife had placed a washbasin in every room; Antonius kicked off his shoes and washed his hands before greeting Helonius' wife with a kiss. She was more than delighted to see him, and feeling the remarkable coolness of December, they decided to eat on the rooftop. Antonius was excited, and he and Helonius waited at a makeshift table, watching the farmers beyond the city gates, the stretching woodlands miles away, their backs to the magnificent forums and baths, backs to the heart of Rome. It was well that way – they would be leaving it all behind in a few scattered hours. For this brief moment in time, rank became nothing, and barefoot and relaxing, they let the sun go down, and spoke of their lives at home, jokes played at the training camp, the daily rigors of Army life. Antonius explained why he had never had a wife – not for want of desire, but want of chance: he had dedicated his life to the Army, following in the footsteps of his father; one day he may even be a politician. Helonius laughed and told he'd be better off to retire from the Army, find a beautiful girl, and settle down and raise a family. As the sun dropped and the farmers called their children inside and the birds began to disappear with their winter songs, the feeling of gloom overcame them. Helonius became mightily downcast, and Antonius did not need to ask why.

"What is war like, Antonius?" Helonius asked. "I have only heard stories–"

Antonius coiled his feet together. "It is a holy mystery to me as well. My grandfather fought the Gauls, and so did my father. Both of them survived the wars, so I am hoping the favor of the gods will pass on to me. But to answer your question, I've no idea what war is really like. My wealth of knowledge is comprised of scholarly teachings and stories from the veterans."

"I am afraid," Helonius said, "that I will tense up on the field, and freeze. I am afraid everything I've learned will disappear and I will be killed." He looked over to Antonius' steel profile. "Does this fear haunt you as well?"

Antonius drew a breath, looked over at him. "No. I have spent my life learning and teaching the techniques of war."

"if I were you, I'd be even more frightened. A life's work flushed in a moment upon the field."

"I am afraid, Helonius," Antonius said, "that my men will not follow me. I am afraid my men will fall apart when the enemy comes at us. I am afraid that they will not be encouraged by my presence. An Army who has no morale is no Army at all. I know strategy. I know techniques. But if I cannot get my men to fight, to fight well, and to hold their ground despite insurmountable odds and all the fear of the heavenly stations... All will be lost." They heard Helonius' wife below preparing to bring the food and drinks up. Antonius leaned in his chair and looked back at his bodyguard. "That is why I have chosen you as my bodyguard. I see strength in you. I see courage and bravery where others do not. I do not fear your freezing; indeed, I feel that you will be *my* strength and comforter. Just to look in your eyes, Helonius, is to see the might of Hercules prepared to unleash. You are a warrior to the core. That is why you are my right-hand man."

Helonius smiled and stood. "I may not be able to stop my fear until the first battle, sir, but this I promise: you need not worry. I shall not fail you." He turned and headed for the stairwell leading down into the mouth of the villa. "Please excuse me while I help my wife bring up the food."

They ate extremely well. His wife concocted a wonderful soufflé of small fishes, a dish she called *patina de pisculis*. She passed around a bottle of wine and they all drank, eating their fill, laughing and talking. She was a beautiful woman, dressed in splendor as if she were the daughter of the gods themselves. Her every moment was lacerated with grace, every word punctuated with charm. Antonius was mesmerized, happy and sorry for Helonius at the same time: happy because he had been blessed with such a wonderful wife, and sorry because he would be leaving her in a short while.

The sun set, the stars began to vibrate so thick, and Antonius marveled: you could see two thousand just by looking up with the naked eye. They stared in fascination, and Helonius' wife said, "Do you ever wonder if there is any life out there? Anyone else, too, wondering, *Is there anyone else out there?*" Antonius had never thought of the concept before; Helonius' wife explained, "Our sun, I believe, is just like all of those thousands of bright dots." Antonius said it was impossible – the sun was so much brighter! She said, "It's only bigger and brighter because it is so close." Antonius laughed. Helonius said she was a nut and hugged her. She just smiled and kissed him.

As the night rolled to a close, Antonius kissed the woman on the cheek, thanked her for dinner, and when her husband was out of earshot, he spoke to her in a low whisper: "I don't want you to worry about him. He is going to be at my right-side

the entire time. If in the radical case that the enemy is able to ride our flanks, I will sacrifice my own life for him. He is a dear friend and he means much to me. He cannot hear this, as such words are not proper for a general of any stature.”

She smiled and kissed him on the cheek. “May the gods bless and favor you. All of you.”

Helonius showed him to the front door. As Antonius stepped out into the narrow street, shivering in the winter cold, Helonius tapped him on the shoulder. Antonius spun and Helonius said, “Thank you for coming tonight. It means a lot to the both of us.”

“No, thank you. I’ve said it before, and I say it again: I’ve been honored.” He turned to leave.

“Sir,” Helonius croaked. Antonius tenderly faced him, smiling. Helonius swallowed. “May I confide in you about something, sir? Something personal? I do not know if it is a breach of authority... It has nothing to do with the Army, but... I don’t know how to deal with such things. Can we speak friend-to-friend?”

“Of course. Yes.”

“I am afraid of losing my skill in the heat of battle, sir, because I am frightened of death.”

Antonius bit his lip. “We are all frightened of death to some degree. Death is a mystery. Who can really know what is on the other side? Silence, paradise, hell? Anything at all? No one has returned to tell us, and I doubt anyone ever well – unless he or she were the gods incarnate. Do not be ashamed of your fear for death – let it fuel your passions upon the field.”

“I am not afraid of what lies on the other side,” Helonius said slowly, “but of what lies here.”

“What lies here?” He stepped up closer, looking up and down the street. “You are afraid she will be... unfaithful?”

“No, sir. I love her with everything and she loves me. It’s that... She’s pregnant.”

A pause. Then, “Pregnant? How do you know?”

“She’s on a strict diet of fish and vegetables, sir, and her tummy is beginning to become round-“ He was breathing hard.

Antonius said, “Calm down, calm down, okay? That’s wonderful news.”

“Yes. I am going to be a father, Antonius... But what will happen to my child if he or she has no father?”

Antonius' brow furrowed. "Listen to me, okay? Don't think like this. Nothing will happen to you. Nothing at all. You are going to be right beside. If you fall, *I* fall. And remember what I have told you? My family has been blessed by the gods – our history is one of survival, fame, glory and honor. I say this not to boast but to reassure you: my family name be damned if you cease to be by my side. I swear on the gods and everything sacred, you shall enter this home again, you shall kneel down, kiss your son or daughter on the cheek, embrace your wife, and smile under the brilliant sun. We may be entering into a season of darkness, but light shines bright on the other side. Patience and courage, Helonius. And that's not all."

"Strength and honor," he concluded.

Antonius nodded. The decree of Rome. "Strength and honor."

VIII

He had spent the day making sure all of the Army's affairs were in order and quickly mounted his horse and rode to his father's manor. Leaving the horse with the stable hands, he quickly climbed his way to his father's private flat and entered. His mother-in-law was dressing, and she turned, embraced him, kissed him. He always felt awkward around her; he had not grown up having a mother, and this woman was not his mother but an impostor. A lousy impostor.

He kissed her and asked where his father was. She said, "Waiting for you in the guest dining hall. He has had the servants prepare a delicious lunch. A going-away treat." He told her thank you and headed towards the stairs. She called after him, "Do be careful, okay? Our hearts are heavy with you in mind." He nodded her direction and climbed to the guest dining hall. He never would've expected she truly did experience grief at the thought of his departure.

His father waited for him at the far end of a long table. The son took his seat. Servants poured them glasses of wine, and the two of them reveled in the silence. Antonius the First looked at his son, remembered when his father had sat across from him, when he had been in his son's position. He remembered what his father had said, the encouraging words. Both he and his father, though, had been going off to war against the Gauls. Only one returned. *No*, he told himself. *Not yet. Soon. But not yet.* The servants delivered giant shrimp, sea mussels, tuna and steamed lamb. The son picked at his small portions, feeling the weight of the room growing heavier and heavier. Pears and apples, dates and olives were

delivered. The son relished the olives, eating them slowly, just looking at his father. The time slipped through their fingers. The date was approaching.

"Tomorrow morning," his father said. "There will be a parade."

"Yes. Just as there was a parade for Brutii and Scipii."

"Do you look forward to the parade?"

"I guess."

The conversation was strained, awkward. It didn't flow well, didn't jive right. The son shifted uncomfortably in his seat. Finally, his father dissolved the chit-chat.

"The night before my first campaign, my father – your grandfather – set me down across from his own table. He told me to stay sharp and stay clean. He told me to sleep when I could and eat all I could. He told me to be brave and heroic, if needs be, but not foolish. I do not need to tell you this. You are a commander. You've been in charge of the training of thousands of soldiers. These credos are engraved into your mind. Instead I wish to talk to you about something else. See, there was a difference when my father sat across from me so long ago. I was in my uniform, just like you. Not my armor and shield and sword, just my undergarment uniform with my knife. Exactly like you now. But here I sit before you in a tunic. When my father sat across from me, he wore a uniform as well. He did not serve one tour in the name of Rome, but two."

Antonius the Second let an olive corrode in his mouth. "I was told–"

"You were told a lot of things," Antonius the First said. "And it is my fault. The politicians and senators know more about your own family than you do. I pray the gods do not curse me for shaming my family name like this. I just didn't want you to be tarnished in mind and spirit."

"Tarnished?" His voice raised. "What have you not told me?"

"Your grandfather was more a man than I could ever hope to be. He was the epiphany of Roman glory, strength and honor. You should've seen the way he fought those Gauls. The way he tore them down and led his men forward amidst the blood and sweat of battle. He was a true Roman if there ever was one. It was my goal to live up to his name, and I felt honored – and I feel honored now – to sit across from him so long ago. We were in different legions, he and I, and that would be the last time I ever saw him. You've been told your father died of memory loss. No. Your grandfather was the keenest, smartest, cleverest, wildest man you'd ever known. I was not there to see it, but I have heard the stories. I have heard how he pressed the attack bravely against the Gauls. I have heard how

he turned a battle completely around. And I have heard how a sect of Gauls hidden in the woods overtook the flank and cut him off. He had saved hundreds of men from pure carnage, and yet they fled in fright, leaving him and several others stranded. They were surrounded, and..." He paused, took a breath, drank some wine. His son clung to every word. "They tore out his eyes. They put his eyes in a basket, gave it to a courier, and sent it to the fleeing Romans as a going-away present. It was the last contact we've had with the Gauls. The last contact till now, when you – his grandson – take the fight back to them."

Antonius the Second absorbed the words. His appetite lessened and he felt full. "Gougged out his eyes?"

"The Gauls are savages. Who knows what they did to him after that. No one can tell."

He stared at his plate. A servant entered, saw the tension, quickly left.

His father's voice dripped with a venom his son had never heard before, an undisclosed passion surfacing in his guile speech: "I hate the Gauls. I hated them even before they tore out my father's eyes, and the gods know I hate them now. They are ruthless, heartless barbarians, and they exist in throngs on our frontier. We do not need barbarians at our gates. Son, what I implore of you here and now shall never leave this room. No secret agendas are to be waged in Rome's wars. I want you to bring justice to the Gauls. But even more, I want you to bring revenge. Spill their blood. Make them pay for their atrocities. They have shamed your noble family's name, and they shall pay for it with their precious lives. Every one of them deserves to die. Do you understand me?"

He had never tasted such malice from his father's mouth, and now he stood, unsure of what to do. "Father..."

His father rose. Alarm rippled through his son as he moved around the table, knocking over his glass of wine. He let the liquid dribble onto the stone floor as he grabbed his son hard by the shoulders and stared deep into his eyes. Antonius the Second went stiff, a million shrieking alarms roaring in his head; *Your father is crazy!* Now Sr. said, "May the gods pour their favor upon you, and your grandfather's spirit empower you. Revenge, Son. That is all I ask for. No, it is all our *family* asks for. Our honor and nobility rest on your shoulders. Make those filthy Gauls pay."

IX

She greeted him at the exit as he was about to leave. Hearing his voice, he turned and saw her coming towards him from the balcony. She smiled lightly and beckoned him inside. He glanced down the corridor, to the stairs leading to the dining hall, where his deranged father still sat, bemoaning the terrible truth. Antonius bit his bottom lip and followed his stepmother into the bedroom. She told him to stand still for a moment, and she vanished into a branching room. He walked over to the balcony, amongst the hanging pots filled with dry soil. He could see the preparations for the outgoing celebration going on in the major streets; Julii's march into Gaul was the talk of the city, entering everyone's ears and extracting in their speech. He could not blame them – the hatred of the Gauls was ever so high. The elders in the city particularly hated “those savage barbarians,” and now Antonius understood why. His grandfather was not the sole victim of the Gauls' barbaric ways – many had fell to torture and mutilation at their hands. The Gauls would steal into the Roman colonies bordering the frontier to rape and murder villagers. The older generations had experienced the worst of it and salivated for payback. Antonius felt proud that he would be the one leading the revenge – and a little frightened at the same time. If a Roman General ever fell to Gallic hands, there would be a hellish ending.

His stepmother returned to the room, holding something in her hands. A soldier, he recognized it immediately. She handed him the three-foot long sword. The handle had initials engraved into the wooden boss, and the leather wrapping around the handle lay frayed, torn in some places. The blade did not glint, but only dully reflected the light from the balcony. He took the handle in his hand and twisted the blade through the air, feeling the balance and weight and agility of the weapon. “A fine sword. Excellently made.” The *spatha* sword was larger than the swords the infantry carried, which were a little under two feet long. The *spatha* was meant for the cavalry soldiers. “It is old.”

“It belonged to your father's father before it belonged to him,” she said. “Now it belongs to you.”

“It's been in many wars,” he said, looking at the blade, imagining its adventures and heroism.

“Yes,” she said in a low voice. “It has slain many Gauls. It would be wise to carry it with you.”

“I would be honored,” he said quietly. He held the hilt close to his chest, the blade running down the length of his chest and abdomen. Much barbarian blood

had clung to the sword in latter days, and now that blood would smear it again. "I will do my family's name much honor."

X

The day had finally come. That feeling one gets when he awakes on a festival morn or during a holiday, or when he opens his eyes to see the trees in the gardens sprouting buds, stole precedence over the soldiers as they stood in their ranks. Antonius mounted his horse in the stables and rode with his horsemen before the assembled Army. In the cool of winter he did not sweat under the heavy bronze helmet or armor. His eyes gleamed with an impenetrable power, only equaled by the crying babes of the gods and goddesses. He looked over the stoic-faced men, remembering: five months ago, to the day, those boys had found themselves in the training courtyard for the first time. It had been different then. They had been unruly and disheveled; Aristotle's observances had been keen: *All youth are immature, lazy, and only want to party*. Boys whose most ambiguous desire was a night of partying and love-making had stood here on the sacred ground, and now they stood again, yet changed by months of hard work and sadistic training. They had been rebellious; now they were disciplined. They had been lazy; now they were hard-working and loyal. Then they hadn't been ones to use their heads; now they were trained *not* to think, simply to obey orders. Five months ago they had stood about, anxious, fidgeting; now they stood in perfect rows, shoulder-to-shoulder, stock-faced, expressions set. They had then worn dusty and grimy tunics; now each wore crimson battle dress, heavy armor, a sword, a clutch of javelins, a bronze helmet and blood-red shields stamped with the emblem of Julii. They had completely evolved from nervous school-kids to trained killers. Such was the way of the Roman soldier. And Antonius smiled, knew these boys would prove their worth; yet under that smile was a grim reality. Many of these boys – most of them, even – may never enter the city again, may never touch the lips of their sweethearts or be embraced by their mothers, ever again. War was a mother's worst nightmare. Yet the words of the poets rung in Antonius' head: "War spares not the brave, but the cowardly."

Helonius rode beside Antonius as they patrolled the columns. None of them had ever before seen the entire legion joined together, and it was a sight to behold. Thousands of helmets, shields, thousands of arctic eyes burning incense to the moon. Three thousand sixty foot soldiers assembled alongside six hundred-odd

cavalry. Behind Antonius and his entourage of bodyguards was the gigantic arch gateway leading to one of the main roads in Rome. He could hear the cheering beyond the doors, the expectant crowds ready to wish their friends and family a safe and glorious tour. The steel gate was closed now, and Antonius rode before it; he drew his sword from its sheath, and raising it above his head, kicked his horse; the horse reared back on its hind legs, pawing at the air. Antonius' steel glare spread across every pair of eyes in the encampment, and his cry tore through every pair of ears: "Strength and honor!"

The men banged their hands against their shields: "Strength and honor!"

"Let us not forget our true home! Let us not forget the Light! Let our thoughts never travail from our motherland: Rome!"

Helonius felt the fire wafting off his friend and felt overtaken. Glory poured from his very being.

The soldiers echoed: "Rome!"

Antonius wheeled his horse before the gate and snapped the orders. The guards began to raise the gate. One hundred fifty cavalry joined Antonius and his bodyguards, and as the gate opened, revealing the milieu of hundreds waiting to beckon them off, the first glimpses were off horse's hooves, sleek bodies, and finally the heroic Roman soldiers dressed in their battle clothes. The people erupted, inspired by the glowing red insignias sewn onto the clothing and the red horsehair helmets whispering in a quiet breeze. Thousands – even millions – of citizens crowded the sides of the street, beating their chest, hollering blessings. Children ran between the parents' legs, aspiring to be a soldier and waving them off. Antonius ordered the march and they left the camp, numbering well over six thousand. The soldiers did not wave or look to the crowds, but stared forward, marching in rhythm. They sought glory not within Rome's gates, but without. Antonius and his cavalry led the way, and Antonius was suddenly blinded by red: buckets upon buckets of scarlet flowers thrown onto the departing Army to honor Mars, the god of war. The air seemed alive with the smell of the roses, and Antonius breathed it in deep. Energy coursed through him as a severed live wire; he suddenly understood the draw of power, the draw of fame and glory. Antonius rode proud upon his steed before the people, eyes intent on looking forward, past the gates of Rome, past the manicured farming villages and outlying towns, and into the dark miles upon miles of uncharted woodland: the realm of Gaul.

X

Antonius the First watched the parade fill the streets below, the soldiers being draped in flowers and praise. He ached, remembering the day he, too, marched out of Rome. That had been the day after his last visit with his father. A steaming hatred for the Gauls swelled within him, but he shoved it down, feeling the shakes crawling into his fingers. He heard her behind him, and she wrapped her arms around him. Sunlight danced off the bare pots, the flowers long removed due to the winter's chill.

"So it comes to this," she said.

"Yes," he replied, and said nothing more.

"You cannot hold him back. He is too much like you. He is a warrior at heart. He will never be satisfied."

"That is what I am afraid of. His own stubbornness and brashness will be his downfall."

"Really?" she asked, walking around him, kissing him on the cheek. "And was it yours?"

"It was my father's."

She breathed deeply for a few moments and retired into the bedroom. He decided to follow her. She sat upon the bed, her gown flowing all around her. He looked deep into her eyes, but was drawn to the bags forming underneath. "Have you not been able to sleep well?"

"No," she said.

"Neither have I. Dreams keep me awake."

"Memories of the war?"

"Yes. The same dream. Over and over."

"I've been having dreams, too."

He sat down beside her. "Good dreams?"

"No. Terrible dreams." She took his hand. "I dream there is yelling and shouting and crying. And I dream I am falling. It is so *real*, Antonius. I am falling, and it is in complete darkness. I just keep falling, hearing the screams of a woman. I realize they are my screams, and once that realization comes to me, I awake with a start, dripping sweat."

"It is caused by the stress, no doubt," Antonius the First said. "The stress over our son's leaving."

"*Your* son," she pouted. "I don't think he considers me his mother."

“In time, he will. That is a promise. In the meantime, do not worry about the dream.” He heard the cheers outside. “It means nothing at all. Besides, we have bigger things to worry about. But you are right – it is only good for him to leave. He is part of my family, and my family is a breed of warriors. He will do well, yes.” He said this to comfort himself. The butterflies in his stomach did not die down. He turned his mind from his son, who would be passing under the raised gates of Rome this very moment. “Your dream does not mean a thing.”

XI

The Army of Julii snaked its way through the city, the great iron gates of Rome grinding open, revealing a sprawling panorama of crop fields, farming colonies and dirt roads stretching to the horizon. Far to both to the east and west, the Great Sea sent its waters crashing against the rocks, throwing up blinding spray and foam. Within the city, the group of men heard the chanting of the Army, the men young and old, proudly wearing their shields and swords and bronze helmets; their words floated through the windows, sliced into the crowded upper room, and caused those within to both wince and smile. The Army was departing; they had been set back but now the time was ripe. A few nights and the Army would be far away, intent on one thing and one thing alone: Gaul. The chant vibrated the stone walls of the home, wafting between the stone pillars out front:

in ut bellum, Romanorum miles militis	(on to war, Roman soldier)
in ut bellum	(on to war)
victoria vel evince	(victory or defeat)
vires quod veneration	(strength and honor)
in ut bellum	(on to war)
in ut bellum, Romanorum miles militis	(on to war, Roman soldier)

“Gently they sing, with courage and bravado,” a man sneered. “We shall hear their chants again, but they will be bowing before *us*.” He faced the men. “We have been set back, but we did not let it deter us. The gods favor us; this we know. I have had the visions, I have experienced the breath of Mars: he commands us to act, and act with honor! If we fail, we shall be seen as traitors; if

we succeed, we will be heroes! Much hinges on this, but do not fear: the war god Mars rests his likening upon us. We will not fail. We *cannot* fail.”

Someone leaned forward, and said over the distant chanting: “When?”

He drew his dagger and thrust it into the table; it wobbled back and forth. He smiled at the knife and snarled, “That decision rests in the hands of the gods; we shall wait for them to speak, or waste our energies on a futile cause. Yet do *not* be mistaken. Our time of glory is at hand.” He ripped the dagger from the table and stormed from the room, awash with abominable fury.

Chapter Two: The Color of Betrayal

I

Had they marched six months earlier, they would've been graced with all the wonderful sensations of spring: orchards curling in bloom, trees alive with a million pink-laced flowers, grapes trimming the vineyards, the first mouths of a new harvest creeping from dormant soil then awakening. The air would've been tinged with a miraculous energy, not distant from the feeling one gets when waking in paradise. The children would've been playing in the rolling hills laced with a myriad of wildflowers, dogs trailing close on their heels. Now the fields were dark and empty, the trees barren, wounded skeletons charred by the erroneous sighs of time; no children ran upon the winter-scorched hills, nor played in the icy creeks. The Army's morale fell, the chants thinned into nothing. The cheers that had been their companion through the eternal city of the seven hills, and even upon the road snaking through nearby towns and colonies, had ended. Now they were left with the searing cold, howling wind, and starry night. The last colony they'd passed through now rested several days back, and scouts reported they had truly entered the frontier. Antonius half-expected marauding Gallic bands to spring from the barren woodlands, to assault his forces with savage rage. But none came. The only life they had seen were a few deer and an abandoned homestead, long charred to the ground. Antonius ordered the camp to be built at sunset, and watches manned the ramparts throughout the night; in the morning, the legion would assemble, and continue to march towards Segesta, their path of travel being many miles from the shoreline so as to avoid any fishermen and fishing colonies who could report their movements.

A cold and wet land it was; no snow fell, only thick rain, covering everything and freezing the flesh solid blue. Antonius' breath fogged, crystallized, and fell before his eyes. His lungs burnt with a brash agony, the pain immense with every breath. He rode upon his horse before the troops, and could only *try* to sympathize with the infantry, knowing their own struggles so superseded his own.

He could not help but feel mercy for them when he looked into their distant and haggard eyes. The marching continued to wear them down. Every day he sent scouts out, and every day the news was the same: no Segesta had been spotted and no enemies were roaming the hills. It could be a good thing, the absence of Gauls

– they didn’t know the Romans were coming. But Antonius felt discouraged by the absence of Segesta. “Have we bypassed it?” “No, sir.” “It didn’t look this far on the maps.” “Maps can be deceiving, sir.”

Helonius did not leave Antonius’ side. Helonius would ask, “How long, sir?” and Antonius would reply: “Soon enough, Friend. Soon enough.”

The day finally came – riders returned, eager and panting, eyes alive with fire. “General! We have seen Segesta! It is but a two day’s march from here.” Antonius demanded details. The scout could hardly contain himself: “Most of the women and children are gone. The homesteads surrounding the town are all but abandoned. I suppose they knew we were coming? A couple hundred men await us, sir, but not to worry about them: a few peasants with pitchforks. The Gallic tribes, I believe, have no clue we are coming.”

Antonius scolded, “Do not underestimate the power of a man defending his home. One ‘peasant with a pitchfork’ has been known to take out ten hired soldiers. But in case the Gauls are using Segesta as a spotting point to register our numbers, we must be careful. Comb the woodlands, Scout, make sure no Gauls are watching us. And be *quiet* about it.” He spoke slow and eloquently, but could feel the fire he’d seen inside the scout’s eyes rising within his own gut, starting as a small flicker, then a flame, and building to its marvelous crescendo: an inferno. He finally understood what the soldier felt as he marched towards his destiny. He looked over to Helonius on horseback: “Gather the best infantry. I want two cohorts of hastati, two cohorts of principes, two cohorts of triarii, and bring Spurius, the leader of the second cavalry group, to me. He shall join us.”

Helonius licked his parched lips, ignoring the cold. “Are we not throwing ourselves against them? We have the brute firepower to crush them all, sir!”

“Yes. But if the Gauls are using Segesta as a ‘lookout’ to measure our numbers, we want to mislead them. This is why I use only a little over half of our firepower. Manias will be in charge of the rest of the legion as we take Segesta. Are my orders clear?”

Helonius grinned under his helmet. “Yes, sir.” He kicked his horse in the side and scattered away.

Antonius looked up the gray skies, the naked limbs of ancient trees forming a loose canopy above the winding forest road. He said a quick little prayer to the gods and continued the march. No more waiting. In two days’ time, Segesta would be Rome’s. His father would be honored. And the House of Julii would have their fame.

II

Antonius the First had been forced to kill his own conscience in order to get his work done amongst the Senate. His wife had convinced him that it did neither him nor his son any good to constantly worry; instead, she said, appeal to the gods every morning, at every meal, and every night. Mars Himself aligned with the blood of Rome, and he would keep such a fine General and worthy Roman out of harm's way. Somehow he believed her – perhaps the sincerity in her voice, the tranquility in her eyes, or the way she touched his shaking hands. He managed to go about his daily routine, jiving with the politicians, walking amongst the courtyards, giving candy to the children running Rome's streets. The news came in a haggard flow: in the west, the armies of Scipii were engaged with Dacia, and Dacia was falling apart, due not only to Rome's brute thrust across her borders and towards her heart, but also due to vicious rivalries and calls-to-power within Dacia herself; the nation had all but collapsed into civil war before Rome knocked at the doorstep and simply barged in. Triremes came once in a while across the sea, sailing north from the coast of Africa, with grim news on the war with the Carthaginians: Carthage had not yet fallen into Roman hands, and the Brutii were still camped outside the city, forced to retaliate against a smorgasbord of guerilla fighting and *two* massive Carthaginian armies.

One Senator, having talked with one of the wounded allowed to return home (in exchange for a hundred-man load of some of Brutii's newest, freshest recruits), said of the battles able to be seen from Carthage's walls, "Their soldiers are brutal and treacherous, paralleling if not excelling the skill of the Romans. For every Carthaginian killed, a Roman falls; except *we* do not have such reinforcements, and the Carthaginians can put *two* men in for every *one* felled." The Senator's voice grew low, and he said, "And they have these creatures. They are called elephants. Enormous beasts, *titans*; ten men can fit upon their backs, and great horns stick out from their faces. Their feet are pillars of bronze and they trample the Romans as they rampage into our lines." Antonius had heard of elephants before; his father would tell him stories of the mighty Carthaginians when Antonius was only a small boy.

This night his son held to the forefront of his mind. He looked up to the stars, two thousand shimmering dots plastered to the black sphere. The moon shone close enough to be touched with a breath of air; he imagined reaching out to touch

it, but felt foolish. Grown men don't do such things. He wondered if his son could be looking at the very same stars. Unbeknownst to him, the skies above his son's head were dark and gray, strewn with burningly-cold rain; his son was preparing to go to battle the next morning, to take Segesta by the afternoon. Antonius the First had no way of knowing this as he entered the building housing his family's manor.

He did not see the guards, but thought nothing of it. Perhaps out getting drunk again. He climbed the stairs to the front door, and pushed open the door. His wife usually waited up for him, burning candles bright, but she was not there. The candles had burnt down into smoldering wads of melted wax, casting short bursts of dim light over the Greek pillars, the draping cloth hanging from the walls, several vases of winter flowers. Antonius the First entered, and paused before his door. His eyebrows furrowed as he felt it – something heavy and close, murky and shadowy – breathing down his neck. He looked into the corners of the parlor, searching for his wife, but saw no movement. He took off his royal sash and threw it upon a bust of Romulus, the Founder of Rome. In quiet movements he entered the bedroom: the bed sheets had been twisted about and were half-lying on the floor. She happened to pride in her neatness, and that was when he knew something very terrible was going on. A cold breeze washed over him and he snapped his eyes to the balcony – the doors were open, revealing the deck and the dry hanging pots, the railing; beyond it the city all but slept, handfuls of Roman soldiers – inexperienced town watch – roaming the streets, kicking teenagers in the rears to get home, wondering when their shift would end.

Something sharp bit into his neck, as if an insect had sunk its teeth into his flesh. He spun around and found himself staring into the point of a short Roman thrusting sword. Beyond it stood an unfamiliar face, masked in the shadows, but apparently grinning. Antonius' muscles screamed for him to react, his heart ran a marathon, but he just let his eyes flicker to the far corner of the bedroom: he could see a pale figure, and two figures beyond it. The dull light from the mellow candles afforded little more. Antonius swallowed, Adam's apple bobbing, and looked back to the man holding the sword to his throat. He raised his arms, opened his palms, revealing an unconditional surrender.

"Coward."

That voice he recognized. He turned his head to the right, saw a figure emerging from the shadows. A broiling anger welled within him and he spoke: "Let her go. Do what you want with me, but the woman: let her go."

The man smiled, dimples glaring. "Let her go? No. We have had much too fun with her to let her go now. Haven't we, boys?" The men in the shadows nodded. He snapped to them, "Throw her down!"

The two men holding the woman threw her onto the bed. Antonius drew a ragged breath: her naked body dripped with blood, saturated with deep bruises and ghastly wounds. Her eyes were bloodshot, one swollen shut, and blood streamed from her nose and mouth. She looked up at Antonius with one feeble eye and collapsed upon bleeding arms. She vomited all over the bed, soiling the sheets, and rolled over, gasping for breath. Her pubic hair matted down in a mass of torn flesh and rank blood; flies buzzed about it. The insides of her upper legs were rubbed raw. She reached for him, mumbling something unintelligent. He tried to go to her but felt the tip of the sword push him back.

"You were late," the leader said, "and we thought we would have a little fun. It's boring to just sit and wait for such an exciting moment as this. We needed an equally exciting activity to keep us company." He moved towards him, around him. Antonius' eyes glared at the man before him; the one behind him leaned forward, whispered into his ear: "Do you know what it is like to feel such a beauty beneath you, struggling and crying out? Truly, Antonius, I tell you: there is nothing like it."

A voice rang in Antonius' head: *Kill him!* And another: *You will only die. Just wait. Be calm. Patient. Do not be brash. Your brashness will only get you killed.* His eyes did not hold such a calm countenance; they swam in a sea of rage.

His wife reached to him with mangled fingers, and her voice: "Antonius... Do not..."

He closed his eyes, wanted to completely shut down. He could not bear to hear her voice like that – beaten, abused, *alone*.

The man now stood to his left. "I expect you to have many questions, my brother. Such as, where have I been? I know what Father told you: 'Your brother died in the early Gallic wars.' He is a liar. I *did* fight in the Gallic wars. I fought heroically. Bravely. And yet our loving, compassionate, caring father betrayed me. I was forced to go underground, to work as a butcher's assistant until the time – *this* time – presented itself. You are the younger brother, Antonius, and therefore I am the true heir to the chair of Julii. It is *I* who am called by the gods to sit upon the chair, *not you*."

He finally spoke, fearing not the sword before him. "You are jealous. Do you not know that Father named me his heir because he saw you unfit to take the

throne? He said your loyalties were twisted, your values broken, your morals completely *demoralized*. He feared the worst for Rome with *you* at the helm.”

“Our father was a fool. He did not know what he was doing. He did not know what power rested within the ruling houses of Rome. He put too much faith in the Senate, and the Senate was his downfall. The Senate kept him at bay. He could not make his own decisions; the Senate ruled his house for him! And you do not break his sad legacy – everything is political with you. You send your boys off to a war you do not want to fight, and *why*? Because the Senate commands it. You are a degenerate, corrupt soul, Antonius. You are weak-minded and gullible. Such a man is not fit to lead Rome.”

“Degenerate?” Antonius growled. “Corrupt? Is it I who take other man’s wives and rape them?”

“She stabbed one of my men. She needed to be punished.”

He looked down to his wife upon the bed. “I commend her for it.”

The soldier with the sword pressed the tip against Antonius’ throat; his eyes frosted with ice.

“Antonius, *brother*,” the other man said. “It is heart-warming to spend time together, it truly is. But I am afraid I am running out of time. Soon the guards will awake from the narcotics we drugged them with, and they will come up here. It was be a sad, sad story to be sure: my friends and I, having been invited to a party with you to celebrate your son’s marvelous march on Segesta, open the door to find you sexually and physically abusing your wife. She screams but we cannot stop you. You stab her in the chest several times, and as she lies bleeding upon the bed, we take ourselves upon you and slay you, driven by an unrepentant passion – a passion for justice. Your name shall be put to shame, Antonius. I will regretfully take the position left vacant. And as for your wife? My close friends, who run high within social circles, will discover that she is married to another man, voiding your marriage with her, making her an adulteress.”

“Lucius, you shall never succeed.”

“A sword is pressed to your throat and you speak so? Brash, you are.”

Kill him. Kill them. Kill them all. He did nothing. *Wait. The sword is still to your throat.*

“Your secret ways will never succeed. The gods are not on the side of rapists and murderers.”

Lucius leaned so close as to kiss his brother. He said, "Do you want to talk about the favor of the gods? Do you want to talk about secrets?" He whispered into Antonius' ear, speaking hurriedly, filled with exotic adrenaline.

Antonius' eyes went wide, and if one were to peer deep into them, may have seen streaks of pure lightning flashing over the corneas. The little, sane voice inside his head drowned in a sea of madness, and the adrenaline he had held back soaked his very being. The soldier with the sword had leaned back to scratch his calf, and Antonius leapt forward, smashing him in the face with his fist; Antonius' other hand grabbed the hilt of the sword, the soldier's limp fingers releasing it in an instant. As the soldier stumbled back, Antonius kicked him in the crotch, twisted the sword around so the blade pointed downward, and yelled, "Viviana! Run! Get the guards!"

Lucius stood behind him, completely stunned; the soldier who had lost his sword raised his hands to protect him but it offered no shield: Antonius drove the blade down into his face, piercing the flesh just beside the nose, crushing the bone, and driving it deep into the skull. He twisted the blade, gave the corpse a kick, and yanked it out: the metal was slick with blood. Viviana jumped up, spewing vomit everywhere, and sprinted for the door; Lucius sprinted after her, hollering, "Seize Antonius!" The other two guards rushed Antonius; Antonius tossed the blood-soaked thrusting sword between his hands; the soldiers drew their own swords.

Lucius grabbed Viviana's bludgeoned shoulders and twisted her to the side; she fell upon the table, her twisting body knocking over several smoldering candles, her skin burning with hot wax. He spun around the table to grab her; she kicked to her feet with a shout, leaving bloodstains on the floor, and staggered threw the open balcony doors, amidst the plotted pants; she turned to see Lucius' fist swinging into her, and she collapsed into several hanging pots, losing her balance; her arms flailed, smacking against the pots, cold soil dripping from the sides, and suddenly she felt something cold on the back of her legs, saw the stars reeling above her, and then she felt weightless, only the wind roaring. Lucius careened against the balcony, eyes agape as the woman's nude body spun through the air before hitting on the marble steps below, sides rupturing, spilling blood and organs all over the steps. A pool of blood formed and rivers streamed down the marble staircase. Lucius' face went ashen and he shook all over, trying to gain composure.

Antonius leapt upon one of the guards, the thrusting sword driving through the soldier's calf, drawing a well of blood. The soldier fumbled back, cursing, dropping his sword; he collapsed, blood gushing from a broken artery. The other soldier struck at Antonius, but Antonius blocked the attack with his sword and elbowed the man in the face.

The man fell to the ground and Antonius raised the sword to bring it down upon him – his muscles suddenly went limp and the sword fell from his hands. Bile crept up his throat and his feet crossed one another and he fell to his knees, leaning against the bed. Lucius loomed over him, his thrusting sword darkened with Antonius' blood. A searing gash had been delivered through Antonius' ribs, into the heart of his existence. Now the world faded from color into black and white and a fishtailing sea of confusion and dizziness overtook. Blood dripped from his mouth, riddled with saliva.

The one soldier was cursing, hand draped over his leg; the other pulled himself against a wall, breathing deep, shaking.

Lucius towered above the famous warrior who had pitched to his knees. "You are a fool for rising against me. The story has changed, brother: we entered to see you bodily throw your wife off the balcony, and we chased you into the bedroom, where you slew one of our friends and mortally harmed another." The man whose leg was bleeding felt his eyes pop wide with shock. Lucius did not care. "Now your name shall be put to shame even more. She lies broken upon the steps of your home. All of Rome shall hear of your wicked deeds, and be satisfied at the justice *I* shall bring." He raised his thrusting sword to deliver the killing blow into Antonius' neck. "Our family is one marked by tragedy, don't you agree? But we always seem to overcome. And overcome we must."

Antonius closed his eyes, breathing deep, and with his last breath, spoke: "My son is going to kill you."

"No. You are a *fool*. Your son will meet you in the afterlife."

The shadow upon the wall captured the blade stabbing into the knelt figure; a moment passed and the figure collapsed to the floor. The sword was thrown to the bedside, and the shadow standing left the room. Shouts could be heard in the stairwell. The guards had awakened and were returning – Antonius had knocked them out. But now Antonius lay upon the floor, and Viviana was avenged.

They burst into the room, meeting Lucius Silvanus, covered with blood and panting hard. He pointed to the bedroom with a shaking hand: "My brother." And he collapsed to the floor; one of the two guards raced into the bedroom and the

other attained to Silvanus, demanding to know what had happened. Silvanus bore his eyes deep into the guard and said, "The unimaginable."

III

Antonius and a handful of cavalry stood upon the rise overlooking the small fishing town of Segesta. The sunlight cast long shadows over the barbaric huts and cottages and an icy mist clung to the boles of the trees and swept in long gray sheets over the dry and crackling fields spread around the town. The coastline a quarter a mile away glimmered with a thousand cerulean diamonds, heated by the sun's laughter. No fishing boats were out this day, despite the few clouds – the gray skies had departed. Antonius felt proud of the scouts, they had done their work well: most of the buildings were uninhabited, the residents fleeing west, deeper into Gallic territories. Antonius gazed north, to his right, and saw the snow-capped mountains thrusting from the dry forest slopes. Clouds rung the tops, shrouding them in haze. Antonius strained to look into the town, and saw several thick shapes, knew they were throngs of the enemy, the Gallic peasants awaiting their arrival. Hundreds, the scouts had said. "An estimate," Antonius had demanded. "Three hundred," had been the reply.

Antonius drew his horse around, looked at the men around him. "We will strike in an hour. Have the infantry prepare and march over this hill – *slowly*. The Gauls will see them coming down in marching formation and think the attack is coming from the front. Three hundred of our cavalry, my group and Spurius' group, will quietly move through the woods, and as the infantry assault the Gallic peasants, we will strike from the rear, cutting them down from behind." He noticed his voice shook, the adrenaline taking charge, a syrupy energy. He turned his horse and strode down the hill, the others behind him.

Those soldiers Helonius had selected, led by the best of the legion's centurions, spread through the trees at the base of the hill. Antonius rode down to them, pulled his horse up close to them and spread his eyes across them. These were his men, his boys, and he knew they would do well. Yet he knew many would fall; young boys, Roman soldiers, to be forgotten in the stains of time. No one, he was afraid, would remember their names – no one except the gods, who would continue throughout time even when all those standing with Antonius – and Antonius himself – traversed the great divide between life and death and entered

the paradise of *Elysium*. He held his own oblong shield against him, felt his father's *spatha* sword at his side, and he admired those standing before him.

"Soldiers of Rome," he said in a loud voice, commanding attention. "We have ridden long and hard, marched many, many miles. We are all tired and worn, but yet we are filled with an excitement and a longing. We have come here, we have taken up sword and shield, to finish the wars our grandfathers and fathers started. The Gauls thought they had us defeated. They thought wrong! For here we are, at their gates, with one intent and one intent alone: to seize Gaul and make it a harvest of Roman glory! I want to know, I demand to know, of you sons of Mars: will you fight? And if needs be, *will you die?*"

The infantry banged their shields and thrust their javelins upwards. The joy washed over Antonius and he spun his horse around; Helonius beside him was grinning. Antonius said, "Cavalry! Ride with me! Infantry, *march!*" He kicked his horse and ran parallel with the front lines; the infantry cheered him on, shouting for their General, Antonius the Fearless, who did not hold back to watch the battle but immersed himself in the fray. Much blood would be spilled, and Antonius would not send his boys in to the danger without engaging it himself. Six hundred cavalry poured behind him and they galloped through the trees, riding low upon their horses, Segesta out of sight as they flew between the giant oaks and asps. Antonius' horse panted hard; his hand brushed the hilt of his father's sword. He looked up to the twisted, snaking maze of bleak tree limbs tearing the sky above them, and he prayed, "Bless us, grandfather. God of Mars, smile upon us today..."

The infantry marched, led by its centurions. The first line of the assault contained the youngest soldiers, most mere teenagers who had enlisted last summer. They had not imagined they would be marching through the trees to invade and take a Gallic town; they just needed something to do, but here they were, handling sword and shield, eager and ready. They had been trained. The test was a rite of passage. The youngest soldiers were called *hastati*: they were the simplest soldiers, armed with two *pila*, or throwing spears, to throw into the enemy before the charge; they carried a short thrusting sword, the *gladius*, upon their right thigh, and held the four-foot-long, two-feet-wide shield against the front of their bodies as they marched; the shield had been constructed in the armories of Rome, dyed calfskin spread over plywood. The armor kept them warm, if their swimming blood would not; their breath fogged before the bronze helmets sitting

upon them. The soldiers had to pay for their own armor, so for some, a simple bronze chest plate worked; the wealthier soldiers, those from high-ranking families, wore mail or scale cuirasses. The hastati's job in the war was simple and straightforward: take the first clash of battle and blunt the enemy attack before the second line could move in. Seven hundred twenty hastati mounted the hill and began the climb down, the mist-soaked fields and the sleepy town before them; seven hundred hastati comprised of two cohorts, each cohort carrying three hundred sixty men, not including the standard bearers – the soldiers carrying the cohort's insignia, to inspire allegiance and devotion – and the centurions, the leaders of the maniples. Each cohort contained three maniples, each maniple made up of one hundred twenty soldiers: again, excluding the centurions and standard bearers.

As the hastati descended the hill, the mist wrapping about their legs and massaging with a cool vapor any flesh not hidden under armor, seven hundred twenty principes crested the rise and began the descent. The principes, like the hastati, carried the same equipment: two *pila*, the famous *gladius*, and a long semi-cylindrical body shield. These were the soldiers who were twenty or thirty years old, and when the hastati had taken the sting out of the enemy, they would take their place, re-supplying the fight with a fresh dose of vigor, strength, zeal and courage. The hastati would retreat between the principes, reform the group, and take several moments to get their breath back. The lines would be much smaller, as several Roman soldiers would be felled in the original assault. The centurions would boost the morale with their own eagerness to get back into the battle, and the very sight of the standard would speak of the gods being with them. When – or rather, *if* – the principes needed help, the hastati would join the battle once more.

The principes were not the end of the line. Several of the soldiers under Antonius' command had walked the fields and forests of Gaul before; many had been only fourteen, fifteen, sixteen or seventeen back then, and now returned to the land of their nightmares, forty or fifty years old. The dreams that haunted their sleep did not repel them, but drew them forward – they would make the Gauls pay for their atrocities. Of all the soldiers, even of Antonius himself, these veteran soldiers desired the fight as if it were air, essential to survival. They were addicted, and developed the shakes if deprived of nourishment. These veterans were the triarii – the third and final line of the legion; their numbers were smaller, with each maniple being only sixty men, not including the standard bearers and

centurions. The triarii carried a different load than the hastati and principes: instead of the *pila*, they were armed with long hoplite spears as used by the Greek cities and Macedon. They did carry a *gladius* thrusting sword and the body shield. Their helmets were not simple bronze like the other soldiers, either, nor like the praetorian cavalry led by Antonius, whose Corinthian helmets were draught with fantastic red horsehair plumes. The triarii wore a pair of long feathers sticking out of tops of their helmets, a sign of superiority and skill.

They would spend most of their time patiently waiting behind the hastati and principes, watching the battle, kneeling behind their shields. If the hastati and principes were defeated or routed, the triarii would enter combat; the very sight of the triarii marching into a battle was a signet sign of crisis. Of all the soldiers, the triarii prided the most discipline: while they burned with passion for the field of blood, they were able to calmly and patiently kneel behind their shields, awaiting one of three things: defeat and rout of the younger soldiers, or victory.

The triarii mounted the hill and began the trek downward; their numbers were only three hundred sixty with two cohorts, but they had enough skill to overpower even the greatest enemy soldiers. The mist spread between the one thousand eight hundred pairs of legs as the Romans marched over the dry fields, crushing twisted corn stalks underfoot, muddy soil staining their boots. The peasants, upon seeing it, would've felt crushed: the very sight of so many soldiers with their blood-red shields coming through the mist like some god-forsaken fallen deity would not deny any chokes of anguish. The Romans did not move quickly, but steadily, in no hurry: let the peasants think twice about what they were doing and give them a chance to repent and run for the hills. There would be no denying it: the Romans would have Segesta by nightfall, with or without Gallic blood dripping from their swords and javelins. They continued their march across the field, the town growing ever nearer. The local ragtag band of three hundred men and boys tightened their grips on spears, axes, swords, clubs and pitchforks. Some began to think twice. But the closer the Romans got, their chances of successful flight waned – until it was too late.

Antonius led point through the forest devastated by winter, the stallion beneath him panting and sweating, leaping fallen logs and dodging massive trees. The cavalry snaked through the trees, sunlight sparkling down upon their spears, swords and shields, dancing over the bronze helmets, running through the horsehair plumes. Sweat cascaded down Antonius' face; he yanked the horse to

the left and drove through the decayed foliage. He could hear the harrowing war cries of the enemy now, floating over the fields and to the woods; he ordered the halt, and the cavalry skidded to a stop, spread throughout the forest. The horses panted and the soldiers leaned forward, straining ears to hear. Antonius dismounted, kissed his horse, told her to remain there, and beckoned Helonius. Helonius did the same and followed his friend through the trees, to the edge of the woods; they knelt beside a fallen log covered with shriveled mushrooms.

"They're going to see us," Helonius breathed. "There's no vegetation. The trees are bare."

"No," Antonius said, "they will not. Do you know why? Because they are not expecting us."

"If they look back--"

"They won't realize we are here. They are quite well focused on the front, where the infantry has nearly reached them." He explored the town across the mist-cloaked fields with his eyes: several scattered huts with thatched roofs and wooden sidings. There was an assortment of barrels and crates, abandoned wagons, contents spilt on the ground from the fleeing women and children. The huts surrounded a courtyard in the center of the town: the town square. The peasants filled the town square, most of them pressing for a better look at the approaching Roman soldiers. Antonius smiled, tugged Helonius by the shoulder, and they returned to the horses.

Spurius leaned forward on his horse as Antonius mounted; he asked, "What're they doing?"

"They look confused," Antonius answered. "And scared. Spurius, take your two hundred men to the far corner of the woods. We'll sweep in from the northeast and northwest of the town, a pincer movement. Bring your cavalry on the far right out first, and charge hard, so it looks like there are a lot more of us than there really are. There will be a gap between our groups, but it will look like we're one sole mass. You will charge upon the sound of the horn. Understood?"

Spurius nodded. "Yes, sir." He kicked his horse into the woods; half the cavalry followed.

Helonius looked over to Antonius. "Sir? What do we do now?"

"Wait," Antonius answered. He caught the hesitant fear in Helonius' eye. "You are a great man, Helonius. I can taste the courage within you. I would willingly go up against a million Greeks with you alone by my side."

Helonius smiled, and Antonius' eyes licked flames.

“Halt!” the lead hastati centurion ordered. Behind him, the hundreds of hastati came to a halt. The principes did the same, and the triarii behind them. All the soldiers stared forward; only two hundred meters away was the first hut, and beyond it several hundred meters were the peasants. They could see the whites of the enemy’s eyes. The hastati commander yelled, “Hastati! March with me!” He stepped forward and seven hundred twenty hastati followed suit along with their centurions and standard bearers. The standard’s flags flapped in the stale wintry breeze as they marched, each breath saturated with water from the milky fog. The principes in the back stood rigid as statues, staring forward, holding their shields close. The triarii knelt down besides their shields, staring forward, knowing they would not fight this day. But they would have their chance again, this they knew. But today’s fight would be swift and the Gallic ‘heroes’ would be slain outside their homes, and their mothers, daughters and sisters would never see them again.

The peasants held their weapons close, breathing hard, having no shields to protect them. Most of them were simple farmers; hardly any had fought before, aside from drunken brawls. They tried to remember better times, crunched together for protection. They had awakened a few mornings ago as a few teenagers came running into the town, shouting about ‘men with red shields and horses’ marching towards Segesta. The boys were thought to be crazy – they had escaped the night before and returned with lots of wine on their breath. The town’s tribesman sent out some horses to see if the rumors were true, and there was no unearthing of adolescent lies: an Army truly was marching right towards them. Panic had ensued; some of the men left, but only under tight ridicule; most remained, whether they wanted to or not, taking up swords and knives, axes and hunting bows, pitchforks and harvesting scythes. They clumped together, feeling safer, as the Roman hastati came towards them, past the lone hut. The peasants flinched every second, expectant of a charge, but nothing came. Then the hastati came to a stop, and the commander yelled out an order the peasants could not translate. The peasants looked at one another, wondering what was happening. Would they try to make a deal to surrender? Some hoped so; others would have nothing to do with such a horrible act.

The Roman soldiers raised something in their hands, sleek and black, long with a point on the end. Some of the hardened peasants who had seen battle with the Romans before knew what came: they shouted for everyone to spread out, to find cover, but everyone just stared at them. Some of the elders ducked between

cottages, kneeling against the cold, wet wood. Most of the peasants did not move, so misunderstanding. One of the elders who had dove for cover looked to the trees in the distance and thought he saw something move in their gray mid-morning shadows. He forgot it as the sound of cutting air shook the town.

Hundreds of javelin careened into the town, peppering the town square and the soldiers within. Shouts went out; peasants dropped their weapons and pitched onto one another, groping at pain, revealing hands slick with blood. Stomachs were ripped open, limbs sheared apart, faces impaled. Bodies fell into the dirt, blood forming puddles and rivers in the sloshed mud. The peasants who had not fallen stared at the dead around them, the massive throwing spears protruding from their bodies, the glazed eyes. A son knelt beside his father, took his hand, and wept. The older soldiers ran from their cover, screaming for the survivors to *spread out* and move. The survivors did not listen, just stared at the carnage; a third of them had been slain, and half of those now lie writhing at their feet, shrieking as blood gushed from their wounds.

The Romans raised the last of their *pila* into the air. The elders ducked away again.

The volley careened through the sky, a hundred black parasites, and they fell upon the town again. Dozens more peasants took the blow and fainted beneath it. The other peasants jumped to and fro, in a daze, their weapons limp in their hands. They were reduced to half strength, standing amidst a sea of bloodied friends and family. A young boy of five walked around with his arm missing, blood gushing all over the ground; a seventeen-year-old grunted as he pulled a javelin from his flesh, sheared muscle and splintered bone dredged from his calf; and a father fell against a cottage, gasping for breath, only sucking in blood, neck awash with red; his two young kids, only nine and ten, watched helplessly, screaming for someone to help. They tripped and stumbled over the bodies; some entered the huts to fall to the floor and weep.

The hastati commander saw the disorder and massacre, gave the order, “Advance!”

The Romans let out a *hurrah* and moved forward in step with one another. A great column of red shields and drawn thrusting swords moving towards the town. Groups of villagers gathered together, standing amidst the bodies, their weapons at the ready. Some were covered with blood from the men beside them – or blood of their own – but their eyes burned with a mystical fury. The centurion

commanding the hastati admired their courage, and found it regretful that such bravado would be wasted on such a fine and beautiful winter day.

Helonius and Antonius had returned to the edge of the woods. They watched as a few peasants dropped their weapons and ran for the trees, fleeing. Helonius grinned: "They are routing."

"Not all of them," Antonius said. "I cannot see—"

"The hastati are marching. A few of the troops are gathering together for a defense. It is so foolish – how can they expect to beat us?"

"They know they will lose. But there is more to life than simply averting death."

The two of them returned to the horses, mounting. Antonius looked behind him at the near-two hundred horses and their riders. "Today, men of Rome, we ride! Hold your spear tight and your shield at the ready!" He kicked his horse and the woods fell away, the trees thinning; the roar of the hooves behind him thundered. The horse's muscles coursed with impenetrable malice. The woods dissolved to nothing, and suddenly the mist broke at the horse's legs and the sunlight fell upon them, gleaming off the swords and spears and shields.

One of the cavalrymen behind Antonius raised a horn to his lips and gave of three chilling blasts. Spurius' group charged as well, and four hundred cavalry swarmed from the trees, the empty field breaking under their charge. Antonius' father's sword vibrated in his hand as he led the assault. He could feel pure energy rushing through him and suddenly understood why there would never be an end to wars.

The hastati were only a few dozen meters away when the earth seemed to split apart. The bodies on the ground vibrated and both the Romans and Gallic peasants felt the earth rupturing in spastic tremors beneath. Only the hastati knew the truth, and soon the truth passed on to the enemy; they turned and saw hundreds of horses laden with battle armor and weaponry tearing helter-skelter for the town. The fleeing peasants turned on their heels and ran back for the town, the cavalry gaining. The peasants were all turned around, surrounded by enemies on both fronts.

The centurion commander raised his sword high: "Charge!"

A fiendish war cry exploded from the Romans' mouths; holding shields tight and gripping swords even tighter, they raced up the slope to the awaiting peasants. The peasants held their weapons before them, echoing the Romans' war cry, and

they charged towards the Roman line. The Roman infantry and Gallic peasants gushed across the mist-choked soil, the distance between them closing fast. The Romans prepared to take the hits on the shields and readied to thrust their swords into living flesh.

A Gallic peasant gaped up at Antonius, and then fell to the ground, back exploding with white-hot pain. Antonius' sword sparkled with blood; the Gallic peasant was crushed under the hooves of the horses on Antonius' tail. The Gallic peasants who had routed were slain by the rushing cavalry, bodies trampled into the earth, broken and ruptured and crushed. The cavalry spread into the city; a huddle of fifty-odd peasants stood ready for the cavalry, bunched tightly together. Antonius kicked his heels hard into the horse, hard enough to draw blood, and raised his sword. He screamed, "Rome!"

The two lines clashed. The Romans did not think; they simply reacted. The peasants tried to think, but found there to be no time for such. The peasants wielded swords and axes, scythe blades and pitchforks; they jumped upon the Romans, sending their weapons between the shields as they could; the Romans hid behind their shields, protecting their vital organs; the peasants fell against the shields, the bosses on the shields pushing them back; the Romans moved forward as one, thrusting their swords into the enemy; blood gushed all over the shields and armor and covered the swords. Peasants fell, shrieking; several Romans felt their own blood pouring down their face and arms as the enemy attacked. A peasant shattered a shield with his axe, and the peasant behind him cut the cheek and throat of the very same Roman, allowing a spray of blood to go heavenward. The Roman collapsed, drowning in his own blood, and as the peasant with the axe raised his weapon to bring it down again, he caught a sword in his side, piercing vital organs; the axe tumbled to the earth and he fell to his knees alongside it; his companion with the harvesting scythe struck at the Roman, but the shield caught the sword, the blade embedding deep. The Roman struck with his sword, tearing open an artery in the peasant's arm; the peasant turned and he struck again, this time sending the blade into the small of his back; the tip protruded from the peasant's abdomen, and it drew out with a sickening growl. Blood trailed at the peasant's mouth as he stumbled through the daze of bodies and fighting.

Such were the ways of the fighting that day, heroes lying amidst the slain, names forgotten in history's books. Yet some did not go down fighting; wounded

and bleeding, fatigued and torn, both Romans and peasants continued to fight. The Roman lines were shuddering, the ground littered with the bodies of the peasants and the bodies of the Roman soldiers, shields arrayed like tombstones.

It was the cry of the Roman General that caused the hearts of the Gallic villagers to falter, and then the hastati charged once again, legs burning with ferocity, and the remaining peasants routed.

Antonius' horse leapt into the air, flying above the Gallic peasants, and fell upon them, crushing two underneath its hooves. Antonius stabbed and swung the sword to his left and right, splitting open Gallic flesh and parrying axes and war-hammers. The other cavalry slammed into the Gallic lines, breaking through; peasants twisted with the breaking charge, bodies crushed by the horse's gallop; Romans grunted as the enemy lashed out with swords, cutting open legs and piercing sides. A Roman soldier fell off his horse, impaled by a spear.

Antonius stabbed a man in the face, right through the eye, and with a flick of the sword, sent the body tumbling backwards, blood arching into the air in a continual stream. Blood soaked his horse's hide; there was a flash as of lightning and his horse screamed; a spear sliced through the creature's neck, protruding from the other side; the horse wretched to the side and Antonius was flung to the ground, losing his shield but keeping his sword.

He lay upon the ground, seeing stars; peasants lashed out at him, and lying on the ground, he blocked their blows with his sword; he kicked the feet out from under one, and after blocking an assault, sent his sword into the heart of another. Antonius rolled over the ground to avoid being sliced with an axe; the axe embedded in the cold soil. A peasant by his head raised a war-hammer – a hammer covered with spikes – to impale the General's face; the sound of a horse's cry burst the earth at Antonius' head, and suddenly the man pitched forward, knocked over by horse's hooves; Antonius twisted his sword upright and the man fell upon his sword, the tip stabbing from the man's back.

Helonius struck at the soldiers trying to get to the General, sent them tumbling back; "General! Stand!"

Antonius pushed the soldier off of him and stood, trying to get his sword. It was wedged under the body. A shadow danced over him as a peasant came at him with a spear; Antonius abandoned the sword, grabbed the fallen man's war-hammer, and side-stepped the spear; he used both hands to swing the heavy club in a wide arch, smashing the assailant in the chest; the ribs splintered all throughout the

body and the peasant fell, coughing up blood as his body bled within. Antonius swung the hammer around, connecting it with a young boy of about twelve; the pre-teen's head was soaked in blood, the skull crushed into the brain, as he fell over a latticework of corpses.

Antonius twirled around, the war-hammer prepared to strike; an older man raised his hands, yelling in a foreign tongue. Antonius flicked his eyes about; all the Gauls had thrown down their weapons, hand raised in surrender. They realized resistance was futile. Antonius stared the man in the face; Helonius raced over upon his horse.

Helonius' arm shook, drenched with blood, and his horse's eyes fogged in and out. "General, are you okay?"

Antonius nodded, licking his lips. His heart screamed. "Yes. You don't look so hot."

"It is but a flesh wound," Helonius said, grinning.

Antonius spied the man who had surrendered. "Round them up." He dropped the war-hammer, rolled over the former owner's body, and drew his father's sword from the man's chest. He was unharmed. His mother had been wise: "It would be wise to carry it with you." It saved his life. And they even had prisoners.

"Helonius?" he called.

The bodyguard's horse galloped up. "Sir?"

"Treat the wounded – both the Gauls and us. We are not savages like them; we will not execute the prisoners and we will not deny treatment to their wounds. Just make sure our soldiers get the first and finest care. And be sure to get your arm looked at. I want all the Gallic bodies piled up and burned, and graves will be dug for those who honorably fell for Rome. Do not worry this day, Helonius. We have taken Segesta. Rome shall be proud! I will ride to the rest of the legion and bring them here; then scouts will be sent out to relay the news to my father. We shall celebrate this victory with feasting and partying!"

IV

All of Rome had been devastated – and sickened – with the news. The secret life of Antonius the First came to light as his loving and caring brother, with a host of friends, came upon the villa to celebrate the might of Rome and discovered Antonius the First beating his wife; when Silvanus courageously confronted his brother and tried to reason with him, Antonius threw his wife over the edge;

Silvanus tried to apprehend Antonius, but Antonius, crazed beyond all imagination, took up his sword and struck one of Silvanus' friends dead and mortally wounded another; Antonius turned on Silvanus' last remaining friend, and Silvanus wept before the Senate as he discoursed on what happened next: "Time will never heal the wounds I was delivered that night. While I remained physically unstained, my conscience has been forever marred; I loved my brother and continue to love him, despite his horrible deeds, but there was no choice in those last few moments. Quick decisions had to be made, and despite my course of action bearing grief upon my soul, I knew what had to be done. Who can describe what it is like to slay your own brother? My sword thrust into him, laden with tears. At first, I simply wanted to disable him, as I did not wish his death. We were *brothers*. But he came at me, locked in a rage, and I responded. He fell in his own bedroom." He broke apart before the Senate, and the Senate granted him the temporary chair, as Antonius the Second was out of earshot to hear the terrible news and receive the call to take his father's place. Silvanus told the Senate and all of Rome, "I will take the chair unwillingly. I am not worthy of such a high position. I will do my best job and patiently yet eagerly await the arrival of my nephew from Gaul." Antonius the First was given a commoner's burial, and just as the funeral for Viviana commenced, the news came: "She is an adulterer!" Silvanus collapsed, broken by the news, and many tried to comfort him, but he had to retire. The royal funeral ceased and she was laid in a common grave.

Silvanus inhabited his brother's manor, and stood upon the balcony, looking over Rome. A smile crept over his face; his co-conspirator behind him sat at the table, eating broiled lamb, drinking a goblet of wine. Silvanus looked into the sun setting beyond the farming communities, at the great buildings of the magnificent city, and said, "We cannot simply sit idle and eat, Friend. We have much work to do. Thank the gods they have blessed us thus far. My brother has been laid to rest a wicked criminal, and his wife a condemned whore." He laughed. "What punishment is greater than a black mark on the reputation? I can imagine none. Not even *death* parallels it."

The co-conspirator pushed the plate away, the feeble lamb bones splintered. He took a wild drink from the goblet and asked, "What is your bidding?"

Silvanus drew a deep breath of cold wintry air, the chill burning the inside of his nose. He smiled at the feeling and returned to the dining hall. "My bidding? My bidding is *Rome*, Gaias. I have no illusions; I will have to deal with Carthage and Greece, and even the houses of Brutii and Scipii. They must be eliminated."

“Sir, the Senate-“

“The Senate will fall in a week. They are politicians, not warriors. Put a sword to their throat and they will fall. The Senate is no problem to us. Six weeks from now we will have the manpower to demand the Roman Republic be made an Empire, with *me* as Emperor. There is only one thing – one man – standing in my way. We must liquidate Antonius’ heir, who will be receiving the call to return home as his father has fallen to the sword. He will be deeply grieved, and he will take the position. We will have to step down, and so many lives will be wasted for *nothing*. If we take him while he sits in his father’s chair, all of Rome will be suspicious, and we will be crucified outside the city walls. That *cannot* happen. We *must* eliminate Antonius’ son before we can make a move to control Rome. Gaias, I am putting *you* in command of Antonius’ army. Eliminate Antonius and do my bidding.”

Gaias grinned. “It shall be done, sir.” He stood. “Strength and honor.”

Silvanus returned, “Strength and honor.”

Gaias left, leaving Silvanus alone. Silvanus walked to the balcony and leaned over the railing, the city spread below him, a quilt of many fabrics and colors and textiles. “He who controls Rome,” he mused, looking upon the glorious city, “controls the *world*.”

Chapter Three: The Taste of Revenge

I

Sputtering torches illumed the faces of the dozen-odd principes standing guard at the road reaching into Segesta, the gentle snow threatening to douse the exposed flames. The guards drew their swords and barred the road upon hearing the sound of horse footfalls; out of the shadows emerged several horsemen carrying cavalry shields and spears; at the front of the cavalry column rode a tall and harrowing man, whose eyes burned like disconsolate coals in the torchlight. He wore a V-shaped tusk of feathers in his helmet and bore the royal House of Julii signet on his shield. The picket soldiers were not impressed; they demanded to know the cavalry's business, as they were not expected.

The leader announced, "I am Gaias Servius. I have been dispatched by Lucius Silvanus, who sits in the chair of the House of Julii. I must be allowed conversation with the legion's general, Antonius the Second."

The picket soldiers glanced amongst themselves. "Who did you say dispatched you?"

"Lucius Silvanus."

"He does not sit in the chair of the House of Julii. Antonius' father, Antonius the First--"

"Has been deceased for weeks now," Gaias growled. "Lucius Silvanus, brother of the First and uncle to the Second, has taken his place." He paused, let the words sink in, then added, "I am here to bring the awful news to the young general. He is being called on by the Senate to take his father's place. Silvanus is only temporary. A fill-in. Will I be allowed conversation with your young leader?"

"How come no news of this has reached us before? Power changing hands is big news."

"It is a long distance to travel. News takes time to reach the frontier. The Senate is eager – no time can be wasted? Must I have your name, soldier?"

The soldier licked his lips, contemplated, shook his head. "No. You may pass. Aurelius will show you to the town."

"Thank you," Gaias said, and they rode past, vanishing in the darkness.

The torches continued to burn and the snow continued to fall.

Antonius sat in the back of the room, watching the soldiers put on a play they had invented to please the general this night. Antonius had given the soldiers much freedom, a congratulations to the great victory many weeks past. The soldiers themselves celebrated with games of cards, throwing dice, and inventing comical plays. Some even dared to re-enact Antonius falling from his horse, shedding a comical light on the subject; any other general would've been incensed, his own heroism being muddled with laughter; but Antonius simply laughed and applauded, and offered them the best wine from one of the many town cellars they had uncovered. A soldier with a horn trumpeted and announced the next play would be one re-enacting the fall of Alexander the Great in the fetid jungles of eastern Asia. Antonius had learned much of Alexander the Great, his demise to the warrior Indian elephants, the great name he had written for Macedonia. He tapped Helonius, said, "This is going to be a good one," and drank from his red wine, let the burning liquid spread through him, warming his front; his back cooked against a sputtering fire.

Antonius let his thoughts sink into the play when suddenly the doors right behind the 'actors' burst open. Antonius reached for his sword; the actors jumped at the sound and stared at the wide doors. Snow draped inside and several soldiers carrying swords and wearing armor laced with the emblem of Julii entered the dining hall. Everyone froze, staring, the faces unfamiliar; Antonius looked over them, didn't recognize them at all; but he felt a sensation, a foreboding dread, and his instincts told him to take up the sword. His fingers brushed the hilt and he demanded to know why the entertainment had been disrupted.

The tallest and most fierce of the soldiers walked across the hall, all eyes trailing, and stood before the great table behind which Antonius, Helonius, and several others sat. Helonius looked between the newcomer and Antonius, wondering what Antonius would have him do. Antonius just stared at the man, who finally announced, "I am Gaias Servius, loyal servant to Lucius Silvanus, the leader of the House of Julii."

Hushes and gasps and ponderings rippled through the audience.

Antonius froze, except for his mouth: "What blasphemy do you speak?"

A crooked smile twisted over his face. "Young and fair General, you are so ignorant. I pity you and everyone who shares your name; weeks ago your father murdered his wife and threatened to take the life of his own brother, Lucius

Silvanus. Lucius was forced to take the life of your father, and now *he* sits upon the chair of Julii.”

Antonius leapt to his feet, eyes afire, lips steaming: “Lies!”

Gaias shouted over his shoulder: “Guards! Seize him!”

Half a dozen soldiers armed with swords made way towards Antonius; Antonius’ loyal soldiers just stared, not knowing what to do; the guards began their trek around the table to apprehend the general, shoving Roman officers against the wall to get to him.

Helonius’ eyes spoke volumes; he looked to Antonius; Antonius mouthed, *No!* Helonius whipped around, drew his *spatha* sword, and curved it through the air, cutting the throat of one of the guards; blood splayed across the wall and he fell onto the table, rolling over and onto the floor; Antonius shouted, “Helonius! *Drop your sword!*” Helonius struck at the second guard, but the second guard parried, thrusting Helonius back; Helonius stumbled; the guard struck; Helonius ducked, the blade cutting over his head and striking the hearth; Helonius drove his sword into the man’s gut, twisted it, and ripped it out; blood sprinkled all over the cobblestone floor and the man pitched forward.

Gaias hollered, “Kill him!”

Antonius felt the hands of the guards take his arms and wrench them behind his back. His long hair fell before his eyes. He did not protest the arraignment; Helonius drew his blade and stared at the third and last soldier approaching him; Antonius hollered, “Helonius! *Drop your sword! That is a command!*” Helonius did not hear him; his eyes funneled into tunnel vision and he saw only the wicked face of the cutthroat Roman before him, the traitor of a thousand shades of color. Helonius struck; Antonius shouted, “No!” Helonius’ sword clashed with the sword of his opponent, who threw him back and struck him in the leg; Helonius shouted and twisted his body, shoulder slamming into the hearth. The guard struck again, this time piercing the flesh of Helonius’ wrist; Helonius cursed and the sword fell. The guard put the tip of his sword to Helonius’ throat and Helonius froze.

Antonius snapped his eyes over to Gaias. “Let him live! I come peaceably!”

Gaias gave him a wicked stare, then to the guard: “Run the infidel through.”

Helonius looked to the ceiling, a desperate plea to the gods, but received no answer. His eyes shuddered as the sword pierced his throat, slashing the esophagus and tracheas. Strength left him immediately; the worst pain imaginable sent excruciating shockwaves into his skull and the sword was removed, dripping

with his fresh blood; the guard sneered. Helonius turned, unconsciousness stealing upon him; Antonius felt tears in his eyes as Antonius swaggered for him, reaching with shaking fingers; Helonius fell against him, clawing at his uniform; he slid to the ground, and Antonius knelt beside him, the guards barely protesting. He gripped Helonius' hands as the proud bodyguard gave his best friend one last look, and Antonius told him, in unspeakable volumes, *Do not worry. I will honor you in everything I do.* Helonius' eyes rolled into the back of his head and he collapsed against the hearth, blood staining the chest of his uniform a vibrant red.

Antonius stood, calm and stoic, and he sent a stare of electricity at Gaias; Gaias stumbled for words for a moment, that glare cutting through him like charred ice; finally he collected himself and said, looking to all those watching, "By order of Lucius Silvanus, the ruler of the House of Julii, I am now the commander of this Army." He walked over to the edge of the table, leaned over the assorted fishes and vegetables, the drinks of wine, and said in a low voice, right to Antonius' face, "Take this man into the woods. Execute him there."

Antonius grunted as the soldiers taxied him around the table. His wild hair fell before his eyes and he snarled to Gaias, "The time for honoring yourself is soon to come to an end, *Commander.*"

Gaias sneered, said to the guards, "Give him a clean death. A soldier's death."

Antonius gave Gaias one last glower as the soldiers wrenched him from the dining hall, out into the blinding snow. Gaias watched him go and said aside, "That is the last I shall ever see of that man."

II

The snow fell between the twisted limbs and charred boles of the Gallic frontier; the cavalry rode into the darkness. Three horses and one prisoner; Antonius had been bound with rope at the hands and thrown on the back of the middle rider, and the three galloped far from the town. Antonius grimaced against the blinding cold, the snowflakes stinging his eyes. He was positioned in front of the rider upon whose horse he rode, and he gritted his teeth and breathed hoarsely, seeing Helonius' death over and over in his mind and hearing Gaias' words about his brutal father. He would not believe it; *could not* believe it. He did not move against the cold, but in the shadows between the rider and himself, he twisted the tight rope back and forth against his palms; the skin turned red and chaffed, and started to bleed, but the rope came loose. It dropped down the side of the horse

and was lost on the winding trail. The cavalrymen continued to ride for nearly ten minutes before the lead pulled his horse back, emerging into a small clearing.

The lead rider dismounted, tying his horse to the bole of a tree. "We'll do it here," he said.

Antonius was given a shove and he fell off the horse; he did not let his arms block the fall, but rolled onto his back to conceal the missing rope. The snow burnt his arms, seared his broken and bloodied hands. He stared upwards into a mesh of thick snowflakes spiraling all around him. The other rider dismounted as well, tying his horse to a bole and striding over, pulling the sword from its sheath. "How are we going to do this?"

The leader growled, "Just like Gaias said – clean and swift."

"Who's doing it?" the middle rider asked. They looked to each other. No one volunteered

Antonius watched the snowflakes. His heart shrieked and his instinct told him to grab the nearest traitor and smash his brains upon the trees; yet at the same time, the voice of his old instructor, hired by his loving father, echoed in the back of his mind: *true strength is not forged in anger, but temperance; if you enter the thick of battle ancy and worried for your own life, you will certainly lose it; but if you are calm, composed, and clear-headed, nothing – not even the gods! – can break you!* So Antonius closed his eyes and took several deep breaths, calming himself; he would pay attention to what was happening, think coolly, and act sensibly. Such was the way of the kingdom warrior.

"Someone has to do it," the third one said.

The leader cursed the gods. "Brutus! Hand me your sword."

"My sword? Why don't you use *your* sword?"

"Then *you* slay him!"

Antonius leaned up on his elbows. "Can we get this over with?" he growled.

The soldiers stared at him, completely amazed. He lay back into the snow; "Cowards."

His word cut through them; the prisoner mocking them for cowardice! Brutus scoffed and tossed his *spatha* to the leader, whom ordered, "Pull the prisoner up. We do it like he told us. A clean death. A soldier's death." He stared at Antonius as the other two prisoners hoisted him forward so he was kneeling, eyes closed and breathing deep. The soldier felt an inaudible cry go out from him, a well of admiration leaking envy for the man before him. He pitied the fact that such a worthy and noble warrior would come to an ungodly end in the middle of the

Gallic woods. The soldier looked up to the sky, praying the gods were not watching, as he prepared to demonstrate the most gruesome act. The blade was cold and the handle cold as well; he raised it up, the blade pointed to the small of Antonius' back. The other two soldiers backed off, backing up against their horses, watching in quiet admiration.

Antonius' eyes opened; he stared forward. *Helonius*.

The soldier stabbed the sword downwards.

Antonius twisted his body to the side, the sword piercing the cold earth; at the same moment his legs fished out into the legs of the soldier, sending him tumbling to the side, leaving the sword stuck in the earth; Antonius released his hands, grabbing the sword wobbling in the ground. The soldier cried for help; Antonius spun on his knees and sent the blade into the base of the man's chin, up into the mouth and nasal cavities. The other soldiers raced towards him; he quickly drew the sword out and stood, the lead soldier spewing blood as he tried to breathe; the second soldier, bearing upon him, yelled to his surviving comrade, "Mount the horse! Return to the town! Alert Gaias!" He struck at Antonius; Antonius blocked it and kicked him in the side, throwing him back against the tree; Antonius struck and the soldier blocked, kicking snow up into Antonius' face.

The other soldier was untying his horse, hands tumbling over each other.

Antonius was blinded by the snow; the soldier struck with his sword, piercing the general's side; Antonius grunted and fishtailed around the tree, twisting his blade beside him and into the flesh of the soldier. The soldier shrieked and fell forward, groping at his wound.

Antonius drew the bloodied sword from the man's side and turned to the cavalryman mounting his horse. Antonius gasped with each breath, the pain from the injury radiating through his entire body.

The horsemen kicked his steed in the side and galloped away.

Antonius ran to one of the horses, hacked the rope with his sword, and jumped on, kicking it hard in pursuit. The first horseman was nearly lost in the snow, but Antonius followed hard, chasing a fleeting shadow. The trees spun by on either side; he gasped for breath, his side tingling in agony, the cold whispering lies down his throat, the world spinning in a cataclysm of distortion. He kicked his horse hard and could see he was gaining on the third soldier; the third kicked at his horse hard, too, but couldn't evade. Antonius was right behind him. The soldier looked back, saw the fire in Antonius' eyes and the blood soaking the side

of his dirtied uniform; and the soldier's eyes became global and he pressed the horse even harder, rocking back and forth upon its back.

The horse kicked snow into the face of Antonius' horse and the horse began to slow. Antonius wrenched it to the side and the snow no longer affected its speed; the two of them quickly gained on the other rider and his horse. Trees flashed between them. Antonius twisted the sword hilt in his hand, the blade spinning in the air, making quick cutting noises.

The other soldier reached for his sword and drew it; the trees between them vanished and Antonius closed the gap between them, striking with his sword. The horseman blocked it; Antonius struck; the horseman blocked. He struck again. The horseman's arm flinched. Antonius struck, but this time he struck in the opposite direction; the sword blade cut across the soldier's abdomen, drawing a deep and bloody line. The soldier shouted and released his sword in surprise. Antonius yanked his horse back over as a thick of trees came between them.

The traitor soldier leaned forward against the mane of his horse, breathing hard. He could see Antonius' horse in the gaps between the trees. He closed his eyes, felt the stinging snow, and opened them. Antonius' horse was gone. The trees vanished and he realized he was alone. He brought his horse to a halt, sent it spinning around between the trees. He sucked in his breath, for each expansion of his lungs tore agony through him and squirted blood onto the horse's neck. He swallowed hard in the cold, trying to find the general. It was clear he was alone.

He turned the horse back towards the camp and nudged it in the sides. "Easy, girl. It's okay now..." The horse panted hard through its nose, breath crystallizing in milky clouds. They trotted through the woods, listening to the howling wind. "It's okay. He's running back home... To the Senate... It doesn't matter... We'll tell Gaias--"

He heard the cutting of the air, felt the splitting pain unlike anything he'd ever felt, and then all was weightless and freezing. He realized he was lying in the snow; suddenly it was warm; warm liquid poured all over his side. He raised his head, saw the hilt of the sword protruding from his side; a bitter taste welled within his mouth and he lay his head down, seeing now eight hooves instead of four. His vision faded in and out; in the last few seconds of his life he saw the snow all around him and the second horse slowly trotting away. He was left to bleed in the snow, forever forgotten, to become a pile of bones to be scattered by the wind.

The dining hall had been left deserted; all the soldiers were ordered back to their barracks and Gaias and those soldiers loyal to him had filled the room, the body of Helonius left beside the fire while the bodies of the fallen cutthroats were carried outside to be prepared for an honorable burial. The centurions were told lies about what had happened; Antonius had gone crazy at the news of his father's death and ran off into the woods, only to be discovered with several arrows in his body from Gallic guerilla soldiers. All who had witnessed the deeds committed in the dining hall were forced to take a vow of secrecy; the punishment for breaking such a vow of silence was straightforward: death. Gaias had booted them all out and let the rumors of Antonius' dementia ride through the camp. He sat upon the wooden table, back to the fire, two of his most trusted soldiers beside him.

"This land," Gaias breathed, "is a sweet land. It flows with milk and honey, as the Hebrews would say it. Can't you taste the harvest just by looking around? The Senate is run by a smorgasbord of fools – you do not seize a land so rich and expect the inhabitants to work their fullest to fill *your* stomachs. No. What you do is send a diplomat to the Gallic King, offer a gift of ten thousand denarii, and propose an alliance. Rome protects Gauls borders, and Gaul provides us with food to feed our children's mouths." He smirked. "War with Gaul? Not a chance. Not in Silvanus' lifetime anyhow."

The soldiers gaped at him; one croaked, "Rome united with Gaul? Is that possible?"

"For ten thousand denarii," Gaias said, "anything is possible. Don't forget that our party has quite a history for these people. We betrayed the Roman army into their hands in the second Gallic Wars. Silvanus himself organized it just before he slipped into hiding. He thirsted for his father's chair; his grandfather – Silvanus' great-grandfather – sat in the chair, and Silvanus knew that if he wiped out his own father, when his great-grandfather fell to mental illnesses, *he* would become heir, being the oldest between he and his brother Antonius the First. Except just before his 'unfortunate' end, their father made a pact that named his second-oldest son as heir to him! Not long after the ambush in the woods, Antonius the First's grandfather died, and the torch passed between *two* generations to him. Silvanus ducked into hiding, we know, but now he has re-emerged, rightful heir to the chair. And we shall completely change Rome."

He looked them in the eyes. "We will not simply be gathering wheat in our barns through Gaul's front doors, friends. No, we shall be amassing a Gallic Army and bring it against the Senate! The Senate will falter, and when the House

of Julii defeats the Gallic Army in a move the Gallic King will not expect, Rome's power will rest on Silvanus' shoulders. And Silvanus, with the armies of Brutii and Scipii underneath him, will brutally massacre the Gallic armies and force the Gauls to work their land twice as hard as if they were free men!"

He took a wild drink of bitter wine. "Do you not see – no, *feel* – the glory that will, in due time, overtake all of Rome? No – overtake the *world*?"

The soldiers licked their lips, not knowing what to say. They exchanged wiry glances.

Gaias shook his head. "You cretin fools will never underestimate the minds of higher thinkers. You are only pawns in a game. Depart from here! Leave me at peace to think! I will discover the soldiers loyal to Antonius and have them executed as a demonstration – per order of our noble Lucius Silvanus."

The soldiers did not move.

"Leave!" Gaias demanded.

The soldiers saluted with a thump on their chests and departed out the front door, stepping into the twirling snow, shutting the door behind them. Silence engulfed the dining hall. Gaias closed his eyes, felt the fire warming his backside, heard the cackling flames, told himself he had much work to do; no time for idleness.

His eyes popped open. Had he heard something? He looked to the door, saw nothing. Heard nothing. He could've sworn – there! He was sure of it *this* time. The soldiers outside were throwing something against the walls of the hall, some awkward game for nitwits and half-brains. Gaias stormed to the front doors, grabbed the handles, ripped them open, aflame with rage. One of the soldiers stood before him, head bowed, sword in his hand. Dark liquid smeared the sword's blade. Gaias opened his mouth: "What is this nonsense?"

The head turned up, and between the snow passing before them, the eyes burned like sulfur.

Gaias drew a quick breath to shout but went fumbling backwards, punched in the chest. The wind flew out of him like a popped water-bag and he tumbled onto the floor, rolling over the cold cobblestone. Antonius stepped through the door, out of the snow, the candles all around the hall illuminating his dark armor, the newfound helmet upon his unkempt and soaked hair, the bloodied line cut across his side. The sword dangled from his right hand, the blade covered in blood. He marched towards Gaias on the floor; Gaias' sword was upon the table by the fireplace, several feet away; he scooted on his rear, moving like a crab with his

hands and feet, shaking his head. "Please, please—" The general shone like fire as if the god of Mars were cloaking him in His wings. "You don't understand—"

Antonius twisted the hilt of the sword in his hand. "I understand perfectly."

Gaias lay under the general's shadow; the general plunged the *spatha* downwards; Gaias opened his mouth to shout for help but only a gurgle came out. The blade spliced through his throat, just as Helonius; blood squirted into the air and Antonius drew out the blade. Gaias rolled over onto his stomach, blood splattering on the stones. His eyes swam in a sea of hopelessness;

Antonius walked around him, knelt down, grabbed his hair in his left hand, and raised him onto his knees. He walked around, still holding him up with one hand and letting the shattered throat send its effuse all over the conspirator's uniform. Antonius raised the blade so it pointed right down towards the base of Gaias' neck. "A clean death," Antonius said. "A soldier's death."

He thrust the *spatha* into the base of the man's skull, down into the neck so the blade ran along the spinal column and even pierced the ribs. Gaias' body shuddered and Antonius yanked the blade out, the entire length dripping in red muck. He kicked the body down to the ground, where it lay sprawled; Gaias' eyes shrunk, he coughed blood onto the rocks, and was silent.

Not fifteen seconds had passed since Gaias had opened the front doors; now he lay in a pool of his own blood.

Antonius walked over to the table, where his father's sword still lay. He picked it up, looked at his dull reflection in the blade, turned, and headed for the open doors, the crying snow.

The wails of the loyal bodyguard could be heard from outside the barracks; they moaned, "How could we do such a thing? We have forsaken our tribute, and now we will certainly be executed by the new commander. We are pitiful Romans without any honor."

Antonius entered the barracks through the front door, looking at them all; they thought they were seeing a ghost! Antonius said, "No, it is I! By my command you held back your swords; you have lost no honor, but kept it intact. And now if you wish to do me greater service and claim your names as legends to be written in history, take up your sword and fight with me!"

The bodyguard eagerly agreed, and they grabbed their swords, following Antonius through the camp. They overpowered Lucius' regimen, and captured several others. In less than ten minutes the Segesta camp was under Antonius'

control. He spoke to one of his bodyguards: "Bring the prisoners to me. Awake the soldiers! We march tomorrow night!"

"March for where, sir? We cannot leave Segesta! The Gauls will retake it!"

"My father's name is stained in Rome and you think I care about the barbarians? By the time the morning sun sheds its light over the sea, we will be marching double-time to Rome, where I will take my rightful place as heir."

The loyal bodyguard, speaking not out of cowardice but wisdom, said, "Sir, there may be demons you must conquer before you plan to march to Rome. Demons such as brashness and obstinacy."

Antonius drew the soldier closed to him. "The only demon I have to conquer is sitting in my father's place."

The bodies of the slain traitors were burned, and Gaias' head put on a pole. Antonius was sure they suffered even worst fates than the Gallic savages against whom Julii had gone to war. As the flames rose high from mangled corpses, and Gaias' bloody eyes stared over the procession, Antonius stood before the entire Army stretched behind him, spread through the fields; he stood at the mouth of the town, where three wooden poles had been erected. Light barely peeked through the trees, the sun rising, as Antonius ordered the prisoners be brought out.

They had been stripped naked, their white flesh shining like phantasms as they stumbled to the poles, driven by Roman soldiers. They looked at the poles as if they were the gates to Hades; Antonius lashed, "Rope them!" The soldiers were whirled around so their fronts faced the entire Army, and the Roman bodyguards pushed them against the poles, pulling their hands and feet behind them and tying them up; the prisoners slightly leaned forward, hair falling before their faces. The bodyguards scattered off to the sides and Antonius marched up to the prisoners, walking in front of them, staring them down with insatiable hate. His eyes spoke unprocurable volumes, and he turned his back to them, stared at the Roman army spread like a banquet before him, and let loose the sentence: "These men are condemned to die for pirating against Rome, spreading lies about Rome's finest leaders, attempting to sabotage the Gallic Wars, and plotting against the Senate of Rome!"

The prisoners raised their eyes to the turquoise sky, perhaps praying for deliverance. None came.

Antonius drew his father's *spatha* sword and walked up to the first prisoner. He locked gazes; the prisoner looked away, tears swelling in his eyes. Antonius did

not know mercy at that moment. He stepped to the side of the naked prisoner, placed the cool blade against the shivering, goose-bump covered flesh of the abdomen, pressed the blade deep against the skin; the prisoner whimpered, Adam's apple quivering; the blade ripped to the side, sinking into the flesh; the prisoner wheezed, eyeballs gaping like Greek saucers; Antonius removed the sword, opening the wound wide; the flesh curled up and intestines unraveled at the captive's feet, spilling bile and blood all over the muddied grass. The flesh grew even paler and the blood continued to gush as Antonius walked past to the middle prisoner and did the same; this soldier shrieked, and his shrieks died down as Antonius mercilessly slaughtered the final prisoner, bowels draping the earth in a bloody crown. The third closed his eyes and died in silence. Antonius could almost admire him.

The general sheathed his sword and grabbed one of his bodyguards. "We ride."

III

Silvanus awaited news from Gaias that the Army had turned loyalty to the new leader, but the word never came. He smiled at the Senate meetings and patted Brutii and Scipii on the back; in the confines of the villa, however, he nervously paced in the bedroom, the kitchen, walked the balcony and looked to the north, expecting a rider to come, only seeing farmers working the land and traveling market caravans roaming the streets. He ate his dinners alone, tended to by new servants; his demeanor grew darker and colder until he hated everyone he met. He feared Gaias would take the army and try to disjoin from the House of Julii; his own imagination ran his mind in circles.

The evening came as he sat down at the table; the servant entered, announced, "Sir, a rider from the—" He was shoved out of the way by a guard, who fumbled against the table. He breathed hard, sweat pouring down his face. Silvanus rose, demanding to know what the disruption was all about.

The cavalryman saluted with a chest-thump and said in staggered sentences, "Sir, there is an army marching towards us!"

Silvanus cursed. "Gauls?"

"No, sir. They are Romans! They are marching against the city!"

He spun out of the dining hall, running down the steps, into the foyer, and out to the balcony. He looked into the distance, but the farmers were lazily getting ready

for spring. He heard the guard on his tails, lagging behind, and demanded, "How far?"

"A day's march. My horse has all but collapsed from the ride!"

"Send these orders to the Second Legion commander: prepare the Army to defend the city! And get the Senate assembled! There will be torment to pay this time tomorrow!"

"His name is Gaius Servius," Silvanus said before the Senate. It had only been an hour and a half since the news broke, and the Senate had been called from their mistresses and baths to bring themselves present upon the Floor. The Speaker of the Senate called Silvanus up to speak about the impending situation; the leaders of Brutii and Scipii watched in the corner, shaking their heads, bewildered. Silvanus looked over all the familiar faces, sensed a lack of appreciation for everything he'd done, tried to mask his own nervousness under stoic eyes and hawkish words. "He rose through the ranks of the Army and was disbanded a few months back. I elected him to take control of Antonius' Army after Antonius took his rightful place. I dispatched him two months ago, and he never returned – nor did the heir. Is it unreasonable to assume that Gaius, in his greedy desire for power, killed Antonius and is now marching the legion *here* to take *my* place? I don't see any other reasonable explanation! You may question my wisdom in choosing Gaius to be the new legion commander, and I assure you, my reasons were logically valid; but for my wisdom? This I cannot defend, for now he marches against us. A night shall pass and then he will be upon us!"

The Speaker of the Senate asked, "Shall we send negotiators?"

The leader of Brutii jumped up, taking Silvanus' spotlight. "We cannot negotiate with traitors to Rome! All Romans who rise against Rome are not foreign soldiers, but native turncoats. They are to be executed for treason!" Silvanus swallowed hard, hoped it didn't show. He kept the veil of deceit wired across his face. The leader of Brutii looked across the Senate and alleged, "We must move our forces against this opposing Army! We cannot wage war with Dacia and Carthage and Gaul and *ourselves* at the same time! We must show all of Rome what happens when its own proud warriors forsake their honor for grabs at power! Every of these Roman soldiers must be executed!"

Silvanus turned his head to see Scipii's leader running to the podium: "Do not address these insurrectionists as Romans! They are *not* true Romans! Anyone who raises their fist against Rome is *not* in any *sense* of the word *Roman*! Friends,

we know Rome is the Light. Rome is beauty, Rome is law, Rome is justice. Rome is everything good and sacred. Her enemies are not. Her enemies must be assimilated into Rome's ways – or destroyed. These rebels coming from Gaul had their chance to assimilate – I see no other choice.”

The Senate speaker jumped into the fray. “And who, then, will rise against them? Scipii's armies are spread out into Dacia, and Brutii has its hands full with Carthage, a war that isn't going at all too well. Your training facilities in your respective provinces are filled with fresh recruits, unequipped with the skills to rise against their brethren – be they rebels or not – who have had experience in battle against the Gauls! And Scipii, Dacia is all but in your hands – to draw out *any* of your forces now would be to admit at the worst defeat and at the least trepidation; in any case, Dacian morale will boost and you'll be thrown back a dozen steps. Who will rise up?”

Brutii and Scipii both looked to Silvanus; Brutii said, “Send the armies of Julii. It is Julii's soldiers who have turned their backs on Rome. Shame them by sending them against their comrades-in-arms! Let Silvanus protect the city's gates!”

Silvanus felt the weight of their eyes boring into him; not just the House leaders, not just the Speaker, either; not even all of the Senate! For a moment he felt all the eyes of a million Romans looking at him; looking to him for salvation. He would be the Messiah, protecting Rome from all, hardened against even the most ‘lovable’ enemies. He would be hailed a Savior and given a royal parade. The history books would inscribe his name for centuries to come.

A smile crossed beneath his flesh, but on the outside he serenely knelt before the Senate and said, “This is my problem. It is a result of my own due error. I shall march the Second Legion against them. I take full responsibility for my actions.” He continued to kneel, but raised his head, peering into everyone's eyes. “But don't be troubled; justice *will* be served.”

The news of the approaching rebels rippled from the Senate, passing through every building, small and great, and wreaking havoc beyond the towering stone walls of the eternal city. Fathers returned to their homes, to their wives and children; kids asked what was happening as cellars were opened and food was taken down into stony basements. The streets filled with people trying to get home, trying to find friends and relatives, shouting and calling out; the market emptied as citizens raced for their homes; the sellers gathered their goods, loaded

their carts, and pedaled hard for their residences. Riders rode to the colonies, villages and farmsteads surrounding the city, warning of the impending disaster, galloping past the farmers and hollering for them to get inside the city. Farmers gathered their family and abandoned their homes, pulling themselves into the city, left to sleep in the wintry cold out on the streets. The fields were abandoned, harvesting equipment left to rust; farmhouses were boarded up and families prayed to their ancestors, the words of Silvanus echoing throughout all of the province: "The rebels are coming, and they will kill or enslave all Roman citizens they come across!" Silvanus stood on his balcony, the streets packed with villagers from outside, and he looked to the distant woodlands, masked in darkness, as the sun set far to the west, glowering over the Great Sea.

A servant entered, bowed humbly. "Sir, the town watch is assembled beyond the gates; your Army is prepared to march out to meet the enemy, sir, at your count. Do you wish to attack them on the field?"

Silvanus imagined Gaia's grinning upon his own horse, feeling the pride of being a general. Anger burst inside Silvanus and he nearly screamed. "No," he said calmly, masking his hedonist rage. "No, we will let them come to us. Perhaps they will see the mighty walls of the city and back down. If not, we will open the gates and meet them before the city itself, out in the fields. All of Rome will be spectator to this rebellion. The one who would dare take the heir's life and then rise against all of Rome shall be ashamed tomorrow afternoon. Assemble the archers upon the battlements; we will rain hell on them and show them what they've gotten themselves into. I cannot wait to see their faces as they fall broken and bloodied."

The servant nodded. "It will be done, sir."

After the servant left, Silvanus shut the balcony doors and retired. Crawling into the bed, he stared at the stone ceiling and smiled, said to himself, "Tomorrow will be an unimaginably glorious day – my stock in Rome will forever be secured. After the enemy's defeat tomorrow, my road to power will be paved with gold." He turned over and easily went to sleep.

IV

It was the parting of the Red Sea. The two great armies faced one another; thousands of soldiers on either side, standing under the winter sun, looking across the fields to the enemy a few hundred yards away. The soldiers stared forward,

unmoving, hiding all emotion; Silvanus' Army spread out before the gates of Rome, stretching the width of the city, three thousand strong. The rebels held only half that many, but their very eyes seemed to glow as if beneath their flesh festered an uncanny Light. Archers upon Rome's walls prepared to fire at the sound of Silvanus' order. The citizens of Rome cowered inside the city, clutching their families close, kissing the heads of their children, wiping away tears, whispering, "It will be okay, it will be okay-" Vultures swam in the opal sky.

Silvanus stood below with infantry, the walls looming behind him, the foreground lashed with thousands of red shields stamped with the beautiful emblem of Julii. Silvanus sat upon his horse, the cavalry pressed against the stone walls; beside him stood one of the best centurions in the Army, hopeless eyes looking at the enemy waiting across the fields. The centurion had never expected it to come to this – fighting some of the very boys he had trained. Bile climbed in his throat.

Silvanus, dressed in his uniform, wearing the cavalry shield, sword at his side and helmet with red horsehair, spoke to the centurion: "This battle will be over before it began. Gaius will be shamed before all of Rome and I swear by the gods I will put his head and all the heads of his turncoats on spikes around the city!" His voice cracked at the condemnation; "Centurion!" The centurion went rigid, awaiting his commands. Silvanus eyed the enemy standing silent and said, "Prepare your men to march."

The centurion didn't notice his jaw drop. "Sir, shouldn't we negotiate? These are our brothers and fathers." He argued, "Surely they have cause to come here. No true Roman would rise against the eternal city unless pressed to the gates of damnation."

Silvanus barked, "You are correct, but you are a fool, forgetting that these are not true Romans. They are garbage to be ravaged by the dogs. We shall slaughter every one of them." The blood quickened in his veins. "Centurion: you will order the march. If you do not, it is undeniably clear where your heart lies, and that is with the enemy! And I swear that your heart will decide your fate: honor in Rome or death alongside the traitors."

The centurion saw the raw and bitter honesty in Silvanus' eyes, turned to the units of the hastati, and drawing a breath, yelled, "Hastati! For the glory of Rome and the protection of its citizens, prepare to-"

A young soldier pointed; "Look! Someone rides forward!"

The centurion and Silvanus turned to look at the enemy Army; a single horseman was coming towards them, galloping hard.

Silvanus leaned forward on his horse. "*Gaias*. My friend, we shall see who takes the glory from this field."

The centurion did not order the march. "Sir, perhaps he is coming with terms. Won't you meet him?"

Silvanus glared. "No parley is to be made! The enemy has committed treason and they will be shown *no* quarter."

The centurion swallowed, looked to the lone rider, then at the Army spread beside him. "Then am I to... charge, sir?"

Silvanus drew a deep breath, adrenaline surging. "No. I will look this traitor in the eyes before I place his head on a spike!" He kicked the horse in the side and sprinted across the open plain between the two armies, drawing near to the rider. The centurion glanced over at the standard bearer, mouthed, *I can't believe we're actually standing here*. The standard bearer shrugged and said, *What can we do?*

Silvanus plotted how beautiful it would be to have *Gaias'* head on a stick, the blood streaming down the wooden pole, perhaps looming over his balcony, a signal to all who would dare oppose him. All the problems of the plan were to be disintegrated here and now; satisfaction broiled inside him as he grew closer to the rebel rider. He could feel all the eyes of Rome upon him; today, he told himself, you become a *legend*. The rebel rider was close enough to almost touch; the horse slowed, but the rider's head was bowed, shrouding his face in darkness. Silvanus gripped his shield in one hand and brushed the hilt of his sword with the other, fingers clawing the iron cross; "*Gaias*, you power-grabbing, incompetent backstabber, I shall have your head on a *pike* before the sun goes down!"

The rebel rider's head raised, the shadow dissolving, sunlight pouring over the rough contours of his face. The eyes glowered and terror rippled through Silvanus like an earthquake's shock-wave; Antonius snarled, "I assure you, *Gaias'* head has already been taken care of, *Uncle*."

Even Silvanus' horse felt the shudder, bowing its head for just a moment. Silvanus forgot the opposing armies, forgot all of Rome, forgot the day and month and year, forgot all his richest and most profane desires, forsaking them all for those horrible, hawkish eyes that tore through him, left him ragged and bleeding, soul in tatters. The world flashed in and out and he almost wanted to vomit. "You're supposed to be..." He croaked, "*Dead*."

Antonius' horse walked around Silvanus', the sleek black hide steaming in the winter sun. "His head rests on a pike, just as you've requested. All those with him have been slain and burned, forever denied entrance into *Elysium* because of their treason." He leaned forward, eyes tossing thunderbolts. "You shall join them."

Silvanus followed with his eyes Antonius' circular path. "If you've any honor—" "Don't speak to *me* about *honor*!"

All energy abandoned him. His merciless manhunt had fallen into a trap, parched of thirst, quickly evaporated. "—March these rebels away, and they shall be pardoned—"

"Under whose authority?" Antonius smothered. "*Your* authority? You sit in a chair that is not your own — you *have* no authority."

"If you've any common sense, you will march off." He straightened upon his horse. "Or you will be slaughtered."

Antonius pulled his horse to a stop right in front of the cutthroat leader. "Common sense? Of that I have none." His voice became grave so as to poison wells of murderous hope. "Now listen to *my* terms, Silvanus. I am not a tyrant like you, and offer you and your followers mercy. Dismount, tear those royal cloaks you wear as if they were rightfully yours, kiss my horse's feet, and you and your followers will be sold as slaves to Egypt. Do not," he added as a forewarning, "and I swear you will die this day."

His lips curled. "You are a *fool* if you think I would ever agree to such terms! You leave this place now, or you and your entire Army will be crushed in front of *all* of Rome — and you will be the cause of the massacre."

"I will be the cause?" Antonius mused. "Don't forget — you are the traitor. Let's see how much a man you really are; let all of Rome see if you are strength to the core — or full of hot air." He waved out to the thousands of proud Roman soldiers aligned facing north and south in front of the city. "There is no need for thousands to die because of your treason; let the two of us alone deal with this; just the two of us. I challenge you, Lucius Silvanus, to a fight to the death. The winner takes the seat of Julii — and he takes the loser's Army."

Silvanus tried to see if Antonius was bluffing, but traced no dishonesty. He looked over his shoulders, to *his* Army, ready to go to battle. *You don't have to fight him*, he told himself. *You can ride back to the walls of Rome and order the charge*. But another voice, a louder voice: *Think of it — you defeat the rebel general in one-on-one, saving countless lives. Everyone will adore you! Your legend will never be paralleled!* He demanded, "Under what conditions?"

“We send our horses back to our armies. We fight shield, sword, helmet.”

“To the death.”

“To the bloody death,” Antonius said.

Silvanus dismounted; the soldiers in the opposing armies wondered at this, thinking, “Is he surrendering the city?” Antonius did not break the challenge; he dismounted as well, kicking his black stallion in the hindquarters; it galloped away. Silvanus did the same to his horse, and the two horses carved lines of dust to their native armies, and at the epicenter of the dust trails Antonius and Silvanus circled one another, bracing their shields against their bodies.

Silvanus drew his sword; Antonius knelt down to the ground, kissed the soft dirt of a broken wheat field, and stood. “This is my homeland,” he said. “I defend it now.”

Silvanus raised his *spatha* sword between his eyes. “This is the blade that will slay you.”

Antonius drew his own sword. “And this is my father’s sword – the one whom you slew.”

Silvanus cracked a smile, looked to the sky – and jumped. Antonius blocked the blow with his shield and thrust his shield into Silvanus’ body, knocking him back; Silvanus spun, swinging the blade; Antonius ducked, thrusting his own blade out; Silvanus bore it away with his shield, the tip of the sword thunking in the calfskin-covered plywood. Silvanus smirked and struck high, bringing the sword down upon Antonius’ helmet; the helmet twisted, the blade skipping off to the side; Antonius swung his head, the helmet sliding back into place, and he used his shield as a block to go around Silvanus’ side, looking for a way in. Silvanus copied the move and struck; Antonius parried with his shield, Silvanus’ brute force sending painful shockwaves chattering across the general’s bones. Antonius struck; Silvanus jumped out of the way, attacking upon Antonius’ side; Antonius whipped his shield around, catching the blade, and twisted the shield, trying to force Silvanus to lose his grip; Silvanus anticipated and ripped his sword from the shield just as Antonius made the move. A waterfall of sweat cascaded down Antonius’ face, stinging his eyes, blurring them; he could hardly see. The word reiterated itself in his mind: *blurred*. He thrust his foot out, kicking dust into the air in a curving arch; it fell against Silvanus’ eyes, blinding him for a few moments. Antonius thwacked with his *spatha*; Silvanus regained and countered, stepping away and striking; Antonius parried and they circled one another, pouring sweat. Silvanus’ eyes were bloodshot.

The armies could not believe what they were seeing. Nothing like this had ever happened before!

Antonius swore in a brutal whisper, “You killed my father’s father and you killed *my* father. Their blood is on your hands – and yours will be on mine!” His sword flashed like blue lightning and descended hard upon Silvanus’ shield; Silvanus stumbled back, dazed at the vicious assault, and tried to hold out with his sword; Antonius bashed his sword upon the shield over and over, hearing his father’s cries as his own brother slew him in his home. He saw his stepmother stripped and thrown onto the bed, grown men moving up and down over her, her mouth stuffed with a pillow so she couldn’t scream. The energy burned like cold steel and he hurled a blow so hard into Silvanus’ shield that Silvanus fell to the ground, his shield covering him like a turtle shell. He gaped up as Antonius drove his sword down into the shield; it pierced the plywood, splinters falling over Silvanus’ uniform, the point sticking through the shield. Silvanus thrust his sword up into Antonius’ arm; blood squirted and Antonius shouted, writhing back, wrenching his sword from the shield. He glanced at his womb, felt the hot pulse of blood, the warmth spreading across his arm, soaking his red tunic even darker.

The pain diminished under the furious wrath – he could not fall to this traitor, this heathen, this pleasure-seeker, power-sucking hedonist. The man who had betrayed his grandfather, the man who had raped his stepmother and murdered his father in his very own home, now rose with a bloodied sword to complete what he had started. Antonius spun the sword hilt in his hand, the blade reflecting the sunlight in sharp flashes.

Dust covered Silvanus’ arms and face as he growled, “I thought I might let you know: when your Army falls to me, I am going to have every one of them executed. They will adorn the city walls like festival ornaments. And *your* head will be on a pike and I’m going to shove it right through your father’s grave.”

Antonius drew a deep breath, knowing he could not react in anger. He must be composed, collected, cool. He looked Silvanus deep into the eyes and threw himself upon him. Dust encircled them, shrouding their movements, except for brief flashes of red and glimmers from the swords. The opposing armies stared at the womb of dust sprouting from the earth, tried to see what was happening within, vying for any knowledge of the events, but found none; instead they gave all their attention to their ears, listening to the metal-on-metal and metal-on-wood, the grunts and coughs and footfalls of the two men locked in eternal battle.

Silvanus cursed as a deep red line cut across his leg; he stumbled back, emerging from the dust cloud; he careened backwards, landing hard on his back, the shield skittering to the side. Blood dripped from his leg; he rolled onto his stomach, pulled himself up, and holding the sword in one hand, took the shield in his other, turned just in time to see Antonius' sword descending; he raised his shield, took the blow; his wounded leg shrieked in agony and he stumbled backwards; Antonius hit again; Silvanus nearly fell; Antonius raised his sword; Silvanus surged forward, throwing the boss of the shield in Antonius' chest; Antonius fell backwards; Silvanus leaned back, panting hard, using the precious moments to look at his leg: blood covered his pants, smeared on his boots, splattered onto the cold field.

He went around Antonius as the general picked up his father's sword; it was improper for Silvanus to kill an immobile opponent. Instead he mused, "They tell me your grandfather cried as he died, and as my men and I raped your stepmother, she squealed like a pig; we ravaged her again and again until she was too broken to protest. And we did it again. And *again*." His words dripped with an unquenchable evil; the man's own marrow was riddled with the potions of a thousand nations' sin.

Antonius turned, eyes filled with storm clouds. "*You had your chance.*" He raised his sword to attack; Silvanus prepared to block; Antonius did not strike with the sword, but as Silvanus' eyes were raised skyward in preparation for the blade, he blew into him with his shield; Silvanus fumbled backwards; Antonius spun on his heels, *spatha* extended; Silvanus fell and his side ripped into the blade, flesh cutting in a dark red line running from his back to his chest; Antonius raised the bloodied blade to his face, watching the blood drip down the sword; Silvanus hit the ground with a grunt; blood covered his shirt. His wounded leg moved up and down, blood staining the dirt. Antonius turned, looking upon the fallen man; Silvanus spit up blood, eyes swimming in a sea of long-forgotten tears; the shield lay at an odd angle, Silvanus' arm twisted and snapped from the fall. Silvanus raised his sword in a feeble hand; Antonius kicked it away with his foot, the sword scattering across the dirt. He stood over Silvanus, his shadow falling over him.

He looked up at the general with wide eyes, pleaded through a tongue swelling with blood, "Mercy-"

Antonius brought the point of the sword down so it pointed at the traitor's face. "You had your chance."

“Please,” the coward moaned. “I beg of you: forgiveness! Forgiveness. I’m begging you.”

Antonius looked over at the opposing Army, the great stone walls of the city. He slowly turned his head around to behold the face of a dying man, saying, “It is not I whom you need to ask forgiveness.”

He looked at that sword, his mouth filling with blood. His gasps started to gurgle, lungs filling with body fluid. “I know, but you are his son, you can intercede-“

Antonius glared into his eyes. “Appropriate, is it not, that I use his sword to arrange the meeting? You fall before his own feet and beg forgiveness – I leave that matter completely in his hands.” He plunged the sword down into Silvanus’ face, piercing the eye and impaling the brain. The body shook once, twice, and blood rose in a fountain from his eye socket as Antonius drew out the blade now slick with bright red blood and gray brain matter.

He sheathed his sword and abandoned the corpse, walking to the opposing Army. The centurions drew their swords, but when they saw who it was, they felt all strength leave them. Antonius looked at the lead centurions, and they sheathed their swords, saluted with a chest-thump. “We did not know it was you,” they pleaded. “We had no idea.” Antonius forgave them and said, “March across this space between us! There is to be no riff between Rome. We are all brothers. Sheath your weapons and embrace your brothers-in-arms waiting across the way.” The centurions nodded and led the Army across; those on the battlements wondered if the attack was beginning, and the archers made ready to fire, but were ultimately perplexed upon seeing the two armies mesh in kisses and hand-shakes and hugs.

Antonius did not join them, but sagged towards the city gates; he collapsed against the stone wall, kissing the cold mortar between the heavy stones; cavalry raced towards him; the lead cavalryman saluted and said, “Are you all right, General?” Antonius turned and looked at him, his eyes slowly shrinking. Blood soaked his arm, an artery having been cut. He fell to the ground, lying down, more fatigued than he’d ever felt before. He heard the cavalrymen shouting and he felt the world grow quiet, peaceful, dark.

V

Sunlight warmed his face and his entire body tingled under the thin blanket the servants had stretched over him. He lay upon a long chair out on the balcony, surrounded by the potted plants sprouting luscious bulbs and dizzying flowers. Jade and ginger and cobalt and lavender; the rainbow grew around him, flooding the balcony with color. The great city crowded with children in the streets, festivals in the courtyards, picnics on the greens. The market roared with sellers competing for customers and the senators walked with mistresses under the great Roman architecture. The floor plans for the Coliseum were in the final stages, and many wondered if it would *ever* be built. The farmers tended their fields, now blooming with color; the thick forest had burst into an avalanche of green, and the sun had grown higher and higher, stayed out longer and longer, the air grown warmer and warmer. The air upon the balcony smelt of a million different pleasant aromas, wafting off the flowers; it calmed Antonius' nerves, his body still growing stronger from the large amounts of blood he had lost just two months before.

He had been carried by royal guards through the parade for his father and stepmother, whose once-shamed reputations had been restored after Silvanus' bloody fall from power. Everyone in Rome did not protest; hatred for Silvanus had sprouted in the underbelly of Rome, and many Senators had even noticed the darker side of his existence.

As for Silvanus' followers, Antonius prided himself in not being totally like his uncle: he did not have them all executed, as he had done at Segesta – due to necessity – but had instead had them stripped of all honor and Roman title-ship, and they were sent overseas, bound as slaves for the desert land of Egypt. He had not bothered to follow up on their whereabouts; it was known that the slaves sent to Egypt did not survive long – most would end up committing suicide.

Antonius would not be leading the campaign against Gaul, at least not in the field, anyway. He coordinated the campaign from his villa, working with his father's top military strategists. He had placed a great Roman soldier, a former triarii warrior, in charge of the First Legion; the man – Decimus – accepted the honorable position with great thanks and promised to do his best for Rome. The centurion who had conversed with Silvanus before Silvanus' defeat took charge of the Second Legion and marched north to monitor any Gallic movements; the news soon came that the Gauls were amassing a large Army from various tribes and warbands, and both legions were put on alert with specific orders to “destroy the enemy at all costs.” He did not believe he would ever see war again, but was

content to remain in his villa, walking the grounds of the Forum. He had spent his time in battle, he had staked his name in the history books. He had been hailed the Savior of Rome – and to his honor, denied the title. “I am not a Savior,” he told those gathered at his ‘inauguration’ to his father’s chair, “I am simply a true Roman – not unlike all of you!” Every-one, you can imagine, adored him.

As for his loyal bodyguard Helonius, also his best friend, he honored him by taking Celesta into his household, allowing her to stay if she wished, promising her child the richest education, be it a boy or girl, and the safety of a royal House. He also promised her that if her child were a son, he would name him his heir. And so she walked out onto that balcony, her tummy round and plump, handed him a glass of water, and the two of them looked out over the eternal city of the seven hills, the capitol of the Light of the World: Rome. “Rome is so powerful,” Antonius said, “and so noble, that I cannot imagine it ever disappearing. I do not see how Rome could ever disappear. We are witnessing the beginning of our world’s true history.”

Book Two

Red Storm Rising

General Antonius takes his father's chair and recommences the attacks on Gaul. He appoints as commander a noble Roman soldier named Decimus, and the war with Gaul intensifies. Scouts report that a massive Gallic Army is being raised. Decimus is sent in a vicious stab north towards the heart of Gaul, on a mission to bring the King to surrender Gaul over as a Roman protectorate.

Through the many bloody and harrowing battles, one poor soldier's heroism and bravery stand out, and he is awarded the nickname, the Son of Mars. But this nickname does not come easily; he will have to prove himself worthy of such a title.

In a twisted accident of failed reconnaissance, Gallic tribes ambush and all but slaughter the Roman Army. Fearing a repeat of the last Gallic wars, the young soldier arouses the eyes of all those around him when he turns the ambush around and sends the enemy routing into the forest.

Yet Decimus has been taken by the Gallic soldiers and all the inferior officers are in chaos. The young soldier offers an idea: rescue Decimus from the hands of the enemy. The officers laugh him down, so the young man takes a band of his closest, loyal friends and sets out to do just that – and solidifies his name forever: the true Son of Mars.

Book Two: Red Storm Rising

Chapter Four: The Approaching Storm

nineteen years earlier

I

They knew they were coming as the first stragglers broke through the forest and stumbled into the village. The night before, women had placed the children in bed, the fathers had wrestled the animals into their stalls, locked up the barns and retreated into the safety of their homes. The night before the stars had shone bright and thick upon the night sky, as if the gods were smiling upon them. In the middle of the night, in several homes, young children awoke, crawling to the windows, listening. They had dragged their parents from their beds and asked what was going on; the parents heard nothing and told the children to return to bed. The children crept to their rooms, shut the doors, and huddled at the windows, peering into the thick woods surrounding the colony. Their tiny ears picked up what the adults had missed: the distant sound of shouting, the echoes of woodlands being torn apart, followed by brief periods of silence until the noises returned. Eventually the noises ended and the children were drawn by exhaustion to their beds, where they quickly fell asleep.

The next morning, just as the sun shed its brilliant light through the dense forest canopy, the road passing through the village evolved into the harbinger of bad news: Roman soldiers, broken and bloodied, parched and hungry, many wounded, marched through the town, stopping to ask for food or drink. Many collapsed upon the house's doorsteps, to be taken in by caring women. The children clung to the windows, watching in amazement as blood-soaked men and boys, many missing helmets, shields and swords, staggered through their town, through their playgrounds, eyes vacant and empty, hopelessly lost.

More and more weary soldiers came through, the road choked with their passing. Many were carrying friends over their arms, or laid their friends upon shields and carried them horizontal to the ground. Horses, hides streaked in blood, carried Roman officers who just looked at the villagers with sympathy. The women offered to help, empathetic; the older women retreated inside the hidden

rooms of their homes, fearing the worst. The truth came to light as a Roman cavalry soldier, when asked if he wanted to stay for a night so he and his horse could eat and rest, told the beautiful young woman, “No. The Gauls are no doubt on our tails, hoping to kill as many of us as they can. There is no time to lose.” He had leaned closer, and whispered into her ear, “I beg you to leave this place. Gather your family, forget your belongings. Come with us. We are a sorry lot, but *your* fate will be much worse when the Gauls come through.” He turned and continued to push his tired horse; the woman entered the home and begged her husband to leave, but he feared she would be taken advantage of by desperate Roman soldiers, and told her they would be perfectly safe indoors. The Gauls would not bother them if they themselves didn’t harbor the enemy or make any attempt to rile them up; “We’ll lay low,” he told her, “and everything will be fine. The Gauls have passed through here before. We keep the kids inside, we mind our own business. Their war is with Rome’s politicians, not its farmers.”

The soldiers passing heard his words and shook their heads. The woman turned from her husband and looked upon the soldiers, the twisted limbs, the bloodied flesh, the hollow eyes. Men who had been robbed of themselves because of the war, men dropped into the maw of hell and forced to either fight and live with nightmares or die and descend into the unknown. She saw the bloodshed and the mutilation, the dirt road caked with blood, and she realized that this time the Gauls would not be so nice; the Gauls were on a rampage, and after gathering their strength, would pursue the Romans all the way to the city gates, wreaking as much mayhem as they could along the way – and the village lie at the epicenter of their path. She opened her mouth and called for her children, voice shaky; she prayed her father’s stories about the Gauls, the stories he told before he fell upon their spears, were exaggerated. She wouldn’t let her hopes up.

II

A few sympathetic villagers had taken critically-ill soldiers into their homes, cleaning up their wounds and serving them hot soup and goat’s milk. The soldiers were thankful, and although they insisted on leaving, were not allowed; they were too weary, too hurt to follow the rest of the Army on foot. The soldiers protested, and as the sun dipped lower and lower until shadows flickered about the thick Gallic forests bordering the narrow road and tinny Roman colony, something could be seen in their eyes, something new, something that hadn’t been there

when they were carried through the front doors, stripped of their heavy armor, shields and equipment, and lain upon the beds. This was undeniably fear; they pleaded to be allowed to leave, pleaded for a horse to bear them to the rest of the routing Army, but the villagers shook their head. One soldier kept shouting, “You don’t understand! You don’t understand!” but his cries vanished as the exertion, mixed with the wounds he’d received nearly twenty-four hours earlier, knocked him out. Children crowded at the doors to the rooms where the soldier now slept, the mother angrily shooing them away, telling them to return to their rooms. The mother and father exchanged nervous glances, and the mother determined to keep watch on their household guest. This was a familiar scene throughout the scattered few-dozen wood-and-clay cottages strewn about the village.

The woman who had spoken with the pummeled cavalry soldier could not sleep; her husband slept beside her, and the kids slept on the floor with the dog. Canvas had been spread over the window and the lone candle had burnt down to nothing, then went out completely, shrouding them in the dark. The kids occasionally spoke in their sleep, and her husband rolled over, stealing the blankets. For once she did not protest.

She lay in bed, straining her ears, trying to pick up any morsel of noise; yes, she was able to follow it: the slow sound of foliage underfoot, snapping twigs and bushes. The sounds drew closer and she understood they were coming from the woods, approaching the village, not taking the road. They crept in from the shadows of the forest, crossing the fields ripe with wheat; soon she heard voices, thick in a wiry accent and a language she could not comprehend.

The noises drew closer; she squeezed her husband’s arm and he awoke with a start, gurgling in his mouth. She slapped a hand over his mouth and put a finger to her lips; she pointed to the canvas over the window. He cocked his head as if to ask, *What?*, and then he heard it as well. He stared at the canvas for eternity before sliding off the bed, walking around the room; he knelt down beside a wooden chest, glanced at the window, the sounds of movement and voices; he unlatched the lid. She looked to the kids softly sleeping, and caught light against her face; the canvas illumined for just a moment, torches being carried in front of it. A ball of spit rose in her throat and she looked to her husband; his eyes met hers and he raised the chest lid, the ancient wood creaking open with a loud wail.

The kids awoke at the sound; one jumped up, asked loudly, “Mommy, what-“
She reached for him, shaking her head.

The door to the bedroom shattered open, splinters flying all over the walls and all over the children. Bright light flooded the room and she covered her eyes; the little children shrieked at the twin figures standing in the doorway, half-naked, smeared with green paint, eyes wild, sneers captivating. They swung torches in front of their faces, illuminating toothy grins and messed hair. Sweat covered their brows and in their other hands they held scythe blades, the blades glinting in the torch-light. The children writhed away; the woman felt her long hair flow behind her as she lurched over the bed, raising her hands to protect her children. The men in the doorway had not seen her husband, who stood at the side of the room; masked in shadows from the door ajar, he quickly reached into the chest and withdrew a carpentry axe.

The woman saw him and screeched, “NO!”, but he leapt before the men, axe coming down hard; one of the men in the doorway shouted, stumbling back, shoulder erupting with blood; the torch fell to the floor, the flames catching the wood; the man ripped the axe from the Gaul’s shoulder just as the other Gaul brought his scythe blade right across his throat; the husband flew backwards, blood spraying all over the wall; he dropped the axe into the wood and careened back into the flames crawling over the doorframe. The woman fell off the bed, world a daze; the wounded Gaul groped at his shoulder, cursing in his native language; the other Gaul stared at his friend lying on the floor, blood seeping from a shattered shoulder blade.

The children ran to their father, ignoring the flames; the woman curled into a fetal position, sobbing; the Gaul on the floor said something hideous to his partner, and the other Gaul turned and approached the children. The woman looked up, tears blurring her vision; she made out the little girls grabbing at their father’s pant legs, oblivious to the gaping slit gouging his throat and turning his chest dark red. She then saw the other soldier raise his bloodied scythe blade and she yelled, “No! Please!” But he ignored her, bringing the blade down upon one of the girls; the little girl screamed and collapsed atop of her father; the man continued to strike her, tearing her back into ribbons, flinging blood all over the room; the woman sobbed harder, unable to breathe, so hopeless and destitute.

The second girl clawed at the soldier, yelling at him to stop. He smacked her away, hurling her to the ground; she lay on her back, began to get up, but he stomped his shoe into her neck, breaking her esophagus. She crawled upon the floor, choking to death, world graying all around her. The woman summoned courage and jumped over the bed, grabbing at her choking daughter; the soldier

laughed, and the fallen one in the other room joined. The woman locked eyes with her suffocating six-year-old daughter, the eyes paling, face turning blue; she gripped her mother, making choking noises, and the woman sobbed, screamed into her hair. The soldiers were laughing, the one wiping his bloodied blade upon his green pants.

The little girl went limp, then stiff, and rage filled the woman's eyes; she laid her girl upon the ground, climbed to her feet, using the side of the bed as a stool. The flames were slowly taking over the corner of the room, the heat sweltering, smoke gathering at the ceiling. She lurched at the standing soldier, but he just bodily shoved her into the wall. She slid down, and noticed the axe handle resting at her finger-tips; she picked it up, swinging madly at the soldier; he easily dodged her blow and threw her to the bed.

She landed hard on her back, and when she looked up, she saw him above her, then he was on top of her, breathing hard down her neck, his sweat dropping onto her skin. She screamed and hollered but nothing came out; she felt him moving on top of her; he was inside her, and it hurt worse than anything she'd ever felt before, and she tried to forget it all, tried to leave, but all she knew for an eternity was the murderer of her family ravaging her again and again as her beloveds' corpses lay about the room and fire engulfed the house of her childhood.

III

eight years later

The memories continue to haunt her. Any claim she had on innocence became nothing that night; bits and pieces, the memories were, but she could fuse them together into a horrific masterpiece of the night that forever altered the course of her life. These were not just memories that came when she closed her eyes; an ungodly scent, a certain sound, shades of light upon the window-sill. The memories came, triggered by an uncanny flood. One moment she could be smiling, and the next she could see herself embracing her suffocating child; one moment she would be eating with her family, and the next she would see the blood on the walls; one moment she would be working out in the garden, engulfed in flowers, and then her head would hurt, she'd feel hot, and the current world would be forgotten for one where she was thrown outside of her house, bleeding

from her vagina, watching her house with her family burn to the ground. She did not live in the same town, but whenever she looked upon the cottages aligned on the village streets, she could still hear the cries of the men and women and children slain because they took care of fleeing Roman soldiers. The Gauls had torn through like a cyclone, ripping the roofs off everyone's lives. No day would be bright for her; never again. The worst memories came when her husband tried to pleasure her, tried to hold her and kiss her; then his sweetness would be transformed into that abominable *creature* who had kissed and sucked and bruised and cut her so many times that night. She would pull away from her husband and cry in the corner; he would try to comfort her, but he didn't understand. All he knew was that she had been taken advantage of long ago, and that in the next room over the boy slept.

She pitied herself for being unable to fully love her son. For whenever she looked at him, the memories and feelings flooded. She loved him deep down, this she knew; but sometimes it was hard for her to kiss him goodnight or sit across the table from him. She would look into his sparkling young eyes and see the eyes of the animal who had abused her; sometimes she would have to leave the table, torn apart by her own dislike for the child, and she'd tell herself how she was such a horrible, dirty person; but her thoughts spelled out, "He is the bastard-child: he is not your own." These thoughts nearly drove her off the edge, to insanity and suicide; somehow she was able to keep a tight grip on herself, and smiled and put on a charming persona as he grew up. Her new husband did not resent her, and he loved the child even more than she. This made her glad – the child now had a parent who truly loved him. This comfort drove her to the brink of suicide again, and if not her the love of her son and husband, she would've probably driven the knife into her stomach.

When he was just eight years old, the boy's father, the one whom he loved so much, suddenly disappeared. He asked his mom where Daddy had gone off to, and she told him that he had to go serve Rome. He knew what this meant. Many of the men in the colony had gone; he learned riders from the distant city had come to the frontier to round up men to serve in the armies. When he was nine years old, working the land as his father had, the Roman Army passed through. He did not know it at the time, but he was witnessing a famous advance of Roman manpower into the heart of Gaul for yet another offensive – one to eventually be known as a tragedy. A month passed before the Army marched in the other direction, the numbers greatly reduced. The woman prepared to flee, but was told

there was nothing to worry about; the Gauls were entrenched in their city, the King at their head, and they were not foolish enough to pursue. She went against her judgment and remained, asking for word of her husband. All she received were shaking heads. After an hour of marching through town, the Roman Army disappeared from the village, and for several weeks she was alone.

One night she was awakened by her son tugging at the bed sheets, saying, "Someone's at the door, Mommy!" Her heart crawled into her throat and she lunged through the small cottage, groping at the door, imagining his smiling face, lavender eyes, the beautiful laughter. Yet she opened it not to her husband, but three Roman soldiers standing in the rain, helmets crooked on their heads. One of them stepped forward, knelt before her; she looked beyond them, saw three horses tied to the fence-posts, manes and hides dripping with rainwater. Lightning traced the sky and thunder shook the cottage as the man handed her something large; she accepted it, her son hiding behind her, looking at the strange men in interesting clothing. She took it, a ball threading her throat, and when she turned, the boy saw she held a Roman shield, the calfskin over the plywood torn in places with deep groove marks, the edges of the tears stained a crimson red. The three men before the door retreated to their horses, mounted, and disappeared in a rolling suave of thunder.

The boy stood in the shadows, watching as his mother fell into a chair beside the kitchen, gripping the shield against her chest. She breathed deeply, the shield moving up and down atop of her, and then she bowed her head, long hair falling around her; her chest heaved harder and tears speckled the calfskin, mixing with the raindrops that had soaked it on its passage to its true home. She ran her hands over the calfskin and let the shield slide to her feet, hitting the floor, and falling over. The young boy stared at it, disbelieving, knowing what it meant. His mother looked at the shield and cried in a hoarse whisper, "I told you to come home with this shield or upon it... And yet you are nowhere to be found." She imagined him lying amidst a pile of burnt bones covered with dirt, or as a bare skeleton lost amidst the towering trees of the Gallic forests. The thought of never seeing him again sent her to the floor, where she lay the rest of the night, crying; and the boy never made a sound.

IV

nine years later

Anthony Barnhart

She put the shield in a closet and locked it tight, sliding a chair against the door; the boy had seen her put it in, and saw something else, but wasn't able to see it completely before the door shut. She did not speak to her son for many days, but lay in bed, just staring out the window, listening to the birds in the trees and letting weeds overtake the garden. Her son summoned the courage and crept into his mother's room, discovering her bed-laden; he was hungry, eating food out of the garden but not knowing how to go into the town square and barter for food. He asked her, "What happened to Daddy?" She looked at him with blood-shot eyes, and seeing his tender face, she resolved to never let him become like her: torn apart, stripped of everything beautiful, left as waste on the fringes of the Roman Republic. He may have been a bastard-child, but he was still hers; she determined he would become someone some day, not condemned to be a farmer under the threat of war for all of his life. He noticed alien laughter in her eyes as she said, "Your father died a heroic death fighting the Gauls. The barbarians raid our villages and taunt Rome's borders. He was called to defend not Rome, but *us*, and he did it bravely. We must honor him." She decided she would honor him not by constantly mourning yet another lover falling to the enemy's blade, but by raising their son – and she was convinced it was *his* son as much as it was hers – to become someone known, someone respected, even – dare she say it? – someone admired. She pulled herself from that bed that day and got on with her life, raising him for nine more years, allowing him to grow into a wonderful seventeen-year-old boy who worked the farm without complaining, fixed meals when his mother was sick, and played with the village children when he had nothing else to do.

The mother even knelt before the idols of her ancestors and prayed every morning and every night, "Avenge what has happened to me. Bring joy into my life. Make my son become someone whom the world looks up to. Make him become someone great, someone important. Don't let him waste his life here; I cannot offer him anything. He may be the son of a barbaric sadist, but he is *my* son as well, he is *your* descendant. Show the enemy that not even they can put a hold on him." She feared the ancestors would not grant her request because her son's blood had been stained with Gallic ancestry as well. Every now and then she wondered what would've happened had the tables been turned; what would've happened had he been born into a Gallic family and raised in a Gallic

tribe to become a Gallic warrior. She imagined him raiding the Roman colonies, settlements, villages and towns, and it sent shivers running through her.

The boy could not ignore the closet covered by a chair. Every morning he awoke and every night he crept back to sleep, the closet stared at him on his way to his bedroom, drawing him, speaking to him; yes, even whispering his name. The temptation grew stronger and stronger, and eventually his dreams filled with its opening. He imagined swinging it wide and discovering wonderful treasures, or even finding a horrific corpse; the corpse of his father his mother spoke of only every once in a while. A frightening nightmare it was, moving that closet, opening that door, and seeing a pile of pale bones, rotted flesh and tattered clothes leaning against the wall, empty eye sockets and gaping mouth looking straight at him. He awoke with sweat pouring down his face, only the bare morning light and sounds of the birds comforting him. That moment he knew he had to open the closet, had to discover what lurked inside; and his hours spent toiling in the fields and helping his mother around the house filled with his mind's contemplations, scheming a plan to open that closet when his mother would not discover him. He expressed this unworldly draw to his girlfriend, who said, "Some things aren't meant to be messed with. Everyone knows your mother has had a rough life, coming into this town all broken down as she was with you in her belly. Your father was the only one who sustained her, and now it is you. She is a fragile woman. Don't go screwing things up." He promised her he would not, and they kissed in an orchard surrounded by flowers blown by the spring breeze.

The time came; his mother went off to the town square to barter for goods they needed around the house, goods they weren't able to make themselves: eggs and milk and a pastry desert one of the town's women supposedly concocted the night before. He watched her disappear around a bend in the road, left the harvesting scythe in the ground, and entered the house. He stood before the closet for what seemed a thousand centuries, his heart pounding. He felt cold all over despite the warm spring heat, and he kept trying to make himself start opening the closet. He felt bad for himself – he'd come all this way and now here he stood, unable to move. His arms suddenly worked and he was sliding the chair across the floor, out of the way of the closet. A group of spiders scattered amidst a sheet of dust, and he grabbed the cold doorknob, twisting. It creaked and groaned. He looked to the outside to make sure his mother was not coming, and seeing that the road was clear except for birds landing and pecking at insects, he opened the door wide, stepping back.

His father's shield lay propped against the wall. The rest of the closet was bare. And something else hid behind the shield.

He took the shield, felt the worn calfskin; he had never touched his father's shield, and it sent electricity through him. *My father's shield. The shield he carried into battle and the shield he held close to him as he died.* He imagined it lying across his father somewhere in the outback of Gaul, his father slowly dying, thinking of his one and only son. The boy took several short breaths and moved the shield out of the way, propping it against the opposite wall. He looked down.

The chest was scorched black, as dark as night. He thought it was a peculiar wood, then realized it was burnt wood. He knelt down beside it, ran his hand over its side, turned his palm over; charcoal streaks covered his skin. He wiped it on his pants and opened the lid; dust blew into his eyes. He blinked it away and peered into the dark recesses of the chest. Only two items lay inside: a knife with a crooked blade and a wood-chopping axe. He didn't know whether he felt elated or depressed; no treasure and no corpse. He picked up the axe, spying it out, and felt something indescribable birth within him; just at the touch of an axe! He then noticed the edge of the axe blade had been speckled with dried blood. A million questions surged through him and he just stared at the axe. Why had his mother hid these away? What memories would they deduce? What horrors lie entangled in their web of secrets?

The sound of feet at the front of the house writhed him around. He jumped to his own feet, the axe handle dangling from his hands. He stepped around the closet door, nearly knocking over the chair he'd scooted out of the way. His mother stood in the doorway, her baskets of market-place goods dropped to the floor. All the color drained from her face; he walked around the door, and her eyes fell to his hands, the axe.

He didn't know what to think when she abruptly turned and stormed out of the house, running to the road; he threw the axe down onto the kitchen table and sprinted after her, blowing into the warm spring air. Grasshoppers grazed his leg as he ran; his mother ran in a zigzag pattern; she collapsed onto the road, landing in a cloud of dust, tears streaming down her face. He fell down next to her, bruising his legs. He wrapped his arms around her and embraced her, squeezing her close to him. She sobbed into his shoulder and he stared down the road, the town square in the center. Birds took off from the trees, flying overhead; a man driving two cattle and riding in a wagon rolled past, eyeing the son and mother suspiciously, but saying nothing.

She pulled away, looking at him through blood-stained eyes, dark lines drawn over her face. "He is not your father," she croaked, swallowing hard. She gripped his arms so tight that her fingers left red marks, fingernails digging into the skin. "He is not your father--"

The boy asked, "*Who* is not my father?"

Dust clung to her tears, masking her face. "He is not your father--"

"Mother," he said, voice desperate, "what are you saying?"

She looked down between her knees. "I am so sorry for the way I've treated you. All these years, treating you like you're second rate. When you picked up that axe, I saw the fire in your eyes. That axe was meant for you." She stared at him. His eyes spoke of mystery. She said, "You are my bastard-child. You were not conceived by a man who loved me and left me. You were conceived by..." She closed her eyes, seeing it all again, that horrendous night. Her face began to warm as if the flames were close. Eyes still closed, she said, mustering all her strength, "You are the son to a Gallic tribesman who raped me and killed my first family -- killed my husband, my two daughters, and burned down our home." She looked up at him; he fell back, landing hard in the dust, feeling weightless and yet deadweight at the same time. "Do not think I do not love you. I never thought I could, not until now--" Now she embraced him, squeezing him to her breast. She whispered in his ear, "You picked up that axe, and I knew you could never be a savage. I know now what is in your heart: you do not belong to those who killed the man you've always called your father. You belong to the gods. I dare say you have even been conceived by the gods, brought up to bring life to people everywhere."

He wrenched away, weak. "No. No, it's impossible. I can't--" He waved north towards the Gallic territories many, many miles away. "No."

"Your heritage is Rome. You have been conceived in the womb of a virgin."

He stood, ran a hand through his hair, looked down at her upon the ground. "What am I to do?"

She wiped dust-laden tears from her face. "I cannot dictate your destiny."

"Mother," he demanded, "what would you have me do?"

She bit her lip, and something new thrived within her, a glow emanating from her entire being that washed over him. "You know what you have to do. I can see it in your eyes. When you picked up that axe, you felt -- complete. The gods and our ancestors have designed you and brought you up. The moment you touched that axe, you knew what you had to do." She glared at him. "*Now do it.*"

V

Hours had passed. Part of him did not want to believe it; another part knew it had been true all along. He had never felt completely right about claiming Roman heritage, and part of him had sympathized with the Gauls. Now, however, he absolutely hated the Gauls. He hated them for what they had done to his mother. He hated them for what they had done to his adopted father. He wished his father had killed the savage who had impregnated his mother. This thought consoled him. His mother told you, "The moment you touched that axe, you knew what you had to do." But the simple truth was that, No, he hadn't. He'd looked at her and nodded his head but he hadn't the faintest clue of what he was to do. So he kissed his mother, entered the house, picked the axe up off the floor, and balanced it between his hands. He spied the blood again and dared to ask: "Where did it come from?"

His mother behind him replied, "With that axe my first husband struck one of the barbarians who entered our home. It is perhaps this axe that conceived you – for if my first husband had not struck the tribesman, perhaps I would not have been raped. Perhaps my children..." Her eyes watered, for a mother never forgets her children, no matter the years that pass. Time heals no wounds. "Perhaps my children would still be alive. It is simply remarkable that anything good came from it – you, Son, are the Good."

He ran his hand over the axe blade; it was dull, not sharp at all. Blood flaked on his fingers; a chill rippled through him. The day of his conception blood stained this axe. He looked away from his mother, out the window, across the wheat fields and to the dense forest to the north. The Gauls lay that way. "I'm sorry... I have to leave..." She excused him, completely understanding, and he left the house, taking the axe with him.

The sun was warm upon his back and he let his legs carry him, his mind elsewhere; first he passed through the town, ignoring making eye contact; the fields went by, his free hand brushing the heads of wheat; he stepped over brambles and entered the thick Gallic forest, maneuvering thorn traps and giant trees. He had traveled this land a lot, especially as a younger kid, with his adopted father. He knew it by heart. He stumbled into a clearing, a quiet brook running at his feet. The water spun around polished rocks and broke in small waterfalls;

sunlight poured through the broken tree-tops and sparkled like stained glass upon the rolling water.

He knelt down, placing the axe in the water. He grimaced, let the frigid water ran over his hand, turning his fingers to ice. Minnows scattered between the rocks and a crayfish tail appeared for a moment before completely disappearing. He pulled the axe out of the water; the blood was beginning to come off. He dunked it within again, scrubbing the flat edges of the blade with his thumb; the blood flaked off in the water and vanished. He raised the axe before him, freezing water dripping into the brook. The blade was clean, the rugged iron tasting water for the first time in many years over a decade. He sat against a tree and closed his eyes, holding the axe in his hand, listening to the brook, the birds above. The sunlight grew dimmer and dimmer, masking the forest. He did not care. Questions bombarded him from every conceivable direction, but none so potent as one that rang over and over: *What am I to do?*

Shadows clung to the forest when his eyes opened. The axe had fallen to the ground; sunlight no longer danced off the gurgling brook. He grabbed the axe and stood, feeling so cold. He looked up to the sky, saw the stars shining so bold and bright. He turned and began walking through the forest, retracing his steps. The birds were silent; the only noise was that of his own footfalls and the questions regurgitating in the night: *What am I to do?* As he walked, he became aware of another sound; at first he thought it was just his imagination, but he told himself to stop, free his mind, and listen. The noise did not diminish. He walked faster; the noise grew louder. The sound was clear and unmistakable: mourning. He gripped the axe handle hard and raced through the forest, spinning past trees and leaping fall logs. More than once he nearly tripped over thick foliage; as he neared the edge of the forest, the mourning grew more varied and extreme; it was not a single incident: it sounded as if the entire town were mourning. The trees peeled back and he was hit with a bright light: he stumbled out into the field, axe dangling from his hand; his young eyes scaled the town before him.

Half the buildings were engulfed in flames, the street crowded with men and women and children. Dark shapes were being carried onto the street from houses burning and treasured possessions were being pulled from the houses. His throat knotted and he sprinted across the field; the heat illumined the fields and the edges of the forest. Some people saw him and pointed; some men ran towards him; they were carrying harvesting scythes. He called out, "What happened?"

The men relaxed and slowed before him. Their faces were stained dark charcoal. "They came this evening. A whole band of them. Maybe fifty, sixty--"

"Who?" the boy demanded, looking between them.

One of them, a quiet fellow who owned a winery, mused, "Who do you think?"

The boy tore between them and raced into the town. A building collapsed, blowing embers into the street; dust caked everything from the implosion. The boy coughed, eyes burning from the dust. Embers landed in his hair and upon his skin, singeing. He did not care. He looked between all the familiar faces. Everyone in the colony knew one another; most frontier settlements were close-knit. Women huddled with their children, crying hard; the kids wiped their eyes and cried or just looked around, not understanding. Men moved about in confusion, trying to figure out what they should do. "Get out of the street," was the most upstanding advice. Through the blinding dust, the boy could see that the dark shapes were bodies; most had been slashed at the throat, others stabbed repeatedly. He even witnessed one woman whose head had been banged in. He turned away from the carnage and grabbed someone, anyone, demanding to know why these people had been killed. It looked so random.

A woman said, holding her two little boys close, "They went through all the homes... Anyone who had anything on their person or in their home sporting patriotism for Rome was killed on the spot... They didn't care whose it belonged to... All the members of the household were killed... The fathers and mothers, even the children, down to the dogs and slaves..." One of her kids started crying and she knelt down, whispering, stroking his hair.

The boy moved away through the town, looking at the hollow faces, the empty stares; he saw the dark bodies, most overturned to hide the faces. The heat from the burning buildings roasted him. He looked down at the axe in his hand. If he hadn't fallen asleep... Anger welled within him.

Then fear. He took off down the road, erupting from the smog of the burning town. The firelight reached for nearly a quarter of a mile until it evaporated completely. He continued to run, legs burning, passing the thick wheat fields, the heads swaying back and forth in a cool spring breeze. He rounded a corner and was hit with a burst of light; the homestead was completely ablaze, crimson flames reaching to the high, offering a thick column of smoke as heavenly incense. His legs turned to rubber and he nearly collapsed as he ran. The axe slid from his fingers, landing on the dirt road. He reached the wooden fence and ran around it; flames gutted the front door, coughing – no, roaring – outward. He

could not enter. He fell to his knees, staring at the house, let the tears cascade down his face, an unending torrent of untouchable grief.

There is something moving to his left. He turns his head and sees her. She is lying in the grass, the firelight dancing over her face; he instantly crawled over to her, leaning over her. He looks her in the eyes first, then looks down; blood covers her stomach in several places where she'd been repeatedly stabbed. She raised a feeble hand, muscles in her arm quivering; he took her hand, didn't say anything. She just looked at him, eyes filling with emptiness, and he knew why this had happened. He knew he'd opened the closet, he knew they'd found the shield; they did not hesitate to throw his mother from the house and stab her over and over, leave her for dead, then go on their way. Now she opened her mouth as if to speak, but nothing came out. Her mouth did not close. He leaned over her, kissed her cold cheek, and wept.

VII

His arms moved without the consent of his mind; his mind had departed, disappeared, secluded itself in a hole and become an infantile recluse. He did not think, didn't even become aware of his own movements. He was completely cut-off, altogether numb. No more did the birds singing in the trees bring him joy, and no more did the sunlight upon his face draw laughter from the depths of his soul. All he knew was dark, bitter darkness. He grabbed a shovel from the woodshed and dug a hole, dug till noon, the sun beating high overhead, sending sweat in great goblets poking from his skin. He did not drink or eat, yet unattached from all senses, he found a way to go on. He picked his mother up, having wrapped her in a canvas from the shed, and lay her inside the pit. He sat on the edge of the grave, legs dangling, staring north into the sinister forests. How long he looked upon those dense woods and colossal trees, he couldn't know.

He looked down at his mother wrapped in the sheet, drew a grave breath, said, "I just don't know what to do. I don't know anything. You're right – I *did* feel something when I picked up that axe, but the emotion didn't light up the path I am meant to take. There are no revelations, no bright flashes of forethought. I don't have any idea what I am here for – except I know I cannot stay here. No." He eyed the charred remnants of his home. "I don't have anything here for me."

He said nothing more, crawled up from the edge of the grave, filled it with the rest of the dirt. His arms shook in exhaustion, and he went into the field, stripping

wheat off the stems and shoving it down his mouth, swallowing it fast. He made his way back to the grave, setting a rock at the head of the fresh dirt; he left the axe on the ground and began his walk into town, driven by a hunger slowly taking over his bones.

The town had been abandoned. Smoke continued to rise from charred-out homes, but the bodies that had littered the street and all those who had survived disappeared. He poked his head inside the remaining buildings, looking for life, but was noticed only by a dog walking around with its tail between its legs. He entered the town square, eyeing the carts laden with vegetables and fruits, olives and lamb. The lamb was covered with flies and much of the vegetables and fruit were rotting to the core. These things had lost importance.

He walked through the town square, and though he did see anything, he heard it. He followed the sound, walking between several huts and crossing two alleys before he arrived at the gated field. He stood at the wooden fence and just watched as several dozen villagers gathered together, holding hands; some stood off to the side, quiet, contemplating. Two little girls rocked on their hindquarters, sobbing with no one to comfort them. The throngs dissolved and people started walking past, quiet and sullen, not looking him in the eye. He went against them, and came upon the seventeen fresh graves. At the head of each was a piece of jewelry or a lock of hair, some memory of the lost, held down by smooth stones fished from a nearby stream.

He looked at the graves, trying to discover who they were, when his blood went colder than parched ice. He did not believe it, *could* not believe it; at one of the graves in the middle, held underneath a rock, was a single necklace. He had seen that necklace a thousand times. He had kissed the neck whom it adorned; he had held it in his hands as she laughed, his breath tickling her chest. He fell down beside it, running his hand over the silver-coated bronze, disbelieving. He looked at the mound of soil, and imagined her beneath it-

A hand touched his shoulder. He spun around, saw an older gentleman standing there. The man said, "Her father fought against them in the first Gallic war. They still had his sword."

He looked into the man's placid eyes, looked away, unable to bear it. "She had nothing to do-"

"Nothing to do with them, I know. Remember, they do not care. They are brutal creatures."

He wrapped his hand around the necklace. "She was the most beautiful woman to ever set her feet in this cursed land. What kind of men can take such... beauty? What kind of men can—" He froze. "Oh no..."

The man gripped his shoulder tight. "They did not. They didn't have time. Be thankful for that."

He closed his eyes, then ripped the necklace out from under the rock, the chain dangling between his fingers. "I cannot be thankful. I can never be thankful for... this." He stood, shadow falling over the grave. He felt the cold necklace scorching his sweat-drenched palm. "If only I would've been here, if only I wouldn't have been foolish enough to open that closet, if only I wouldn't have run off from the farm, if only I wouldn't have fallen asleep in the woods."

The wise old man spoke: "Don't blame yourself. You did not do this to them. You are not the kind of man who does this to innocent people. And tell me, what good would you have done if you were here? In your quick thinking – or lack thereof – you would've gotten yourself and maybe even others killed. There is nothing you could have done."

He turned, faced the man, his eyes alight. "You are wrong. If I would've been here, she would've lived. Mother would've lived. All these people would've lived."

"You aren't thinking straight. There were nearly fifty of them. Go home and get some sleep—"

"I have no home," he snarled. "I have nothing left for me here."

The sun was setting as he walked down the road, the charred farmhouse coming into view. A single sack hung from his shoulder, laden with all kinds of spoiled fruit and vegetables. Had the merchants not been giving out free food in remorse, he would've turned up empty-handed, for all he had were the clothes on his back, a necklace around his neck, a single hatchet and a beat-up ancient shield. He sat the sack beside his mother's grave, looked at that mound, turned away, retreated into the shadows. He drew up again, this time carrying something with him. He set the shield beside the grave and grabbed the axe; sitting down beside the shield, he used the last remnants of the spring light to examine the axe and examine his soul. He withdrew some potatoes, peeled one open with a small knife, and began to eat. The food went through him like hot soup and he could've sworn it was just as good. The nutrients saturated his stomach. He finished off the potato, licked his fingers, and stood.

“I know what I have to do now,” he said to the grave. “If I don’t do this... What kind of man am I? Who is a man but one who makes the world a better place? I don’t know if I can make the world a better place, Mother. Such things are left to the politicians and the lucky. I am just a poor farm-boy. But I can try, Mother. My grandfather died against the Gauls, my father died against the Gauls, and now you and my girlfriend have died against the Gauls. They have destroyed everything that meant anything to me. How can I just try to get on with my life without *doing* something? What haunts me the most is what they did to you and your first family. It has invaded my memories, and I’ve been unable to dispel it. I believe the gods are weighing it upon my heart, the revelation and direction I’ve been seeking. Look what the Gauls did to you; they thought they got away with it. But they bred something much worse than they’ve ever fathomed. They might’ve gotten away with it with you, but I swear on my own family’s blood that they’re going to pay for what they’ve done to me.”

The old man who had spoken the cryptic words to the boy at the cemetery heard the sound of horse’s hooves and walked out the front door, fearing the worst. Others popped their heads out of their homes, still teary-eyed and splotched-cheeked from crying. Out of the shadows, in the pitch darkness – as the stars were blocked by gathering storm clouds – a single horseman appeared down the street; he carried a single Roman shield, and underneath the belt around his tunic rested a single wood-chopping axe. He carried a satchel around his front, resting it upon the horse’s neck. He looked at the villagers as he passed; something unseen and hideous melted in his gaze.

The old man stepped out onto the road. “Boy, you can’t do this.”

The boy stopped the horse right in front of him. He said nothing, just looked at the man.

The man protested, “You aren’t acting sensibly. Just get off this horse, come inside, get something to eat. You’re just going to get yourself *killed*. You’re just an eighteen year-old kid! You are not a warrior, even *if* you carry your father’s shield!” The boy made no movement; the old man cursed under his breath, said, “You’re just running off your emotions, and you’re running off the edge of a cliff. Don’t be blinded by your anger. Do not let it control you.”

The boy spoke: “You are controlled more than I; controlled by fear. You are contemptuous.”

Anger flared inside the man. "Tell me, Boy: what do you expect to do? Do you even *know*?"

The boy nodded. "Of course I know." He smiled, a smile that sent chills sprinting through the man. "I am going to kill every one of them."

VIII

All night he traveled, the horse panting; he did not run, only walked, knowing that the horse would falter under a run. He knew the Gauls were marching on foot, and would wind down, turn back – and run into him. He was not an arrogant boy; having nothing to live for, he had nothing to lose. He was certain that before the sun rose upon the thick trees drenching either side of the road, he would enter *Elysium*, walking into the hands of his mother and girlfriend. These thoughts met him and he slid asleep, dreaming nothing; and when he awoke the sun was high and the horse was dipping its head into a stream, lapping up water. He made sure he still held the shield; though his arm was numb, it was there; and the axe lay against his side. He ate some vegetables and pulled the horse away from the stream, gauged the time by the sun, and continued the journey.

Midmorning came and went; noon approached, and he smelt the scent of burned flesh and caught wisps of smoke in the air. The road turned, arching through a settlement where several buildings lay smothered and bodies were being lined up against the houses. Some men were arguing amongst themselves, some saying, "Let us take after them!" and others saying, "No! You are a fool for proposing such a suicidal plan!" As he rode through, he looked all those men in the eyes; some were strengthened, but the cowards were ashamed. They looked away, unable to meet his gaze, and he passed through the town, eyes scourging the orphaned and widowed. He did not experience the sorrow he had felt at home, only an inescapable, climbing hatred, an unfathomable gulf existing between any concept of love and the emotions burning within his heart. The settlement passed and once again he was alone.

The horse rested for a short time and he took a walk through the woods, admiring the flowers, wishing he had the heart so bend over, sniff them, remember better times. No; instead of enjoying the fruits of nature he returned to the horse, mounted, and ate as they made progress. Another settlement clasped in mourning drew nigh; he stopped the horse, asked an older woman, "How long ago did this happen?"

She wiped tears from her eyes. "Hours ago. They came through this morning..."

He peered down the road. "They cannot be far."

"Please," the gentle woman pleaded, "do not pursue them. You will lose everything."

"Woman," he said slowly, "I already have." He kicked the horse in the side and they were off.

The woman watched him go, looked up to the gray skies, and prayed, *Watch over him.*

A steady rain fell that night. The dirt road turned to mud and he was forced to abandon the course; he tied the horse to a tree in the woods, raindrops plinking down around them. The thick canopy half-shielded them, and for this the boy was thankful. He kissed the horse, stroked its mane. "Sorry to get you into this," he whispered into its ear. One of its eyes rolled in the socket; the ear flinched as if a fly had landed upon it. "I don't know what will happen tomorrow." He felt a little foolish talking to the horse, but needed the company. "Whatever happens though, just know that I'm proud you were with me through it all." He wondered if he weren't going insane; pursuing a Gallic war-band of nearly fifty to one hundred soldiers and talking to a horse. He shook his head. No, he was not crazy. He knew exactly what he was doing. "A crazy man," he said to himself, "would be filled with the illusion that he would live through it all." He fingered the axe, leaned against a tree, listened to the rain and thunder and watched the forest illuminate under sparse flashes of lightning, and awaited the morning.

Mud covered the horse's hooves, making loud noises as they walked. The cloud still crawled with dark clouds, and once or twice they passed through low drizzles. Light filtered between the clouds, but only enough to turn the world into a dark and dreary place. He crested a hill, looked across a wide valley thick with trees; he stroked the horse's mane, staring at the rolling foothills spreading before him. He looked down and then looked up, his eyes drawn; in the distance there was a bright flash of light, followed by a ball of fire rising into the sky, choking smoke. He squinted, trying to make it out. Moments later, the muffled echoes of an explosion reached him, rippling through his chest, carving a hole; the horse shuddered, stomping its feet in the mud and shaking its head. The boy's heart spun within him. He whispered to the horse, "Today we die," and kicked it hard in

the hide. The trees of the valley immersed them and they disappeared under the thick-wooded canopies.

The road twisted and turned, and it felt like eons until they came upon the first sign of wicked destruction. A broken wagon lay to the side of the road, the cargo containers ripped open and gutted; the spokes on the wheels were snapped and one of the wheels had broken off; a man lay twisted upon the top of the wagon, eyes staring upwards; a giant red slash covered his abdomen, and flies spun webs around blood-soaked hands. A pair of oxen lay upon the road, guts split open and innards wrenched out. The horse recoiled, nearly throwing the boy off; he stared at the net of insects covering the corpses and kicked the horse harder. Blood had stopped flowing from the carcasses, and he feared his time was vanishing as quickly as the sun went down.

A gentle rain began to fall, sprinkling through the trees, splashing upon the muddied road. All was silent, except for the screaming. A single farmhouse stood alone against a quiet field, the barn going up in flames. The light danced through the trees, sawdust igniting as if it were crimson gunpowder. The three men looked on, helpless, held back by a spear and sword; another barbarian placed his spear against the wall of the house and grabbed the woman, throwing her down amidst several bales of wheat. Her shoulder-blades hit the ground and her arms stuck up between the bales; she cried out, tears choking her face, wet hair pressed down upon her scalp; the fetid creature pushed her down harder, grinning, sulfurous eyes shrieking an evil sonnet. His arms pinioned her to the ground and he licked her face, becoming hard over her struggles beneath him. The rain grew harder, a stiff mist seeming to raise from the ground, enshrouding the surrounding trees in a mystic white haze. The three men eyed each other, but knew they would do better to remain put. One of them stepped forward and caught a spear inches from his face; he stepped back, eyes smoldering, swearing vengeance – in this life or the next.

The Gaul upon the woman did not know he was there until the very last moments. A sound ruffled through the air, blasting his ears; he looked over his shoulder to see the horse lunging from the mist, a single rider carrying a shield in his right arm and an axe in the left. The Gaul lurched upwards to snatch his spear just as the horse rushed past; he screamed as an axe blade smashed into his back, piercing his spinal column and its accompanying cord; he pitched forward as the

rider ripped the axe from the back of his back, bringing out shreds of pulsating muscle and shattered bone. The man fell atop the hay bales, bleeding all over the place; the woman shrieked, frantically stood, and dove over the other hay bales, trying to hide herself from the sight.

The two guards heard their companion holler and turned; one of the prisoners shouted, "Amandus! Run!" She took off into the field, vanishing into the mist; the guards cursed; the rider rode towards them, bloodied axe tight in his hand. The Gauls glanced at one another; suddenly the prisoners jumped onto one of the men, knocking him down; the Gaul slashed his sword, the blade smearing a bloody streak over one of the man's legs; the man fell to the side, groping at his leg, blood pulsing between his fingers. The other Gaul turned, facing his spear at the men; he charged, driving the spear between the ribs of one of the commoners; the commoner spun around, and the downed Gaul leapt to his feet.

The horseman had wheeled around the lawn and was coming towards them; the Gauls shouted at one another; the one with the sword ran towards the horse, intent on bringing the rider down; the man with the bloodied leg lay sprawled in the grass, and the one with the impaled ribs gasped for breath, faltering against a lone tree. The spearman ignored the prisoners and chased after the horse as well.

The Gaul with the sword slashed at the boy, but his blade struck the side of the horse, drawing a bloody line; he had come onto the horse's right flank, so as to avoid being struck by the boy's sword, since his shield was on his right; but the boy just whipped the axe around, smashing the blunt end into the Gaul's face; the barbarian's nose smashed in and the front of the skull imploded; he fell into the grass, barely breathing. The spearman loomed before the horse; the boy gripped the axe, eyes afire and unthinking; the spearman stepped out of the way, thrusting the spear into the horse's neck; it pierced the flesh and stabbed out around the horse's mane, spewing blood all over the boy's front; the horse buckled over, throwing its rider; the boy lost his shield and axe and tumbled into the grass, rolling. The spearman yanked the spear out of the suffocating horse and ran towards the boy.

The boy leaned up on his elbows; the axe was at his fingertips; he grabbed it just as the man was upon him; the spear came down; the boy twisted his neck to the side, let the spearhead splash into the muddy earth beside his face. He spun the axe blade into the wooden spear shaft, snapping it in two; the Gaul fell forward, and the boy rammed his forehead into the Gaul's nose, breaking it open; the Gaul cursed in a foreign language, blood crawling down his chin; he stumbled

back, groping for the axe; the boy lurched to his feet, raised the axe. The Gaul with the bloodied face stared up at him, shaking empty hands, pleading in a language he did not understand; he made eye contact, and the Gaul knew then and there no hope would be found; he shrieked as the axe came upon his face, piercing the bone and impacting the brain. The boy fell away from the corpse, blood dripping from the axe.

Mother.

He hollered and unleashed, hurling the axe into the corpse over and over, until he was completely drenched in blood; he thought of nothing else, felt nothing else, experienced nothing else, save for a radical and unquenchable hate. Eventually he felt the eyes of a million souls upon him, and he looked up to see the winded commoners staring him down in disbelief. Their eyes drove through him; the blood-soaked axe fell from his hand and he collapsed onto the ground, eyes swimming; he just breathed, felt the rain upon him, blending with the blood. He listened to the birds, closed his eyes.

Mother.

She would never leave him.

One of the men croaked, "What have you done?"

The boy looked at the mutilated body at his feet. He felt no remorse – neither did he feel satisfaction.

The man who had remained uninjured approached. "What have you done–"

He looked over at the man. "What you should have done."

He marched over to the boy, ripped him up, pointed to the man pierced in the ribs: he was wheezing against a tree, color fading; blood covered his side. "Because of what you've done, that man is going to *die*."

"Because of what I've done," the boy snarled, "one woman will be able to live."

The man turned away, grabbing at his hair, staring at the three bodies and the body of the horse. "I can't believe this, I can't believe this." He turned and looked at the boy standing. "You know that when they don't show up with the rest of them, they're going to come around, find us, and kill us all!"

"No they won't," the boy promised. "Where did they go?"

"South," he said. "Towards Aquae Sulis."

"How long ago?"

The man swore. "You're just going to get more people killed–"

"How long ago? My father was stationed at Aquae Sulis. There may still be a military regiment there. By the looks of it no one is hurrying ahead to warn them,

so I guess I'll do it. Let me tell you what will happen: the Gauls will strike *any* military at Aquae Sulis in the dead of night, slaughtering them all. They are not strategists, they are not mercenaries, they are blood-hungry sadists. They will march deeper and deeper into Rome until they are all killed. So we either do it here and now or we let more innocent men, women and children fall because of our cowardice. I must ride ahead to Aquae Sulis and warn the militia stationed there – and if there is none, I shall warn all the residents to flee with haste deeper into Rome.” He looked at the man. “I am sorry for those who fell here. They will be remembered, I swear it. But I ask of you not only forgiveness, but for your help: ride with me. We will go to Aquae Sulis together.”

The man paused. “My sons are hurt, and my wife is missing. I cannot go.”

Cowards. “My horse has fallen,” the boy said. “May I borrow one of yours?”

IX

Evening doused the town in pallid light; torches burned on the corners, and the aroma of the butchery pervaded the entire settlement. Aquae Sulis was a larger town; the town square was constantly the place for discussion on politics, the most in-style gossip, a place to find someone fresh, young and willing, and a bartering quarter for finding anything you needed. Over forty homes ringed the town square; children played in the surrounding fields, drawn into their homes by mothers calling their names. Several older men tossed dice under the torch-light. A great wooden building housed one hundred sixty Roman soldiers, mostly young boys handed a semi-rectangular shield, a spear, and told to guard the frontier. Any illusions of heroism were quickly smashed to pieces: the soldier's life was one of monotonously walking the streets, sweating under the heavy armor, counting the days until they were allowed to return to Rome, toss in their arms, and get on with life. As dusk grew deeper, the guard shift changed; some soldiers went to eat, others crawled into bed, others decided to play some games in the fields, and the guards patrolled the nearby roads and paced through the town streets.

Upon one of the roads, several soldiers heard the quick approach of a horse. They stepped into the middle of the street, torches lowered; the horse came to a stop before them. The soldiers looked up under their round helmets, saw the haggard boy covered in desiccated blood, an axe hanging from his belt, a Roman shield on his arm. The soldiers looked at one another, searching for an explanation; before any words were said, the boy spoke: “Is this Aquae Sulis?”

His voice dripped with fatigue, and he barely held on to the reigns; his muscles shivered in the cold sprinkle of spring rain.

"Yes," one of the soldiers said. "Who are you? Why do you carry one of our shields?"

He ignored him. "I need to speak with the commanding officer. Can you take me to him?"

"No," a youthful-looking boy said. "Tell us who you are."

He gave them his name. "Can I pass now? It is urgent."

"Are you a Roman soldier?"

"No." Then, "But my father was."

"Then we can't let you talk to the commander. He is asleep. In the morning--"

"In the morning," the boy hissed, "we will all be dead!"

One of the soldiers lowered his spear, pointing it at the boy's throat. "What are you saying?"

"Do you not see the blood upon me? I swear it to you: the Gauls are coming!"

The commander awoke groggily, rubbing his eyes. A soldier stood above him. His eyes groped in the darkness; he muttered, "It'd better be important."

"There is a man here to see you, sir," the soldier said. "He needs to talk with you immediately."

He laid his head back on the pillow, closing his eyes. It felt so good... "In the morning--"

"He says there is no time. It is urgent, sir."

The commander rolled over on his bed. "It can *wait*. You are dismissed."

The soldier did not move. He swallowed hard, the tension causing sweat to crease his brow. "Commander," he said, "the boy who is here, he is from a village a several day's ride north of here. He has ridden hard to come to us, and I don't think it is professional to leave him waiting. He has some very important news for you, sir. He is *adamant* that it cannot wait; and if I thought he were just some impatient fool, sir, I would tell him to shut up and sleep in the barracks, wait till morning – like you said. But sir, there is something about him... Something that just--"

"Why are you still talking?" the commander growled, getting up. "Get out of here. I'll be with him shortly. And I swear you will be pulling double-shifts for screwing up my sleep like this. It is simply unacceptable, and I don't care *what* he has to say."

The commander's jaw had dropped. He felt all potency leave him. "How many?"

"Maybe a hundred," the boy said. "Maybe fifty. Who knows?"

"And they are coming here?"

"They were headed this direction last I saw them," the boy said. He didn't say that he hadn't actually *seen* them, but was simply acting on tips. He stepped forward, face illuminating in the brilliant torch-light in the wooden building whose walls creaked in the wind and rain. "They have been killing anyone with ties of devotion to Rome. If you have a Roman insignia on your shirt, or a journal describing your times with the Roman Army, or even just a relic sword or shield..." He paused. "Then they will kill you and your entire household. And they burn the buildings down." His voice doused. "They killed my mother and my girlfriend. If they had not hurt me so, I would not have ridden so hard. But deep emotions can drive a man to unbelievable acts."

The commander looked to some of the soldiers surrounding him. "If what this boy says is true, the Gallic war-band will be marching into our town to kill us in our sleep. Perhaps they plan on blocking the doors to the barracks and burning them down. Thank the gods this man has come to us. Forgive me, Aulus, for being so snappy with you. I am putting you in charge of setting the ambush. I will let these Gauls come to me – and we will slaughter all who refuse surrender. What is the time? Nearing midnight. They will be here soon. Aulus, set the trap – it's the plan Titus came up with. Tell him today is his night!" The commander's eyes sang. "Gallic blood shall drench our swords."

The soldiers scattered away. The boy stepped up to the commander. "Give me a sword."

The commander looked him in the eye. "Have you been trained?"

A pause. "No. But I killed three Gauls on my way here. They were about to rape a woman--"

"I am sorry. I am thankful for your warning, but I cannot give you a sword. I do not want your blood on my hands, especially after you have awarded me with this treasure of knowledge. I ask that you stay out of the way. Stay out of danger."

The boy protested. "These men took the life of my mother because my father served in the Second Gallic War. They took the life of my girlfriend because her father did the same. You have no vitality in human emotions if you think I am content to step this one out." His voice drew quick, pulsed with passion. "I want to be the first to strike them, I want to lead the charge."

The commander smiled. "Rome needs more boys like you. And for this reason, I must deny it."

The boy shook his head, bewildered.

"Instead you shall be given a place of honor. Ride beside me. You will be witness to a historical ambush. Titus designed it. The Gauls will either bow down to *you* – or be destroyed."

X

No stars shone, hidden by broad rain clouds sluggishly carving their path over the carpet of trees and snaking streams. A steady rain, so monotonous as to be forgotten until one ventured outside, trickled between the trees and bent the stalks of budding wheat in the plaid fields. If one were not looking for them, they would not be seen. After many days' marching, fueled by sacked food and pressed on by promises of glorious praise, the Gauls had managed to move without much noise, passing out of the forest and moving through the fields, spread out, eyes intent upon the quiet and quiescent town: Aquae Sulis. The darkness hid their numbers, but had one had the eyes to see, they would've been witness to ninety-eight barbarians making their way past the first houses on the fringe of the town: one-story, wood-and-mud huts. The windows were shut and doors locked. The Gauls did not stop, bore towards the center of town.

Most traveled without shirts, far more comfortable in the balmy and rainy weather being bare-chested rather than having itchy and rain-drenched clothes clinging to their skin. Their pants had all but woven into their legs; the pants looked black in the night, but were in truth a mottled green, some with scarlet stripes running down the side; they were held onto the waist by a single rawhide belt. Feral tresses fell across their faces, malicious eyes staring forward, glowing in the shadows; in one hand many held a crude spear or a rusted sword; some carried shields and others did not. Those who carried shields bore ones that looked like an elongated oval, green in the center with a metallic boss, painted crimson on the outside; others held close to them circular, knobbed shields painted olive to blend into the trees in which they lived. Most had inherited their shields from their fathers or grandfathers; others had made them days before the expedition, often resulting in them being undeveloped and fragile. Most did not carry shields with them; they had not met any real resistance, and the plan for the night was simple: burn down all the sleeping Romans and then ransack the

village, butchering everyone for allowing Roman troops to reside within the town walls.

None of the soldiers noticed there were no Roman guards on patrol, but it did not faze them. No Gallic warriors had crossed Rome's borders for years, not since the Second Gallic War. Why would there be any change this night? Vice sneers crossed their faces and their bodies felt frosty with acidic exhilaration. Muscles quivered and shook in expectation. Drool ran down their faces, blending with the rain, at the thought of the rape and murder. Had the clouds dissipated and the moon come out, the moon itself would've turned its radiant face from the murderous creatures sulking up the main road to the town square, shoulders hunched and eyes crazed with lust.

No one moved or breathed within the town. The only sound was that of the rain falling on the streets, on the timber fences, plinking off the edges of the simple woodland cottages. And the pitch darkness – their eyes tried to see, tried to make sense of it, but the shadows enveloped everything in a black mist. They continued their mystical trek up the central road snaking into the town square.

The ninety-eight soldiers jumped as the sides of the road exploded upwards in a towering wall of flame. Their eyes burned with the brilliant light; muscles went limp in surprise; a shield dropped to the ground. The cavernous flames coughed upwards to the inky sky, disintegrating the rain daring enough to touch its scourging flames. Their shocked faces illuminated in the light, and they all turned their backs to one another, staring into the shrieking fire. Two walls of parallel flames ran on either side of them, stretching the length of the entire road.

At the end of the road, splashed against the edge of the town square, three horses trotted into view. The nearest Gaul was twenty feet away; the riders upon the horses were dressed in armor and shield, spears in their hands; one carried an axe. Horsehair helmets rose upon the crests of their helmets, shadows draping over their blood-famished eyes. The Gauls looked up at them in astonishment; the soldier with the axe defiantly said, "Throw down your spears, swords and shields. Bow down before our horses and surrender yourself to Rome." He leaned forward on the horse, the firelight enlightening the boyish face. "Surrender – or die."

The Gauls exchanged looks with one another, then audacity ran through them. Three mere horsemen would not faze the bravery of the Gallic tribesmen. They gripped their lances and held their shields close, mocking the horsemen with their eyes. The nearest Gaul twenty feet away yelled something indistinguishable to his companions and charged, the fire flashing by on either side of him. The other

Gauls echoed the cry and pursued; one of the riders raised his sword into the air, the horse rearing back and screeching.

The fire at the sides exploded into the street, dozens upon dozens up Roman soldiers throwing themselves through the flames and into the streets, thrusting their spears into the frightened Gauls, blocking the Gauls' attacks with their rectangular shields. Gauls bordering the flames fell, impaled and losing blood, crying out; other Gauls tried to attack with their spears and swords; spears snapped upon the Roman shields, and the Romans used their shields to block the infantile sword hacks. The Roman spears often broke in the soft bare-chests of the Gauls, and the Romans drew diminutive daggers to thrust into the enemy's faces and hearts. Bodies collapsed to the ground, writhing and rolling in blood gushing from wrecked flesh.

The Gaul nearest the cavalry issued an epic battle cry and charged the horses with his spear. The horses did not falter nor did the Roman riders flinch; the sides of the horses awoke with dozens of Roman soldiers leaping before the cavalry, bearing their shields, thrusting spears into the body of the valiant Gaul. The Gaul screamed as his spear fell from his hand and his shield fell into the muddy earth; six or seven sword-tips pierced the wet skin, breaking and passing through ribs, shattering his internal organs. He coughed up blood and his eyes went ghostly white as the Romans withdrew their bloodied spears; the body fell into the mud, blood staining in the rain; some of the spears had even poked from his back, leaving holes gurgling blood.

Some Gauls tried to flee, but the end of the road was blocked off by nearly thirty Romans holding their shields ahead of them, spear tips pointed outwards, forming an impregnable wall. The Gauls twisted and turned as the Romans on the left and right stood over the bodies and formed their own walls with spears pointed at the twenty-odd remaining Gauls.

The Gauls looked in every direction, saw they were completely surrounded. Their hearts pounded in their chests, eyes going to their companions lying bleeding and dead on the street. The flames from tar-drenched pits continued to roar, turning the cold night into a sweltering inferno. The light from the flames danced off the tips of the Roman spears and sparkled the sweat upon the Gauls' chests.

The rider with the axe spoke from behind a wall of shields and spears: "Throw down your weapons and surrender. Do this or every one of you will die."

No pretense laced his words. The Gauls knew the command would be issued. Without complaint they threw down their spears, swords, shields, standing all but naked in the center of the street, shoulders slumped, some covered in blood from injuries or friends' being slain.

The rider smiled and said, "Town watch! Seize them!" The Roman soldiers moved forward as one, ever on guard in case the Gauls tried one last frantic plea of escape; but there was none, and the Gauls said nothing and thought nothing except shame and defeat as the Romans apprehended them, forced them onto their knees, stripped them naked, and made them kneel in the rain until morning, when the commoners would come out, laughing and spitting upon them, mocking them with every ounce of their existence. The prisoners were bound and clothed, and the commander attached his right-hand man Titus and a dispatch of sixty soldiers to march these prisoners to Rome, where they would stand trial – and inevitably be executed.

The commander gave the boy permission to travel with Titus and the Roman soldiers, and by that evening, the convoy was moving away from Aquae Sulis, twenty-four Gallic captives marching to their deaths, the rest of their kin being burned in mass graves. Only twelve Roman soldiers had fallen.

None could imagine this was simply a foretaste of the great war that was to come.

XI

The city was unlike anything he'd ever seen before. All his life he'd been subjected to life on the frontier – farming, hunting, gathering food from the forest. The largest gathering of people he'd ever found himself in was a wedding, where over four hundred people showed up. He had been amazed to see so many people walking around in the same place. After several long and weary days of traveling, they passed through many outlying villages and towns, each growing larger in size; the forest dissolved into fields and vineries, markets and trades places. The boy's heart had been sprinting as they climbed a towering hill spread thick with a carpet of ripe fields; peasants let sweat drip down their face as they toiled under an atrocious sun, the fields ripe with the gentle smells of spring. He had anticipated cresting the hill and seeing the legendary city alive on the other side – yet when the hill was topped, he did not see a city, but many hills covered with towns, a patchwork of settlements and streams and patches of woodland amidst

the massive fields swarming with laboring slaves. He rode upon his horse and simply stared, marveled at it all, wondering how so many people could exist. The soldiers looked at him, laughed, shook their heads – most had trained in the big cities, such as Arretium or even Rome itself.

That evening the boy's request was granted. A final hill was topped, and he held his breath, nearly falling off the horse. The great city walls rose, parapets of an ancient time, laden with millions of quarried stones. The walkways upon the walls were drenched with lookout towers and patrolling soldiers; soldiers stood at the many monstrous gates, hundreds of people flooding in and out of the city, walking and on horseback and riding on caravans. A river coursed through the city, hundreds of small ships making their way to the city from the ocean via the single river. Beautiful buildings thrust up from the earth beyond the city walls – domes and steeples and statues. Courtyards brimming with children's laughter, baths floating with the latest gossip. A giant building rose in the middle of the city, giant marble pillars walking around its side. Millions of people walked about the wide and narrow city streets. The boy felt all the moisture drain from his lips and he muttered, "I did not know men could build such things."

Titus smiled. "Rome is more powerful than you've ever imagined." He straightened up on the horse. "Rome is the Light of the World. One day, my young friend, Rome will stretch its power all across the world. Every nation will bow down before us – the Carthaginians and Egyptians and Dacians and Parthians and Britons. And yes, the Gauls – and I assure you, they shall be the first to throw down their weapons in shame and kiss our feet."

The boy smiled. He longed – lusted – for that day to come.

The first thing the boy noticed were the other Roman soldiers inside the city. Not all wore the red uniform of his father, of his father's father, and of the soldiers with whom he'd been traveling. There were Romans with emerald shields and jade horsehair helmets; and there were other soldiers with cobalt uniforms as well. He inquired Titus about why the Roman soldiers were all wearing different color uniforms; the soldier replied,

"Let me tell you why Rome is so much greater than the other nations. The other nations are Empires; they are controlled by a single Emperor whose will is carried out to the letter. Have you learned of the Egyptians? They have a single ruler and they call him the Pharaoh. At his word, men are condemned to death; at his word, prisoners are pardoned. At his word, war is made. At his word, the gods bow

down – or so he thinks. The gods favor Rome because Rome is not oppressive. Rome is controlled not by an Emperor, but by the Senate – elected men who guide the decisions of Rome. Rome, my friend, is a *Republic*. And within the Republic there are three families who vie for power – the House of Julii, the House of Scipii, the House of Brutii. All say they have the right to lead Rome and all press forth valid points. But the Senate controls the actions of the patrician families. *We* belong to the House of Julii, and so do you, as you live in lands belonging to Julii. We wear red to differentiate ourselves from the soldiers of the other families. The Brutii are the ones who wear blue, and the Scipii wear green.”

The boy was taken in by all the *life* of Rome: the swarming market-places, the children playing in the streets, the men and women huddled under umbrellas, eating and talking politics; the teenagers – many like himself – who were messing around and getting yelled at and laughing about it. He spied a beautiful girl with chocolate hair and hazel eyes – he forced himself to look away, guilt invading. He reached up, touched the necklace around his neck. *Never forget.*

They passed through a giant set of gates within the city, and suddenly hundreds – even thousands – of Roman soldiers surrounded him. They all wore the red uniforms, and all looked on as the prisoners were dragged into the compound. The boy realized he was standing inside a training facility; columns of jogging soldiers ran past, sweating and legs burning with exhaustion; other trainees used wooden clubs to practice thrusting and striking ‘enemy’ dummies set about upon a grassy field. The horse looked at all the soldiers, eyes wide with suspicion. The prisoners gaped at all the Roman soldiers, as if they had never imagined there could be so many. Hue totally sapped from their faces.

A contingent of cavalry rode up to the column. A soldier wearing a horsehair helmet and sweating under his uniform looked at the soldiers, then glanced at the captives, smirked, said, “What do we have here?”

Titus rode forward. “I am Titus Philippi. I come from a small town called Aquae Sulis, where I and these other soldiers were stationed. Most of our cohort remains there.” He pointed to the boy. “A few nights ago this young man entered the camp and demanded he speak with our commander. Our commander agreed to speak, and he told us there were nearly a hundred Gauls coming to the town to try and slaughter the soldiers and peasants as they slept. The war-band had been harassing dozens of towns, massacring anyone with ties to the Roman Army. We ambushed them and captured these Gauls.”

The soldier rubbed his chin. “The Gauls have not made any moves on our lands-“

Titus waved to the prisoners. “Well, here are the first.”

“Have you questioned them?”

“They refuse to talk.”

The man sighed. “We shall make them talk. We will take them from here. You have my permission to return to Aquae Sulis. And you have my thanks.” He turned his back to them and began to lead his horse away.

Titus glanced to the boy; the boy said, “General?”

The man turned his horse around, facing them. “What is it you need, Boy?”

“I have no home to return to. These Gauls killed my entire family and burned down my home. I have come here in hopes of...” He struggled for the right words. “I have come in hopes of securing a place in the Army, sir.”

The man squinted. “The enlistment days are over. You’ll have to wait till the next round.”

“What will I do?” the boy returned. “I have no home to return to. I have traveled over two weeks and here I stand. I have proven my worth – I killed three Gauls myself, and because of me, these Gauls were captured.”

“And Rome thanks you. But there is simply nothing I can do for you-“

The boy quickly said, “Might I speak to whoever is in charge? A last request?”

The man smiled. “Persistent. Of course. Follow me.” He turned his horse and strode for a larger building. Titus winked at the boy as he was drawn away.

The boy dismounted and followed the man into the building, up a flight of stairs, into a spacious room adorned with a beautiful mural of the sea and desert shores. He was left alone to examine the painting, listened to the sounds of weary trainees outside large open windows near the ceiling. He did not notice the man enter the room, and he jumped at the man’s voice: “It is the Egyptian coast. I think it is absolutely beautiful – a giant ocean teeming with life meeting the arid, dry desert, completely devoid of any life at all.” The boy turned, looking at the tall man. The man said, “They tell me it was your work that captured those new prisoners. And they say you single-handedly killed three Gauls, saving a woman from rape. Is this true?”

The boy felt all strength leave him. His soul wanted to kneel down and bow; he felt as if a god were standing before him. His dried mouth squeaked, “Yes, sir.”

“The Gauls are brutal savages. They are trained warriors. You must have some skill.”

The boy said nothing.

The man introduced a hand. “My name is Antonius the Second. I spend my time here at the camp and my father spends his time jockeying for position with the Senate. But you do not know any of this; you were born and raised on the frontier. I am jealous – I’ve always wondered what it would be like to live in the untouched, unspoiled countryside. A secret desire of mine, I imagine. Don’t worry about the prisoners – they will most likely be executed for screwing around with our towns and harming our citizens. I have already signed documents ordering nearly an entire legion to spread up into the vast edges of the frontier, to guard our borders. We grew slack on watching out for the Gauls, perhaps forgetting the mistakes of our forerunners. We paid for it, and we paid for it dearly, but we will make up for it. No Gauls shall touch our lands without their own blood being spilled.” He paused. “And what can I do for you?”

The boy managed to speak. “I wish to join the Army.”

Antonius cocked an eye and laughed. “Really? Our enlistment season just ended, so we don’t really have room. I can only ask that you wait another year and come back. With the legend surrounding your name, you should be able to easily get in. We will give you a horse and some gifts and send you home – if you want, we can even send some horses to you this time next year so you can get a ride down here to-“

The boy cut him off. “The war-band killed me entire family and burned down our home. I have no home to go back to. I have absolutely nothing – nothing except my father’s shield and an axe. I beg you, General. You know I am not just joining because it’s a fad. I am completely alone here. I have no one. I join because it is the only course of actions I have left. I am desperate.”

“That is not the only reason.” He grinned. “You want to join so you can kill more Gauls.”

The boy fidgeted. “I cannot deny it. You will forgive me-“

“All men have a warrior’s spirit. Some seduce it, others try to subject it to lesser passions. Even others deny they have it at all. But the gods have *designed* us with the warrior’s spirit. We are built to love fighting, we are built to salivate at the idea of proving ourselves on the field of battle. It is written on our hearts. A man truly comes alive when he admits to this truth and lives from it. This is not a warrant to fistfights and screaming insanities at the people who annoy you; it is

instead a way of live marked by justice, compassion, self-control, and love. These are the virtues of a warrior. What you are feeling a longing for is justice. It is appropriate. You have my approval. Go to the headquarters and ask for Decimus. He will take care of you. If he turns you away, tell him I will take his head. Do not fear him – he is a fierce and savage warrior, but he has a heart of gold.”

The boy asked for Decimus and was led to an adjunct room in the main building. He entered and saw a man with his back turned towards him. The man was drinking a glass of water; the boy patiently waited. The man turned, jumped a little at the boy’s shocking arrival; the boy’s face melted into an ashen paste; the General who had turned him away earlier looked right at him. “It’s you again. What can I do for you?”

“You are General Decimus?”

“Yes,” he said. “I am busy. I suppose Antonius sent you to me.”

The boy nodded, clammed up. “Yes.”

“All right.” He rummaged across a wooden desk, pulled up a clipboard with a piece of parchment attached to it; a quill pen found its way into his fingers and he dipped it in ink. “What is your name?”

“Quintus Marcellus.”

He scribbled it down. “We have a spot open in the third hastati cohort of the second legion. We’re two weeks into training, so you will have to catch up. It will be hard work. You are on the second manipule and your centurion is a man by the name of Cassius. The cohort’s standard is outside his tent. I will show you the way. You already have a shield? Good. Will you be turning in your axe?”

He fingered the hatchet on his belt. “It is my only record of home.”

“Then you will keep it. Cassius will give you your sword, armor, helmet, provisions.” He offered his sinewy hand. “Forgive me if I ever forget your name. Welcome to the Army. May you serve Rome well.”

Chapter Five: The Eve of the Storm

two years later/ the year Antonius takes the Seat of Julii from Silvanus

I

“You will not need your arms,” the slave said; the General sighed and handed over his *spatha* sword. He set his round cavalry shield against the wall next to a recently-carved bust of Antonius the First. He bowed before the slave and the slave took his helmet, placing it beside his sword and shield. “Follow me, General,” the slave said, and the General walked behind him, armor clanking loudly in the cavernous corridor. The air felt milky and warm, falling over him in hazy sheets from towering rectangular windows, from whence came the songs of birds and the laughter of children in the courtyard behind the large stone wall. The din of the street had all but faded into the back of his mind, as it was a constant sound in the big city. He looked out smaller windows as the slave led him down an adjacent corridor; brilliant trees with round tops bursting with pinks and purples, birds soaring amongst the nimble trees, hopping on the branches. He smiled. The slave opened a door. “The Nobleman will see you now.”

The slave scurried out of the way and the General entered. His eyes crawled about the round room, the high-ceilinged dome casting awkward shadows over the walls. A pair of slaves stood near an opposing door; in the middle of the room sat a long table covered with the finest dishes of patrician Rome: water and honey melons, pear soufflé, seafood fricassee, apricots, and a large basin of olives dripping dew. Glasses set on either end of the long table, beside each a pitcher of wine. The man at the other end of the table stood, came around, embraced his friend. They clasped each other’s arms and smiled into each others’ eyes. The man who had been waiting said, “It has been far too long. My work has kept me busy. I apologize for missing our games of dice in the evenings.”

The General replied, “You seem to have made up for it.” He motioned to the table of food. “It is a lot better than the usual grain ration the cooks serve us in the mess hall.”

“Wait till after the dinner,” Antonius said, releasing his friend. *Dulcia Domestica*. You said-“

"You remembered it is my favorite dessert. Wonderful." He walked towards his chair. "It looks as if you are pretty well-off, my friend." He sat down, pouring some wine.

Antonius sat down and picked up slabs of spliced apricot. "Do not be fooled by the trappings. Life lived side-by-side with Senators and up to your eyes in politics isn't what I am cut out for. My father perhaps, but not me." He plopped an apricot halve in his mouth and spoke as he chewed. "The Senate will bore your mind and turn it to rust. I sit in the Senate chambers and feel as if my life is wasting away before my eyes. I *itch* to return into Gaul, I long to feel the wind against my face and my feet hurting from the constant marching, pulling twenty miles a day. No, Decimus, this is not what I am designed for. But it is the place in life the gods have granted me, and I accept it with their favor."

Decimus nibbled shrimp. "Better you than Silvanus, let's admit."

"Without question." Antonius drank some wine. "I am jealous of you, Decimus. I am a warrior at heart. We are all warriors at heart. Some of us quench our hearts or try to subdue them. I feel somewhat abused – my heart has been taken from me. I am passionate about these men and I am passionate about defeating the Gauls. I want this war to recommence and these Gauls to sign their lives over into our hands. Those barbarians don't deserve a single wooden hut on this earth. I am simply surprised the gods have not completely wiped them out in disgust. It is okay, though – for the gods have bestowed their power onto us so that *we* can do their bidding for them, and completely – *utterly* – crush the Gallic tribes. My friend, I envy you, because you will lead Rome's finest against the Gauls, and in the chaos of battle, route and destroy them."

Decimus winced. "Not anytime soon. We have been given no orders--"

Antonius leaned over his plate. "Let me be frank with you, Decimus. We've known each other for a long time. I've considered you one of my good friends for quite a while. You know how it goes with the House of Brutii and Scipii. Brutii has held out against Carthage for this long, but more and more triremes are returning laden with broken and wounded soldiers. Brutii's forces are draining and the Carthaginians aren't letting up. All the while Scipii has all but defeated Dacia, and now Macedon is throwing troops on their borders. Scipii is stretched thin as it is, and now the Senate in their *infallible* wisdom, have decided to send a handful of Scipii's legions to Carthage to aide Brutii's fledgling war. All the while we've been ordered to sit tight and clam up with Gaul, all because of Silvanus trying to play the role of the gods. So we've been sitting in a stalemate

for months, the first legion encamped in Segesta and just *sitting* there, growing old and fat and bored. The Gauls think we aren't coming, think we've been frightened away by 'internal' conflicts. Why shouldn't they think this? We have nearly twenty legions under our controls, with almost three hundred thousand Roman soldiers ready to go to war at a moment's notice, stretched through Rome and Arretium and Ariminum, all across the frontier, and they are doing absolutely *nothing*."

The desperation soaked every word; the candles across the table seemed to burn low, flickering, then igniting again as Antonius drew back in his high-backed chair. "Decimus, my father had me leading the first legion. With me drawn into the Senate chambers, I handed the torch over to Fabius, from the second legion. That leaves the second legion's legion commander slot empty. And I want to know if you wish to take that position. You have been in charge of recruiting for years now, and both you and I know your potential. Father, bless his heart, did not see it. But he is not running the show anymore. What do you say? An old friend is asking a great favor of you."

Decimus lost his appetite. He set the shrimp down and simply stared into the candle-light. He caught no record of how much time had passed. Eventually he blinked, eyes beginning to sting, and he breathed, "What are my orders, sir?"

Antonius grinned, flew out of his chair, raced around the table, embraced his friend, ripped him from the seat. "Over the next several months, you will lead the second legion north into the heart of Gaul. The seventh and sixteenth legions will be close by in case you are in need of help. March twenty miles a day, so you will reach Mediolanum by six months, where the Gallic king will sign the alliance of Gallic tribes over to Roman control. You are in charge of making sure the king surrenders his nation, his city, even his *soul*, over to Rome; and Gaul shall become a Roman protectorate, where we will draw supplies and men and increase the glory and stature of our homeland."

Decimus nodded. "It will be done. When do I leave?"

"Tomorrow night. I want you out of Rome by tomorrow night. And you will send me any news of conflict. Anything noteworthy, I want to know of it." His breathing began to steady, the adrenaline spawned in the heat-of-the-moment salving. "There is no one I trust more than you. You are a man of absolute skill, and your strategically-endowed mind is impeccable. You always beat me in our little war games. But remember: the Gauls are not friendly. These are no games. If you lose, you will be tortured, mutilated, and *then* killed. They are a very clever

people – but in no way are they quiet or holy. I have no illusions – they are fiercely patriotic and will fight to the very bloody end. But as I’ve said, I have no illusions – and I know you can defeat them. *We* can defeat them.” He pointed to the door. “Our brothers-in-arms can – and I swear it, they *will* – defeat them. Make no mistake about it, Decimus. It will be bloody. But the gods favor us, and it will be *victory*.”

Antonius saluted with his fist-on-his-chest. “Strength and honor.”

Decimus returned the salute. “Strength and honor.”

She wrapped the robe around her and shut the balcony doors, drawing vast drapes over them. The quietness invaded every fiber of her soul, weighing her down to the ground. She pressed her face against the drapes and felt the cold on the other side of the wooden doors. The sound of someone entering the manor reached her, and she turned, saw him coming in. He wore the usual toga found everywhere in the ecclesiastical learning centers of Rome. He saw her eyes and paused, walked up to her. “Why do you close the doors? It only gets quieter when you close the doors.”

Celesta rubbed her tired eyes. “It is just so cold. My entire body is freezing.”

He looked at her arms covered with goose-bumps, and the rounding tummy. “Let’s get you warmed up. I will have the servants start a fire-“

“No,” she said. “You don’t have to. I am just going to go to bed. I will warm under the covers.”

“Okay.” He watched her go into a side-room and shut the door. He turned and drew aside the drapes, opened the door, exited the manor onto the patio. The lights of Rome formed a lattice-work amidst the buildings, and he could feel the cold coming from the north, and he knew instinctively it would just get cooler and cooler. Sometimes spring would be warm and sometimes it would be cold. The stars twinkled, thousands of bright white pinpoints, and as he gazed up at them, he remembered sitting with Helonius and Celesta; Helonius wrapped his arms around his beautiful wife, and Celesta mused, “Do you think we’re all alone?” Antonius and Helonius had laughed, and Antonius promised Celesta that her husband would be perfectly safe. Now he looked at those stars again, and felt the weight of his failure collapsing his lungs. He could not stand it.

He left the balcony, the door remaining open, and he entered Celesta’s separate bedroom; she lay under the covers, startled as he entered. Her face had been devoured with anguish. He walked over to her bedside and knelt down, grabbing

her limp hand. He kissed it as he had kissed it so many months before, but when it had been warm, now it was cold. The color in her cheeks had turned to ash, and the sparkle in her eyes become iron; the laughter that had danced on the contours of her face and rose from a joyful spirit became tears wept in solitude, reaching out for the presence of a forgotten husband, but finding no substance. He kissed her hand again and pleaded for forgiveness, crying out, "I have failed you. I promised nothing would come of him, but he is gone and I am here. He should be kneeling beside you now, he should be resting a hand on the stomach containing his own flesh-and-blood. The shame tears my heart and makes me want to forsake life and all its pleasures. I deserve to adorn myself with sackcloth and ashes and plead mercy from the gods for such a terrible thing done to you."

Her other hand came out and ran through his hair. "I am not upset with you. I have no right to offer forgiveness – you have not offended me. Every day I am thankful for how you have helped me. I am thankful that I have not been forgiven." She stared deep into his eyes. "And I am thankful that my beloved died such an honorable death for such an equally honorable man."

"Celesta–"

"When I am awake, he is never here. But when I sleep, he is everywhere. He speaks to me in my dreams. I know it is not just my imagination; he really, truly comes to me. He comforts me. He tells me he is in *Elysium* with his mother and father and his younger brother, who died in the plague. They are all together. He tells me that I cannot live my life in sorrow, but that I must smile and laugh, because it will make me happier." A smile broke over her face, small and hardly noticeable, but there nonetheless. "He tells me that you are my brother, as you and him were brothers. He tells me not to fear you."

"Fear me?" Antonius asked. "What have you to fear from me?"

"Don't you know Helonius at all? So protective he is. He says I don't need to fear your taking advantage of me, taking me against my will."

Antonius shuddered. "I would be spitting upon Helonius' grave if I did anything of the like. If you talk back to Helonius in these dreams, you tell him that he is crazy. I would never do such a thing."

"You think I am crazy, don't you?"

"Crazy? No, never! Helonius spoke of you more than anything. You were his life. Apparently, you *still are* his life. I don't think you are crazy. Tell Helonius I am no Silvanus, and if you desire, I will post loyal guards to watch over you, guards who would slay even me if I laid even the most hostile finger upon you."

“No,” she says. “I trust you. He says you are my brother. My older brother. You look after me like the brother I’ve never had. And my son is going to be fortunate to have such a worthy and glorious man for an uncle.” She paused a moment. “He comes to me in my sleep, because he knows how alone I am. He was my life, and when he was taken from me, I was left empty-handed. You have taken me in and gave me security, a refuge, and for this I am grateful. And yet you’ve been burdened with such a task of leading a family faction in the greatest world superpower that exists and ever *will* exist. You cannot remain by my side forever. The aloneness, it is suffocating.” A tear slid down her face. “He comes in my dreams, but he can never hold me as he used to hold me. In the middle of the night, when I would feel scared, he would wrap his arms around me, kiss my forehead, breathe life into me, tell me everything would be okay, that he was there for me, right beside me. Now, I am completely alone.”

She broke down into sobs, curled up from the bed, wrapped her arms around her brother. He did not know how to react.

“Comfort me, Brother,” she cried in a quiet voice.

He took his arms and moved them around her back. He suddenly felt the iciness of her being wash over him; his fingers touched the chilled skin of her back, and the grief and despondency lurking within rushed through his fingertips, coursed through his arms, and made roost in his own heart. He winced, not having felt this since he watched his mother and father’s bodies being dug from the common graves in which Silvanus had lain them. Celesta’s back quaked and twisted with each cataclysmic sob, crying oceanic basins onto his shoulder; he smelt the lavender in her curled hair and whispered, “You are not alone, Celesta. You are not alone, for we *all* are alone.” He never knew that truth to be so true right then and there, as the bitter darkness swathed its shadows amongst them, as Celesta shuddered against him; he realized then that in this world of a billion souls, in a world tinged with the blood of warfare and the cries of dying men, both he and she were truly, vastly alone.

II

months later

All the striking flowers adorning the trees gave way to brilliant green masterpieces as spring dissolved into summer and the air grew warmer, humid, dense. Decimus led the way upon his horse, marching the men thirty miles a day, driving them to the brink of exhaustion. He was not ruthless about it; when his soldiers started complaining, he gave up his horse and walked, allowing the stragglers to ride upon the horses of the cavalry for a mile or two. His compassion made headlines amidst the Second Legion, and he found himself beloved. As they passed through towns, nearing the Gallic frontier, citizens waved and cheered and hollered; the men smiled at beautiful girls in kinky outfits. More than once women even flashed their breasts outside the two-story windows, and the men would whistle. Decimus appreciated the bravado of the women and all the cheering; while some Generals looked down upon it as being uncivilized and unprofessional, Decimus knew that at the lengths he was pushing his men to bring the hammer upon Gaul, any boost of morale would be appreciated.

But eventually the towns and farms vanished, and they were doused in thick, eerie forests; at night they would spend several hours constructing a massive camp from the nearby woodlands; every soldier had an assigned job so the fort would rise quickly. At night, as the soldiers lay to sleep in their eight-man tents, they would listen to the coyotes and crickets and odd sounds of the thick forests. Torches would glow about the camp, and sentries would walk upon the fort walls, sometimes half-asleep, waiting for their shift to end so they could sleep. At first the soldiers kept expecting the Gauls to ambush them in their sleep, but after nearly four weeks of monotonous building of forts, sleeping soundly, then destroying them the following day, all ‘hope’ of an attack dwindled. For all the hype about the ‘fierce Gallic warriors,’ the expectations were doused – the barbaric savages never showed their faces, gaining them the title of cowards.

Decimus would walk upon the ramparts, conversing with the sentries, patting them on the back, encouraging them, “Keep a keen eye – tonight could be the night!” He didn’t expect it; the Gauls were clever: they knew a direct assault on a Roman fort would be suicidal. So they never showed. After his rounds on the watchtowers, he would descend into the camp; if a soldier were awake beside the fire, chatting with friends or writing in journals, he would sit beside them, and they would talk about life back home: family, friends, working the farm, girlfriends, the future. He would joke and everyone would laugh. Decimus did not fake compassion nor did he carry pretend sincerity. The General was emotional and relational to the core. His soldiers loved him.

One particular night, after he finished passing around a flask of stored wine with some fellow triarii, he nodded his approval to the guards stationed before his own tent, slipped inside, lit some candles, and undressed. He looked at himself in a plate of polished metal, saw the bags under his eyes, could feel the weight of the march wrapping its umbilical noose around his neck. "Maybe tomorrow," he would mutter. "Maybe tomorrow." Under the candlelight he would look over scout reports and write letters to Antonius back in Rome, to be sent with a horseman every week. This night he just finished blowing out the candles when the front flap of his tent opened and the guard said, "Sorry to interrupt you, General. Someone is here to see you. If you have the time? He says it will only be a moment, sir."

Decimus yawned, threw on a robe. "If it will only be a moment, I guess. I awake in six hours."

The guard stood aside and a figure dressed in armor stepped inside. Decimus apologized for not being able to recognize him, as it was dark; he lit some candles and looked upon the soldier standing at the door of his tent.

A smile crept over his face. "What can I do for you, Marcellus? How's the march going?"

"It is an easy march," he replied, "compared to my flight south."

"This is true," he said. "I am sorry to skip over the pleasantries. It is getting late--"

"I understand. I have wanted to speak with you alone, or I would've approached you as you made your rounds through the camp." The eighteen-year-old boy pointed to a chair. "Can I have a seat?"

"Of course," Decimus said, praying this wouldn't take long. As Marcellus sat, Decimus mused, "Are you having trouble finding companions? I have heard the complaint before. Sometimes kids from the country come here and aren't able to socialize very well. They're just not used to it. Most of us are seventeen, eighteen, nineteen years old, so--"

"No, that's not it," Marcellus said. "I promised only one request, but under the circumstances, I have one more. You granted me my first request -- being allowed to enlist in this Army -- and I do hope you will grant me this one." Decimus saw what appeared to be brief pockets of silver lightning forming a lattice-work in the pupils of the boys' eye, and he wondered if it were due to the odd waving of the candlelight. "I ask that you put me on the front lines. In the cohort I am in now, we would not see action until the cohort ahead of us retreated in exhaustion. I ask

that you move me into *that* cohort – and place me in the very first row, right in the middle. I can see in your eyes that you think I am insane. Maybe I am, but this desire haunts me. I want to be the first to throw my javelins at them and the first to raise my sword against them. I want their first casualty to be due to me. Sir, if I have been any annoyance, grant me this so that I can be put out of your mind, if that's how you think it will end."

Decimus licked his lips. "No one has made this request–"

"Most soldiers, whether they admit it or not, fear death. You know this to be true. I do not think we so much fear the process of death, how painful and bloody it will be, but the idea of the unknown: what lies beyond death's door? This is the fear that haunts me. Not fear of death, but fear of passing through death and entering *Elysium* with my head bowed in shame for *fearing* death and not following the course my heart has laid out for me. And this course is what has drawn me in here tonight – and if you so desire it, I will prostrate before you and beg that you grant me this truly final request."

Decimus leaned back in his cot. Laughter passed outside the front of the tent. Marcellus' eyes did not move from the General; Decimus looked away, bothered. "You are a very young and very brash boy. I know you have seen more action than almost all of these boys. You were present in the Gallic skirmish at Aquae Sulis and you say you slew three Gauls single-handedly with your father's axe. This is honorable. But killing three Gauls in a surprise attack is much different than facing a massive Gallic Army head-on."

The youth nodded. "I know this. What you are saying is complete truth, every bit of it. Can I confide in you, sir?" Decimus nodded. "I have been having these dreams. Horrible dreams. Nightmares. I dream that I am held back by grinning Gauls as my mother and father are crucified, and my girlfriend is being raped again and again. And my girlfriend is screaming at me, crying out for me to help. Crying out for me to do something. I am crying in the dream, because I am forced to watch all innocence be ridden from her, and then as she is screaming, the scene goes dark, and I am standing before a giant shield, a shield the size of the tallest mountains all standing on-end. It is a bright red Roman shield, with the Eagle emblem and flames. Two swords, each the length of all of Rome, lay across it; and this deep voice from every direction speaks to me; the voice says–" His eyes became enveloped in a mist and his voice grew detached; the candles about the room flickered dim – "*Do not fear any man, living or dead, friend or foe. It is*

you whom we've chosen, and you go forth with our favor." His eyes returned to normal; the candlelight became bright again.

Decimus looked about the room, feeling as if a hundred eyes were watching. To the boy: "Be careful what you say. Do not be a victim of blasphemy... Am I wrong, or are you doing the unthinkable, claiming *intimacy* with the gods?" He felt as if he were speaking to an audience, even though only the young soldier sat before him.

"No," Marcellus answered. "I am claiming that I have had this dream many, many times, completely unchanged each time."

Decimus felt as if he had no choice. He could not shake this eerie and condemning stare upon him. He stood, offered his hand to Marcellus. "Then I pray you go with the favor of the gods on our side. You are a reluctant and adamant young boy, and if you are lost, I shall grieve that such a spirit will be forgotten. But it is your life to write, not mine. You have my consent." He walked across the tent, hunched over a desk, and under candlelight, wrote a declaration. He sealed it with a royal wax seal and handed it to the boy, who now stood. "Give this to Cassius and report to Cnaeus of the first cohort."

Marcellus grinned ear-to-ear. "You will not regret this. I will do Rome proud – and even more."

The sentries upon the watchtower heard the sound of hooves and ran to the ramparts above the gate. A Roman soldier upon a horse raised his sword into the air; one of the guards yelled down, "Open the gates!" The guards below obeyed the order, raising the gate open. The horseman passed underneath, running down the main avenue, awaking many of the sleeping soldiers in the tents to either side. The gate lowered, all the soldiers staring at the horseman who now came to a stop before the General's tent, where diffused light shed underneath the flap. Black animal hide drenched the soldier, and he wore the mask of a bear upon his head. The horse panted hard, rib cage shuddering. Roman guards ran up to the rider, who dismounted and spoke loudly to the guards. A young boy emerged from the General's tent, glanced at the rider snapping orders to the guards, and he slipped into the shadows. The guards nodded and took the rider inside the tent. Light flooded from underneath the tent, more candles lit, and many moments passed. The guards glanced at each other, hope flooding their veins. Eventually the flap opened, the rider disappearing into another tent. Minutes passed; the light from the General's tent did not extinguish; a single soldier came from the smaller tent,

ran to yet another tent, vanished inside. Moments later he rode out on a horse, kicking hard, running for the gate. The guards opened the gate, mesmerized as the rider rode out, turned around the fort, and headed south towards Rome. The guards knew it was inevitable. Any doubts disbanded as the General himself emerged from the tent, saluted his personal guards, and hung a purple sheet over the front of his tent; this was the signal: there would be war.

III

Marcellus heard commotion in the distance but thought nothing of it. He entered the tent of his maniple's centurion, shocked that he was still awake. The centurion's back was turned towards him as he was hunched over his cot, scribbling in a journal. Marcellus waited patiently; the man's writing paused, and after a moment, he glanced over his shoulder and nearly fell over. He snapped his journal shut. "Why do you have to be so quiet all the time? What do you want?"

The boy handed him the envelope. The centurion took it; "What's this?" He ripped it open, bent it into the candlelight. A scowl crossed his face. "First cohort? Are you sure about this? They're center point. Don't worry. Let me talk to the General in the morning and we'll sort--"

Marcellus cut him off. "Sir, I requested to be transferred."

Cassius gave him a wry, undeserving look. "Are you crazy? If you have any issues with the men here, we can deal with them. I thought you were getting along fine, but appearances can be misleading--"

"No. I just wish to be moved so I can be the first to get into the fight."

Cassius paused, then erupted with laughter. "Are you joking me?" He waited for the punch line. It never came.

"Sir," Marcellus said, standing tall, "I believe the gods are calling me to take center-stage and--"

"The gods?" Cassius sneered, all joviality gone. "Are you claiming conversation with the gods? You are a fool! If you play the gods, they will play you, and I guarantee you will be slaughtered. Take this letter back. Your heart is too good to be wasted with this petty nonsense."

Marcellus did not move forward. "I remain steady with my decision. I will be joining the first cohort in the morning."

"Then you dig your own grave," Cassius said, rising, towering in the candlelight, an intimidating sight to behold. He did not have many friends, but

many hotheaded enemies. “Have you ever seen what happens to the soldiers on the front lines? How many real battles have you fought in, when thousands of soldiers mesh on the battlefield? How many, Marcellus? None? I didn’t think so. You schoolboys imagine war as being some nice little party, where if your heart is good, you will conquer. Those dumb little ideas are smashed on the rocks when the first enemy wave hits. Everything you’ve ever *imagined* about war is broken to pieces. The hastati facing the enemy’s charge sing songs and chants of victory going in, but they always route in panic and shouting, wounded and bleeding.”

Marcellus faced him. “How many times have you been forced to kneel at your lover’s fresh grave? How many times have you had to live with the shell of a woman, a woman left hollow because of what the barbarians did to her and her family? How many times have you seen a woman screaming as she is being ravaged? How many times have you had to find your mother – your own *flesh-and-blood* – lying on the doorstep of the charred remains of your home, find her stabbed over and over and left to die in the rain?”

Cassius said nothing, couldn’t have said anything had he tried. The boyish, quiet, innocent child he had known had become greater than the gods, and Cassius fought the urge to recoil and cry for mercy. He stood his ground, but said nothing. Marcellus’ piercing eyes mauled the centurion’s conscience, and then it was over – the flap of the tent flopping back and forth and Marcellus’ footfalls disappearing outside the tent. Somewhere in the distance, a pack of coyotes howled.

IV

She spread her arms and rose, the earth dwindling, the clouds enveloping her in their misty haze. She spun and dove and swam in the skies, raising her head, heart rejoicing at the freedom, the vulnerability, the escape. The clouds opened and she saw the brilliant blue sky, an endless vase of untamed beauty, an aqua wilderness demanding reverence. She turned her head, closed her arms about her, and through the clouds she spun; the clouds thinned and she tucked to the side, the trees rushing past beneath her. Thousands of thick trees meshed together, entwined with snaking streams and rivers; she looked down, searing her eyes upon the polished stones of a sandy river, and as she flew over the trees, she heard something remarkable, something reminiscent of thunder. She dove into the trees to avoid the rain, and she suddenly saw the thousands of men in red armor, carrying shields and swords, walking in file and companies, marching between

the trees, pressing forward, horses trotting along the sides of the massive arrangement tearing through the undergrowth. She had never before seen anything so amazing, such a vast array of splendid color; she flew over a horse's head, catching her reflection in the rider's polished bronze helmet, and then up ahead, through the trees, light crawled; she exploded from the tree line as the first men made their way from the foliage. A vast plain of wildflowers – daises, blue fax, sweet alyssum, scarlet sage, chicory – made its way nearly a quarter of a mile, the soft flowers whispering in a quiet breeze, and then blended into the opposing tree line. She soared above the flowers, and saw thousands more men coming from the other side of the plain, but they were not so uniform as the others, and they did not carry the same kind of equipment. She spun above them, into the air, glanced back, and saw the two groups of men marching onto the plain, heading straight towards one another. Three thousand six hundred soldiers in red marching towards five thousand men and boys ready for a fight. She turned her eyes, thought of food, and did not remember those men anymore.

Marcellus sweated under the heavy armor, the weighted shield; he could feel the sword sheath bouncing against his leg. They stepped out of the shade from the trees and were immersed in three-foot-tall wildflowers of every imaginable hue. He looked upon them, thought, *How beautiful, such a design, here and now – a taste of irony.* His eyes left the flowers and he could see a hawk rising into the air, escaping over the trees, and vanishing. Beneath the disappearing hawk, he could see thousands of men, small as they were distant, coming from the opposite tree line. An avid fury welled within him, his heart began to beat faster, blood began to boil.

The centurion looked back at his men. "First cohort! Follow!"

As many of the infantry stopped in their tracks, a handful of cohorts maneuvered to the front to position for the battle. Some of the soldiers relished their position in the front lines, and others would gladly relinquish it. Some who were not in the first line envied these soldiers, and others felt a certain gratuity for their more humbling position. Marcellus had to keep himself from not running ahead; his legs screamed for him to draw his sword and charge across the plain. He closed his eyes, *Wait – the chance for revenge is at hand. Wait.* When he opened his eyes, he saw Cassius passing to his right with his own cohort; Cassius shot him a condemning, "This is *your* party," kind of look. Marcellus looks away,

ignoring him. He had much more important things to concentrate on. The focus of his attention lay across the plain.

They maneuvered to the front, nothing but a field of flowers between them and the opposing Army. The centurion bellowed, "First cohort, halt!" Three hundred sixty men froze. Three hastati cohorts made up the front line, running nearly a quarter mile in width, filled with over one thousand ready Roman soldiers. The other cohorts fell into place.

Marcellus eyed the enemy, then heard a commotion, looked to his right, saw the General with his ten-man bodyguard division trotting before the front lines. Hastati soldiers knelt behind their shields at his passing, saluting and repeating in symbolic unity, "General," as he passed. Marcellus knelt behind his own shield, said the word; and when he stood, he looked to the General moving in the other direction; the General looked back, into the young boy's eyes, and Marcellus could see compassionate sadness written all over. He shook his head, as if to tell the General, "You've no need to worry." Decimus looked away and continued walking the lines, encouraging the troops.

They were villagers and farmers, sons and brothers and fathers; the youngest was eight years old, the oldest nearing fifty. For days messengers on horseback had ridden to the assorted tribes in Celtic Gaul, giving the warning: "The Romans are coming!" Festivals erupted, calling the gods down upon Roman invaders; women sang and kissed their men; great bonfires with dancing and singing and sex lit up the towns. The day came and the men kissed their families goodbye, promised to return with Roman loot; they took pitch-forks, hunting bows, wood hatchets. They made their own spears or took swords serving as family heirlooms. Some made their own war-hammers and crude swords for stabbing. Shields from their ancestors were borne on the arms, or rough and basic shields covered with animal hides were made during the march to confront the Romans. The tribes all met together, and the night before the battle would take place, they sang songs and told old war stories, admonished each other and encouraged great deeds of heroism; warriors of the Second Gallic War spun tales of Roman cowardice, encouraging the younger volunteers. King Aliexo, an older man who carried his own sword and shield, who had led many battles against the Romans before their defeat in the Second Gallic War, took control of the group of five thousand volunteers, and after a charming speech, passed around lime woad dye to be smeared on the bare chests and faces to intimidate the enemy. He spoke of

reconciliation; while the tribes were always at each other's throats in peacetime, their true honor showed as they banded together to face a common enemy – and force that enemy from their land. His speech drew opposing tribes to embrace amidst the great barrels of beer, a wonderful drink Egyptian and Babylonian diplomats had taught leading Gallic Kings to make.

Now King Aliexo stood with the flowers rubbing against his bare legs, and he stared as the Roman Army, thousands strong, formed their first line of attack across the field. Memories of many years earlier, when he was much more lean and youthful, barraged him, but he pushed them aside. These were different times. He gripped his sword in his right hand and the calfskin-covered shield in his left; he had learned how to make the shield from Roman captives during the Second War. He skimmed his eyes over the first line, made a mental head-count: close to one thousand soldiers. A second line of one thousand soldiers formed behind the first, and still marching from the woods were yet another one thousand soldiers, these ones carrying spears. He could not see behind the spearmen, but knew the Roman Army would not show all their forces at once. He could see some cavalry to the left flank, and a group of eleven horses marching along the front Roman lines, but he knew there had to be more Roman cavalry elsewhere. He slowly scanned the trees to the left and right of the quarter-mile-long, quarter-mile-wide field, wondered if the cavalry weren't hiding in the trees, waiting to pounce as his men swarmed in. He did not like being left in the dark, but knew there was no way around it. He was not showing his full strength – for three thousand men exited the trees, and two thousand remained within, hidden in the shadows – and he knew the Romans would be just as deceptive. He watched the eleven horses and knew the lead rider was the General, holding his sword and shield, and an intense hatred for the Romans brew within him, thicker than the beer they'd drank the night before, the beer still wreaking havoc in some fools' heads.

"Look at them," he snarled to a fellow tribesman beside him. "They parade like this is *their* land, like it's *their* right to own it. We've been here far longer than they have. Our ancestry is rooted into this land. They come to take it, and condemn us as barbarians. Who is the barbarian? The invader or the invaded?" He spit in the long grass at his feet, stared at his adjutant. "I do hope every one of them dies this day."

The adjutant squirmed, looked back to the thousands of men talking behind them. "Sir–"

"I know." He wanted to sound the order to charge. "Send him. They will never live up to them."

"Then perhaps," the adjutant said, "you will get your wish."

Decimus rode behind the first line of hastati, the principes kneeling beside their shields, echoing their greetings: "General." He looked over the arrayed helmets of the hastati, across the field of wind-blown flowers, saw the amassing Gauls. Scouts had given him the news of almost five thousand volunteer soldiers marching day and night for the Roman legion. Decimus wished he would've been better prepared, called for two more legions to comprise a task force. He would not make such grave mistakes anymore. He looked over to the principes, saluted back with his fist on his chest. These were wonderful boys. He looked up to the sky, the scattered clouds and deep azure sphere. "It is a beautiful day."

A soldier beside him said, "General! A rider comes from the enemy."

He looked and saw a lone horseman dressed in green rags coming across the field. He smirked to his companion, "Perhaps the war is won today – do you imagine they will surrender?"

The officer smiled. "Not a chance, General."

"I guess we shall meet with them at least. It would be the professional thing to do. Await for me behind the triarii." He kicked his horse, ran around the right wing of the hastati first line, and under the eyes of several thousand soldiers on either side of the field, galloped to the horseman.

The horseman slowed his horse and pulled up beside him. Decimus glared at him under the shadow of his horsehair helmet, flashed his sword and shield, as if trying to be impressive. The Gaul looked at the fine weaponry, felt the own inadequacy of his small spear, but found himself able to speak. "Roman General, I will be brief." His Latin drenched with a nearly impregnable accent. "March your men from this field and return to Rome, and we will grant you the territories of Tricassi and Venetia–"

Decimus broke his train of thought. "Rome is not interested in backwater territories that are thrown to the dogs. We are *disgraced* to be thought of as mere dogs jumping at the bit. Do you think we've marched these many months to acquire swamps and grime? There will be no retreat. You either march *your* untrained volunteers from this field, or we will decimate everyone who raises a fist against Rome."

The rider sneered, "You've lost the first two wars--"

"I was not leading the armies in those two wars. Let this be your warning." He gave the emissary a final farewell stare, turned his horse, and galloped back to the Roman Army. The Gaul cursed and rode to the other side of the field.

Decimus rode past the left wing of the hastati and principes, waved to the triarii, and fell behind the veteran soldiers. Nearly four hundred archers huddled together in the shadows of the forest, awaiting the order. Behind them were nearly three hundred heavy Roman cavalry; Decimus joined his entourage and rode to the two centurions of the archer cohort.

He said, "When you receive my signal, march out from the trees, load your bows, and fire. We will form the defensive. The Gauls are hotheaded, driven by emotion. They will grow ancy and charge. As they are running across the field, we will pepper them with arrows – and then our hastati will move in and wipe them out." Decimus spoke with candor that had not been seen since ancient times, his very skin glowing, radiant even in the gleaming sunbeams breaking through the limbs above their heads; his eyes demanded attention and his muscles quivered in expectation. His hand fell to the *spatha* sword at his waist. He glanced over his shoulder, eyes trailing to the gathered Gauls. "They will come to us, yes; they will come. But first, we must draw them out. Order the hastati to march."

Decimus' companion said, "Strength and honor, General."

He returned, "Strength and honor." The creed of Rome; then, unspoken, *We shall see...*

Trumpets echoed across the Roman formations, screaming in the ears of the soldiers. Across the field, the sound of the horns massaged King Aliexo's ears, and his blood ran quicker, hotter. He had heard those sounds before, and he knelt down, touched his palm and fingers to the cool earth between the rising flowers, closed his eyes, listened to the earth – yes, he felt it, the quiet tremble, the rising sonnet. He stood, covering his eyes from the sun's blinding rays; as a shadow fell over his face from his hand, he saw the first line of one thousand soldiers marching across the field. The soldiers behind him saw the Romans coming and began to cheer, hollering obscenities and mocking the Roman Way. They thrust their weapons into the air and banged their shields, a coarse cacophony scratching brutal lines over Aliexo's brain. He wanted them to stop, could feel the morale soaring sky-high, could feel the spirits shimmering, knew it was coming, closed

his eyes. They continued to shout and roar, weapons glinting in the sunlight, shields pressed before them, beckoning the Romans to come, thirsting for blood. Aliexo's throat parched; *You will have it, you will have it...*

Marcellus put one foot in front of the other, crushing the beautiful sage beneath his worn leather boots, flower petals folding against the face of his shield. He looked down the lines to his right and left, saw hundreds of soldiers in the first line marching in unison, the gap minutely closing between the two armies. Marcellus could see it written on the boys' faces: the youthful innocence, the desperation to prove themselves, the excitement about the first battle, fueled by the thought of girlfriends watching and feeling heart-warmed at brave heroics. He also saw another emotion, a counter emotion, that hid underneath stoic faces, but flashed like scarlet lightning in their eyes. The emotion, the fear; the knowledge that many would die, the knowledge that they did not have any select comforts, that they were just as ample to fall as the brother next to them. Some began to breathe hard, arctic sweat sliding down steaming faces; muscles began to quiver, and fingers began to curl into balls, squeezed in the biting stress of knowing what would come. Marcellus returned his gaze before him, to the vast field, the thousands of barbarians crowded in the woods. He could hear their shouts and war-cries, their taunts of weapons in the air or spears and swords banged against wooden shields. His eyes narrowed and tunnel vision overtook; he could see the white's of their eyes, felt nothing except a savage rage, and then he saw his mother being lain in a grave, his girlfriend coming to an ungodly rest. The necklace felt cold against his neck. That was when they came.

King Aliexo knew his control was breaking. He had felt it dozens of times during the Second War, when the emotions became so enriched and enflamed that the volunteers simply lost all self-control and ran at the enemy. He tore his eyes upon the various tribal leaders, whose ears heard the rants of their men, and then the war-lords, self-righteously craving a reputation stenciled in bloody fame, and seeing the other tribal leaders edging forward, raised their swords and clubs and spears and shouted, "Let's kill them all!" Aliexo winced, eyes rolling, when the volunteers all cheered, and the first war-lord, desperate to be forever hailed as the one who truly, without any hesitancy, first charged the Roman mob, pushed his feet hard against the ground and surged through the long grass, cutting a swathe; the boys and men of his tribe followed suit, grimacing in the heat, eyes infernal.

Aliexo looked to his companion, who had served in the Second Gallic War; the companion just gave him a, “What’s new?” look as the other tribesmen gushed over the field, surrounding Aliexo and the adjutant. Aliexo felt the thundering of five thousand pairs of feet as the Gallic mob rushed across the field, streaming towards the Romans adorned with their pretty Eagle standards and polished red shields. Aliexo did not even try to tell them to stop. He knew it would do no good. Instead he gripped his sword and joined the fray, knowing that all there was left to do was to fight. The two thousand reserves, disciplined by Aliexo’s second-in-command, remained stagnant, knowing their defensive line was all that prevented the Romans, if the first wave failed, from storming straight into the heart of Gaul.

Fidelus had only started to walk sixteen years ago, at the age of two. His brother had joined the Roman Army, and upon returning from a sleepy service, said it was the most fun he’d ever had. At sixteen, inspired to join, Fidelus enlisted and was given placement with the Second Legion, which was led, at the time, by Fabius, now in charge of the First Legion sitting idle in Segesta, blocking a Gallic counter-invasion from the west. Fidelus had gone from a pale suburban kid whose only satisfaction in life had been playboy-ing and dancing to a disciplined, well-trained, highly-skilled warrior. He had gone from wearing dusty sandals and a dirt-stained tunic to heavy armor and a bronze helmet; from carrying bags of goodies for girlfriends in his left hand and deceit in his right, to carrying a shield in his left and a thrusting *gladius* sword in his right. His mother, upon his leaving for training, kissed him and said, “Please come home to us.” He told her, “You know I will.” She had the best cooking all down the street. He kissed his girlfriends, too, and hoped they wouldn’t learn he cheated on them. He would lay in his cot at night, listen to the din of the city’s nighttime scoundrels, and imagine mighty battles against Carthage, and when he learned to read, he flipped through scrolls describing Alexander the Great’s battles as he stormed west with his Greek Macedonian soldiers. He yearned to be a part of something great, he imagined fighting alongside Alexander, wondered if Alexander looked like a man – or rather, like a god. He lusted over battle, salivating day and night to partake in what turned the veterans quiet and made headlines of heroism, valor, bravery all over the Roman provinces and cities. Now he stood with his shield before him, drawing his first of two javelins upon the centurion’s command, watching with paled face and dilapidated eyes as thousands upon thousands of war-crazed barbarians came right at them, now only four hundred meters away. A ball

clammed up in his throat; he dreamt of his mother sewing right now somewhere in Rome, whistling as his father returned from the bakery; he imagined his girlfriends curling their hair and talking about their boyfriends, oblivious to what was happening here, now, on the frontier, as thousands of Gauls stormed the Roman front. He pushed these thoughts from his mind and drew his javelin, raising it above his head, arm burning, aiming it forward, waiting for the command.

“Come,” Marcellus muttered under his breath, javelin held above him. “Come on, come on-“ He heard his mother shrieking as she was wrenched from her home, stabbed over and over, heard her crying out for him, crying out for salvation, deliverance. He heard her words: “You know what you must do.” His muscles scorched with adrenaline; he heard prayers amongst him, prayers for the gods’ help, but he did not pray. He knew Mars fought beside him. He knew this plainer than the plainest beauties the earth has ever conceived in a virgin womb. He knew this and it filled him with pure hate, pure bitterness, a pure surge and lust for violence. He wanted every one of them to die today. Three hundred meters away. They continued to come, their faces coming into view; wild and grime-soaked hair, woad dye streaked over dirty faces, rags for clothes, thick muscles drenched with sweat, weapons of all shapes and sizes, ramshackle shields. “Come on, come on-“

The Gauls fell in step with one another, tearing the wildflowers down underfoot, feeling the heat of midmorning sun, sweat covering their hands wrapped around leather-bound weapons, shields banging against their legs, the sound of rolling and unappeasable thunder, the echoes of fourteen thousand legs charging at once. A flock of birds flew over, scattered at the sound of thunder, the magnificent mass swarming towards flimsy lines of red shields and throwing *pila* held above the defenders’ heads. The Gauls screamed, throats lacerated, and they raised their weapons at two hundred meters, the shields growing larger, the determined faces set under the helmets’ shadows coming alight. The barbarians knew nothing else, thought nothing else, except vengeance; knew nothing else except to keep these men from their home, from their families, from stripping them of their rights to control themselves. Liberation, freedom drove them. Sweat cascaded down their faces, and they knew they would fight to the death, until the sweat pulsing from their bodies evolved into blood and they writhed the battlefield. The Romans

would fall with them. The Romans; how they hated the Romans, hated the Roman Way, hated the pride in democracy. The pride, they determined, would be banished. The shields rose before them. Moments now, moments now- They screamed and charged harder.

Decimus galloped in front of the three hundred sixty Roman archers. He looked over the spears of the kneeling triarii, past the horsehair helmets of the principes, past the round bronze helmets of the hastati, and he saw the ocean of green mashing the field into the earth, nearly ready to collide with the Roman lines. A brief thought ran to Marcellus, and he knew the boy would be regretting his decision about now. He wheeled back on the horse, yelled at the archers, "Fire!" The archers knelt down, plucked arrows from sheaths, strung the bow, raised them into the air, pulled back; the centurion ordered, "Fire at will!" A wave of hot air smacked Decimus in the face as three hundred sixty arrows flew in front of the tree line, arched, and rained down upon the Gauls.

The Gauls did not at first notice the arrows, as they were intent upon the line of Roman shields one hundred meters away. Then the sound of cutting air splashed all around them, and they looked left and right and saw their comrades falling, screaming. Arrows tore through the ranks, slicing into throats and chests and abdomens, piercing flesh and splitting bone; a Gaul fell forward, the tip of an arrow pointing out of the back of his neck; another dropped his spear, three arrows lacerating his gut; another stumbled to the side, in a daze, as he ripped an arrow from his arm, blood coming out in a torrent from a broken artery. He stumbled through the charging Gauls, tripped over fallen bodies. Strength left him quickly. He fell to his knees as another volley of arrows fell among them; the soldiers to his left and right twisted under the brute force and fell; he stared at the broken front lines as the unscathed Gauls, ignoring hundreds of fallen companions, continued to storm towards the front Roman lines. The Gaul began to feel lightheaded, a pleasure went through him, and he turned his heavy head left and right, amidst the soldiers running all around, heard more screams from another arrow volley; blood splashed all over his face, and when he turned, he saw another volunteer groping at the ground, blood coming from his mouth and side, where an arrow had completely spliced him open. He lay in the grass, panting hard, each breath sending a torrent of blood onto the grass. The calm Gaul

fell forward, felt the warm of the crumpled wildflowers, looked up to a beautiful sky, thought, *What a wonderful day*, and then everything became quiet.

Hundreds had been swathed down in the first volley, their fallen bodies tripping up charging soldiers. The thick front line dissolved, tattered; and yet the Gauls who had not been downed continued to run, untainted by the Roman missiles. Though the line was ragged, they ran harder and faster; at two hundred feet, the first two lines of Roman soldiers rotated their left shoulders forward, ready to hurl the *pila* resting in their right hands. The spear-tips glinted in the light, silently crying out to be thrown. Marcellus patiently waited – as patiently as he could – for the Gauls to near to one hundred feet. He saw they were tall men, some young and others old, wielding all sorts of weapons, but only a few had shields, so their bodies were mostly exposed. Beautiful.

His maniple's centurion, Cnaeus, shouted the order: "Fire *pila*!"

Marcellus wrenched his arm forward, letting the javelin fly forward. The line behind him released, too, and hundreds of javelins coated the air in a black cloud. Another volley of arrows joined the fray, and the two descended upon the first lines of the Gallic invasion. Nearly every enemy in the charging front line screeched as javelins tore through their bodies; they fell back into their brothers, landing in the grass, coughing blood from the wicked javelins that completely pierced their bodies all the way through. The Gauls behind them leapt over the bodies and continued running after the Roman line, eager.

Decimus watched the arrows and javelins fall upon the enemy, saw so many go down, but when the Gallic Army did not falter, but continued strong, he realized for the first time that his plan was in jeopardy. He kicked his horse and rode past the kneeling triarii, rode to the principes. He heard the Gallic war-cry now, and the hurling of javelins into the enemy at fifty feet, massacring even more. He looked across the wide expanse between the principes and the hastati, saw the enormous wave of Gallic soldiers about to smash into his lines, unfazed by the missiles. He rode down the line of the principes, sword raised, catching the cheers of his men, and he ordered, "March!", hoping they would be able to counter the Gauls when the broken hastati retreated, for he knew it would happen. He rode around the principes' right flank as they began to march, galloped past the triarii, his eyes telling them the truth: "Today you will fight again."

The tribal leader who had initiated the charge felt all breath escape him as the javelin came down; he saw it, but it was too late to react. He simply closed his eyes, hoping it would miss. All hope shattered: the javelin tore through his chest, stabbing out his back, piercing lungs and heart, splintering his ribs within, and he felt warmth spread through his body, inside and out. He swaggered forward, the spear slipping from deadening, numbing fingers. He reached out as dozens more volunteers around him buckled – friends and brothers, sons and fathers. The men behind him, who had been rows deep during the charge, now led the way, rushing past him, jumping over the bodies, screaming in a malignant rage; his sickly, pale, weak fingers scratched at the Romans only thirty feet away. He realized he would never meet his goal, that his name would be forgotten, and he regretted leading the charge, for now the ground rose up to meet him, the ground charred with blood and death, and he knew it was all over, knew his time had come, and he was dead before he hit the ground.

The last of his javelins left his fingers; he leaned forward, peering over his shield as the Gauls thirty feet away were downed in a washing coat of blood. He saw a Gaul stumbling to the side, stomach ripped open by a javelin, guts unraveling at his feet; the Gaul fell on top of his innards and Marcellus felt joy. Cnaeus hollered, “Draw your swords!” His eyes stared forward, and he led the movement, drawing his own 55-cm thrusting sword from its sheath, holding the shield before him, sword in hand. The other soldiers of the cohort did the same, and Marcellus felt complete as he held the sword tight in a stone vice. Marcellus kept himself behind the shield, as the Gauls charged across the field. Twenty-five feet. His eyes widened, went global, time slowing to a trickle. The Gauls came at them, weapons raised; some cast aside their shields as they were ungainly. Twenty feet. Cnaeus hollered, “Shields down!” The front line, Marcellus not excluded, knelt down, thrusting their shields up at an angle, left shoulder braced against the curve of the shield. Marcellus prepared to feel the brunt of the enemy’s charge breaking upon the wall of shields; then he would hurl off anyone unlucky enough to be on his shield, his sword would burn like frozen blue flame, and Mars would smile upon him, endow him, fight beside him.

The Gauls ran too fast to prepare themselves as the Romans knelt behind their shields; the barbarians ran full-throttle, flashing their weapons about, flattening the flowers, and then they threw themselves against the shield wall, tumbling

face-first over into the first line of Roman soldiers; as the first row of kneeling Romans gritted behind braced shields, the second row blocked themselves with their own red shields and struck out with their swords, piercing flesh; blood sprayed warm on shields and faces, and the screams of dying men ran through the ranks. Marcellus' shield blew into him as a Gaul flipped over behind him; the soldier behind Marcellus drove his sword down into the Gaul's chest, and as he yanked it out, blood soaked the man's dirty chest hair. Marcellus heard the man cursing behind him, heard a thousand-strong war-cry, and then his shield shuddered again; the centurion hollered, "Stand your ground!" Marcellus lunged the shield forward, throwing the Gaul atop into the grass; the Gaul's arms flew out and his harvesting blade scattered behind him. Marcellus was already on his feet; the Gaul cried out as Marcellus slammed the bottom rim of his shield upon the man's throat, snapping the bones and esophagus. He stepped back to block a pair of barbarians, leaving the man asphyxiating, kicking his legs back and forth, struggling for life, finding none.

Fidelus fell kneeling to the ground, bracing the shield up at an angle, gritting his teeth. He bit down upon his tongue, drawing blood, but he did not notice; in the dark shadow of the shield's belly, he saw his mother smiling at him, her cheerful words, "Please come home to us." The ground shook and his shield rattled; he heard the screeching war-cry, felt a blast of hot air, then his shield wrenched to the side, and the fetid breath of an ugly man washed over him, and he fell backwards, into the ground, stared up as the barbarian raised a war-hammer. Fidelus scratched at the cold earth for his scattered sword, and saw his girlfriends smiling as the war-hammer came upon his face.

Marcellus turns at the sound of shattering bone, sees a Gaul raise his bloodied war-hammer from the face of a young boy; Marcellus sees the broken bone, twisted strands of tissue, the sheared muscle and blood gushing from it all: the mask of an honorable man dying for an honorable cause. Marcellus cursed under his lips and thrust his sword at the man with the war-hammer; the man ducked back, avoiding the tip of the sword; a soldier from the second row took over Marcellus' right position; the man with the war-hammer swung his weapon in a wide arch, streaking for Marcellus' head; Marcellus wrenched his head back, neck screaming in pain; the barbed war-hammer cut over his shield and smashed in the face of the Roman who had just joined the front row. The soldier's arms went

limp, the shield and sword clattering atop the other soldier's body; the war-hammer had stuck in the man's pale face, now spurting blood and brain matter; the man with the war-hammer wheezed as Marcellus drove his sword into the man's chest, driving it so hard the tip stabbed out the back; he yanked out the bloodied sword and the Gaul fell on top of the fallen Roman.

All this happened in split-seconds; Marcellus swung his eyes around to block the blows of three Gauls, striking with his sword, blocking, striking, heart racing, spinning, mind searing, seeing only the battle and, at the same time, seeing his mother screaming as she is stabbed over and over and over.

Marcellus was not aware of the men fighting to his right and left, of the Gauls and Romans falling, of the vicious battles and the lives equally-viciously ending. All he knew was what was behind him, the shield on his left hand and the blood-sparkling sword in his right. The sword, one might say, seemed to glow as if pulled from mines of gold, and it seemed to order the death of hundreds as they came to meet it; Marcellus did not control it, one would go on to say, but it controlled itself, thrusting and blocking, stabbing and quartering.

A Gaul flung his axe at Marcellus; as trained, Marcellus raised his shield and stumbled back under the power of the blow; the shield splintered along the impact line of the axe blade; the axe-man drew it out, and before Marcellus could react, brought it down again, this time with such force that Marcellus' legs gave out and he fell to the ground, strewn above two bodies, back coating with their blood; his shield lay upon him; the Gaul leapt spread-eagled onto the shield, raising his axe to drive it into Marcellus' pinned head; Marcellus flashed his right arm and the sword rose as if from the grave, and with a harrowing shout he drove it into the bottom of the Gaul's chin, thrusting it up and into the mouth; blood dribbled down the sword and as Marcellus ripped the sword out, the Gaul tottered to the side, blood coming from his mouth, eyes wide, axe slipping.

Marcellus could not stand before another barbarian jumped on top of the shield; Marcellus felt the bodies squirm underneath him. With all his might, he shoved his shield to the side, and the attacker fell into the grass; Marcellus rolled overtop of him, pinioning him to the ground with his shield. The Gaul's arms are held back, and all he can do is watch as Marcellus raises his sword and propels it down into his throat; the man's body shudders with the invasion of cold and priceless steel; Marcellus hears a shriek behind him, whips his head around to see two Gauls charging him, swords in their hands. He leaps up, bringing his shield around to block the first blow; he jumps to the side, sending the sword over his

shield and into the enemy's face; as the enemy falls, he throws the weight of his shield onto the other barbarian; the Gaul falls, tries to stand, but Marcellus stomps on his face, then finishes it off with his sword.

He looks over the rim of his shield to see dozens more coming upon him. He holds his blood-gorged shield before him, raises his sword so it is pointing to them above his shoulder, grits his teeth, and with insane eyes, beckons them forward.

A sea of barbarians surged against the rocks of the Roman Army, and in the collision left a spray of broken bodies and spilt blood. All along the Roman front lines, the hastati returned the fight, not backing down, blocking attacks with their shields and striking with their swords. The Gauls, too, fought, and they fought well, inspired by intense devotion for the land they knew and so intimately loved. Romans fell and died in a frontier they did not know, in a place where they would be forgotten; their death-stories would be riddled with heroism and honor, leaving out the murky details of twisted organs and crushed bone.

Birds roosting in the trees surrounding the field took flight at the sound of the war-cries, at the throbbing echoes of screaming, crying, gasping; the sound of metal-clashing-against-metal, the noises of shields thudding against bodies sang a sonnet dipped in shadow and gloom. Swords and spears, axes and shields, bodies ripped open and stabbed, impaled and shorn, lay at the feet of the quarreling soldiers; young men screamed for their mothers, and cried out for help as the feet of the enemy swirled among them; Roman soldiers reached up to the sky as the barbarian's spears speared them again and again until blood gurgled up through their armor. One boy lay completely headless, neck-stump pumping vibrant red blood all over the tattered green shield of a missing savage. The crippled who tried to escape were jumped upon by the enemy and beaten to death, the world growing dark and mysterious, until finally there was nothing.

The Romans fought hard and they fought extremely well – most of the barbarians were not trained, but the Romans were trained to be the best fighters in the known world, rivaling even the Greek Cities! But the Gauls' numbers were extravagant; the Roman soldiers grew weary, became slow, and wound up dead, lying crumpled in the grass, strewn amidst hundreds of more bodies, the earth drowning in a lake of crimson. As the hastati lines dissolved, the Gauls entered the ranks, pushing through like parasites, attacking anyone left and right. All organization broke apart; the Roman lines of the hastati shattered: the enemy were

in every direction, and every soldier had to watch his back. As the confusion escalated, the strength of the Romans – a strength that became exponential with astute organization – dwindled to nothing, and the Gauls easily slept through, nimbly picking apart the tired Romans worn down by battle armor, helmets, swords and shields. A carpet of scarlet blood and red uniforms coated the field.

Decimus rode behind the principes, mouth gasping in silent shock as he saw the Gauls tearing through the hastati lines. He asked himself how he could ever let this happen. He saw the Gauls team up and slay the chaotic hastati soldiers one-by-one. Boys he had talked to the night before now squirmed upon the earth, drowning in their own body fluids. The principes continued to march, stoic and undeterred, pushed forth by the knowledge that fleeing was not an option. They stared into the fray of the hastati and closed the distance faster.

Decimus roared, “Principes! Charge!” He did not order them to fire their javelins – it would only kill more Romans. So the principes took their javelins, stabbed the bottom into the ground, drew their thrusting swords, cried out in a rage calling on the god of Mars to seduce them and slay the enemy, and they charged, blending into the startled hastati and slaying the enemy at their feet. Decimus pushed his horse back towards the triarii as an ocean of arrows flew overhead, landing amidst the middle of the Gallic swarm still charging across the field. He did not look back to see the carnage. He had seen enough.

The principes surged through the tattered ranks, thrusting with their swords and slaying Gauls left and right. The Gauls did not waver, only intensified their attack, joining in clumps and running weapons-free at the nearest Roman soldiers. Marcellus heard the principes behind him but did not look; he saw a Roman soldier without his shield, left arm bleeding, running toward him, mouth agape in fright; behind the soldier a Gaul raised an axe. Marcellus leapt forward, grabbed the Roman by the arm, wrenched him down, and with the other arm speared the Gaul in the abdomen; the Gaul drops the axe and disappears into the maze of quarreling soldiers. The Roman whom Marcellus had saved looked up, mouthed, *Thank you*; Marcellus quickly grabbed the Roman and tore him up; before any words could be exchanged, the soldier bodily shoved Marcellus out of the way and drove his own sword into a barbarian’s throat; the barbarian swaggers to the side, blood gushing down his neck, and he falls into the grass, crawling amongst the mass of corpses in an effort to breathe. Marcellus exchanges a wry smile with the hastati and the two of them go shoulder-to-shoulder, as trained in Rome; the

soldier grabs a shield from a fallen Roman and braces himself; two Gauls leapt at them, but Marcellus and his savior knocked them to the feet, bleeding atop scattered bodies.

Marcellus grunted as someone hit his side; he looked over and saw Cnaeus, blood streaming from his nose. Marcellus tries to say something; the other soldier shouts, and Marcellus turns his head to see five Gauls coming at them. Marcellus' sword sings and the Gauls fall, but not before Cnaeus is hurled to the ground, sword knocked away; he used his shield to block the sword strokes of a Gallic man; the soldier Marcellus had saved kicked the Gaul in the face, sending him landing hard on his back. Marcellus drove his sword into the man's scalp, ending it all there; the man's body went rigid, lashed with rigor mortis. Marcellus smirks at Cnaeus, but Cnaeus leans forward, grabs Marcellus, and tears him down; as Marcellus is falling, Cnaeus grabs his sword and lunges it forward as a Gaul comes down atop of them. The Gaul screams, deafening Marcellus' ears; Marcellus hurls him off and the sword comes out with a sickening slurp. The Gaul, still living, snarled and came at them again, despite the blood flowing from his chest; the other soldier jumped on top of the Gaul, grabbed him by the hair, held his head back, and drove the tip of his sword into the base of the man's skull. The head went limp as blood scorched the lukewarm steel.

Cnaeus, Marcellus, and the other Roman stand; another soldier joins them, and Cnaeus shouts, "Form a wall! Form a wall!" They act quickly before another marauding band of scattered Gauls can accost them; they stand side-to-side, with just enough room between them for maneuvering the swords, their blood-speckled shields facing the field now littered with over a thousand bleeding corpses and screaming wounded men. Marcellus heard a blend of hastati and principes forming behind them, and he felt the first jitters of success running through the stale, blood-rank air. The Gauls see them forming up, and driven with a desire to break any formation, knowing formation was the rule of the Roman's warfare, they gathered together and charged at the wall. They raised axes and swords and held spears before them, green face-paint smearing in their sweat under the sizzling summer heat.

Marcellus hollered, "Steady! Steady!" He looked one in the eye, and the Gaul looked away, perturbed, but continued to charge. "Hold it! Hold it!" He holds his shield before him, legs positioned in a defensive stance; the sword is grinning with blood, held over his head, the tip pointed out over the shield. His voice rang shrill – "Rome!" – as the Gauls ran into them. One Roman fell, his shield

splintering with the impact of a spear, the spearhead slashing into his gut; the shields rattled and the swords glistened. Gauls stumbled back, slashed and stabbed, bleeding and gasping, organs tattered and flesh raped. Marcellus steps to the side to avoid a spear, and the man with the spear falls forward, against the shield; Marcellus drives his sword down into the man's scalp; blood sprays onto Marcellus' face, slick and warm. He kicks the body away; the Gauls falter and run, but the retreat is isolated; Gauls had infiltrated most of the ranks and now most of the hastati were either slain or running, the principes carrying the brute force. In the background, the triarii were marching forward, spears held before them in a semi-phalanx stance.

Marcellus looked over to see Cnaeus on the ground, blood covering his chest; he raised bloodied hands, looked Marcellus in the eyes; the centurion's mouth was moving but no air passed into him. His lungs were broken; the eyes swam, insipid.

An indescribable anger ran through the boy; he was blinded of all common sense; he saw his mother being raped and stabbed, his girlfriend rotting under a pile of stale earth, and suddenly it all made sense, and yet nothing made sense; he had everything to live for, and nothing to live for. He fought for Rome, and yet he fought for himself. He was a Roman, and yet he was an innocent child stripped of his family; the men coming against him were Gauls defending their homes, yet at the same time they were murderers and rapists and every one deserved to die a horrible and grisly death.

He was stunned by the revelation of divine wrath, and seeing a pack of seven Gauls coming at them, he suddenly broke from the shield wall, streaming forward, sword flashing like crimson lightning; Gauls fell on every side of him, and he spun as if locked inside a cyclone, a blur before the eyes of all watching; the Gauls tried to defend themselves but only fell twisted and broken. A scream of unquenchable rage escaped from Marcellus' throat, and he charged through the matted undergrowth, jumping over bodies and shields and swords, killing every man not wearing the Roman uniform, massacring every one he came across. The Gauls saw him and charged, not thinking; Marcellus did not think, either, and for this he comes out victorious: no man governed by the natural laws of common sense would ever go single-handedly against an enemy hundreds-strong. Yet, after moments of their meeting, Gauls kissed the earth all around him, dropped into history to be forgotten, and Marcellus shone as if the gods were blessing him that very moment.

As Marcellus kicked a dying man away, under the shadow of his blood-soaked horsehair helmet, he saw the standard-bearer for the cohort falling under Gallic knives; the standard was taken into enemy hands to be slowly carried away, aiming for the other side of the field. Seeing their standard – the very gift of the gods – the Romans began to route, all valor and bravery, all courage and morale, vanishing in an instant. The shield wall fumbled and the Romans began to disintegrate into a fleeing mob; the triarii were horrified.

But amidst the retreat, one soldier pushed forward, shrieking at the top of his lungs, chanting the name of his homeland. He ran toward the standard being so ignorantly carried away. At that time, the eyes of all of Rome were upon him. This day he would become a hero.

The Roman soldier turned to run and felt something slam into his back; the breath surged from his lungs and he stumbled forward. He shook his head, ears ringing, and took a breath – but he could not! No breath came to him, and all his attempts only wracked him with searing pain that took him to his knees. He leaned onto one arm, and looked down at his chest, saw the tip of a spear pointing out, blood soaking underneath his armor, the sword-tip stained scarlet. The realization that he would die did not frighten him; he knew soldiers died, but he never imagined he could be one of them. He hugged the ground on all fours, a splintered spear poking into his back and coming out his front. Everything grew weak, silent; his head roared, and he moved his mouth, knowing it was an impossible try, knowing his lungs were pierced; he blinked his eyes, and the vibrant red-washed green grass and crumpled flowers before him bled into a white paste, and suddenly all he saw was white, and felt nothing but peace, calm, love and joy. In that white haze came the laughter of children, the words of his mother, the firm yet gentle approval of his father; he saw his daughter being born in Rome, he saw her running through the orchards, hands outstretched; he saw his wife picking olives and whispering prayers to him. The whiteness dissolved, and he felt as if he were standing; a large oak door rested before him; its handle was cold, numbing to the touch; light bled from underneath; he felt drawn to it, completely forgetting the battle, and opening the door, he jumped in surprise, air flooding through him. Yes, now he breathed, and yet at the same time he did not – for he was struck breathless, gazing into a world of oceans and rivers, waterfalls and forests, mountains and laughter, the *Elysian Fields*, the place of eternal and complete happiness, resting just beyond the first life. A world of laughter, love, and best of

all, no war. He smiled, entered through the door, felt the sun on his face, and knew he would just have to wait a little while longer before he could hold his daughter and kiss his wife once more.

Marcellus jumped up and over a Roman soldier with a spear in his back, saw the face masked in a dreamy pain, and as he landed his soles burned, the shield almost fell from his arm, and he threw his shoulder into an enemy soldier. The soldier, surprised by Marcellus' fierce running against the grain of the Roman route, spun sideways and Marcellus slashed the tip of his sword across his bare side; the Gaul stumbled aside and Marcellus ran on past. The barbarian's legs knocked and he felt his side, felt a wicked gash and boiling pain, brought his hand before him, saw it was slick with blood. He looked forward to see Gauls running past him and the Romans routing, and suddenly he knew it was not worth it. At that moment he just lay down upon the grass, listening to the shouts of the Gauls cheering the Roman advance; he closed his eyes and felt warmth spreading through him, the pain easing, smiled and thought of his home, his family, the fields waiting to be harvested.

Marcellus left the Gaul behind him and ran after the standard being hauled away. A Gaul ran after him, charging Marcellus' shield, intent on knocking Marcellus down; as the gap between them dwindled to nothing, Marcellus turned the shield away and, in the shield's place, revealed the red sword blade. The Gaul's chest ran straight into it; the Gaul screamed, blowing fetid breath over Marcellus' face; blood seeped all over Marcellus' hand, as the blade passed through the Gaul's body until the hilt touched his torn flesh. Marcellus delivered his forehead into the Gaul's face, breaking the nose; the Gaul writhed back off the sword, spewing bloody vomit as he fell to the ground. Marcellus jumps over him, lands just in time to knock a Gaul to the ground using the boss of his shield; he smashes the Gaul's face in with the bottom of the shield, sees the distance between him and the standard deepening, and the Roman lines are fading.

He cannot turn back. Gritting his teeth, inspired with malice, he runs harder, dodging and jumping strewn bodies, making his way across a field of corpses; some of the bodies on the ground still breathed, last fatal breaths. Spears stuck from the earth, swords lay under cadavers, a standard lay plunged in the earth, eagle ornament broken and flag tattered. Roman shields lay at odd angles, most unbroken, creating obstacles Marcellus had to weave about. A Gaul came at him and Marcellus slashed him with the sword, opening his throat. Another body

added to the slaughterhouse; Marcellus was not deterred. He believed he would die, could not see the gods infesting him with themselves to such a degree as to allow one man victory over thousands of Gallic barbarians. But he did not fear death; no, he embraced it, smiling: he would accept it and face many more to accept the same fate.

A pair of Gauls ran after him from either side, trying to pinch him between them; they close fast and he twists his body around, hurling his shield into one and striking the other with his sword. The Gaul struck by the sword is thrown backwards, groping at a side wound; the one hit with the shield falls atop the bodies, tries to stand, but cannot before Marcellus thrusts his sword into his throat. He wrenches it out, leaves the man to die, and runs toward the standard, screaming the name of Rome, screaming bloody death, condemning them all the gates of Hades; they hear his yell and turn; the huddle of them smirk, and the one with the standard hurries off as the other bare their swords before them, beckoning the mere Roman forward.

Marcellus accepts the invitation and runs helter-skelter right for them.

One of the Gauls kicks over a fallen Roman, sets his sword down, grabs one of the victim's javelins, twists it in his hand, and hurls it at the figure running towards them. The javelin splices the air; Marcellus does not slow, simply raises his left arm and the shield strapped to it; the javelin pierces the shield, the end sticking out between the planks of plywood, barely missing Marcellus' armor. The Gaul grabs another javelin and throws it; Marcellus twists his body to the side, the javelin slamming into a body with a low thump. The Gaul reaches for the sword he had set down, but Marcellus is upon him, jumping up, smashing the crest of the shield into his face and driving his sword up through the armpit, the point stabbing out between the shoulder blade and neck. He fell back down, wrenching the blade out. The man who had thrown the javelins pitched forward with a groan.

One of the other Gauls hacks his sword down at Marcellus; Marcellus blocks with his own *gladius*, but the thrusting sword breaks under the impact, shattering; the top of the blade drops in fragments, leaving a jagged edge on a much shorter sword in Marcellus' hand. The Gaul raises his sword to bring it down again; Marcellus instinctively drives the jagged blade across the enemy's face, drawing a deep red line and curling facial tissue; the Gaul shouts and the Roman takes his hair in a ball, throws his head back, and shoves the broken blade into the Gaul's

mouth. He pushed the body away as a Gaul wielding a spiked war-hammer swung at him.

Marcellus leaned back, blocking the hammer with his shield; the hammer slammed into his father's shield and broke the plywood. The shield all but came apart in Marcellus' hand; he tosses it away, now without a weapon *and* a shield. The man with the war-hammer is turning to deliver another blow; Marcellus tackles the man, sending him to the ground, kneeling him in the groin; the Gaul releases the war-hammer. Marcellus took it up and slammed it down on the barbarian's face, shattering bone and flesh; he lifted the hammer up with a sickening sound, and was unfazed to see the face was no longer a face but a mesh of bloodshed.

He stood and turned, the war-hammer dripping blood, and saw the warrior with the standard running across the field stricken with arrows and scattered Gallic bodies. Gripping the war-hammer in sweaty palms, he took off after him, catching up quickly. The man with the standard glanced back, hearing footsteps, and expecting to see his friend's following, took up a face of absolute mortification as the Roman in the bloody armor and blood-crusted horsehair helmet brought the war-hammer across the man's side; the man shrieked and fell, the war-hammer splitting skin and breaking bone, rupturing organs. The standard fell to the ground and he writhed in the trampled flowers; Marcellus' shadow danced over him. The man cried out, blood forming pools in his mouth, chest heaving, broken; Marcellus raised the war-hammer high, and without hesitation, let it fall, crushing the Gaul's chest. The Gaul's head moved, flopping about like a fish, color vanishing; blood came from the nose, ears and mouth.

Marcellus panted, tossing the war-hammer down. He grabbed the standard, lifted it high. The flag flapped in the wind and the eagle stood proud; the god of Mars swept over him, and he cried out the name of Rome; the fleeing Romans heard the noise and looked behind them, saw the lone soldier standing amidst a field of arrow-pierced bodies, and sensing the call of honor, they charged the enemy chasing them, and easily slew them. Marcellus held the standard high into the sun as Roman soldiers fell in behind him; he looked back with war-crazed eyes and hollered to his brethren, "In the name of Rome!" A war-cry went out and the Romans held their shields before them, their swords glistening with the blood of the savages, and they charged the second line of Gallic volunteers.

The triarii had been blending in with the fleeing hastati and principes, Decimus wallowing in guilt and shame, when one of the riders beside him said, "General, is that one of ours?" He pointed over the mass of soldiers, over the field coated in bodies, and to a soldier dressed in red, with no shield nor sword, waving a standard in the air. Decimus squinted, trying to see in the haze of dust aroused by the quarreling armies. He could not believe what he saw, and he wanted to say, "No." But he knew that it was a Roman; the name, he could not place, seeing only the back. But then they heard the man's cry, the name of Rome repeated over and over, and Decimus felt his own pulse quicken; no amazement crossed his soul as the fleeing Romans turned and tore through the chasing Gauls like a dagger through water. The triarii, inflamed with the warrior spirit, joined in the haste and they slaughtered the remaining Gauls, joining the lone man carrying the standard. The standard waved high, and then Decimus felt all moisture drain from his mouth: could it be possible? The man beside him acknowledged, "General, are they *counter-charging*?"

Decimus shook his head. "I have never seen anything like this, never before."

"That one soldier, sir," the man said. "I have fought in three battles before this. Nothing like this. *No* one like *him*."

Decimus looked back towards the cavalry, voice rising in his throat.

The man beside him said, "Sir, that man with the standard – who is he? I've never seen him before. Did you see him impale a Gaul with the standard, then swing it around to knock another off his feet? Look! He plants the standard in the ground, picks up a sword of the enemy, and he is cutting through them unlike anything I've ever seen before! They are completely smashing the second line!" He laughed, the onslaught ended. Rome had the upper-hand. *One man*. "Look at the Gauls run! They're running into the trees, with all of our soldiers right behind them! A wonderful victory, General!"

Decimus looked to the trees, saw flickering movement. He leaned upon the saddle, staring.

"It is quite a remarkable sight, General. General Antonius will be delighted–"

"There's more," Decimus said in a low voice. "It's a trap."

The man's cheeriness crumpled. "Trap? What do you–"

He kicked his horse; the horse reared back, kicking its legs in the air. He glared at the man beside him: "There are Gauls in the trees! Hundreds of them, fresh and eager! We'll be routed again, and their fresh men will overtake our exhausted ones! This day will be even *worse*!" He looked to the sky. "How much more can

the Fates frown upon us?" To the cavalry, "Ride with me and ride hard! We don't have much time!" He kicked the horse and they drove away; three hundred Praetorian spearmen cavalry went to the right of the field, and three hundred to the left, flanking the charging Romans.

Decimus risked a glance over, saw the Roman who had led the counter-charge, the boyish face now stained with blood, and he felt all breath knock out of his lungs. *How could it possibly be? It was impossible! Just a boy! A boy on the front lines! And now-* He turned his thoughts to the tree line. He led the horses into the trees, turning them left, driving through the thick underbrush. He could hear shouts from the Gauls hidden, and then they were upon them, the horses stampeding the crouching volunteers, crushing them. The Gauls lifted from their hiding places, brandishing their weapons, and rushed the cavalry.

Marcellus was nearly upon the trees when the cavalry swooped in from either direction. He had not understood it, but then the woods behind him came alive with nearly two thousand Gallic reserves leaping up, their weapons ringing, shouts explosive. Marcellus did not slow, but charged harder, rushing into the trees, surrounded by Romans on either side. He saw a Gaul with his back turned to him and drove his Gallic slashing sword across the man's back, splitting his spine. The man crumpled. The Gauls blended into the forest with their green paint and clothes, and the Romans stood out in their heavy red armor. The red of wall advanced through the trees; Romans were slain and left to die amidst the weeds and ferns, birds singing madly in the trees; the Gauls fought hard, but all who came upon Marcellus fell. He slashed his sword left and right, up and down, driving into the throngs of Gauls, layering them in a swathe of blood and spilt life. The earth ruptured with the cavalry charging, the horses coming in so fast as to knock Gauls up off the ground, send them spinning, and landing them hard upon the earth, or thrown against trees, bones shattered.

Horsemen flanked Decimus on either side; he raised his sword, screaming in wild rage; beside him, to his left and right, was a wall of spears carried by the horsemen, glinting tips pointed straight at the Gauls. The horses flew between the trees; the two forces collided. Decimus hacked at the Gauls, slashing them in the face and neck and shoulders as he rode past, the horse shrieking, blood spraying against her hide, warming his shield and sword. The Praetorian spears impaled Gauls in the chest, limbs, neck or face; the spear would be withdrawn and used

again, or snapped upon impact; if it snapped, the riders drew their long *spatha* swords and went to work, breaking the Gauls into smaller groups to be ridden by the infantry or cavalry. The Gauls put up a frantic fight, spearing and cutting at the horses to down the riders, then jumping atop the riders and hacking them to death. Several Gauls were mutilating the body of a Roman horseman, bathing in his blood, when Decimus raced past, his sword dancing, and they fell over the Roman's body, their own blood blending with his.

The infantry weave their way through the forest, an impregnable wall pushing the Gauls back, many lives – both Roman and barbarian – being lost in the advance. The cavalry on the flanks downed many Gallic soldiers, but the presence of the hundreds of horsemen panicked the Gauls who had not died, and they fled deeper into the trees.

Decimus orders the second group of cavalry to chase the routers down and slay them; he blocks off the path for the Gauls fighting the infantry; his spearmen point their spears into the trees, creating a wall the fleeing Gauls cannot pierce. The Gauls turn to see a wall of red shields coming after them.

The Gauls huddled in a group, prepared to fight to the death; Decimus said, "No more lives need to be lost! Throw down your weapons, and I swear on everything sacred, you shall live."

The Gauls taste the sincerity in his voice; they were not bred warriors, they were husbands and fathers, some only children not yet twelve years old. They eagerly throw down their weapons in defeat, inviting the sensation of life.

Decimus looks across the group of prisoners, sees Marcellus standing there without a shield, captured sword speckled with honeydew blood. Decimus looks him in the eye, and in that moment feels something akin to immortality. An immortality unable to be touched or felt but known to be there. For a brief moment he felt as if he were looking into the eyes of a god. He swallowed hard, raised his sword, and hollered, "Rome!"

All the Roman survivors cheered, the sound carrying for miles through the forest, blasting the ears of running Gauls before the cavalry swept down and destroyed them.

V

The General remained true to his word. The infantry marched forward, secured the prisoners, and drew them back to the field, setting them aside and under

Careful watch. Decimus planned on sending them back to Rome when the chance presented itself, and having Antonius deal with them on the basis of one simple request: "Do not kill them." Antonius would not understand, Decimus knew, but he would agree; they'd probably be sent to Egypt or Macedon as slaves. Marcellus sent half the cavalry out roaming the hills, searching for Gallic reinforcements, and he allowed the Roman soldiers to take off their gear and just sit under the sun, regaining strength. Some wept, but most were silent. They had not seen much combat before. The hospitals were erected and the surgeons got to work. As noon came and went, Decimus ordered the bodies of both the Gauls and Romans to be carried from the center of the field and be deposited in two separate groups. He did not just sit idle while his men moved the dead; he mounted his horse and walked amongst them, congratulating them, consoling them, telling them how proud he was, and when the word reached Rome, how proud Rome would be, too.

As his horse weaved between the piles of dead, it came to a stop before a soldier hunched down, moving one of the bodies. The horse would not move. The soldier let the body slip into a pile, and as he turned, Decimus saw that it was the young boy who had recaptured the standard and led the counter-charge.

The General did not know what to say, and was perplexed when the soldier knelt down in the blood-ridden grass, bowed his head, and said, "Please forgive me, General – I have lost my father's shield."

Decimus did not answer for the longest time. Then, finally, "No. Forgive *me*. Forgive me for leading so many great and innocent young men straight to their deaths against an enemy outnumbering us two to one."

Marcellus looked up, sensing something divine in the General's words.

The General scanned the growing piles of corpses. "So many dead." He looked back to Marcellus. "And forgive me for ever underestimating you. Your actions saved countless lives – and, dare I say it, may have even saved this war."

Marcellus nodded. "Thank you, General." He saluted. "Strength and honor."

A ball of emotion rose in Decimus' throat, but he staved it down. "Strength and honor."

Afternoon turned to evening. The bodies were cleared from the center of the field and a fort for the night and perhaps longer started to be assembled. Nearly a third of the Legion had been killed in the attack, and another third had been wounded to the point of being unable to work. Decimus worked every man three times as

hard, and he himself dismounted and got to work. By the time the stars had grown thick upon the sky, the fort had been assembled. Despite the night, Decimus knew the bodies had to be disposed of, or they would infest with disease, and many more – perhaps the entire Legion – risked dying. He ordered the Roman corpses to be carried to the forest, where they were lain in shallow graves. Giant pits were dug upon the field, the flowers vanishing under piles of blood-wrought soil.

Decimus walked through the hospital within the fort, looking at all the broken bodies, the wounded eyes, the tattered innocence. Many more men, he knew, would die throughout the night. He took one soldier's hand, sat beside him, and just listened to the rummaging of the surgeons and the cries of those men still being worked on. It hurt his brain so much. When he looked over to the soldier, he realized the hand was cold, eyes closed, chest unmoving.

Despite a day leaving nearly everyone breathless and deprived of energy, torchlight illuminated the confines of the encampment, nearly every able soldier celebrating, passing around wine and hot food, singing and dancing around the fire, slapping each other on the back and kissing on the cheeks. A goat was brought forth and slaughtered, the blood spilt over idols to the god of Mars, a celebration of absolute victory. The men in the hospital closed their eyes and listened to the celebrating, could not help but to smile, to feel that they played a crucial role in bringing about such a heroic victory. Decimus walked the ramparts, quietly walking past the soldiers on guard, nodding and saluting to them, looking out over the emblazoned field, the light from the fire snaking into the dark shadows of the enveloping forest. He would look up to the stars, many hidden due to light pollution, and he thought about the citizens of Rome looking at the same stars; he saw the dense forest and felt so alone, so cut-off, felt as if he were drowning in a pool of hopelessness.

Marcellus did not join the celebrations. He remained inside his eight-man tent, staring at four of the cots that would never be filled by the same men; most of the boys in his hastati cohort had lost their lives that morning, and looking upon the empty cots brought a swell of memories too difficult to bear. His head found rest in his hands; were it not for being so parched, so tired, so bone-weary, he would've cried. But now no tears would come. This made him feel horrible, made him feel like some miserable, god-forsaken cretin. He could hear the laughter of his friends, could hear the conversations, the jokes, could still walk amongst the pranks pulled, back when they were so eager for this war to begin. All of them

had been smiling then, Marcellus included. Now some of those faces were gone forever, buried in mass pits in the forest, to be reclaimed by the earth over time. Marcellus did not smile now; yet in his deprecated sorrow, he did not feel remorse for what he had done. He felt no more hideous for slaying the Gauls than if they were brute animals. Instead it fueled his rage, his impotency, his bare-boned malice. He thirsted to fight again. He wanted to hear them scream, wanted to feel their blood on his hands. Yes... he even *lusted* for it.

A soldier with a torch passed before the tent, the light entering the tent, flickering about for a moment, then disappearing. The singing and shouting and hoo-hah came through the canvas walls and stirred all kinds of emotions within the young boy. Emotions pointed at his own face. Anger that he cannot join them; anger that he is not like them, he is not 'normal' in the strictest sense of the word. All boys have dreams, all boys have visions, all boys have nightmares – but his haunt him in the dead of the night; when others sleep peacefully, disconnected from the world, he lived in fright. Every time he closes his eyes, he sees them: his mother stabbed repeatedly, then even more; and his girlfriend being buried. He does not remember being consoled that she was not raped; his own mind, his beguiled imaginations, spins on the story and he can see her screaming as her thigh becomes thick with blood from being ravaged so many times. At this horrendous thought, the necklace burns around his neck, and he wonders, all to himself, alone in the dead of night, with nothing but his unguarded thought and bare-naked heart, "Have I done enough?" His conscience tells him, "No." He has not been satisfied. There is singing and dancing, rejoicing and worship outside; but inside his eyes harden, his heart grows cold. He is not satisfied. He must fight again. A peace, an inaudible voice: *You will fight again*. He will fight until the gods bestow him consolation. He will do all that he can – and if necessary, surrender his life. He will fear no man, living or dead. The gods have put their mark on him; he is their bounty. He is their servant. His blood runs bronze.

He looked up, seeing two figures standing inside the tent. How long had they been there? He did not know. He stood, saluting. He began to apologize for not joining the celebration, but one of the soldiers cut him off. "You must come with us. The General wishes to speak with you."

Marcellus humbly bows. "I am at the General's service."

VI

The firelight came off the field in rolling waves, bursts of orange and red. Decimus stood in full battle gear, some of it still stained red with blood, and he looked upon the field, the scene reflecting in deep, unwavering eyes. Dozens of pits had been dug, thousands of slain Gallic corpses thrown inside, covered with tar, set ablaze. The fires consumed the pits, sending choking breaths of smoke into the air, spewing ash, miniature volcanoes amidst a field of torn wildflowers. He thought of the irony, as if he had not seen it till then. His heart shuddered and ached. Such a beautiful thing, flowers; he remembered walking amongst his grandfather's garden, leaning over to smell them, his grandfather talking about how flowers embodied innocence and were the gods' materialization of immaculate beauty. Now that splendor and incorruptibility had been torn down in a wake of blood and gore, in screams and cries. He closed his eyes, and from the ramparts felt his heart speaking; he opened them again, and looking over the field of burning flesh, imagined the field in all its beauty, the multi-hued flowers radiant in spring, deer and fox cutting through the undergrowth, birds building nests in its hideaways. And then he saw the field as it had been that morning – the two armies colliding in a fray of smoke and blood, chaos and confusion, lasting nearly half an hour before the Gallic lines dissolved. Another breath, it returned to normal – the fire crackling, purity deficit, so many lives gone. A field of loveliness has become a field of bereavement. It hurt his heart. No one at home ever saw this: there was no *honor* in this, the rape of everything wonderful and true.

He heard the soldiers coming up behind him, upon the ramparts, and he turned. The young boy was with them, the side of his face illuminated from the field's fire. Decimus dismissed the guards; they bowed and left them on the wall. Decimus faced the field again, squinted, beckoned Marcellus over. The boy showed up at his side, and follows the General's gaze to the fire engulfing the pits in the field. He waited for the General to say something, listening both to the laughter of the fire and the laughter of jubilation behind and below them. Decimus drew a deep breath, and Marcellus poised to listen.

"Let me be plain: I have never seen anyone like you." He looked Marcellus in the eyes. "I have never seen anyone lead a counter-charge like that, have never seen someone fight so well on the verge of exhaustion. Never in a mere infantry soldier, at least. As the General and leader of this near-decimated Army, I thank you for what you've done. I am not blind. I do not claim this victory has my own. *You* saved the rest of our men from being destroyed. I have no doubt that had we

not been able to push the Gauls back, we would've lost the field – and maybe even our lives. The war would've been over then." He didn't speak for a moment. "And yet, part of me wishes this war *were* over, that we *were* returning home. This is my first real battle. I wasn't... prepared. Learning the tactics of the Greeks and Persians will not prepare you for the real horrors of war."

Marcellus bit his bottom lip. "What is it you wish of me, General?"

"I appreciate your lack of tact. Your inefficiency for diplomacy is a strength. Soldiers are not supposed to be diplomats nor negotiators – we are called to give orders, receive orders, carry out orders, all without thinking. Here is my order to you: your centurion, Cnaeus, has fallen. I want you to fill his spot. Yes, as centurion, along with the other centurion Tiberius. We do not have many soldiers in the way of *hastati*, and so we are combining our three cohorts into one. You and Tiberius are the only *hastati* centurions I have."

Marcellus bowed his head. "I am honored." He turned to go.

Decimus put a hand on his shoulder. "Please. Stay. It gets lonely here."

Marcellus, though feeling awkward, rejoined him against the wall.

The General said, "I've been through the hospital. It is a nightmare all on its own accord. I held the hand of a dying man, and his spirit slipped away while I was with him. A third of our forces have been killed. That's over one thousand Roman soldiers. If the Gauls were to launch another attack, what with another third of our men being wounded, we would be crushed. We would either surrender to be tortured and killed – or we would fight to the death. Yet this is not what bothers me the most. What bothers me is that we've went up against frontiersmen with pitchforks – and been all but smashed. Our enemy today was not the enemy we were called to fight. The trained Gallic soldiers stationed near Mediolanum are ten times more aggressive, ten times more skilled. And they number in the hundreds of thousands. Today was just a small skirmish, and it all but crippled us." He shook his head. "Antonius is going to weep when he hears the news. We never should've gotten into this war." He cursed the Senate, then apologized. "Forgive me, my friend."

Friend? Marcellus pushed it aside. "General, sir, I caution you not to worry. The gods are on our side. They fight beside us, with us, and even *within* us." Yes – he had felt it that morning. "The gods bestow their favor upon Rome and all its citizens, for Rome is the Light."

"Rome is the Light?" He laughed. "Of course it is. But let me ask you: is this your cause? Is Rome why you fight?"

Marcellus said nothing, just stared at the flames. Inside one of the pits, a charbroiled body rolled over. Embers sputtered into the flattened and blood-dried grass outside the crater.

"There are thousands upon thousands upon *thousands* of Gallic men and boys ready to fight for their country, ready to fight against us, the invaders. No real Gallic soldiers came against us today. Some veterans, maybe, but nothing organized. They came upon us as a mob. Perhaps the King did not send any of his organized and trained fighters, to see how weak we were, to see if we were serious about a *third* war. But we drove the Gauls back. The King received his answer. He will send hundreds of thousands of men against us. Do not be fooled," he continued, looking at the boy. "There will be many more battles, many hundreds of times larger and longer than today's, with hundreds of thousands of men charging at one another. There is no way this Army can withstand that – I have already sent a dispatch to Rome to call for Antonius' support, asking him to ally us with several more legions to comprise a task force. Maybe then we can go to war with the *possibility* of winning. I have faith in Antonius." His gaze drilled into the boy. "And I have faith in you."

Marcellus said nothing.

"Do you remember when you came to see me in my tent? You told me of a dream you had. I want you to be entirely honest with me: is this dream true, or did you invent it to win my favor?"

He did not miss a beat. "Every part of it is true."

The General then did something unspeakable, something unheard of. He turned from the wall and knelt down before the young man, bowing his head. He stared at Marcellus' shoes, and with tears in his eyes, pleaded, "Pray for me. Pray for all these soldiers. Pray for Rome's victory." He cocked his head back, staring up into Marcellus' confounded eyes. "I have seen, with my own eyes, the way you carried yourself in battle. My breath was taken from me. Awe passed before me. Your great warrior spirit has evidenced that your claims of intimacy are not faked."

Marcellus stuttered, "I have never claimed intimacy with the gods—"

"No," Decimus said. "But *they* have claimed intimacy with *you*. You truly *are* a son of Mars."

Chapter Six: The Call of the Gods

I

The hours never seemed to end. Antonius had thought there was nothing worse than simply sitting in full battle dress, waiting to be given the order to march, waiting for hours upon hours under the stifling heat of a violent sun, left alone with your thoughts. His ignorance of the excruciating boredom of politics simply fell apart after the initial excitement of serving in the Senate wore down to a mere nub. Sitting amidst all those Senators, vouching to be heard, ears throbbing after a day of listening to nothing save hundreds of voices clamoring and shouting at the same time, all this made him relish the days when he would ache upon the training grounds. Antonius found himself convinced he would easily trade in the musty confines of the Senate chamber for a ruthless march through the wilds of the frontier.

He entered the chamber in the morning after breakfast, already depressed because he knew he had near ten or twelve hours of pointless babble to endure. He sat in the family's chair, a chair much coveted, and wondered if it were blasphemous to desire giving it up. Antonius' head pulsed in pain, migraines creeping up every day after the first several hours. The life of the politician wore him down to a bare skeleton, devoid of soul and life.

He found his walks about the gardens were covered with a gray shroud, a veil of depression and hopelessness. No longer did he enjoy the scents and feelings of summer, nor did he smile at the children who tugged on his toga, asking for candy. He would shoo them off, then in the confines of his own home, feel guilty. His heart had been hardened. Not by war, as so many were, but by the duties of office. Politics drained him, emasculated him, sucked the life energy right from his bones. He could not even enjoy the most delicate of foods; his fat wasted away and his bones began to show. It concerned Celesta, who said nothing, knowing the strains the General went through day in and day out.

Celesta's life did not fare too much better. She did not go out of the manor, did not walk the streets, did not join other women. Antonius left early in the morning, before dawn, and when he returned in the evening, she still remained, never having left. He often found her standing out on the balcony, breathing in the scents of the sprawling flowers in the earthen pots, making no notice of the servants going about their business. Antonius wondered what went on inside that

head of hers, behind the eyes so distant and detached. Pondering life? Contemplating fate? Or was it more simple: remembering her beloved, aching in the night and hurting in the day?

It had been many months since Helonius entered *Elysium*, and Celesta's stomach had grown rounder and rounder. The doctors said the baby would be arriving in a few months' time, and the thought of the baby seemed to be the only thing able to bring a genuine smile to her face. The rest of the time she was locked in a state of despair; with Helonius gone, she relied on Antonius for comfort.

More than once Antonius would awake in the middle of the night, torn from sleep, to see Celesta standing beside his bed, dark hair falling about bare shoulders, night-gown loose around her. The shadows hid her eyes, but he could sense the tears trailing down her cheeks. No words were ever exchanged then; he simply understood. He would sit up in bed, make room for her, and she would sit next to him. His arm would wrap around her, and she'd lean her head on his shoulder, staring into space. She would cry harder, and ask him to hold her, so she could feel the warmth, the touch, so she could close her eyes, and imagine Antonius were Helonius, and in that flight of imagination, find solace. He would pull her close, pull her against his breast, and she would cry into his neck. No words were said during any of this; his strong arms around her frail body spoke enough, and sometimes, when she was close, he could feel Helonius' child kicking within her. This made him grip her all the tighter, fearing for the child's future, fearing for the state of its mother.

She would fall asleep in his arms, and he would lay her down on the bed, wrap her in the covers, and enter the living area, perhaps go out on the balcony, overlook the lights of the city, soldiers patrolling. His heart always cried for her. She began to mean more and more to him, in many ways the sole connection he had with reality. She was proof that he had been someone great once, someone noteworthy. And she was proof he had once had a true, honest friend – how long had it been since he'd had such a companion? Too long. He was a politician; politician's were not meant to have friends, and why would he be the only exception?

The politician's life murdered him; not all at once, but slowly, as if it were a noose tightening around his throat, squeezing the breath out of him. He grew weaker and weaker, crazier and crazier. During the festivals when the Senate did not meet, or after the Senate meetings late in the day, Antonius would not return home, but go to the training grounds, and from the walls around the complex, he

would watch, alone, the young boys in the field, the centurions leading the drills. Envy struck a chord within his heart, and he would try to remember what it were like to be detached from politics, oblivious to the Senate, abandoned completely to honing your skill and training for war. He had been there, and he loved every moment of it. The gods had not bred him for this life; maybe his father had been designed for both politics and war, but his son had fallen through in the former.

His heart would pulse faster and his lungs draw deeper when he watched the trainees lined up in their formations, when he would listen to the commanders walking down the lines, shouting, “If you lose your helmet and breastplate in battle, it is of no consequence, except maybe to you! If you lost the shield, then you are to be severely punished! For the helmet and breastplate are for your protection alone; the shield is for the protection of your brothers-in-arms to your left and right and behind you, and it is for the protection of Rome! To lose your helmet or breastplate is an act of foolishness of misfortune; to lose your shield is an act of dishonor!”

The commanders never failed to advance the importance of the weapons. “A Roman soldier lives and dies by his sword. If you cannot use your sword, you cannot live... It is my job to train you with the sword, and then to lead your forward with the sword. I am called to turn you from boys into men. Now is the time to work hard, fight well, and bring Roman glory to those who need it most.” Antonius thirsted for the sword in such times, and felt his hands tingling, even sweating, at the thought of touching the hilt or running a finger down the smooth blade; his mouth went dry, tongue sticking to the top of his mouth, and he wondered if he weren’t obsessed. He *was* obsessed. He’d *had* to be obsessed. It had been his job. And it had been taken from him – could the gods expect him to turn over his true identity and be content to live within the Senate chamber? He watched those boys training and wished he could rewind time.

New recruits did not touch weapons the first day. They could only watch in zealous jealousy as their commanding officers carried them with pride and dignity. The Romans gathered into their legions and were trained as legions – they grew to know their comrades as friends and brothers. The first thing a soldier was taught to do was to march. Of great importance to an Army, seconded only by the ability to fight, was the ability to march quickly.

If a soldier were unable to march with speed, the enemy would always escape, always catch the retreats, and the Roman Army would be defeated in a week. Any

army that could not march with speed could be split up by stragglers at the back or soldiers running along at different speeds. The enemy could easily swoop in and make a clean sweep of them. Marching, though, wasn't just speed – it was organization as well. A Roman was taught to march in line and to keep the army a compact fighting unit even when on the move. During training in the spring and summer months, the soldiers were woken up, marched out of the city, and paraded for up to and around twenty miles a day, through the fields and country backroads, through towns and villages, admired by onlookers and children. Twenty miles had to be completed in less than five hours. Every fifteen minutes, a mile had to be marched. Such were the grueling techniques of the Roman Army – essential to the survival of the troops. An aide to helping this marching goal find itself accomplished was physical exercise – running, long and high jumping, and carrying heavy packs sometimes weighing up to seventy pounds. In the summer, Roman soldiers would also train by swimming, especially if the camp was near the sea, a lake or a river – in Rome, the trainees would swim the Tiber River.

Once a Roman was capable of the march and his body had been honed close to perfection by rigorous exercise, he reached the tip of his training, the moment every new soldier lusted after. They would be trained to handle the weapons. They weren't given real weapons at first; wickerwork shields and wooden swords often drove splinters into their hands. It was thought by the military leaders that if a Roman soldier could fight with heavy dummy weapons, why wouldn't he be twice as effective with the proper ones? In the beginning of training, a soldier would be employed against heavy wooden stakes, about six feet high, rather than against his fellow soldiers. The stake became the brunt of various moves, strikes and counter-strikes with the sword, and the beat and abuse it took bore testament. Only when recruits were able to fight against the stakes were they assigned in pairs to train in individual combat.

Practicing against another human was called *armatura*, originating from the gladiatorial schools. The methods for training soldiers were borrowed from the training techniques of gladiators. The soldiers were not given real weapons against one another, but their new dummy weapons were of the same weight of the real weapons.

Once a soldier reached the point where he could train with real weapons, the training took a much more serious curve. If a soldier handled the weapons really well, with expertise, care and skill, he would often be rewarded double rations of food. If he were poor in handling his weapons, his rations may be cut back or

replaced with something less tasty: wheat instead of barley. The soldiers were forced to learn and become skilled with the three main weapons of the Roman Army: the *gladius*, the *pilum*, and the *pugio*.

The *pilum* was the javelin thrown into enemy ranks. Legionaries would throw it at the enemy as they charged; the javelins were not designed for hand-to-hand fighting, and so were discarded when close combat became the rule of the day. The main purpose of the *pilum* was to disrupt the enemy's defense, slash through their ranks, throw out confusion and chaos. The enemy would be too focused on avoiding the hurling javelins that they wouldn't realize the Romans were charging! By the time the enemy would re-organize, the Romans would be upon them! If one were hit by a *pilum*, it could do some serious damage: the thinner top section would crumple into you on impact, and removing it would be very painful. If the javelin hit you in a fatal area, you would literally bleed to death on the battlefield as the war raged around you.

The *gladius* was the main weapon of the Roman soldier come close combat. The sword was razor-sharp, but was used more for thrusting than for cutting – though a cut could be just as deadly. The sword was the lifeblood of the Roman soldier. If a Roman soldier lost their sword, they were as good as dead. Yet even without a sword, they could turn to the *pugio*, the small dagger used in combat if no other weapons could be scavenged.

A Roman soldier was also trained to use the *scuta* shield for both attack and defense. In attacking, the Roman could use the boss template to smash the enemy or use the sharp edges to deliver deadly blows. In defense, the shield could withstand arrow attacks – especially in *testudo* formation – and could also hold its sway against the spears and swords of the enemy. The shield was four feet high, two and a half feet wide, and curved; it could be held against the body as artificial armor if all else was lost.

A Roman soldier lived and died by the sword. Unlike the Greeks or Egyptians, the Romans could not rely on a blanket of spears to keep them safe. Of all genius military tactics, the Romans never fully adopted the use of the phalanx, even when they easily could have given their *triarii* or *auxilaria* spearmen longer spears and teach them how to hold the phalanx. The Roman soldier had to rely on his skills with the sword and shield, his own courage and hardened discipline – all of this operating in concert.

The vigorous training of the Roman soldier did, if anything at all, turn him into a boy into a man. Turned him from a wine-loving, girl-chasing, party-animal to a merciless killing machine. Such was the riddle of the glory of Rome.

This training Antonius remembered too well. His father had taken him to the camp at the age of twelve, and he had watched in awe the trainees fighting each other with wooden shields. His father, faction leader and General, enabled Antonius to be placed within the First Legion, and as his skills improved, he scaled the ladder of military offices, eventually reaching the commander of the First Legion, even before he'd tasted real combat. He remembered very well riding alongside Helonius into the quiet fishing town of Segesta; excitement, fear, exhilaration, wondering if he'd be able to fight – all this ran through him like a cold blade. He wondered if he would be able to do it when someone – a son, brother or father – would die because of it. He had pushed these thoughts from his mind and let honed instincts overtake. He had come out victorious, even though he'd been dismounted. In battles, one's heart beats faster, blood runs hotter, and Antonius, watching the training, longed for battle again – and feared he would never taste such a beautiful providence.

Celesta noticed his lust for the chaos of battle even more, perhaps, than Antonius recognized it himself. She would find him standing before his desk, eyes craned upwards, at his father's sword mounted above a desk strewn with papers needed reviewing and signing, a desk covered with quills and ink bottles, rolled parchments and unlit candles. His eyes would run over the sparkling blade, salivating, remembering it as it looked when covered with blood, as it looked covered in Silvanus' blood. The sword, in some mystical way, would call to him speak his name, and he'd crunch his fists together in a ball, fighting down the passion.

Celesta evolved from the comforted to the comforter, wrapping her arms around him, speaking lightly against the back of his neck: "Forget it. Things have changed."

He would turn from her, take her hands, face her, look into her dove eyes. "I cannot forget." His eyes spoke volumes of pain, the pain of a lover who cannot touch the beloved, someone enflamed with passion but locked in a cold, dark cellar with no hope of escape. The passion does not die. "The gods have cursed me."

Celesta would smile, something so unseen, and she would speak lowly, in whispers, barely audible, but his ears would engulf them. “Perhaps this is a blessing in disguise?” He looked at her with curiosity, demanding to know how she could say such a thing when his soul were completely overtaken. She would read his eyes and respond, “Your passion doubles everyday, every hour. It is overcoming you and you cannot stop it. You think it is a curse, but perhaps it is truly a blessing, because the hour of your abandoning the sword has yet to come.”

II

Summer progressed by the calendar, but Fall seemed to be coming early. One morning a wicked frost covered the ground, and the farmer’s were complaining about it destroying some of the tender crops. Citizens were caught completely unprepared, all the winter clothes stashed away. Cellars were entered and basements dug out, crates dragged from closets; heavier clothes were drawn out as the temperature dropped from the eighties into the seventies, then, almost overnight, plunged into the sixties. Had they been returning from last winter, it would’ve felt warm; but with summer so recent, the air felt gnawing to the bone; everyone complained. Celesta had reason to stay inside; she did not go out onto the balcony, but closed the doors, sometimes going out and watching in dismay as the flowers, despite everything the servants did, began to wilt. Some began to suspect it were a sign from the gods, a warning to Rome: something horrible was about to happen and soon. The more superstitious residents packed their bags, gathered the families, and headed out of the city. But for most, life continued as usual, except only a little colder.

Celesta smiled at Antonius when he returned home early one afternoon. She stood to embrace him and ask if he wanted to order something nice to eat, but when he did not return the smile, she sent her gaze up to his eyes, reading them. “What’s wrong? What’s happened?” A quiet part of her remembered the wizards and cracks on the streets hollering about the early autumn being some forewarning from the gods, some malicious omen. Now she ran over to him, embracing his hands, feeling the warmth fled from them, and asked again, “What’s wrong? Please, tell me!”

He led her to a wooden couch laden with pillows, and they sat down. She took his hand again, and he let her hold it. She could read a troubled heart within. Finally, after many moments of compiling his thoughts, he spoke. “On my way to

the chamber after lunch, some soldiers approached me. A rider from the frontier has arrived.” Now he faltered for a moment. “Decimus went again seven thousand Gallic barbarians. We killed most of them and some prisoners are now in the camp.” She waited to hear the bad news. “A third of the legion was killed.”

“How many?”

“Over a thousand,” he said in a low voice.

She bit her lip. For all the might of Rome, one thousand trained killers fell to untrained savages? She wanted to ask, “How?” but refused.

He continued. “Another third has been wounded and are out of action. The legion has erected a fort several miles from the battleground, to keep away from potential diseases spread by the bodies and by scavengers. That leaves only a little over one thousand able-bodied soldiers, and Decimus says the Gauls were not regulars hired by the King. They were just boys and men drawn from various towns and tribes throughout Gaul. He is demanding two legions join him to make a Task Force. He expects... He only expects it to get harder, much harder.”

“Have you sent the dispatches, then?”

“My military advisors are meeting with me in an hour or two. I just needed to come home, wind down...” He stood, walked about the living room, pacing fast, head swimming. Celesta watched him move. Suddenly he turned towards her, eyes livid. “If I had only been there, if I had been leading the troops, if I had been calling the shots, then wouldn’t have happened! I love Decimus like a brother, but what was he *thinking*? He bluntly sent our soldiers into battle. He sent me his battle plans. They were uncalculated and poor. Perhaps he has been blinded by the common-folk calling the Gauls weak and cheap inferiors to Roman civilization. How could he forget that the Gauls are bloodthirsty, clever, skilled? If I would’ve just *been* there, Celesta-“

“Then more men would’ve died,” she said slowly, shocking him. “You forget how stubborn you are. You would never have even *considered* retreat. You would’ve sent the rest of the Army in and maybe two thousand would’ve died.”

“No,” he said coolly. “I would’ve devised a strategy that is *sound* and *reasonable*.”

Celesta’s fingers curled over one another. “Why don’t you appoint someone to look after the House issues for a little while, maybe escape to the frontier, speak with Decimus, tell him what you are telling me. Maybe even lead the next battle, show him how it’s done?”

The idea made him salivate, but he shoved it down, giving it not a second thought. "Celesta, I could never do that. I would be leaving you alone. You are a sister to me, and I would feel better being condemned for treason than for abandoning you."

Her eyes narrowed. "Don't say anything like that again."

He continued to pace. "The gods have placed me here. I know this for a fact. The gods have looked upon me and dealt my hand *here*, a politician in the Senate. I must honor the gods and not defy their wishes. If I were to go against the wishes of the gods, I would send many more boys to their graves. Besides, Celesta, I cannot leave. What happens if I appoint someone who locks onto greed just as Silvanus did? No accidents like that are worth the risk."

A moment passed. "Then what are you going to do?"

He stopped pacing, hands on his hips, and sighed, looking at her, desperation etched into every line on his face. "Get ready for a bigger war."

III

Antonius greeted the military advisors upon entering the dimly lit room, and nodded to the leaders of the House of Brutii and the House of Scipii, hiding his surprise at their coming. He did not go to their military meetings, why must they bother him at his? He did not complain. He acknowledged their presence and said nothing more. Small windows at the top of the room let in cold summer air, making goose-bumps shiver upon the gathered men's skin. A canvas map was rolled out upon a table, revealing the wide expanse of the known world.

The barbaric Britons occupied the islands to the northwest, and beneath them spread the Germanians and the Spaniards. Across the small strait Ibericum Mare lay the lands of Carthage; Carthage stretched to the east, meeting the borders of Egypt in the wild deserts, directly south from Rome in its Latin peninsula. Egypt spread farther east, brushing shoulders with the empire of Parthia. The Scythians, Macedonians, the Greek Cities, Dacia and Thrace spread out in a carpet towards Rome, wrapping around giant Internum Mare, a great sea holding the islands of Sardinia and Sicilia, both controlled by Carthage (except Rome had a small piece of Sicilia). North of Rome ran the frontier, and against the mountains of Cisalpine Gaul lay Mediolanum, the Gallic capital and residence of the Gallic King who held the Gallic and Celtic tribes in his grip. The military advisors pointed to the province of Liguria, home to Segesta and the location of the idle first legion. The

House of Julii controlled the southern provinces of Eiruria, Venetia and Umbria; Venetia was covered with green forests and laced with farms and homesteads, on the fringe of the frontier. The second legion, the advisors pointed out, lay between the Liguria and Venetia, settled firmly in the Gallic province of Cisalpine Gaul. The Romans had entered the land of the barbarians, so there was no way of turning the attack into an act of defense. The Army was miles into Gallic territory. It was a long way, the advisors said, to Mediolanum, despite the map portraying it as a short distance. Much more opposition would be met before the fringes of the Gallic city came into view.

As Antonius tried to devise a strategy, Cicero, the leader of the House of Brutii, spoke up. "My twelfth legion can go to Gaul at your bidding. We are eager to do our part in the Gallic war."

Antonius looked up, knowing full well his intentions. Stake some glory in the Gallic battles, seize some rights to the Gallic land following its capture. He understood very well why Cicero and Dionysius, the Scipii faction leader, were present. These golden emblems, models of all stately politicians, made Antonius sick. "We do not need any help, but we thank you for your assistance. Besides," he couldn't help but add, "I think you have your hands full in Carthage. Triremes just keep coming back with the wounded and you aren't able to replace the soldiers fast enough. You've made no ground against the city of Carthage, your forces are growing weaker, Carthage is growing stronger, and you're saying you can help us out. No, thank you. For the sake of Rome, stay where you are." He returned his eyes to the map.

Red blushed over Cicero's face. Dionysius said, "Antonius, Dacia has all but fallen to our troops. We are right now in the middle of negotiating for Dacia's surrender to Rome as a protectorate. I regret that many lives have been lost, but Roman power has overcome. Unlike Cicero, I have the ability to lend you a legion – or two – if you so desire. I have already dispatched to legions into Carthage to help in the war effort there."

"Then you are a fool," Antonius said, "for ignoring the Macedonian threat. Alexander the Great was not the only great warrior to spawn in those lands. Rumor has it that a General Alypius has hundreds of thousands of elite spearmen ready to march and defend Dacia if it is resorted to surrender. Their alliance is tight, as blood runs between them. You think Macedon will back down to Rome?" He laughed. "The Macedonians thirst for war just as much as the Senate does. They may go to war even if Dacia refuses to surrender. Yet you keep ignorantly

thinning your forces. It's going to cause you much pain if you don't straighten out. Both you and Cicero are wading in holes of human waste. I'd like to keep my sandals clean, thanks."

Before he could return to the map, Cicero growled, "Don't pretend like you're situation is much better. One of your legions has all but been decimated. We offer help and you shove us down."

"Offer it out of the sincerity of your heart, and maybe I'll consider. I've seen what greed can do." Nonchalantly, "It killed my father, after all."

Cicero and Dionysius said nothing, just looked at each other. The military advisors were silent. Antonius felt proud of making them feel so awkward, and returned his eyes to the map. He soon raised his head, said to the faction leaders, "I have the forces to handle this problem. We are doing well. We've captured Segesta and have legions ready to move. Thank you for your eagerness to help but it won't be necessary. Please, from the depths of my heart, do what you can in Carthage and Dacia."

They gave the cordial good-byes and slipped from the room.

One of the advisors smirked. "Only Cicero has fought in battle before."

"Really?" Antonius asked, surprised. "He seems a coward."

"I don't think he actually *fought*. His back turned to the enemy much quicker than normal." He pointed to the map. "Time is pressing, General. What are your orders? We have our own plans, but we are not fools. You know the land better than we do. You are better at strategy. We may have fought in many more battles than you, but it is not physical strength we need right now. It is wit. Uncanny wit, at that. What are your orders?" The three of them stood ready to receive them; one held a quill dipped in ink, a piece of parchment waiting to be written upon.

Antonius walked around the map. "How does this sound? General Decimus wants two legions. Since we don't have to spare any for Brutii or Scipii, we can easily afford that. The first legion will remain in Segesta, but let's send this sixth legion there as well. Be quiet about it, too. The fifth and eleventh legions are close to Decimus, so we'll set them up in a Gallic town and link them together. They will march forward ten days later."

The advisor cocked an eyebrow. "Ten days? That will give the enemy ample time--"

"This is true. *But*, look here." He pointed to the map. "There are five legions stationed in Venetia alone. Let's send two of them, the fourteenth and twelfth, west towards Mediolanum. At the same time, we will have two of our frontier

legions, the ninth and sixteenth, marching east to Mediolanum. The ten day grace period will give the other two task forces to the east and west time to get in position and start marching to Mediolanum; they have more ground to cover. Then Decimus and the two legions with him will begin the march north. Our three-head attack will spread the King's forces thin, and even if he lodges his main body against Decimus – or anyone else for that matter – we will still have two more task forces on the move. We will be closing a noose around the King, and it will tighten right around the capital. This gives us thirty one thousand trained Roman soldiers marching into Gaul. We will put other legions on alert, so, if necessary, we can draw up anywhere from one hundred to five hundred thousand soldiers. I don't think that will be needed, though." He shook his head, agreeing with himself. "We should easily be able to take the town and force a national surrender to Rome."

The advisors grinned. "We shall send the dispatches immediately."

Antonius leaned against one of the walls of the giant tower rising above the main city gates. The farms with their immaculate fields stretched like a spread-eagled virgin before him, and to the east and west, following much-traveled dirt roads, lay ports that would cough up ships to Segesta and Patavium, in Venetia. Beneath him, dozens of horses galloped through the gates, some going west, others east, others north, kicking up trails of dust as they ran hard. He felt a grim exhilaration, an ungodly excitement. How he wished he were one of those riders, not cooped up in the dull rain of politics. He wondered if he *weren't* cursed, if just for a moment, but he told himself not to think about it, watching the horses vanish upon the horizon. *The gods have put you here for a reason. Be patient – in time, that reason will shine forth its true colors.*

A voice behind him. A soldier said, "General, sir?"

Antonius turned. "Am I needed in the Senate?" He prayed no.

The soldier shook his head. "I've been looking all over for you. Your mistress seeks you."

"Mistress?" he asked, bewildered. He had no- "Oh. Celesta. No, she's not my mistress."

He did not faze. "She needs you immediately, sir. It is very urgent."

She had never called on him before. "You have my thanks. Now, get my horse."

Were it possible, he would've sworn the air grew even colder again and remained.

IV

She sat in the living area, masked by the shadows. Antonius entered quickly, tightening his tunic about him, and advanced towards her. He could see her shaking hard, and when he knelt down beside her, she looked up, eyes bloodshot and stained with tears, cheeks a ghastly purple from such hard crying. Her throat seemed to vibrate and she looked upon Antonius, eyes a well of desperation unfulfilled. Antonius did not think, simply acted; he wrapped his arms around her waist and pulled her to the floor, holding her there against the couch, feeling her shudder beneath him. She cried softly into his shoulder, breath tingling his neck, and he could feel the cold coming in from the balcony, the door wide open. She wore her night robes, now stained in sweat, and her face felt cold to the touch, clammy. She swallowed a few times, trying to regain composure, and he forced himself to break the silence, asked, "What happened? Is it Helonius?" He hoped the man's name would not bring on a fresh torrent of tears.

She pulled away; his hands remained on her shoulders, and she stroked both his arms, long molasses hair dangling mangled in front of her forlorn eyes. She spoke, voice shaky and fluttering, as a baby tries to breathe amidst violent sobbing. "No... I had a... I had the most horrible dream." She started to cry again, leaning forward; Antonius embraced her.

"What kind of dream? We should talk about it, it will help calm you down."

"It is the most terrible dream I could ever have," she stammered, slowly pulling away once more. Antonius waited. She took several deep breaths. "I was giving birth to my baby, and it was in here, in my room, on my own bed. And all around me there arose a chorus of screams, and I felt the worst sorrow I'd ever felt, a desolation even worse than losing my husband, and every part of me wanted to curl up and die. I did not see in the dream, I could only hear and feel the emotion. But I knew I was holding my baby... And the baby lay curled in a fetal position, dead."

She started crying again, and Antonius drew her against him, kissed her chilly forehead, stroked the silky hair dense with cold sweat; she cried into his shoulder, and he peered over her head, to the sword over the desk, the sword once drenched with blood, and he heard it so real, so audible, and his heart jumped at its sound: the sword itself whispered his name.

Chapter Seven: The Rise of the Warrior

I

Gentle snowflakes came with the morning. The nightly guards on the latest shift told the waking soldiers that while the night had been silent, except for some rustling in nearby fields – “village kids” – the dark clouds had gathered, the storm had gathered above. Decimus set out the decree that they were going to weather out the storm in the fort, and consequently sent out some of his legion to strip the rest of the field of its wheat. Marcellus, Quintus and Tiberius were called to the general’s tent, along with several other leading Romans; the first, second and third hastati had been assigned the harvesting duties. The word spread and soldiers grumbled – they just wanted to stay by the fire in the fort, not work their hands off in the deepening cold.

In several minutes, one thousand eight hundred Romans had dressed in their battle armor and grabbed their swords and shields. To leave the fort without the sword and shield and Roman helmet was an outrage against Rome itself. Most of the soldiers left their javelins at the tent, and the commanders, knowing Decimus would keep no record, said nothing. Marcellus barked out orders and a handful of soldiers pushed wagons with the cohorts.

Gallic men, women and children were working in the fields, tilling the soil, tending their cattle. The legionaries felt their hearts burn; such rural life reminded them of the homes they’d left behind. The dirt path, caked in frost and slashed ice, wound between course fields and murky forest, until finally reaching the stripped field.

The soldiers with the wagons let the wagons go. The men of the cohorts planted their standards in the ground, did the same with their swords, leaned their shields against them, and removed their helmets. The wagons were raided, soldiers taking up scythes, wicker baskets and empty sacks. They spread out amongst the rows of wheat stalks, cutting and collecting, chattering and laughing among themselves as they worked, closely supervised by their commanders, who soon told them to shut up if they became too rowdy.

Marcellus chatted with Tiberius and Quintus for a few moments, all the while feeling the burning cold cutting through the dense woods facing the ravaged field. Marcellus pulled the tunic under his armor tighter, goose-bumps rattling up and down his arms.

A superior officer spat, "Centurions! Walk the lines!"

The three of them nodded and spread out. Marcellus walked over the barren field, dodging tossed and crumpled stalks. His boots crunched in a thin layer of thickening snow. The wind grew heavier, the air nipplier. He glanced over his shoulder and saw plumes of smoke rising from the fort. Heat. How much longer, he wondered as he watched the curling smoke, would he have to stand and watch these soldiers-turned-gatherers...

He heard the cutting of air and muffled shouts. He slowly turned his head to see soldiers scrambling away from the woods. Javelins lie embedded in the earth. A soldier was screaming, grabbing at his leg, blood gushing all over the sacks of wheat. Another soldier loped away from the woods, one hand resting on his back, the other on his stomach; blood seeped between fingers of both hands. Marcellus glared over to Tiberius and Quintus; Tiberius stood stock-faced, staring at the trees; Quintus was running for the piles of weapons, as were the other soldiers. Marcellus looked over at the trees just in time to see another foray of javelins open up from the breadth of the trees and land amongst the scattering Romans. A Roman fell with a grunt, shoulder spliced open. He lay groveling in the chopped field, cursing and trying to pull the javelin from his flesh. A friend rushed to help him – and the forest exploded.

Terrifying war cries echoed over the foothills and hundreds of Gauls streaked in green woad war paint, carrying axes and swords and spears, gushed from the trees. The Romans closest to the trees were soon overtaken, swarmed over; they collapsed, screaming for help, as they were beaten and bloodied to death by the enemies' weapons.

Marcellus fell into tunnel vision and he saw the hundreds of Gauls rushing over the field right at him, their eyes ablaze with unquenchable fury.

The superior centurion hollered, "To arms! To arms!" A horn call floated over the soldiers.

Romans grabbed swords and javelins. Marcellus ran for his weapons, blending in with the other soldiers. Marcellus ripped a sword from the earth, picked up a javelin.

Tiberius ran through the throngs of frightened, disillusioned soldiers: "Form the lines! Form the lines!"

Soldiers grabbed their red shields, gleaming with the emblem of Julii, and faced them towards the enemy.

Marcellus grabbed a shield and held it against him, blocking off the cold. The Gauls were halfway across the field.

Tiberius glanced over at Marcellus, then dropped into the rough formation. Roman lines were drawn; they formed together, pressing their shields side-to-side, forming a wall against the edge of the field, many lines deep, stretching the entire edge of the field. A wall of shields and swords and javelins. Marcellus sheathed his short sword and drew his javelin, ordering the other soldiers to do the same. He rose his javelin into the air. Adrenaline shot through him; the Gauls pulsed, a living organism, only a few hundred meters away. More were coming from the woods. Thousands upon thousands of Gauls. A trumpet rang out behind them, and a horse galloped towards the fort.

“Hastati!” Marcellus hollered. “Aim your javelins!”

The Gauls’ eyes burnt with crimson rage.

The Gauls were nearly upon them – fifteen meters.

“In the name of Rome!” Marcellus screamed, “Fire!”

Hundreds of javelins arched from the Roman lines, dropping into the Gauls. Gauls were thrown backwards, dropped to the ground, howling and twisting. The entire front line of Gallic warriors fell into the snow-burnt fields. The rest leapt over the javelin-pierced bodies and charged the wall of shields.

“Draw your swords!” Marcellus roared. The first three lines drew their swords; the others pulled out javelins and threw them over the heads of their comrades, raining into the enemy. Still more came from the woods.

Energy coursed through Marcellus’ blood; the world became stark and clear, beautiful and translucent; he saw the Gauls, some bloodied by the javelins, only meters away. Everything hovered in slow motion. A deep romance melted his heart, fueled by an uncontainable hatred. The sword’s hilt was cold in his hands. He locked eyes with one of the Gauls and gave a ferocious stare; he braced his shield forward, readied for impact. Peace enveloped him. Not even a drop of fear. *Come, my brethren.*

The Gallic lines smashed into the Romans and hell unleashed.

Decimus raced up the steps of the rampart and looked out over the woods to the snowy dust cloud rising at the foraging site. His wanton glare smothered into a grimace and he grabbed a lieutenant. “Order the cavalry to mount! Bring me my sword! Open the gates! Set the rest of the legion on alert! Sound the horns!” Trumpets cried out over the encampment.

Marcellus' shield fell against him, bruising his arm. He grunted and pushed back; he saw the ragged hair of a woodland soldier and pushed the shield harder; the man fell backwards and Marcellus drove the bottom of the shield into his feet. The man fell and the Roman beside Marcellus stabbed him with his sword. Marcellus smashed his shield into the oncoming Gauls, throwing them tumbling back, faces bloodied by the brass boss. He used the edges of the shield and the boss to knock the enemy back, and he gripped the sword and stabbed it over the shield or around its sides. The tip penetrated the flesh of the enemy, drawing blood and splicing muscle and organs. The soldiers would fall at his feet and he'd work to avoid tripping over the bodies.

The Gauls tried to wedge between the shields, only to catch swords in their necks and faces. Yet not the entire Roman line was holding. Gaps formed and the Gauls swarmed, striking with their woodland weapons: axes and crude swords, spears shining in the falling snow. A break in the Roman lines formed and the Roman soldiers had to break their wall of shields and assault the enemy; Gauls leapt against the shields, clambering over, driving their weapons down into the helmets, shoulders and faces of the Roman soldiers. The two armies mixed together, the sounds of bitter struggle and spilt blood staining the cold songs of birds flittering between the trees.

Marcellus glanced over and saw the Gauls spreading between the ranks. Some of these boys had never seen real combat before, and some fought well – and others died just as well. Marcellus turned back the Gauls rushing his side of the line, and with a horrendous cry, screeched, "Rome!" He thrust himself forward, stepping over the bodies of fallen Gauls and Romans, and threw his shield against the nearest charging Gaul. The Gaul flew back, the shield shook, and Marcellus drove the sword down into the bare-chested man's gullet. He ripped the sword from the man's throat and blood spurted onto his pants. He rushed over the body and into another Gaul, hurling him down with the shield boss. The other Romans around him let out a war cry and charged, and together they met the second charge of the Gallic barbarians.

Blood smeared Marcellus' shield. His chest quaked with each intense breath. Sweat dripped into his eyes, nearly frosting in the bitter cold. The blood spilt in the husked wheat steamed in the belligerent snow. Weapons fell from loose hands, and bodies crumpled to the earth. The teenager beside Marcellus shrieked as a sword pierced his throat; blood sprayed all over Marcellus, and Marcellus

hurled his shield against the attacker, at the same time driving his sword into the Gaul's face. The Gaul grunted and tottered, dropping his bloodied spear; the Roman fell to his knees, clawing at his throat; he locked eyes with Marcellus in a desperate plea for life, and yet Marcellus gave him no comfort: he turned his head and struck again. The Gauls never let up; each one felled was replaced by a dozen more in its place.

Boys became men. Acne-ridden, red-faced, plush children from Roman provinces really, for the first time, became men that day. They watched as their friends fell, torn apart and pierced. They themselves delivered lethal blows, sent men down to the ashes, watched them howl and cry, and knew, *I did this. My own hand, stained in blood – not the waters of the ocean can wash the guilt from my hands.* And so they fought, no hands barred, nothing to lose. Some hated it – others loved it. Some did it out of passion; others to simply survive another day. The Roman cohorts stepped over the fallen and pushed the Gauls back towards the tree line.

Marcellus cursed as an axe blade slashed his arm. He stumbled backwards, cursed under his breath, and hurled his sword into the enemy's chest; the enemy pulled away, and he struck again. The enemy fell to his side, and Marcellus, gasping in agony, bent over and sent the sword through flesh, rupturing internal organs. The Gaul cried out in a foreign tongue; Roman soldiers rushed past, leaping for the tree line amongst scattering Gauls. Marcellus looked back and to the side; where the Gauls had bent the Roman wall back, now they just lie in the field. The Roman soldiers there, too, were pressing the Gauls back; the Gallic line bent deeper into the field at that position, and Marcellus' maniacal brain calculated. He screamed, "Follow me! Follow me!"

The Gauls fighting in the bend tripped over fallen comrades and ran helter-skelter for the trees. Suddenly the tree line shattered as hundreds of Roman shields and swords cut them off. The Gauls held their weapons stiff and came to a halt. About forty of them huddled together. Hundreds of Roman soldiers formed a circle and enclosed them, raised their shields. They slowly began to march inwards, tightening the noose. The Gauls sweated, standing amongst slush-red snow, bodies and weapons scattered. Beyond the noose, nearly a thousand Roman soldiers chased the remnants of the Gallic ambush into the trees. The sound of flaring hooves shook the trees and the cavalry tore across the field which now lay under a carpet of thousands of Roman and Gallic corpses.

Hope fluttered back into Marcellus as the cavalry rushed past, chasing the Gauls into the trees. Decimus' cavalry would run down any Gauls who did not surrender. Bodies lay all over the field, some steaming from the touch of hot blood in the stark-cold air. Marcellus brutally ignored the searing pain of his arm and led the circlet to close around the Gauls. He ordered the Romans to stop; a defiant and angry *Hurrah* issued out, and the shields formed a brute perimeter around the circle. The Gauls stared at all the Roman soldiers.

Marcellus ordered, "Drop your weapons!" He spoke Latin. They would understand that.

They did not move.

"Drop them!"

Swears ran out between them, and someone shouted an order, and the Gauls dropped their weapons to the ground.

A soldier beside Marcellus muttered, "Sir, you have found your glory."

The cavalry sent up clouds of snow, the hooves trampled bodies, broke swords, snapped spears and shields, rushed between the trees. Cries ran through the fleeting Gauls as they hurried for the river, stumbling through dry thickets and brambles. Thorns and branches drew deep welts and bloody lines on their bare bodies, ears shook with the distant victory chants of the Romans, and the earth beneath them shuddered as if the gates of Hades were swallowing them up. Snow fell from the trees, limbs shuddering under the heavy charge of the Roman Praetorian cavalry. Gauls found themselves trampled underfoot or cut down by the sword, only to be trampled as they lie bleeding and broken in the woodlands. The Gauls reached the river and dove into icy waters, throwing off their weapons, swimming. Some made it; for others, the cold took charge, intensified their wounds, drowned them in the waters. The Roman cavalry reached the river, watching as the Gauls clambered along the opposite bank and staggered into the bordering woods, shivering and nearly unconscious because of the dripping ice water and arctic temperatures.

A lieutenant told Decimus, "Sir, there is a bridge just up the river! We can ride the rest down."

The general heard the victory cries back at the field. "There is no need. We no doubt have prisoners. And those barbarians will freeze to death before they reach anyplace safe." He gave out the order and one hundred fifty horses turned and

trotted back into the woods. "What a miserably cold summer. It feels like winter out here."

One of the last horseman to depart glanced over his shoulder and saw a Gaul fall into the snow on the opposite bank, overtaken by the cold, and slip into unconsciousness. A friend of the fallen man knelt down next to him and sobbed into his ear, and looking back at the departing Romans, cursed them for all the wicked they'd brought. That last Roman knew, more real than ever, that it was Rome who had invaded; Rome who had brought on the rape of the children, the enslavement of the men, and death to the children; these barbarians were not mercenaries fighting for money, but husbands and brothers fighting for freedom, fighting for justice over innocent lives taken. The Roman closed his eyes, turned his head, and trotted back into the forest, not allowing his eyes to explore the fallen Gauls trampled down in the snow, lying twisted and broken, legacies of shattered lives and a ruined land.

II

The soldier who had remained inside the fort crowded the ramparts and the gate as the hastati and cavalry re-entered, weary and bloodied. Marcellus' hand slapped over his arm, blood coming up between the fingers; with each heartbeat the pain intensified; he gritted his teeth, the stinging cold making him sick. All around him soldiers marched, no longer in formation, carrying their shields and swords and javelins. Some cavalry soldiers walked beside their horses, eyes hidden in the shadow of the helmet, bodies lain over the horse, bodies dressed in blood-soaked armor. Friends carried the fallen, saying nothing; the fallen would lay upon their shield, and one soldier would take the front and the other the rear, and they carried them into the fort, dressed in grave silence.

Decimus was the last to enter, encouraging the wounded troops who were able to walk, even if the pace was slow and ragged. He went quickly to the hospital set inside the encampment; throwing open the entrance, he entered into a horrible scene: men were screaming as doctors went to work cutting off limbs or digging into wounds to retrieve shards of metal; men bit down upon wooden stakes and balled their fists, cursing as the pain traveled through them. Blood fell upon the floor in torrents; several men passed on, and Decimus knew their numbers were quickly dwindling. He still waited for word from Rome. Several doctors with bloodied hands were attending to a soldier whose chest had been opened by a

scythe blade, the skin curled back to reveal red muscle and pale rib bones. Decimus knew he would not make it. When he tried to look into the man's eyes, all he received were the whites: he had already gone unconscious. Decimus took several towels and bent over, trying to wipe up the blood, but it only drenched the towels and spread the stain. He turned his head and stood; the doctors stared at him. He said nothing and moved away.

Marcellus sat near the back of the hospital, leaning against a wooden post. Doctors had splashed alcohol in his wound and were now stitching it up; the piercing of the needle made him want to pass out, made him want to die, but he kept his eyes trained forward, stoic, bearing through it, knowing it would be better in the morning. It would itch like crazy, but it would begin to heal. A face passed before his view and he turned his eyes to Decimus, who steadily approached.

Marcellus managed a crooked smile, said, "I really don't know what to say."

Decimus stood before him. "It's okay. I know you're faking it. The smile."

Marcellus shrugged; the doctor told him not to move. He apologized. "What are the numbers?"

"One hundred seventeen dead," he answered. "A lot more wounded. What happened to you?"

"Axe blade," he replied. "It will heal, though. My arm is still strong. What have you done with the prisoners?"

"They are safe," Decimus said. "They will be interrogated and held until we can send them to Rome. My bet is Antonius will have them executed, or sent over to Egypt as slaves."

Marcellus grunted, needle going through his skin. "How did this happen? The scouts--"

"I sent the scouts out this morning. They found nothing. I don't think they searched."

"They were hiding in the woods. They blended in."

"I know. I know." He sat down beside him. "Were any of your fellow centurions killed?"

"I don't know. I lost track of Tiberius and Quintus. I heard Quintus was injured in the face."

"I will ask around and be sure to tell you."

Marcellus nodded. "I would appreciate that, General."

"Do you realize how thinned out we are? Over half of our Army is crippled. And we haven't even hit the regular Gallic Army yet." He shook his head, cursing

everything he knew. "You begin to wonder what we're doing here. Why has the Senate sent us here? Yes, we know all too well the political answers. Food for the Romans, land for the Romans, a greater expanse of Roman glory and honor. What they don't let you know is their agenda of revenge. That's what this is all about. Just getting revenge for what the Gauls have done to us in the first two wars, and, sadly, even in peacetime."

"Revenge," Marcellus said grimly, "is a meal best served cold."

Decimus winced. "I am here because I was ordered to be here, not because I have some avenging agenda to play out. Let the Senate go to war with who they want *why* they want. I don't care. It's pointless to me. But their case is revenge, and they are fools for sending in one legion to bring revenge. How can they expect us not to be decimated? We are stuck in the middle of the Gallic frontier and there are Gallic warriors surrounding us in every direction. We are freezing, hungry, and everyone wants to go home."

"If it counts as anything," the boy breathed, "I do not want to go home."

"Many men would take their wounds and call it a day, go back home to the farm."

"And that is why no one will remember their names."

Decimus smiled. "Can you ride?"

Marcellus blinked. "Why? Yes, I can ride, General."

"You did an amazing job today. If you wouldn't have led the counter-charge, we would've been completely wiped out. They'd be running their spears into our fort. Antonius would send up some scouts to find out what we were up to and all he'd find is a pile of charred wood and broken skeletons. I admire what you've done. I never thought you'd amount to anything. First time I saw you, I thought of you as soft and clean-cut. Hah! Look at you now. Your arm is bleeding all over the place and all you want is another stab at the enemy. Well, my friend, I have to say, your wish may be granted. This place is *crawling* with the Gauls, and we've either got to hook up with another Roman Army or high-tail it back to Rome. Either way, we probably won't be able to stay put. I want you to be my second-hand man. My right-hand. Ride beside me. Protect me. A personal bodyguard. I am not commanding you to accept this. Really, you'd probably find more action as a centurion, and that *is* what you want. But I consider you a friend, and my loyal bodyguard died in this morning's ambush. I grieve his loss tremendously, but I can't help but feel the voice of the gods pointing me to you. So I lay it before you; yes or no. It is your decision. My treatment of you will not hinge on your

decision. Whether you accept or decline, you are still one of the fiercest and brutal warriors I have ever been humbled enough to know.”

Marcellus listened, and looked away, feeling the silent doctor at work. Marcellus closed his eyes, mulling over every piece of it, seeking the gods’ guidance. He finally opened his eyes and said, “I accept. Give me a horse and a *spatha* sword. I will follow you and do my best to protect you, may the gods allow it. And bless it.”

Decimus stood, grinning ear-to-ear. “It will be done. Thank you, Marcellus.”

“I am honored, General.”

Decimus saluted; “Strength and honor.” Marcellus nodded his return and Decimus crept out. As he exited the hospital tent, a soldier was waiting for him.

“Sir,” he said. “An urgent message from General Antonius awaits you within your quarters.”

The rider lay upon Decimus’ bed, stripped of his clothing, attended to by frantic doctors. Decimus hovered over the man, whose eyes became a beady white, the sockets sunken and weathered; each breath tore through him, and his limbs shook; fingertips turned purple, chest a light blue hue, and his thighs rubbed raw from riding, he did not seem much to look at. The doctors’ eyes told the General that the man did not have long to live; Decimus admired the man’s strength and determination, riding so hard and so fast in such extreme cold. He knelt down next to the man and said, “What have you to tell me?”

The rider’s mouth moved, voice barely recognizable. “General Antonius sends his greetings...”

“Yes, yes. What commands?” He was impatient and hated it, but he could not lose this man before he received the orders.

The man’s head rolled to the side, eyes closed. His breathing labored.

Decimus knelt beside him, took a frostbitten hand. “Please. Speak to me. You cannot die now.”

The rider turned his head, neck muscles screeching; the General read a deep well of pain in the man’s eyes, and then the man said, “March your legion to the town of Sequini; you will be met...” He coughed, blood and snot coming from his mouth. An empathetic doctor calmly wiped the excess from the man’s lips, and he continued to speak. “There you will meet with the fifth and eleventh Julii legions, and from there will continue on to Mediolanum.” He said nothing more, just closed his eyes, breathing hard.

Decimus returned to his feet. The doctors shook their heads.

"Let him sleep," he said. He knew that when he returned to the tent after making his rounds and preparing for tomorrow's excruciating march, the rider would be gone, his cot would be clean, and all he'd have to worry about would be staying alive on the march to Sequini, twenty-two miles away.

Marcellus waited outside the General's tent; when Decimus exited, Marcellus stepped in front of him. "What news did the rider give?" he demanded.

Had he been any ordinary soldier, Decimus would've scorned him. But he knew the power found in the boy, and he knew the gods aligned alongside him. He looked into the boy's sapphire eyes and told him. "We're to march twenty-two miles tomorrow. It will be a two-day march, since we will have to carry the wounded. Please, Marcellus, pray: pray that we will survive the march tomorrow. The weather is cold, it is ungodly. It as if the gods are giving us an omen; we shall not live long."

"Our soldiers shall make it," Marcellus said. "For the gods favor me, and I will leave none behind." A quirky smile crossed his face. "I will force them to give us *all* favor."

"Do not tempt the gods."

"The gods," Marcellus growled, "serve *me*."

III

The mist came off the mountains, rolling down the wooded slopes and slinking between the trees; it came softly at first, then stronger, until the air seemed to vibrate with fog, a mirage of water vapor clinging to the armor of the three horses trotting between the dark trees. Sun barely broke the treetops, and any light coming through hastily became absorbed in the fog; from a distance, the miasma seemed to glow, as if saturated with angels, and all the trees became black silhouettes, sentinels in an unmoving army.

The horses glanced into the fog surrounding them, eyes wary as they trotted between the trees, crunching undergrowth underneath their hooves. The soldiers kept their shields close to them, eyeing the mist, imaginations playing with them: they could see figures running about within the vapor, dancing to and fro, but when they focused their eyes, there was nothing. None of them said anything; they simply held their spears tighter in their hands and felt the comfort of the

slashing sword on their hips. The horses breathed heavily, mane lowered, frantic eyes spinning between the murky trees. One of the soldiers stroked his horse, leaned over, whispered into her ear, promising everything was okay; yet his own eyes flickered amongst them, and each breath felt the tinge of water vapor entering the lungs. He knew the marching Roman Army was not far off, wished he were with them.

They peered into the trees and listened, but all they heard were the sighs of the wind, the chattering of the cold, and the horses weaving their way through the shallow forest undergrowth.

The horse's back lay covered in rawhide skins; netting on the rear flanks held numerous flasks, some filled with water and other hollow. The long mane fell unkempt about the stiff neck. Upon the horse, the rider in olive-green pants held by a tight leather belt scratched his bare arms, running his fingers over the cold muscle and the bristling hairs. Overtop a loose shirt he wore a rusted breastplate, the metal frosty with the summer's winter. Long blond hair fell about his neck, curling at the end, and a golden beard drew tight over his face; indigo eyes scolded under the knobbed iron helmet. Against his waist was a single crude dagger, and in his hand a five-foot spear with a one-foot-long metal spearhead. The jet-black horse made its way between the trees, all but utterly silent, and the rider pressed forward, searching with his eyes, tuning in with his ears. No sound came but that of the flasks jingling on the horse's flank.

The lead rider raised his hand, signaling a stop. The horsemen came to a halt, glancing at one another. The lead rider cocked his head over his shoulder and gave a symbol, telling them to hold back. They nodded, feeling blood run through them; the spears grew larger yet lighter in their hands, and the hilts of the swords appeared to glow. The lead rider gently kicked his horse, and the steed pushed into the fog; the two riders left behind watched as the horse and rider vanished into the mist, and they were left alone, only to their thoughts and the choking mist.

Massive trees slid by on either side, the trunks wrapped in shadows. Water droplets sparkled on his shield and spearhead, and the helmet felt icy against his brown hair. The horse shook its head, eyes blinking as they passed through a patch of dense mist that left the rider wiping his eyes, wondering how such

impenetrable fog could exist. Shaking his head, telling himself he was crazy, he began to turn the horse around; it was then that he heard it again. His ears trained in on the sound, and he tried to follow it with his eyes, but found himself staring into that godforsaken mist. Yes, he felt sure, knowing now his imagination did not have reign: there truly was something moving beyond the trees, something precise and cool, something jingling. He gripped the spear tight, glanced back the way he'd come, saw only mist, and pushed the horse forward.

The man who rode upon the horse draped in rawhide heard the patient steps coming towards him; immediately he stopped his horse and craned his mind towards that ever-approaching sound. It grew louder, the echo of twigs and weeds broken underfoot rising towards him with the mist. Surrounded by rising poplars, he held the six-foot-long spear in his hands and awaited, collectively patient as the rider drew near.

The scout pulled between the trees and the shape grew larger. He approached slower now, sweat beginning to form on his chilled brow. The shape refined itself as the mist departed, and the rider looked upon an abandoned horse, canteens dangling from its haunches; the neck bent over, the maw gently pulling at sprouts of weeds growing up from the ground. The rider drew a deep breath, heart hammering; just a stray, probably abandoned after the battle in the-

He turned his head as the shape flashed close; he could not lock on the figure before excruciating pain rammed through him, nailing his side with such an impact as to hurl him from the horse. As he spun through the air, hit the ground, and rolled against a tree, he wondered how hurt he'd really been; he'd felt no piercing at all. His head rolled to the side and he took a breath; that beckoned the first spasm of true, undeniable pain. He ceased breathing, the pain too much, and just moved his mouth. He forced himself to look at his side, and between matted ferns he could see blood coming from the chinks in his armor; he became aware that the pain ran the width of his body, and looking on the other side, he saw blood coming out there as well. The realization dawned on him slowly, and as it came, when he realized he would not survive, he could see the figure coming around his horse; a bloodied spear rest between his hands. The rider grimaced, looking into those wild eyes, and he screamed as loud as he could, ignoring the brilliant pain flashing between him.

The two riders heard the distant shriek, and without second thought, kicked their horses hard, sent them lunging forward. Trees whipped by on either side as they hugged the horses, kicking them harder. A second scream came, but this time it was cut off, ending in a ragged gurgling noise, the silence. The panting of the horses and the ground breaking underfoot were the only sounds to reach them, but they pushed all the harder, trees spinning in a macabre dancing all around.

Suddenly a shape came out of the poplars and they slowed to a trot; the horse of their friend, standing alone amidst a stand of trees. Lying on the ground, sprawled next to the gnarled roots of a tree, lay the rider, arms twisted violently. Blood formed twin pools on either side of him, and empty eyes rested above a hollow mouth in the shape of a shriek; the neck lay ragged and bloodied, pierced through by an invisible weapon. The rider did not breathe; the horse nibbled grasses nonchalantly.

The two riders looked at one another, wondering what to do, when they heard the rustling sound coming from the mist-enshrouded trees before them. One went to the right and the other moved forward, pacing slowly, spear ready to thrust at a split-second's notice. The trees thinned and he waded through long grass; against a backdrop of trees, surrounded in mist, was another horse with a tall rider, and a helmet foreign to Roman design.

The Roman scout hollered and kicked his horse in the side, trailing after the lone horsemen, long grass trampled beneath them. The lone rider's horse turned, and upon seeing the Roman descending, he kicked the horse hard, and furiously descended into the trees. The Roman yelled again, hollering some Latin incantation, and dove through the trees after the lone rider, only split-seconds behind him, following an ephemeral figure wrapped in fog.

The chase abruptly ended as the lone rider was wrenched off his horse, landing hard on his back amidst the trees. The horse shrieked and ran harder, vanishing. The Roman scout raced towards the man, who now tried to stand. A horse maneuvered in front of the fallen man, a spear pointed straight at his throat; the man lay back down, opening his leathery hands, just as the rider who'd been pursuing him came up. The two riders looked down at the panic-stricken man, exchanged a few words, and got to work.

IV

The day had been drenched in tension. Decimus rode with Marcellus behind him, walking the lines of the marching soldiers, the entire time watching the forest-cloaked sides of the slender road. Five hours of marching passed, and they covered a little under ten miles due to having to carry so many wounded. Other soldiers hobbled along, carrying themselves, going as fast as they could, but not fast enough. The General could feel anger welling within him: anger at the Senate, anger at the Gauls, anger at himself. Suddenly he wanted to be in the city of Rome again, doing paperwork; he realized now what it felt like to be one of the unlucky Generals who, despite the very best of intentions, leads all his men to the slaughter. He prayed he would be remembered for keeping these boys alive, not leading them to their deaths. He looked to Marcellus for comfort, whose features betrayed all sense of nervousness and fear, instead collecting a mural of peace and steadfastness.

After marching ten miles, Decimus ordered the fort to be built, and it was done by nightfall. Guards were posted to walk the ramparts and Decimus inquired as to where his scouts had run off to before reporting to him. The soldiers told him that the scouts had never returned. This news did not stir up any feelings of hope within him, and after excusing Marcellus to sleep, Decimus retired, listening to the wind, feeling the cold despite a fire cackling at his feet, and tried to fall into slumber, though knowing it would not happen. Every now and then a patrolling soldier would pass by his tent, and he'd hope it was a scout with good news: no news. But no such luck. His eyes began to close, frightful dreams of death and bloodshed passed before him, and he was ripped from all hope of sleep by someone standing next to him.

His eyes fluttered open and he asked, voice shaking, "What is it?"

The soldier said in a low voice, "The scouts have returned, sir. They request you immediately."

Relieved to hear the last few remaining scouts had returned, he took a vicious sigh of relief and said, "Dismiss them to sleep. I do not need a report. All is well."

The soldier squirmed. "Not all, General. One of our men was fallen by a barbarian."

Decimus leaned forward on his elbows, the embers of the fire casting off little light. "When?"

"A few hours ago. They were prepared to kill the man who did it, but the man offered them something precious."

"Tell me."

“He says he has the name of a spy. A turncoat within our own Army.”

Decimus let the words settle. “This barbarian, is he here? Within our camp?”

“Yes, sir.”

“Give me ten minutes.”

Several torches illuminated the tent, where an array of armed soldiers stood around a naked Gaul whose skin was beginning to turn purple from the cold. His teeth chattered, a symphony of pain, when Decimus entered. Marcellus stood in the shadows, having been summoned. The General saw the freezing Gaul and lashed out, “Get some clothes on him! Are we merciless, uncouth savages? It’s forty degrees outside and you’re dragging him around naked!” He looked over at Marcellus, who crossed his arms and showed no emotion.

Decimus marched past the guards as a cloak was brought out and wrapped around the Gaul. The man said thank you in a foreign tongue, and looked over as Decimus grabbed a wooden stool, drew it over, and sat beside him. The torchlight massaged their faces as Decimus spoke. “Are you hungry? No. Okay.” He took a breath, feeling the weight of all the eyes around him. “We have several more of your kin earlier. We killed them. We could not afford to have them marching with us. Perhaps you understand this? Do you?”

The Gaul nodded, fearful; his eyes showed it.

Decimus said, “Then listen to me carefully. I put a cloak around your shoulders so you can trust me. I offer you food – which you refuse – so you can trust me. I am a man of my word. Do not call my integrity into question. I promise to let you live if you tell me what you have to say. I will not promise that you will return to your homeland, but it is my solemn word that I will not allow you to fall to the Roman sword as long as you don’t raise one against us. If your Army overwhelms ours, you shall be relieved over to them. If not, you will probably be sent to Egypt as a slave. It is better than death, is it not?”

Nothing.

Decimus drew his *pugio* knife. “Or do you prefer death?”

The Gaul spoke in a tongue Decimus understood: “I desire life.”

“Good,” Decimus said, sliding the knife back into its scabbard. He leaned forward on the stool, peering directly into the barbarian’s eyes. “Then you will tell me who in my Army has turned his back on Rome. If you cannot give supple evidence, you will be executed without question. This is my word, and it will be so.”

The man looked about the guards, saying nothing.

Decimus stood, taking out his knife. "Hold him down," he announced. Guards moved forward.

The Gaul leapt up, splaying his arms. Soldiers drew their swords. Decimus smiled. The Gaul spoke in stumbling breaths: "I will give you a name! Please do not kill me!" Decimus waved his hand; the soldiers sheathed their swords and stepped back. Decimus did not put his knife away. The Gaul swallowed hard, nearly choking on his tongue, and gave a single name: Marcus Livius.

Decimus looked to the royal guards. "Who is this man?"

One of them said, "He is a private with the third triarii cohort."

"Wake him and bring him here!" Decimus ordered.

Two guards nodded and ducked out of the tent. Marcellus had not stirred.

Decimus let the torchlight sparkle on the blade of the dagger. "If you are lying, this shall find root in your gullet."

They did not have to ask if the charges were true; the eyes betrayed all sense of deception. Decimus bodily through the thirty-two year-old veteran onto the ground inside the tent, left him sprawled there on the cold grass. He stared upwards, mortified, knowing all too well the punishment for treason against Rome. The soldiers stood darkly by, unmoving, as Decimus drew his knife, the blade glinting in the torchlight. The Gallic scout stared at the Roman spy, pity written all over his face. Marcellus had said nothing, standing in the corner lost in quiet contemplation.

Decimus did not give the cutthroat time to defend himself; holding the *pugio* in his hand, he snarled, "Your eyes condemn you. You knew what was happening the moment they came inside your tent. I don't need to tell you what you deserve. You've been in the Army longer than most of us. I am just appalled at how you can turn your back on your motherland. Before I do you in, there's only one question: why?"

The man did not answer, only stared at that frigid dagger.

"Was it money? Did your greed pave the road to your own destruction? It's always money! Always bribes! How long until we realize that money is not the bottom line? How long, my dear friend, until we begin to just *understand* that life is about so much more than attaining wealth? You can stalk the earth for centuries, accumulating wealth, and find that it means nothing in the end. Your foolishness is highlighted by your treason for a little bit of denarii in your pocket.

I am not so much angry as saddened – saddened that you will never know the beauties of truth. For beauty is truth, and truth is beauty.”

The man seemed not to hear anything.

Decimus raised the knife. “Do you fear this? Yes. I am even more saddened. You will never know anything about honor or sacrifice. Your life is run by greed and fear. The two go hand-in-hand. They are brothers.” He passed the knife before his face, morose eyes studying the blade. “Perhaps I should pity you? Perhaps I should be empathetic? I don’t know. The gods are quiet on that matter. But I cannot find it in my heart to be understanding. I simply cannot understand something like this. Perhaps, were I a lesser man, I would strip you naked, whip you forty times, and excommunicate you from the camp, *and* from Rome. Or perhaps I would bind you, humiliate you before all those you called your friends as you wore that deceptive mask, and then send you to General Antonius to see what he would do with you. Or perhaps I would cut off your hands and release you, a model to everyone else in this Army... But I am *not* a lesser man. My sadness is underscored with rage.”

His eyes incensed. “My friend,” he growled with deep-seeded sarcasm, “I think you ought to know that I am salivating over the idea of running you through. I am drooling at the thought of your blood spilling onto the floor; or at least what blood is left, seeing the color of your face.”

He stepped forward; the spy cringed back against the grass. “Oh. The blade? You fear this. What a horrible thing, to meet your death with fear in your heart. The gods just may deny you entrance into *Elysium* for that. Do not worry,” he said, sheathing the knife. “The blade will not touch your pitiful flesh.”

Color began to return into the man’s face, blushing in laced webs through his cheeks.

Decimus pointed to two guards behind the defector. “Kill him.”

The guards drew their swords and came forward; the prisoner tried to stand, protesting, crying out for mercy, but the swords entered him, and his screams woke many in the camp, who poked their heads from the tents to see if it was an ambush. Decimus watched coolly, eyes alive with liquid energy, as the guards drew their thrusting swords from the broken man and kicked him down. Multiple wounds in the back gurgled blood; the man’s arms reached for Decimus’ boots, demanding forgiveness, pleading forgiveness before he died, but Decimus simply turned with a curt order: “Finish him off.” The man lay his head down, spit up blood, and one of the soldiers drove the tip of his sword into the base of the

traitor's skull; he drew it up, yanked it from the scalp, and left the body there. The Gallic scout looked on in terror, eyes flirting between the executed Roman and the bloody swords in the guards' hands.

Decimus glanced over at Marcellus, who was staring at the cadaver, absent of emotion.

One of the guards said, "What do we do about the barbarian, General?"

Decimus had his back to the Gaul; "Does he have anything else to tell us, or will he return to Rome without two feet?"

The Gaul lurched forward, spewing in his native tongue. Decimus' eyes went global, blood surged through the veins in his neck, and spinning around, he shrieked, "Kill him!"

The guards did not hesitate. They rushed forward, driving their swords into the man, and quickly finished him off. The two enemies of Rome lay side-by-side, locked in an eternal sleep of destined torment. The guards looked to the General, whose global eyes condemned them all. They waited, patiently, could see his heart beating underneath his armor.

"General?" one of the guards spoke up.

In a low voice, he answered, "Twenty two hundred Gauls are combing the woodlands, preparing to ambush us at sundown tomorrow. If we do not march quickly, they will come upon us. A force of that size will end us all then and there. If we do not reach the town, I have no faith that we will survive to see two mornings from now. Not even the gods will be able to help us. The town must be reached." He rubbed at tired eyes, ignorant of the corpses on the ground. "Awake the troops. We set torch to this camp and march in an hour. We will have to march on fumes. There is no other choice. I am sorry for getting everyone into this mess. The gods, to say the least, have blessed us with this information."

One of the guards said, "We're with you to the end, General. The horn shall sound."

Decimus turned to see what Marcellus had to say, but the boy was gone.

V

Marcellus prayed they would make it. His eyes closed, lost in the shadow of the helmet, and all he knew was the horse rocking beneath him and the freezing cold slipping between the chinks in his armor. He could hear the ragged breaths of Decimus' horse beside him and the quiet footfalls of the soldiers all around them.

Had he opened his eyes, the sight of nearly one thousand soldiers carrying the wounded, on the verge of collapse, barely clutching the threads of ability to walk, would've met his eyes. The fort had been burnt to the ground, and by sunup the Army was underway, at first double-timing towards Sequini, but now moving at a sluggish crawl. Exhaustion crept into the bones of every soldier, and some began to fall over at the side of the road, especially the wounded: loss of blood and weariness took their fatal tool. Word spread that some were literally falling dead, and the Roman soldiers would walk around them, paying them no attention. Marcellus felt time going by, but was not aware of it: he had fallen into a stupor, a brutal sleep overtaking him; his body leaned against the neck of his horse, helmet tilted at an angle. Decimus did not wake him, but dismounted, offering his horse to the stragglers who, despite all attempts, could not keep up. Everyone kept their eyes upon the sides of the road, and also upon the winding road before them, desperate to see the small town come into view, to find shelter inside the homes and pitch up a guardian wall to prevent any ambushes. As Decimus walked beside his horse, his eyes trailed to the sky, the sun moving overhead, then trailing off to their right, falling into the west, beyond the trees, orange light shedding through the thick trees, casting a pall light upon the burdened marching troops.

Marcellus dreamt. He dreamt of holding her hand, of running through the fields with her, feeling the wheat against him, of only worrying about the harvest. He dreamt of her tender smile, those beautiful eyes, and he dreamt of her body against his, their tongues entwined. In the dream, he was not tired nor thirsty. Despair he did not know. All he knew were the flowers around them, the birds singing about the trees, sitting beside a brook, running his hand over the smooth of her back, whispering sweet nothings in her ear. This was his paradise, the land of his dreams: no death, no dying, untainted perfection. He did not wear armor nor did he have the blood of others upon his hands. The gods had chosen him, and he took the role with dignity and honor, but there remains inside every man, hidden behind the warrior's spirit, a desire for peace, a thirsting for romance. For some, the dream would never become a reality; it would be dashed upon the rocks as they fall under the enemy's sword. Marcellus did not let this bother him; he pushed the war and revenge and anything fleeing this sanctuary from his mind, and knew only her, the tender breath coming from tender lips. He would be with her forever. She smiled at this thought and they embraced, her lavender skin so close. Nothing could separate-

He awoke moments before it happened, the dream of paradise snatched away by the sound of air splitting between an axe blade and hard wood. Before his eyes could open, an intense pain riveted into his arm, splashing shockwaves of agony through his body. His world swirled and he opened his eyes, suddenly aware of the stark cold, the armor about him, the sword at his side. But what came to him most was the most god-awful pain to be experienced by man; and he turned his head, forgetting to breathe, and saw wedged within his arm the shaft of an arrow; blood poured from his arm, and he saw the length of it was covered with red. He twisted his fingers, the very movement increasing the pain a hundred fold. This was all he knew, and he grabbed the arrow, and despite the awing pain, snapped it in half.

The end of the shaft fell from bloodied fingers and for the first time he could see the Roman soldiers running about, drenched in chaos, some lying upon the road, arrows sewn into their flesh. A soldier rushed past him, an arrow in his shoulder; he was holding a sword, oblivious to it all. Marcellus turned his head, looking for Decimus, but only saw an empty horse. He could hear the General's voice, somewhere behind him, but over the din it was impossible to tell where he was. Cavalry rushed past on every side, pushing their way through the scattered soldiers; the wounded lying on shields fell onto the road, shouting out in pain. Centurions blended in with the soldiers, trying to gather together their units. Everyone was blended together; hastati and principes and triarii and archers all amassed in a single bunch, confusion having the final word.

Marcellus' horse looked in every direction, stomping its feet; Marcellus craned his neck back and forth, searching for Decimus, cursing himself for letting the General escape from view. A soldier who had lost his shield and helmet came running towards Marcellus, waving his arms; he opened his mouth to shout something, but the air came alive and he pitched forward, landing on his face, two arrows in his back. An arrow whizzed past Marcellus' face, tendrils of hair whistling in its passing wind.

The horse cried out, an arrow entering the hindquarters. It reared back; Marcellus tried to hold on but his numb fingers lost control and he slid off the horse, seeming to fall forever, before landing hard, shoulder exploding in vibrant pain. He lay absorbed in the shock, the horse disappearing, and he managed to pick himself up, bringing his octagonal cavalry shield to bear against him, and with his strong arm drew his *spatha* sword, wondering if the gods were not retaliating for him saying they served his own desires and whims.

Running soldiers and horses bumped into him, and he became dizzy by all the commotion. Bile crept up his throat, every nerve telling him to just lie down and sleep. He looked at the ground and saw a soldier spread out, blood poking from beneath his armor, face a contorted mask of horror. A centurion ran past, yelling; Marcellus grabbed him, the effort draining him, and he asked where the General was; the centurion gave him a look of astonishment and tore away, yelling; another volley of arrows sprinkled around them, and the centurion twisted about, an arrow piercing his temple, shattering the bone and entering the bone; bloodying eyes looked at Marcellus, then the centurion toppled against a horse and slid to the ground.

Marcellus turned and looked to the far tree line against the narrow road; figures could be seen amidst the woods, reloading bows. He looked to the other side and saw nothing except for Romans fleeing into the woods. Ahead of them, the rim of Sequini could be seen barely breaching the treetops ahead of a curving road. Strength continued to leave Marcellus, going faster and faster, and the sword grew heavier. He trudged towards the tree line where the Gallic ambushers were reloading. He half-dragged the sword, stepping over fallen bodies, hearing nothing but the pulsing of his own heart, feeling the blood spurting from his arm. Soldiers ran past, telling him to turn around, but he ignored them all. He raised the sword, or almost raised it; his arm could not bear it.

The archers finished reloading, aimed at the air. Marcellus ducked underneath a standing horse, gritted his teeth, heard the splicing of air; arrows landed amongst the horse's feet, sending a pair of soldiers down in a clump. The horse cried out and Marcellus felt warm blood splatter on his helmet and forehead. Before the horse could frantically gallop away, he ducked underneath the horse, stepping over bodies and broken arrows sticking out of the dirt road. The archers paid him no heed; a Roman soldier, arrow sticking from his leg, grabbed Marcellus by the shoulder, told him to stop playing the hero and run for the town. Marcellus shoved him hard, hurling him to the ground; he spit upon the earth and continued on, the soldier gaping at him.

A great commotion came from behind, but he gave it no heed. His strength had nearly reduced to nothing, and he raised the sword and began trekking up the slope into the trees where the archers now disguised themselves. Blood covered his entire left arm and continued to trail down his left side, itching its way down his leg, leaving stains in the grass. He panted hard, breath leaving him; a Gallic archer looked at him, and their eyes met. The archer drew his bow around,

pointing it right at Marcellus' face; Marcellus tried to raise the sword, but the arrow reached him before he could react; his legs gave out and he fell on his back, world spinning, wind knocked out of him. He rolled over to his side, ears drowning out all the noise, hearing nothing but roaring silence and the limp beating of his heart.

He clawed at clumps of grass with bloody palms, mouth slack, eyes fading out, a smoky haze obscuring his vision. No longer could will drive him; he stopped crawling, rolled onto his side, looked up at a gray sky littered with shafts of breaking sunlight. The earth vibrated beneath him; his head turned to the side, grass filling his vision, and he saw what looked to be hundreds of trees moving past him; he heard murmurs, felt the whisper of life, but then his eyes closed, and the thunder in the ground massaged him to sleep. He saw her again, but this time her back was turned to him, and she sat upon the stream with another; the head turned, and he could see the wild hair, the green streaks of war-paint, and then he knew, and in the dream, he wept.

VI

The birds drew him forth. At first they were distant, and he wondered if it weren't a lie, a mirage. But they grew stronger and resonated within him; bright light invaded his mind, and he shut his eyes, becoming then aware of the furious pounding taking control of his head, a headache that felt like a barbed war-hammer jammed into his brain and twisted around until everything became a miserable mess. He called out for water, but nothing but scratches and stings came forth; he tried to move, but felt his arm burn as if touched with fire. He lay back on the bed, breathing hard, telling himself not to move, wanting to fall asleep but at the same time refusing to give in.

He felt a presence beside his bed, and a voice he'd never said, "Young Marcellus, you're awake? Water, I imagine? Give me a few moments." He disappeared.

Marcellus listened to the birds, wondered if he hadn't entered *Elysium*. If he had, he wanted to find his mother. He wanted to find his girlfriend. He wanted to know that her heart remained with him, not with the barbarian savages.

Footsteps resounded and cool water touched his lips. He opened his mouth. The water entered and he swallowed, ignoring the pain streaking up and down his throat with each gulp. The voice spoke: "You are a man of great honor. A man of

great deeds. They say you are unparalleled. They say you are protected by the gods. I find it hard not to believe.”

Marcellus groaned.

“You think I am crazy, because of your arm? It is a minor wound. You lost a lot of blood, lots of damage to the muscle tissue, but your bone is untouched, and it barely missed your artery. The doctors withdrew the arrow only a few hours ago, and burnt the wound with metal embers. It will heal nicely. The luck of the gods comes here.” He gently touched Marcellus’ chest, flaring up a lashing bout of displeasure. “Nothing but a bruise. A bad bruise, yes. But the arrow was shot so close to you, all common sense says it would’ve pierced your armor and entered your heart. But for some reason, it shot at you at an angle, and the arrow got lodged in your breastplate. Knocked you down pretty good, but no skin was broken. It really is amazing.”

Marcellus opened his eyes, blinking in the blinding light. He managed, “What... time...”

“It is about eight o’clock. Or somewhere around there.”

Marcellus turned his head, blinking at the pain in his neck and brain. A cloth had been wrapped around the top of his arm many times. He moved his fingers; despite hesitant pain, if he didn’t make many sudden movements with it, he would be fine. He wondered how long it would heal, but didn’t care to ask. He did, however, look at the man beside him, saw the weather-beaten face of an older soldier, the lines deep and defined; grime covered his face and a speckle of blood lay on the helmet he carried in his hands. Short brown hair topped his head. Marcellus ran his eyes over the man, trying to find a name, coming up empty-handed.

“I am General Kaeso, commander of the fifth Julii legion. We came upon the road opposite you, heard the commotion, and I immediately dispatched some of my principes to find out what was happening. By the time they went around the town and reached you, most of your ragtag Army was running for the hills. My men charged the tree line and overtook the archers, and nearly seven hundred Gallic soldiers. I lost a good number of my men, and so did your legion. But the Gauls did not win. Not this time. We have secured the town and moved the wounded into some homes surrendered to us by the townsfolk.” His eyes burnt in despair. “Yet even now we continue to bring the dead from the road and from the forest. So many have fallen.” He sighed. “You, my friend, survived it all, and

slept through the entire thing! Your strength should be at least somewhat returned to you by morning.”

His mouth moved, churning for words. Only one came out: “Decimus.”

Kaeso stroked the horsehair on his helmet, running the bristles between strong fingers. “We have not been able to locate him. As he was in the rear of the train, some Iberian mercenaries were able to capture him. Some who watched say he slew many of them before falling into enemy hands. We would venture after him, but dark is approaching, and the Gauls are all around us. By nightfall, even if there are bodies left outside the city walls, everyone will be called inside. I cannot risk anymore dying. We still await the eleventh legion. They should come sometime in the night.”

Marcellus turned his eyes from the General and stared at the far wooden wall of the room. Several quilts hung from a banister, and a dresser covered with jewelry adorned the far wall. Other than that, and the bed he lay in, the room was bare. His countenance told Kaeso his companion was not desired; Kaeso excused himself and left the room, shutting the door behind him, leaving Marcellus to the birds – and his guilt.

He had failed Decimus. Decimus had been taken, and Marcellus had been unable to do anything. The gods had abandoned him, struck him with an arrow, leaving a mark to forever remind him of his juvenile arrogance. He pondered how he could be so ignorant of the gods to claim they work for him. Their wrath descended upon him in a whirlwind, and the punishment, he realized, was not only a scar, but the lifetime of shame, completely devoid of honor. He would never be able to enjoy himself again. The gods spared his life just so he could revel in the shame; he closed his eyes and slept pitifully as the sun went down, knowing he did not deserve to ever see his mother or girlfriend again, knowing he did not deserve *Elysium* – and wondering now if he would ever enter that sacred land of eternal happiness. He had gone against the gods and had paid for it. His arm hurt him even in the sleep and his heart wept.

Flowers fell from the trees, wrapping about him, creating a beautiful carpet in the small grove. The sound of a brook touched him, whispering his name, and he found his hand brushing the rough tree trunks, feeling the broken bark, and he could feel the wet leaves kissing him on the hands. He could see her sitting upon the brook bank, legs dangling over the edge, small feet cutting currents in the meandering stream. Her back was turned to him, her bare arms supporting her as

she looked at her reflection in the water. He did not move, could not move, so entrenched; he simply stood in the grove, feeling the wind against his skin, birds singing in the trees, the flowers swirling around him in the gentle spring wind. She stood, feet dripping water, and turned, looking right at him. His heart melted and his hands shook. She did not tear her eyes from his as she walked across the grove, sliding upon the earth as if she were an angel. Into her hands she took his hands, and he could feel the warmth pulsing through her wrist. She pressed her face against his, chuckled softly, and kissed his lips. Energy rushed through him and he returned the kiss, passionate, arms reaching around her, feeling the rough tunic she wore, drawing her ever closer, lost. Yet she broke away, stepped back; he protested, and she put a little finger to her lips, eyes sparkling.

He shakes his head. "I don't want to stop. I want to hold you, I want to feel you close to me."

"And I you," she said in a voice rich with lavender and honey. "But that time is not yet come."

He looked down at his arms, the ground, knew this was not a dream. It felt so real, even more real than back home. "Is this—"

"*Elysium*," she said, grinning. "Yes. I am here to stay. But you must go. We will meet again."

"I don't want to leave," he complained, stepping towards her. "I want to stay here. With you."

She stepped away from him, keeping her distance. "We cannot remain together here. The gods forbid it. I have been chosen to give you the news."

His eyes narrowed. "What news?"

"Do not despair," she told him. "The ambush was not vengeance on you for your speaking crudely of the gods' will. The gods did not appreciate it, but they have not swayed from their decision to align their swords with you. The ambush is part of the plan, devised by the gods, and it will deal a wicked blow to the Gauls. The gods work in unfathomable, untamable ways."

He shook his head, long hair draping the sides of his face. "Stop it. Why do you tell me this?"

"Because, Marcellus, you have to return. Your time of glory has not yet come."

"Let the gods choose someone else!" he exclaimed. "I don't want it anymore."

"What sane person would spend a day in *Elysium* and return to the created world by choice? The gods do not let it happen often; you are a uniquely gifted one. They bring you here because it is so important you do not lose touch with

reality: you *are* chosen of the gods. The gods did not spare your life to torture you, but because, despite your blatant blasphemy, you still *are* the chosen one.”

He closed his eyes, heard his own heart mixing with the chirping birds. “Why me?”

“It can only be you,” she said slowly, walking up to him. When he opened his eyes, she stood right before him; she took his hands in hers, leaned against him, and after tenderly kissing him, said, “Not many girls have been privileged with tasting the spirit of a god.” She saw the confusion in his eyes give way to light. “Yes,” she whispered into his ear. “Yes, you’re beginning to understand...”

“...How can it be?” he stammered, refusing to believe.

An unnatural silence, then, “Your mother did not conceive you till two weeks after the rape.”

He kissed her again, asked, panting hard in the clearing, “What shall I do?”

She pulled away, holy eyes burning into his. “Pursue Decimus and fear no man, living or dead.”

“I do not have the strength.”

“Your strength does not come from grain, it comes from the gods.”

Kaeso stooped upon the chair, head resting on his knee, staring at the map in the failing light.

Across from him, General Appius of the eleventh brushed dirt from his clothes and said, “We ran into a few scattered Gallic patrols, sent them running. They’re everywhere. We could feel them staring at us from the trees. These small-town walls won’t protect us much. I have a third of my legion on guard.”

Kaeso scratched a stubble of beard. “We will have to march with the first light. The other two task forces are already on their way to the capital. We’ll have to march quickly to fill in our spot, or the Gauls will have time to double up and hit each task force, then come to us right as we reach Mediolanum. The plan is well thought-out, but if we miss just one step, everything will go to the grave.” He shook his head. “So many wounded. We cannot just leave them here and we cannot just send them back to Rome; the Gauls will be all over them. They’ll have to come with us. We don’t have time to let them-“

The tent flap opened, a guard stumbling inside. “Generals, there’s a-“

Marcellus pushed his way past, storming into the tent. He wore his cavalry armor, the sword on his side, a shield in his left arm, a helmet on his head. The

two Generals looked at each other, and Appius said, "What can we do for you, Private?"

"I want a cohort," Marcellus growled. "I want to pursue Decimus and rescue him."

Kaeso stepped down from the chair. "Private Marcellus. We don't have the time for this."

"Then give me one manipule."

Appius shook his head. Kaeso spoke. "This is foolishness, and I will hear no more of it. Your pride has shown you to be stubborn and insolent."

Marcellus did not back down. "Then give me fifty men."

Appius glanced at Kaeso, who rose up. "Private. I don't have time for this."

"Twenty-five soldiers," Marcellus said, looming up.

Kaeso rose to the challenge. "It has been hours since General Decimus disappeared. It is nightfall, and Gauls are combing the hills. It is not safe even five feet outside the city walls. You are out of your mind. For your own safety and the safety of the soldiers, I cannot give you any men. Please. I know you must be heartbroken at his loss—"

"Listen to me, General," Marcellus defied. "The gods demand you obey my command."

Fury enveloped Kaeso, who snapped, "Guards! Arrest this man! His own insanity is a danger to us all."

Guards came from the entrance to the tent; Marcellus drew his sword, turned, faced them, snarled, "Touch me, and you shall fall. See how the sword glows? The energy of the gods is forged within the blade. Come against me and you shall fall, forever forbidden entrance into *Elysium*."

The guards faltered.

The enraged Kaeso roared, "Seize him! He is but a boy!"

Marcellus faced the General. "Come and apprehend me yourself. I *am* but a boy."

Kaeso froze, unmoving. Appius drew a deep breath. The guards fingered their sword hilts. Marcellus kept his sword steadily before him.

Marcellus growled, "Imagine – a General who fights his own battles. What a story *that* would make." He turned and left the tent.

Kaeso paced about his own tent, Appius in the shadows. He balled his fists. "I ought to have that man executed."

"It would be suicide. Everyone in his legion adores him."

"Everyone in his legion is nearly dead! He is almost the only one who can walk upright. And how? Did you not see the arrow that went through his arm? He has strength that does not belong to him. There is only one explanation: he lives his life deceiving others, making himself look like the great and wonderful soldier, but hiding in the shadows." He kicked at a helmet lying on the ground, sent it rolling against the sloped wall. "I ought to let him go. Send him out the gates. He would never return. Problem solved. Hah! Why didn't I think of that before?"

A guard entered the door. "Sir! There are thirty-three cavalrymen awaiting leave from the town."

Appius looked to Kaeso, who was grabbing the helmet. "For what purpose?"

"They would not say. A man by the name of Quintus Marcellus leads them."

"Bloody fool," Kaeso growled. "Take me to him immediately!"

Appius muttered, "Perhaps you will get your wish."

The stars throbbed upon the night sky as Kaeso stormed up the cavalrymen dressed in their armor and carrying their shields. Kaeso could see the loyalty in their eyes, emblems patiently digging graves. He searched and found Marcellus, grabbed him by the leg. Marcellus kicked his hand off, ordered, "Raise the gates."

"Your men will disperse—"

"They are not my men," Marcellus said, not looking at him. "Most are older than me. They are loyal to General Decimus. And loyal to Rome."

"Then may your loyalty keep you in Rome's service, *alive*. If you ride, you will be killed!"

"That is for the gods to decide," Marcellus said. "Not you. Raise the gates!"

Kaeso fumed, "I will let you pass, but know that you shall never enter these gates again. You will be met by disaster. Decimus is gone! The only ones who remain are the barbarians thirsty for your blood! You are riding into a trap! Fine! Let your foolishness guide you. But you will die before the morning breaks."

Marcellus turned his head, and under the bronze helmet, said, "Then I shall see you in Hell."

Kaeso ordered, "Raise the gates!", feeling pleasure that this man would get what he deserved. There was no avoiding it. Only a god in human flesh could survive the terrors of the coming night.

VII

They had been marching for hours, their numbers greatly reduced in the first bare moments of battle. Most of the crescent-moon shields close to their cold bodies had been sprinkled with blood, now dry and crusted. Their swords, too, had lost their zeal, run through the soft bodies of routing Roman soldiers. Now, with their prize, they meandered the narrow road, lost in thoughts, thinking of a distant home, thinking of the money that would be awarded them when they and their precious cargo – a Roman General! – reached Mediolanum, where the King would offer the General up as a ransom to the Romans (retreat or he dies), and if the Romans did not disengage – and if history repeated itself, as it surely did, they most certainly would not – the faceless General would be tortured and then killed. Perhaps flayed alive, or crucified before all the city as his balls were cut off and he was forced to slowly die in a body lost in shock.

These thoughts of torture called to them, made them salivate, but did not arouse the deepest emotions they possessed. These men were mercenaries. They killed and died for one thing only: money. Money to feed themselves, money to feed families; money to stockpile, hoard; money to spend on prostitutes in the cities. One could live an easy life if he were just willing to enter the fray of battle once or twice a year, and if he were, ultimately, lucky enough to survive.

Only a few stray clouds had passed overhead, coming and then disappearing against an ink-black sky laden with thousands of vibrant stars. The last memories of the battle they owned were of the Romans running into the woods, completely scattered, the Gallic archers doing them in. The mercenaries had stayed true to their word: grabbing Decimus and retreating, despite the urge to slay as many Romans as possible. Love for anything Rome ran dry back home on the grassy plains of Carthage. Imagining the Romans being slaughtered by the Gallic regulars awaiting in ambush before the town, the mercenaries paid no heed to the sides of the road, the dark forest suffocating in shadow. They did not see the brief moments behind the trees, flashes so brief, shifting shadows. They did not pay attention to the hastily-dug trenches on the side of the road, nor had they spent any time learning the history of the Gallic campaigns to expect anything so clever. Heads were bobbing; the mules pulling the baggage cart grunted and strained, knees aching. An owl hooted somewhere. Nothing peculiar.

It was then that the Romans showed the mercenaries what true courage meant.

Marcellus had devised the plan from ancient memories; two flashes of light came upon the road before them; the mercenaries leading the way paused for just

a moment, seeing two torches coming down to touch the ground, the flames dancing inside the pit. The figures holding the torches in one hand held swords in the other, and horsehair helmets adorned their scalps. The mercenaries, the weariness suddenly swept away, began to draw their own short Iberian swords and opened their mouths to shout; their voices drowned in the roar of fire, twin walls leaping up to either side of the fifteen-man caravan. All the soldiers jumped at the noise, the screaming walls, the tremendous heat threatening to melt even the blades on their swords. Most held their shields before them, swords drawn. The fires raged. They twisted and turned, caravan completely motionless, all the soldiers looking at one another and pressing their gazes to the walls of flame, expecting something, anything. Nothing came.

The fire vomited, hurling dozens of arrows. The soldiers raised their shields to ward off the assault, but some were unable to move quick enough. Arrows plunked into both wooden wicker crescent shields and soft flesh, the latter spewing bodily fluid and downing those who were fatally hit. Some who had been struck snapped the arrows and roared defiantly, their swords sparkling in the light. The wagon had three arrows stuck into the wooden boards; one of the mules grunted, raising a leg, blood crawling down the calf.

The flames vomited again, but not arrows this time. Roman soldiers, red shields and uniforms and horsehair helmets melting from the fire, charged upon the soldiers, *spatha* swords moving like crimson water. The mercenaries parried and blocked and struck; a Roman cried out, leg gushing blood, and he fell; the mercenary drove his sword into the Roman's face, then Marcellus swept in, sword yelling, and the mercenary's head flung from his neck; the body toppled over. Marcellus swung the sword around his side, shattering the shield of an enemy; the enemy stumbled back and Marcellus smashed him in the face with his shield; the mercenary turned and the Roman thrust his sword into the Iberian's back; when he drew it out, blood covered the blade.

The mercenaries did not back down and would not surrender. Marcellus knew they would not. Mercenaries were paid only to survive and win, no in-betweens. The Romans had cut through most of them, leaving the road drenched in blood, when a twin of Iberian soldiers rushed towards the wagon, intent on slaying the General who laid upon it. Marcellus crossed across their path, the sword vibrating in a thousand bloody colors; one of the mercenaries faltered, but the other kept moving; Marcellus slew him, the man's body sprawling against the wagon's spokes. The other tossed his sword between his hands, grimaced, and charged.

Marcellus turned his shoulder to the man, flipped his own sword between two hands; upon him, the mercenary thrust his sword; Marcellus nimbly jumped back. The man pitched forward, sword embedding into the hard wood of the wagon. He tried to free the sword, eyes of fright looking upon Marcellus, who deftly brought his sword down upon him. Blood rose in a spray and the man screamed, collapsing downwards, arms tangled about the rear of the wagon.

Marcellus panted, steam pouring from his nostrils, and looked over the field of bodies, several friends. The Roman soldiers approached him, one nursing a wounded leg. Another gripped at his side, gritting his teeth, face losing color. Marcellus sheathed his sword, climbed upon the wagon, and pulled back a sheet, expecting the worst.

Decimus lay in a fetal position, wrapped only in pale linens, stripped of all his Army insignia. His eyes looked up at Marcellus, and the boy immediately knew there was no hope left. Blood trailed with saliva from the General's mouth, and when he spoke, all that came was the sound of scratches and gurgling; he could barely be understood. "I am dying," he said. "I have been wounded and have lost too much blood. And I am bleeding internally." He coughed, blood dribbling from his mouth. "Who is it that comes for me when all common sense denies it?" He could not see even in the flames, for Marcellus' head was turned from the wall of fire.

Marcellus waved his hand; a torch entered his hand. He waved it before his face, embers floating down. The General managed a weak smile. "Who else could be so foolish? Who else so brave? Who else so lucky?" He took several breaths. The owl hooted again. "The gods truly love you, Marcellus. I am honored to know you. Please. Take my hand. I am too weak to give it."

Marcellus obeyed, feeling the General's wet palm and icy fingers.

"My friend," he said, "I can already feel the warmth of *Elysium*. This is my last order to you: when I am gone, you are to take temporary command of what is left of the second legion. Forgive me for losing so many great warriors. I am a foolish General, worthless, except to get others killed."

A Roman soldier stepped forward, took off his helmet. "I am honored to serve under you, General." The other soldiers echoed their agreement. Tears welled in their eyes, their beloved father on the doorstep of mystery.

"You were loyal to me," Decimus coughed. "Now, be loyal to him." He squeezed the boy's hand. "You have shown courage and strength well beyond your years. I feel so blessed to have known you. Take command, my friend; and

when you get the chance, and I pray it is soon, personally take my effects to Rome. Among my effects in my chest, you will discover a sealed envelope. Do not open it. It is addressed to *dear friend*; give it to General Antonius in person, and have him read it there before you. This is a dying man's last request to the son he never had. I pray you, accept."

Marcellus bit his lip. "I accept."

"And do not let me find my eternal rest here," he said. "Honor me in honoring my body."

"It will be done."

Before the words left the boy's mouth, Decimus walked the golden fields of *Elysium*.

VIII

The cavalrymen returned in the morning; as the first beads of sunlight poked between the branches of the eastern trees, they came upon the road, at first mere shadows, mistaken for mirages; then they grew clearer, and excited guards sounded the call to raise the gates. Generals Appius and Kaeso were summoned, and they stood upon the ramparts as the cavalry entered through the gates; Kaeso stood over the gate, looked down upon them; Marcellus looked up, meeting the General's eyes, and the General turned away, muttering incantations under his breath. The body of Decimus, safe from the mutilating hands of the enemy, lay upon a single horse; the soldiers within the town celebrated the rescue, cheering the cavalry as they made their way to the hospital to tend to some of their wounded. Kaeso made his way off the ramparts, cut a path through the swathe of over five thousand cheering soldiers, and broke into the hospital just as Marcellus' men were being lain about gurneys to be attended to.

Kaeso violently grabbed Marcellus by the shoulder; Marcellus ripped away, snarling, "Careful: you deal with an equal."

Kaeso's mouth went dry in understanding.

"You should tremble," Marcellus breathed. "You stand before a true Roman. They are few and far between in these parts." His eyes did not leave Kaeso until the General turned and angrily left the tent, throwing the flap shut behind him, hollering at anyone who even looked at him with the wrong tone. Marcellus ignored him, staying by the side of the wounded, comforting them and thanking them for their sacrifice as the doctors went to work.

A physician approached, asked, "They say you are the new General, sir?"

"Temporary," Marcellus answered. "I am to leave for Rome shortly. I wish to leave tonight."

"What would you have us do with the body of the General? Shall it be buried?"

"No. General Decimus was a great man. Do not be swayed by the many lives lost under his command. He was able to keep at least a handful of survivors, a remarkable feat. I declare it: he shall not be remembered as a foolish commander who sent innocent boys to untimely deaths. No, he will be remembered as a persevering General who kept his Army together, leading them as a father, with the enemy hemmed in on every side, until they reached salvation; and he sacrificed his own life in the process." He let his words take root in the physician's ear. "He is not unworthy enough to be buried in a simple dirt grave, his flesh eaten by worms and bones lost amidst the tangles of hidden roots. Do you know the method the Greeks used when honoring their fallen heroes? They built great wooden altars and burnt them there. The smoke, mixed with ashes, rose to heaven, incense to the gods, carrying the noble warrior home. This is the kind of burial Decimus deserves. Make it so."

The physician promised it would be so and slipped away. By nightfall, a pyre had been constructed, and when the first stars began to appear, the trinity of legions remained silent as Decimus' body was carried out on the shoulders of his noblest followers, Marcellus among them. They lay the body atop the altar, and priests came forward, dabbing it in tar and lighting it ablaze. The fire rose about the middle of the town, stretching its tentacles high into the sky, able to be seen for miles around. The light bled over all of the quiet town, the soldiers' maroon uniforms glowing. Marcellus felt the heat upon his face and bowed his head, staring at the ground. When he looked up, he could see Kaeso staring at him, face a mix of compassion and anger. The boy turned his gaze, returned it to the fire, wondering how he could ever lead a legion, even if it were only temporary, and decided to just trust the gods. What had she said? The gods worked in mysterious ways? He crossed his arms and looked over to Kaeso, but the General was not there. A presence overcame Marcellus, and he turned his head; Kaeso stood beside him.

"You are leaving tonight?" Kaeso breathed.

Marcellus nodded. "Four hundred of our soldiers come with us, not to mention the critically wounded. We will march to Segesta, even though it may take half a month. A vessel awaits us, where we will board. The four-hundred-man guard

will be able to visit families and friends in Rome, take a bath, eat good food, but then they will return with me to Segesta, after delivering Decimus' personal effects. We will remain at Sequini as you and General Appius lead the task force north to Mediolanum." The words flew off his tongue quick and easy; he had studied the strategy over and over, praying for safe passage through the woodlands.

Kaeso swallowed, Adam's apple bobbing. "I don't need to tell you the dangers of night-time travel."

"I understand them. But I feel Decimus would want me leaving right away."

"Then you have my blessings." He offered his hand. "Accept it. We are Romans, not savages. There can be no civil war between us. Accept my hand as an offering of alliance; an alliance against Gaul, an alliance with Rome. A peace-offering, forgiveness for my hotheadedness towards you. It is quite clear that you are favored by the god of war."

Marcellus cupped Kaeso's hand in two palms. "Of course he does. He is my father."

Kaeso stared at him, wondering if he had truly heard what he said. Marcellus did not fear blasphemy; the realization came to him clearer than ever, and he banked upon it. He left Kaeso in Sequini, and gathering his men and loading the critically wounded into wagons, he made a goat sacrifice to the gods, patiently requesting their guidance and deliverance. He mounted his horse, saluted Appius and Kaeso, and left the town. The gates were closed behind him, and his force quickly vanished upon the curving road, leaving Appius and Kaeso upon the walls, listening to the chirping of the crickets. By morning, the pyre had burnt to carbon-smothered logs, Decimus walking smoothly in *Elysium*, running through golden fields, bare feet on pearl-white beaches, running through the painted canyons, swimming in marvelous oceans under a turquoise sky, all the nightmares and hellish truths of war lost forever to a man now finally and fully alive.

IX

Nearly a month later, the fleet of triremes loaded with Roman soldiers docked against the River Tiber, and took another boat into the mouth of the city. Roman citizens awaited them, laying down palm branches and singing, shouting, celebrating. Banners clung to the buildings and children ran at the feet of the soldiers, laughing and carrying wooden play swords. Soldiers embraced

girlfriends and wives, kissed their mothers, hugged their own children, hardened soldiers finally knowing the truth of bare-bones emotion as tears slid down battle-weathered cheeks. Marcellus made his way through the throngs of people, escorted by several town watch guards to the royal palace, in which Antonius stayed. He was given their blessings and he ascended the steps to the front of the manor, knocked several times. A beautiful woman opened the door, smiled at him; he told her he needed to see Antonius. She told him to go the Senate Chamber. He could read sorrow in her eyes but said nothing. He thanked her for relaying the news, rejoined the town watch escort, and they marched to the Senate Chamber, where Marcellus ascended the great marble steps, and was soon accosted by hundreds of senators streaming from inside the building. He shouted out Antonius' name, not knowing what the General looked like; a man in a Senate robe and wearing several rings came over to him; Marcellus could read something great in the man's eyes, and knew immediately he stood in the presence of a giant.

He gave Antonius the letter, said, "You must open it now. It is from General Decimus before his fall." Antonius had received word of Decimus' death even before the fleet of triremes came into view of the city.

Antonius tore open the letter, withdrawing a flimsy wrap of parchment. He unfurled it and began to read. He took a breath, folded it up, and intently looked over the young boy before him. "What is your name?"

"Quintus Marcellus," he answered, not missing a beat.

"And how many years do you have?"

"Nineteen, General."

"How many years has it been since we met?"

"Not even a year, General. Six months."

Antonius nodded. "Come with me." He entered the Senate chamber, Marcellus at his heels. They followed winding stone passageways and came to a small room; Marcellus realized they were in Antonius' Senate office. Antonius shut the wooden door and said, "Sit down over there, on the stone bench."

Marcellus did. Antonius turned his back to him, and when he returned, a wooden sword was in his hand. The boy did not understand. The General held the sword against the breadth of two palms, and he hovered over the boy, said, "Do you accept this sword I give unto you, per request of a great and dear friend? Do you accept this great honor, to be given the humble rank of General and to lead our forces into battle?"

Marcellus heard nothing save his own heart and expanding lungs. He could feel nothing except the overwhelming sense of disbelief. His eyes focused on that sword, seeming now to pulse with living energy, and his voice crackled. "I don't understand--"

"My friend Decimus asks that you be given the rank of General and lead the second legion. He is quite confident you are the only man up to the task. He has great faith in you: you are a heroic warrior and a friend of his. Yet this a Republic, and I cannot force this great title – and great responsibility – upon you. You must accept it. If you take this sword, you will be doing all of Rome a favor. Decimus has written of your exploits, and while I find them hard to believe, I know he is not a liar nor a fool, and I see something in your eyes that I cannot explain, something I have never seen before."

Marcellus found himself standing, driven by a force not his own. His hands extended, boyish hands taking the wooden sword. He knelt before the leader of the House of Julii, clutching the wooden sword to his breast, and said, "I shall be led by the hand of the gods. I accept this wonderful honor."

"Then stand," Antonius said, smiling. "Drink with me." As Marcellus stood, Antonius handed him a ring in which a polished red crystal bore the emblem of Julii. "We are no longer superior and inferior; we are no longer acquaintances, nor are we only friends. We are brothers. I may be cooped up here, but my spirit goes with you upon the battlefield." They drank, Antonius chanting, "To Rome." Marcellus echoed the assent. Antonius beckoned him on his way. "Take two thousand men with you to Patavium, go by sea. The gods will guide you from there. I see they are intimate with you."

"That is what they say," Marcellus said quietly, going out the door.

As he walked down the corridor, Antonius leaned out, yelled, "Give them hell!" Marcellus smiled. "It shall be done."

Book Three

The Wrath of Mars

After two massive wars and constant harassment on Roman soil, the Senate of Rome has declared a third war that will decisively wipe the memory of Gaul from the face of the earth. The constant river of rape, murder, pillage and all forms of barbaric cruelty and torture streaming from Gaul has been met with war-cries throughout all of the Roman Republic. The time to fight is now. Gaul is on its deathbed.

The leader of the House of Julii, Antonius the Second, has declared Marcellus the General of the Second Legion. The gods have favored him and all of Rome worships him as a demi-god. He is believed to be the greatest warrior Rome could send against the Gauls and thousands upon thousands of Roman citizens are thirsty for his justice.

Marcellus is torn between two desires: the desire to enter Elysium and be with his mother and beloved and the desire to wreak vengeance upon the barbarian horde. He has been chosen by the gods and he is determined to serve them—he initiates total war: Gallic settlements shall be burned, crops ravaged by Roman hands, and any Gallic men, women and children who do not bow down and kiss the feet of Rome will be slain without hesitation. No mercy or quarter shall be shown to the brutal enemies of Rome. Inspired by the brutal rape and murder of his mother and the murder of his beloved, Marcellus rides forth to bring vengeance and justice against those who have raped and murdered Rome's men, women and children for decades on end.

In Rome, Antonius is fraught with horrific dreams of Rome's soldiers being murdered and tortured on the city walls. Helonius' widow Celesta is tortured by nightmares where her child as well as all the children of Rome are killed by foreign hands. Antonius thirsts for war but is unable to take up his sword, and he is frightened that these dreams may be foreshadowing warnings from the gods. Celesta has told him, "Perhaps the hour of your abandoning the sword has yet to come."

Chapter Eight: Dreams of Terror and Death

I

Afternoon sunlight blinded him and he raised a hand to block off the choking rays. He let the wooden sword dangle from his other hand and nearly collapsed upon the steps at the sound of vibrant cheering. His heart skipped a beat and he removed the hand from his eyes, trying to keep a straight face as he looked down the marble steps. Roman officers of highest rank stood upon the steps to his left and right, cheering; at the foot of the steps, several hundred Roman soldiers with their shields before them formed a pathway for Marcellus in his walk to the military encampment. He walked down the steps, amazed, realizing the wooden sword meant much more than he'd initially thought. The Roman officers bowed their hands and saluted with fists upon their chests, and Marcellus numbly returned the salutes. He wondered why he was being shown such fervor and knew Antonius had arranged it. Why would a man of such power give Marcellus such honors? Marcellus wondered this and concluded it came as a reward for his deeds. News of his victories and ruthlessness against the Gauls were stretching across the entire city and weaving into the hills of Rome; with each new spin of gossip and rumor he was elevated more and more from a mere mortal with a bloody sword to an immortal god in human flesh, blazing territory for Rome and bringing swift justice against all her enemies. He looked into the eyes of the officers as he descended the steps and knew they were not saluting a soldier this day; they were saluting something more.

Marcellus reached the bottom of the steps and made his way to the encampment. The Roman soldiers would kneel behind their shields in honor, and women and children behind the soldiers cheered as Marcellus walked. Yes, Marcellus thought, I have become a god. He was still a teenager, the same age as many of those infantrymen kneeling before him, even younger than most of them. Yet the gods had bestowed him such favor, such adoration; they had filled him not only with the route skill learned in training, but also with a spirit and courage trademarked by the gods themselves. He could feel the kiss of the gods as he walked through the giant archway into the camp, where just a six months before he had entered upon a weary horse, frightened and scared and clueless as to his future. He realized the gods had been paving his path for some time now, perhaps

a path forged even before the foundation of the world; this thought should've inspired him, but instead he grimaced.

Had the gods arranged the murder of his mother? Had they made sure the murder of his beloved? If they had, he no longer desired their service. The anger in his bones at this thought made him want to hurt the gods, but also hurt the Gauls even more. Again he wondered if the gods were not installing anger to promise victory? He began to fear simply being a pawn, a figure upon a board, to be moved at the gods' wills – and exterminated at the right time. A shiver ran through his spine. If his blessing came from the gods and it was so great and yet so terrible, would not their curse end him completely and even ban him from the tender golden fields of Elysium?

His thoughts broke apart as two Roman soldiers carrying oblong cavalry swords came to him. They saluted, did not kneel, and Marcellus felt more comfortable. He looked at their eyes underneath the helmets and could see rage and blood-lust in one, compassion and understanding in the other. He thought this to be an ungainly horrible combination but made no mention as the two soldiers introduced themselves.

The tallest of the two said, "General Marcellus, I am Commander Aulus. My entourage and I will be serving directly beneath you. You shall meet your entourage in a few moments."

"Entourage?"

"Your servants who will serve you."

"Of course."

The other soldier, the one whose eyes were filled with a lack of hatred, "I am Captain Hadrianus, third-in-command. I am honored to be serving under you. I have heard of your great deeds and believe you to be the noblest of Romans. My father says it is not in doubt that the gods favor you."

Aulus smirked. "His father says lots of things. You may have heard of him, the famous Caesar?"

"No, I'm sorry, I have not."

Aulus returned, "Really? No mind, then. His work is mindless prattle. He is a silly man."

Marcellus gave him a wry look.

"My father," Hadrianus hastily defended, "is a thinker."

"A philosopher?" Marcellus asked.

"If you wish to be specific. He is a student of Plato and Aristotle."

Aulus interjected, “And a student of his own folly. He speaks words that no Roman should hear.”

“He is not a heretic,” Hadrianus growled.

“Why would he be a heretic?” Marcellus inquired.

“He’s not!” Hadrianus fumed.

Aulus laughed. “Rome is an empire built upon the foundation of men. We are a nation of warriors. We are civilized, yes, but the ignorance of the people is paramount to our success as a nation. The people do not need to know everything that happens outside Rome’s walls. Indeed, I say, let them be ignorant. Let them think Rome is a beautiful and compassionate nation. But do not let Rome’s greatest forget that Rome is where it is now because of her courage and prowess in battle. Hadrianus’ father says Rome must lay down arms and instead bring the Light to other nations through diplomacy and charity, not by the sword. His father has never served the Roman Army, only the Roman Mob, and so he has no true knowledge of how Rome really works. Without war, Rome would crumble. Rome thrives on war. Its people thrive on war, their ignorance is them denying it. Hadrianus, what your father fails to take into account, other than the obvious complexities of Rome’s founding, is that everyone hates Rome. So why should we lay down our arms and invite them to sack us?”

“Everyone hates Rome,” Hadrianus growled, “because Rome rapes and pillages them. If we share our lands, our crops, if we open trade with all nations, we can experience unity and truly prosper—prosperity is not only land and wealth, Aulus, but the heights of knowledge, happiness, security.”

“Rome keeps Romans secure. We throw down our arms and invite trade, we are inviting disaster.”

“No nations truly adore war,” Hadrianus argued...

Marcellus jumped in. “Rome adores war,” he said with a crooked smile. “And have you not heard of the Greeks and their Spartan warriors? I look forward to fighting alongside both of you. Aulus, I look forward to seeing your sword in combat. Hadrianus, tell your father that we need more men like him.” With a wink, “But I don’t think Rome will throw down her arms. Yet the pursuit of knowledge—yes, the very pursuit of truth—is what makes us men even more than how many barbarians we slay.”

Aulus flanked behind Marcellus’ left and Hadrianus stood on Marcellus’ right. Marcellus stood upon the steps overlooking the two thousand-odd infantrymen

and the six hundred cavalymen assembled in the camp square below. A flock of spring board flew amongst the rafters of the building as Marcellus looked at them all and felt every one of them looking straight back at him. He met eyes with as many as he could, letting him know that he was a man, a mortal, just like them, and that he did not hold himself in higher regard, but would eagerly give his life for the sake of any man present. He stood before them and spoke, loud as thunder and clear as lightning, and he allowed the gods to take his words into every man's soul:

"I come to you today not as a god nor as an immortal. We have all heard the stories, and some even say I am a god in human flesh. I stand before you now and declare that I am not! I was born to a mother and I fell in love with a beautiful girl... Then the murderous barbarians took them from me! I tell you I am not a god not to discourage you, but rather to *encourage* you. For I am a mortal and I have fought; I am a mortal and I have slain; I am a mortal and I am the epicenter of legend. If I, a mere boy, can become a legend, then why, my friends, cannot you? We are all born and destined to die. We as Romans send men to their death sooner than ought, and we face death like men, knowing it is but the entrance to a more beautiful and pristine world. I have avenged the deaths of my family tenfold, but I thirst for more. I shall have my vengeance—and so shall you! Tonight we march, and I swear it shall not be long before we meet the Gauls across the battlefield, and it shall not be long before their blood paints our swords. Many of you have seen the glories of war, and know the atrocities we shall meet. Most of you have never seen another man mercilessly slay another, but you shall see it, and bathing in the favor of the gods, partake in it. Many of us will die. It is the will of the gods; glory and fame cannot exist outside the sphere of death. But my friends, we who die live more and better than we do in any life we've ever dreamed of. And we who survive become legends—what greater profit can war offer? So take up your sword. Take up your shield. And come with me. I am not a god, but the favor of the gods is upon me. And I swear it to be," he hollered, pointing his sword out towards them, "their favor rests upon you!"

The priest was surrounded by a circlet of smoldering candles, the smoke of flax and incense swirling to the domed ceiling. His robes wrapped around him and not even the candles could illuminate the darkness upon his face. The cheering of the Roman army he could hear too well as Marcellus came from a side door, walked to the far wall, and after sheathing his own sword, took up the smaller dagger, the

blade cleansed and oiled many times over in preparation. Before the priest a young goat bowed its head, clicking its toes against the cool stone; the priest stood and grabbed the goat's horns, twisting it around so it faced the General, who looked at the blade in his hands.

Marcellus turned with the blade and approached the goat.

The priest smirked. "This is all quite unnecessary, wouldn't you agree?"

"The gossip grows stronger every day," he replied, grabbing the goat by the horns.

"Be sure you do not anger them by this sacrifice," the priest warned. "It would show that your heart is not at ease with their favor."

"They know my heart well enough," Marcellus told the man. "I do this not for me but for my men."

"Your men, General. They see how the gods have spared you, and they honor you as if you were one."

Marcellus cocked his head to the side, the helmet sliding upon his small head. "Spared? What makes you think I have been spared? To die by the hand of another man's sword is not a curse but an honor and I wish it upon myself every morning and night."

"Strange words from someone holding such grave hatred against the Gauls."

"The gods have spared me death so that I can ravish their hate upon the Gauls. This is an honorable position and I accept it. I will not back down. I will press forward until the Gauls are mercilessly destroyed. I shall not settle for rout. Every one of them deserves to die an agonizing death, a holy payment for their wickedness upon Rome. I thank the gods for sparing me. But I also feel a curse against them rising in my blood. For I ache not to be here, but to be there. I ache to see my mother and beloved again. These desires run stronger in me than any desire to send a sword through the gut of a barbarian. If I am not here, Rome will still fight the Gauls. And Rome will still beat them. Mediolanum will fall and all of Gaul with it. It shall be bloody and many lives will be lost... I do not fear death as most men do. Why, priest, do men fear death?"

The priest answered without hesitation. "They don't know what is on the other side."

"But I know what lies on the other side. I know that death is not the end, but it is the beginning. I know what life awaits me upon the passing, and this to this life sings my soul. I will not fear death like any normal man, but in my fearlessness, I will not fall. Because of my fearlessness, I shall not be permitted to taste the

sweet honey of Elysium. Instead I am destined to slay and slay until I drown in an ocean of guilt and no amount of holy water can purge my hands of the blood upon them. This, priest, is the curse of the gods." He began pulling the goat by its horns towards the door. "Now let us do this and be on our way. We do not want to keep the Gauls waiting. There will be much mourning in Gaul before I am done."

II

"You aren't eating."

Antonius looked up from his plate, the steamed fish curling cold. His thoughts break apart and he is aware once more of the servants standing in the shadows, the candles glowing low with their melted wax spilling over the table and hardening, and he can hear the sound of the wind and the crickets outside through the open balcony doors. He looks across the table and sees her face shimmering in the candlelight. Her fish is picked nearly to the bone, and she was on a second one, eating enough for the baby. She had a few more months yet and was coming along nicely. This comforted him. Helonius' line would continue, and perhaps even continue upon the throne of Julii. He looked down at his own plate again, the empty eye sockets of the carcass staring at him, bitter herbs spilling from the mouth. His appetite has vanished. All he can think about is Marcellus.

"You're not worried," she said. "That's not worry written upon your face. It's depression. Sadness." She knew about depression. She knew about sadness, perhaps more than anyone. He could not deny it nor act as if she were mistaken. She was reading right through him, exposing his soul bare. So he said nothing and let her continue her discourse. "You're depressed because you're jealous. You envy him." She set down the fish she was eating and reached for her goblet, took a drink. He kept his head bowed as if in reverent prayer. "You can't live like this. You've been blessed like no other man has. You are a legend. People revere you as you walk down the street. Stories are told about you. Everyone remembers you defeating Silvanus. You are a hero. You are favored by the gods."

He snorts, "Favored by the gods? It is so easy to say when you are not."

"What is wrong with you, Antonius? You are the most bitter person I know. Your father was never bitter."

"I am not my father," he growled. "Do not mock me by using his name. I suffered for his name."

"You were never like this when Helonius was around."

"Helonius is dead," he snarled.

She said nothing, just stared at him, his eyes burning like the sun wreathed in wrath.

He sighed, the emotions leaving. "I am sorry. Celesta... Please accept my apologies and forgive me."

She spoke quietly. "You were not speaking from your heart. The bitterness—" "Celesta—"

"Don't deny it, Antonius. Everyone can see it. The senators see it. Your servants see it. I see it. And your voice betrays any denial. You're bitter. And you're not bitter with your father. You're not bitter with the Senate, you're not bitter with your servants, your not bitter of Helonius, you're not bitter of me. You're bitter with the gods. You're bitter because they've given you a high rank you do not desire. I wonder how they feel about this, Antonius? They have bestowed you with such grand blessings and you forsake their name by cursing them by your thoughts."

He answered quickly. "I never asked for this."

"But it's what they've given you. Would you rather be given death, out in the wilderness, for your bones to be picked apart by scavengers and ravens?"

"All I wanted was to fight. The gods knit me in my mother's womb so that I would be a fighter, so that I would be a warrior. Not a philosopher, not a debater, not a thinker, certainly not a man for the Senate. They've made me addicted to war, addicted to the rush of piercing another man's flesh, addicted to every ounce of love and hate forged upon the battlefield... They made me like this, Celesta, and they leave me abandoned and alone, denying me my true passions."

"The gods favor Rome," Celesta said. "They do not look at men individually."

"They look at Marcellus individually!"

"Perhaps his greatest desire is not to fight."

"Have you seen his eyes? Have you seen him up close? He is built for war—and look at how the gods ravish their love upon him!"

"The gods favor Marcellus because he is the best man to lead that legion into Gaul, not because he wants it. The gods have placed you here, Antonius, because you are the best man to lead the House of Julii in the Senate. How selfish you are to think they bend to your every beck and call. They exist to serve the greater Rome, not the lesser men within. You and I are not greater than this wonderful nation, and the gods push Rome to its destiny through men like you, whether you like it or not." She stood from the table. "I am done eating. I will retire—don't

come to kiss me goodnight. Eat your food and think about everything you've been saying—and pray the gods don't get mad and strike you down as they struck down your uncle."

His hands beneath the table clenched and he watched her leave the room.

He stood once he was alone and ordered the servants to clean the dishes. He made his way to his room, fuming within not because she had spoken against him, but because she was right.

There was only silence. The doors to the balcony were shut as they were every night, and Antonius slept fitfully in his oversized bed, the covers twisted about him, sweat beading on his forehead. The servants prowled outside his door, throughout the house, and watching the doors; they were armed so as to prevent another horrible Silvanus incident. Antonius was not aware of the servants as he slept; falling asleep had been a difficult task, even more unbearable than sitting through the Senate meetings, and he continually heard Celesta's voice inside his head, her brutal condemnation, and the fear it wrought because he knew she was absolutely right. He feared the gods striking him down, and he hated himself, condemned himself for his greed, his selfishness, the way his tongue moved without consent. He was a man of the sword, a man of power, a man the people admired, and he could not even put a reign on his own tongue. Her curt and fiery words ran through him as he slept, her own voice squeezing fountains sweat from his brow, soaking the pillows so as he had to switch them throughout the night.

His sleep offered no sanctuary. His dreams did not carry the sweet memories of his childhood, nor even the mindless prattle of the Senate chamber he so ruefully dreaded. Instead his dream were the harbinger of nightmares, and instead of hearing laughter in the ripe orchards or the sound of senators droning on and on about issues that really didn't matter, he heard distant screams, cut-off and vibrant, and out of the darkness a steam, a smoke, and he tried to push away the smoke, but it only came closer, each breath seeping it into his lungs, his heart pushing it through his body. The smoke he somehow knew was not the smoke of a smoldering fire put out by water, but the breath of a million men rising from their souls; he waded through a sea of ashen carnage, and the screams grew louder until they reverberated throughout his head. He tried to scream, tried to writhe about to wake himself up—anything was better than this!—but the mythical smoke entwined him, pinioned him to the mist; from the mist came eyes alive with pouring flame, except the flesh had vanished to reveal a hideous skull, jaw

open and eyes an inferno. A sword erupted from the jaw and stabbed into Antonius' heart; he screamed and felt the world tilt, and the smoke vanished, revealing to him a world only his imagination could conjure, a world where he lay bleeding upon a table, and the sounds of a thousand Roman soldiers crying and hollering and cursing the only lullaby in the land. He tries to get up but he feels something atop of him; he raises his head—oh, it is so heavy!—and is horrified to see a man in a white tunic pulling intestines from his body—and Antonius cannot feel it! His head falls back and turns and his eyes are slithering into the back of his head and he can see a sea of Roman soldiers upon tables, being gutted and castrated, skinned and burned, tortured as if the fare of the gods had completely turned against them. The man at the table next to him turns his head, and Antonius sees the blood-soaked wild hair of General Marcellus, who opens his mouth to allow a swarm of locusts to fly forth. The locusts swarm all over Antonius and enter his body through his gut and they spread through him, biting and stinging and poisoning and—the screams! the screams! the screams!

He throws off the covers, horrendously awake, the darkness in the room overpowering. But the screaming did not stop. It was coming from across the manor. He lunged out of the bed and flung open the doors to his room. The servants were all staring down the corridor to the Celesta's shut door, their pale faces betraying movement. The screams grew louder, laced with crying. Antonius screamed at them to move as he ran into the living room, grabbed his father's sword off the wall, and he ran down the hallway as the servants were hammering on the door, calling for Lady Celesta, asking if she was okay.

Antonius angrily shouldered them out of the way and slammed his leg into the heavy wooden door. It burst open and he lunged inside, sword held at the ready. The servants entered with candles, and Antonius saw Celesta was alone. She lay at the head of the bed, wrapped in her covers, sobbing hysterically. He threw down the sword and jumped onto the bed, embracing her, covers and all. Her arms emerged from the bundle of blankets, grabbing onto him, squeezing, and she sobbed into his shoulder. The servants stood at the back of the room, hearts racing, the candlelight dancing everywhere. Antonius soothed her, promised her everything was okay; she snaked a hand down to her round tummy, felt about, and could feel the baby kicking, afraid at the increase in her heartbeat. Antonius let his hand slide down there too, fingers draping over her hand and stomach. He told her it was okay, couldn't she see everything was okay?

She spoke in broken words, spoke sentences no woman should ever hear. She spoke of holding her child, her precious child, in her hands, except the eyes were full of blood and the hands were gone, leaving only bloody stubs. And she spoke of the screams of a million men, women and children, and flames at the window. She stumbled for words to describe the horror she encountered when, gazing upon the walls, she saw tiny bloody handprints all over the stone: her child's handprints.

She cried again and he promised to remain with her, ordering the guards to leave the candles and retire. He stayed with her all throughout the night.

III

Many weeks later

The lone horse kicked up a trail of dust as it rode fast along the rutted road running between the crops fields opening for summer. The first breaths of light barely came over the treetops, sending their snowy rays between the giant trees bordering the crops. Men on the farms looked up at the horseman as they came out of their small homes, and children, as they always wake early, ran through the fields, trying to keep up with the horseman; the horseman waved and smiled at them and continued on. The children never could keep up. Energy surged through the horse, an energy that only can when the horse's legs move like lightning and its chest heaves in such a way as to make each stagnant breath a flash of thunder. The crop fields thinned and the dark forest clothed the road, mist hovering amidst the boles of the trees. The horseman knew exactly where he was as the road began to break apart, then end altogether. Brambles and thorns covered the dead-end road and he paused the horse, took several breaths, dismounted, and dragged the steed over to the side of the road, reigning it up to a tree trunk. Veiled in full armor, the warrior stood next to his panting horse and looked over the brambles and thorns, into a wild and untamed land of thick forests, scattered settlements, and all the nightmares of an ungodly childhood.

He looked into the depths of the trees and searched his mind; no love was to be found, only hate: a seething hate that poured from his eyes and mouth and ears, from every pore upon his armor-clad body. What secrets hid within? the warrior wonders. What vile mockery exists within these trees, what fortune, good or for ill, awaits? How much blood will stain the earth and how many carcasses left to

rot? His hand moves down upon the *spatha* sword upon his side and his fingers dance a lullaby upon the hilt. What villains lay hidden, awaiting only to be discovered and run-through?

He smiles, a crooked smile, a smile from the gods, and it plays within his mind: houses broken into, vengeance repaid in full; this time the Romans would break in, and the mothers who fondled the barbarians would be slain, and the children too dark for assimilation would be cut down. He looked up the sunlight barely coming over the trees. This was a time for revenge; it was a time for payback; it was the time for all of Gaul to weep for the children are no more, for the homes are burnt and the crops ravished. Rome stands idle no more; Gaul shall mourn for decades. History shall be written upon the bones in the vultures' mouths. He would ride forth and conquer. His name would forever be remembered—the young General who did not tame Gaul, but the young General who *destroyed* Gaul.

He stepped through the trees, entering the land he had fled, the land he had entered, and the land that even now bore his name upon scorched corpses laid into the earth, corpses finding no sleep, only tossing and turning in the gates opposing Elysium. The soldier walked through the forest, sliding between the giant trees; the mist clung to his boots and armor in beads and speckled his sword. He breathed it in like a vapor and it drenched his lungs. The birds pranced in the trees and called out to one another; he walked, closed his eyes, let his hands gently guide him between the trees, and he listened to the birds, remembered when they brought him joy upon an old life, when he would finish his chores early and run to her house, and they would embrace and kiss and walk the fields and the forests, listening to the birds and discussing the future. They had never discussed this, and yet here he was. The Gauls took *everything* from him, and in doing so, enraged not only a monster waiting to be unleashed, but also enraged the gods who spin the worlds and hold the gates to Heaven and Hell. Now the man whose future was destroyed would come and reap justice fifteen times more than the injustices he'd been dealt. The rivers of Gaul would flow with corpses and the women would shiver at his name, the children cry for their fathers and brothers are no more, and the man—the Voice of the Gods—is coming, yes, he is coming swiftly.

The man knelt down in the trees, and his prayers were laced with the masterpieces of the birds. His prayers to the gods, pleading direction, pleading him victory; he did not fear death, but over the weeks of weary marching, he did not grow tired in the joints, but only thirsted more for destruction on the vile

barbarians. He ached for his mother and his beloved, and Elysium haunted his dreams; but he knew that he could not stand in Elysium with honor if he did not destroy those who had made a covenant to destroy *him* and *everything* he was. Now he prayed to the gods for victory; that he would honor his ancestors, honor all of Rome, and enter Elysium with the singing of the prophets, for he was a man of the gods—the son of Mars—and Gaul was wiped from the memory of the earth. He was prepared to do everything needed and he prayed for the courage, the willpower, the strength, the skill, and most of all, the hand of Mars upon him. “For I am but a mortal in flesh and deed; but you are immortal, and I humbly ask that your hand be upon your servant. Gaul shall be shattered and broken in your name, and in the middle of the settlements I shall build giant temples to you, carved by the hands of your warriors. Bless us, be with us, and fight alongside us!” He prayed to his mother and his beloved, asks that they be honored by him. He knew that they could see him, and for a moment he felt their touch upon him, a wallow of compassion surging through him, but it lasted only a moment, and then all he felt was rage against the Gauls. He asks that they accept him when the glorious come times, when it is in the gods’ desire that he pass on for the good of Rome; he asks that they be waiting at the gates of Elysium to bring him home, to a paradise of golden fields and orchards and wineries, where he would spend eternity running with his beloved and the children who were mercilessly murdered by the Gauls. He did this not for himself so much as for all of those who had fallen under the Gauls’ barbaric lusts.

He continued to pray until his stream-of-thought was broken. His eyes snapped open and he looked over his shoulder; the sound of someone slowly approaching. He quietly stood and peeled around the tree, breathing softly, in complete silence; he drew his sword without sound, the blade sparkling with dew. The sound of the intruder grew right beside him; he slipped around the bole of the tree and came behind the prowler. His sword reaches out and the tip touches the back of the man’s head; the man, wreathed in mist, does not move. The soldier says nothing and the man turns. The soldier withdraws the sword and the man manages a smile, though his heart is screaming.

“I am sorry, General, for having to approach you like this. I wish more time could be given you to pray.”

Marcellus looks into the second-in-command’s eyes. “You have my forgiveness. I was just finishing up.”

Aulus nodded as Marcellus sheathed his sword. "General, the men are eager to move out."

"Eager? It is a blessing of the gods, Aulus, for I am eager as well. Then let's go."

They moved through the woods, back to the steed. "How did you find me?"

"Begging forgiveness again, General, but I heard your prayers. I did not mean to intrude—"

"Don't worry about it," Marcellus said. "Are the men awake?"

Aulus grinned. "General, you truly are a pious man. It is nearly noon."

Marcellus looked up between the trees and saw the sun overhead. "Strange. It didn't feel that long."

"You've been gone for several hours. The Army is waiting upon the road."

Marcellus took Aulus by the shoulder and made him stop. "Commander."

Aulus turned. "How can I be of service, General?"

"The Army enters Gaul today. Several hundred thousand Roman soldiers are entering its borders from every direction. Gaul is not to be tamed. It is to be destroyed. Not a stone is to be left unturned. Every man, woman and child will kiss the boots of the Roman soldiers or be slain. There will be no mercy—"

Aulus stammered, "General? It is the Roman way to display mercy—"

"Not now," Marcellus cut him off. "How much mercy have the Gauls given to us? How much mercy did they give to my widowed mother? How much mercy did they give to my beloved? They have shown no mercy towards Rome, and it is no ancient Hebrew proverb 'Ye reap what you sow' that is to be ignored on this campaign. We shall torch the homes and claim the fields with our own hands. The villagers will either bow down to us or they will be slain on the spot. You must understand this if you are to be right beneath me. I consider you a good friend and I need you to be with me on this one. It shall be done whether you are or not, but without it would be harder."

Aulus licked his lips. "I was raised as an honorable soldier."

"The gods are angrier than all of Rome, even angrier than me. You call me a pious man, Aulus, but doubt my conversation with the gods. This is their desire. I am their servant. *You* are their servant. All of *Rome* is their servant. Now do we serve, do we obey, do we run with the gods' favor... Or do we cringe back, falter, fail, and merit the anger of the gods just as much as the Gauls? Disobedience from your child's friend can be tolerated for just a little while, but when the child disobeys, it merits grave punishment."

“Hadrianus will be enraged.”

“Hadrianus is not in charge. *I am.*”

“What exactly are you asking for, Marcellus? I speak to you now as a friend, not an inferior.”

The gods breathed into Marcellus as he spoke: “Total war.”

IV

Rising cases of sickness in the baths; how to deal with the few crops not destroyed in the recent wintry outburst; would the coliseum ever be built: these were the running discussions that crept through the walls, slithered from the mouths of the Senators, etched erosion upon the pillars of the chamber. As the weeks grew longer and spring threatened to turn to summer, Antonius did not find that his work became easier. The trees were turning brilliant green and the crops were swelling, the trade roads packed with traffic, and there were children and plays out in the street. When there was silence in the chamber, he could hear the laughter and talk out on the street, and he would think of Marcellus out in Gaul, would envy him, and then he would feel terrible when contemplating being a farmer or a blacksmith instead of the high-and-mighty leader he was. He yearned for war, he yearned for love, he yearned for simplicity. He did not yearn for this. He kept subconscious grudges against the gods and did not let himself grow close to any senators in fear of acquiring their taste and zeal for such a monotonous and—in his mind—useless job.

This day he had been asked for his opinion on many issues, and he would cite that whatever the senators decided would be fine with him. This bloated the admiration of the senators, but the other House leaders scowled at him. Dionysius would cross his arms and shake his head while Cicero scoffed with a roll of the eyes. Antonius did not mind. He was of different breed, different stock than they; he could not share wine and bread parties with them and be happy. This was not the life for him. It murdered him, an umbilical noose tightening around his neck.

The hour for lunch was approaching and Antonius counted the minutes. He looked up as an African servant entered the chamber; he imagined the man was perhaps from the Egyptians. One of the chamber security guards demanded his business; by this time Antonius had looked again to the windows, dreaming of being outside where life meant something beautiful. He did not hear the servant the first time, but Cicero shouted his name; Antonius looked over to Cicero and

the leader of Brutii pointed to the servant. Antonius followed the trace of his finger to see the servant standing in the middle of the chamber, flanked by two guards. Antonius just stared as the servant spoke.

"Honorable Leader," he said quickly. "Your presence is demanded at the home."

"On what business?" Antonius demanded.

"Your mistress beckons you."

"Mistress? She's not my mistress. Can it wait?"

The servant licked his lips. "She is much distressed. She seeks you."

Antonius cocked his head to the side. "What kind of distress?"

The servant stumbled for answers. "A morbid kind, Honorable Leader."

Antonius half-walked, half-ran with the servant down the street, dodging pedestrians and shopping carts and ignoring the pleas and cries of the merchants. The streets were wide but packed. The servant trailed behind him, hanging on to Antonius' every word; Antonius demanded, "A bad dream? What did she dream?"

"She could barely tell us, she was crying so much—" This made Antonius' heart break. "She dreamt she was swimming through... a sea of dead babies. She was unable to find her own baby, and then, I think, because every word took so many breaths and it was hard to keep track of what she was saying, then she realized there was a tiny skeleton within her." He jumped over a cart of spilt olives. "She says you are the only one who can help her. Has this happened before, Sir?"

"Once or twice," Antonius replied. The manor was straight ahead.

Servants waited at the door, stepping aside quickly to let Antonius inside. He could hear her across the room, sobbing upon a couch. He fell onto the couch beside her, taking her up in his arms. Her cheeks were bloated with blood and her eyes scratched dry. She sniffled and wiped her hands all over her face, smearing the tears. The servants stood in the shadows, silently watching; Antonius did not tell them to leave this time, for his thoughts were completely on Celesta: she said he was the only one who could help her, but he is clueless as to what is happening. He wondered if all women suffered such dreams, but he doesn't think so. He wondered if the absence of Helonius continued to claw at her conscience, but didn't think so: she was in despair over Helonius' death, but acknowledged that he resided in paradise and was awaiting her and her little child.

Celesta slightly pulled away and looked up at Antonius. "I am sick."

"We'll get you a doctor, I promise." He touched her forehead.

"Not that kind of sick," she breathed. "I am sick here." She touched her head. "I am a sick person, Antonius. I have a little child within me and I have the most horrible thoughts. They plague me, ruin me. I love the child within, but something inside me wants to... wants to just dash it on the rocks." Had she anymore tears, she would've cried: her throat warbled. "I am such a sick and twisted person."

He shook his head. "No. No, you are a haunted person. These dreams haunt you. You hate them, Celesta, not because they *are* you, but because they *aren't* you."

She looked back at the servants, who looked away; she stared at the floor and whispered under her breath, clutching Antonius' hand, "*What is happening to me?*"

V

Two weeks later

The songs of the birds betrayed what the soldiers knew as they marched towards the heart of Gaul. The scent would touch them before anything else, that common scent of war known too well by the soldier, the scent that made the little children's heart beat faster and the women cover their noses. After the smell would come the smoke over the trees; the road would twist and turn and the smoke would grow closer, the smell intensifying until you reeked of it, and then with a final bend the soldiers would come across the trampled remains of what used to be crops, now stripped bare and denuded and left as forage for scavengers. In the epicenter of the ravaged fields rested the villages, the true pushers of the smoke. The soldiers would find themselves dumbly staring at the charred skeletons of barns and buildings, the smoking ruins of what used to be stables and homes and market centers. The towns were completely burnt to the ground and completely absent of mourners. On down the road the smell only swelled, and the soldiers were forced to march past giant graves dug along the sides of the road, filled with hundreds of bodies, the corpses of men and women and children left bare in the pit so as to spread disease and be carried by the carrion of the ground and air. It disturbed the soldiers, seeing the brutal carnage and knowing it was done in the name of Rome; but for others it drew up a sense of pride: *this is what the Gauls deserved for the way they so brutally treated Rome and its citizens*. An

eye for an eye and a tooth for a tooth. Leading the Army with his entourage of armed cavalry bodyguard, Marcellus smiled as he came to the towns, and relished in the sight of the smoke and blood. Kaeso and Appius' fingerprints drenched everything.

As the Army marched past fences where javelin-impaled bodies of Gallic men were strapped, the flesh peeling and crawling with maggots, a disgruntled officer approached Marcellus directly, breaching the protocol of command, as his disgust rained out all sense of professional reason. "Is brutality the mark of a good conscience and of a good man? I think not; so how is it the mark of a clean nation and a great one?"

Marcellus simply looked at the officer and laughed. "You are a mindless philosopher." He turned and proceeded to ignore the man.

A crow pecked at the eyes of a corpse upon the fence.

The officer did not falter. "I wonder, General, if Rome ought to be the better man, treating the Gauls with justice—*and* with mercy."

Marcellus stared at him, sitting straight and undeterred in the saddle. His eyes burn down to embers, then extinguish into the darkest storms of an infernal soul. A rain-cloud of anger sweeps over him, and he snarls, "You have no idea who the Gauls are. The Gauls deserve every inch of justice and agony that can be dealt. Rome will be the better man when Gaul is crushed under its feet and the King is cut into seven pieces and sent to the seven hills of the eternal city. Your festering mind disgusts me. In my own wisdom I know no Gaul—be it man, woman or child—deserves the right to breathe air anywhere close to Rome, and if it were my decision, I would have every Gaul ruthlessly massacred without hesitation. It is the gods who force me to make quarter if they kiss our boots. You think you've seen Hell; I promise you, you haven't even felt the first warmth from the flames yet."

VI

The man's heart beat within his chest as he stood at the doorway of the stately manor. He waited as the servant summoned the Master, and the man closed his eyes and tried to restrain his soul. He could not believe where he stood now, could not believe whom he was about to speak to. The very thought of it thrilled him. The great warrior, the legendary soldier, the man of unstoppable vengeance, a man favored by the gods themselves. The man thinks that if he can only shake the

man's hand, his life will be complete. His heart stammers as Glory approaches and his palms sweat. The servant returns with a tall and masculine figure behind him; the servant dips to the side and the sunlight breaks over the tall man's dashing features. The man at the doorstep swallows hard and fumbles through his words, introducing himself as the one summoned. The man in the doorway took the breath-taken man gently by the shoulder and allowed him to step inside. The visitor's heart screams: *he is touching me!*

"I trust," Antonius said as they walked up the stairs, "that everything seen here remains confidential."

"Doctor-patient confidentiality is a pact of my own."

"If this got out," Antonius warned, "it would hurt me *and* it would hurt her. She does not need more pain."

"You have my solemn oath," the doctor said as they walked up the stairs. Silence; only the sound of their feet upon the stone steps. Then he asked, "What, exactly, is the problem, General?"

Antonius stopped at the door at the next story, opened the door to his manor. "She is in distress."

"Depression?"

"Yes and no." Antonius took him into the manor, pointed down the corridor towards her room. "She is sleeping right now. We must keep quiet. I don't want to wake her. She isn't screaming. She must be dreaming peacefully." He led the doctor to the couch where he had held Celesta weeks before, and where he had held her once more last night; in the darkness, he had made a silent vow to bring medical help in. He could not bear for Celesta to suffer. "You see, Doctor," he said, pacing before the couch, "she's been suffering from... delusions. Delusions in her sleep."

"Nightmares?"

"Yes. But no. They aren't like normal nightmares. They grow in intensity with each one, the next being two times as worse as the last. And none of them are anything I would ever dream of her having. She's such a wonderful woman. She hasn't a bad bone inside her, and yet she's dreaming—seeing—these horrible, ungodly things."

"How many of these dreams has she had?"

"I've lost count. Too many. At first I did not worry—Don't all pregnant dreams have nightmares about their children being lost?"

"It's not uncommon, no. Most women have dreams of their babies dying in child-birth. Is this what your mistress is suffering?"

"No. Hers are much worse. Last night she had another one. It pains me to mention it. I can't think of her seeing this, and in the dream it is all very real. She has trouble sleeping, and when she is awake she feels awful, physically and emotionally: she is dizzy, nauseous, has headaches, and she is convinced she is a horrible person because of these dreams. I tell her the dreams are not her. They aren't windows into the soul."

The doctor nodded. "You're right. Dreams are random. They mean nothing."

Antonius walked over to the open double doors and felt the warm breeze. He closed his eyes, recalling the dream, and despite the warmth, shivers mocked within. "Last night I was awakened by screaming, and I knew immediately what it was. The servants came to wake me but I was already awake. The screams cut off because a servant woke her up before I could get to her, but she got out of bed and just ran into my arms. She kept looking about the room as if it were her own prison and asked to be taken outside. I took her out onto the balcony to get fresh air and she told me about her dream. She was crying the whole time... She dreamt she was in her room and she was being... ripped open and raped. Her baby was taken from her open stomach, and the baby was torn apart by rabid dogs foaming at the teeth. They ripped her baby apart at her bedside, and it was so real she did not wish to remain in the room. We remained out on the balcony for near two hours before she asked me to remain with her upon the couch, where she fell asleep. Thankfully, with daylight, she is able to get more sleep. The light comforts her; I think it's because, from her open window, she can hear the noise of the city, the laughs of the children, and it brings her peace."

The doctor licked his lips. "Bad dreams about their children are normal for pregnant woman. But this seems far more serious in the magnitude and repetition your mistress is having. I'd recommend some herbs to calm her down at night-time. I'll give you the names of the herbs; you can find them in the market. Just blend them together as I tell you."

Antonius glared at him in desperation. "And her dreams should stop?"

"Yes, medically speaking."

"What do you mean by that? Yes or no?"

"I mean..." He searched for the politically correct words. "I believe the dreams will stop. Her husband died just recently, and with his child in her body, this may be the cause of some subconscious discomfort which will be subdued with the

herbs. I even expect that, upon birth when her child comes to her from the womb just fine, the dreams will be a thing of the past, a dark memory... But we must never forget that there are some things medicine or herbs can't render harmless."

Antonius didn't understand. "What things?"

"If the dreams do not stop, I recommend seeing a priest."

He scrunched his brow. "A priest? What for? You said it was clinical."

"And it probably is. But..." He tried not to offend the General. "Perhaps the gods are speaking through her dreams. Perhaps they are telling you something, something you need to know." He shrugged. "I don't know. Like I said, I think the herbs will clear everything up and you won't see me anymore."

Antonius sighed. "That would be nice. Thank you, Doctor."

"It is an honor," the Doctor said.

Antonius let him out and returned to the balcony, looking over the city, running his fingers over the potted plants. He returned inside, could hear Celesta snoring, and he felt his eyes drawn to the sword upon his wall, the doctor's haunting words scurrying through him like melting ice: *perhaps the gods are speaking through her dreams*.

VII

The noises came even before the first light. The Army slept within the palisade walls, snoring soundly in their tents. The guards outside Marcellus' tent scratched their ankles, leaned against the poles of the large tent, and kept their eyes to the wispy clouds passing over the blanket of stars. Sentries walked along the ramparts, keeping their weapons close, yawning and waiting for light, hoping to catch a small nap before the long twenty-five mile march north towards Mediolanum to meet up with the legions of Kaeso and Appius. Marcellus lay in his cot, lost in dreams of paradise and wheat fields and flowers blooming in spring. The first sounds came and the sentries thought they were just hearing something, but the noise grew louder: the crash of feet through undergrowth. They leaned over the edges of the ramparts, peering into the darkness, hearing the noise all about them.

One of the guards ran to one of the wooden towers, dipped inside, and returned with an arrow dipped in tar. As the noise surrounded the camp, he quickly raced past a friend to a smoldering torch and touched the tip of the arrow onto the torch,

igniting it. The light danced over his arm and waves of heat washed over him as he strung the archer's bow, and pointed it outwards.

The man behind him, shaking his head, told his friend he was a fool: "Only deer. When you come from the cities, you don't understand these things--"

The man told him as he drew and anchored the bow, "That's not deer. I *know* what deer sound like. Do I look like an idiot?"

The other man shook his head and readjusted his helmet. "Deer. We're all going to laugh at you. Go ahead." He crossed his arms. "Well?"

The man released the arrow, a warm blast of air running through him. He stood upon the ramparts and his friend stepped to the edge; both of their eyes trailed the smoking, blazing arrow as it curved through the sky. It flew down and stabbed into the earth, spraying goblets of burning tar in every direction. The tar caught upon the dry earth and rose. The muscles within them froze as the light spread before them, illuminating the forest all about them. Blood drained from their faces; the one who had fired the shot just gawked, sweat beads peppering all over him, and his friend darted through the darkness. The remaining man just stared downward, mouth moving, unable to believe, unable to comprehend.

The General's guards threw back the tent flaps and ran inside, the low glow of smoldering candles casting oblong shadows upon the canvas walls. One of them reached for the sleeping General, but in the next moment the tip of a blade was pressed to his throat, and Marcellus, lying in bed with eyes of flame and pressing the *pugio* dagger against the guard's flesh, demanded to know what was happening. The guard swallowed, fearful of the blade, and told him the news: "The Gauls are all around us!"

Marcellus withdrew the dagger and leapt from his bed. He grabbed his clothes and his sword, ignoring the armor. "Get the men in position! We attack immediately; no hesitation. The gods do not favor those who hesitate."

The guard licked his lips. "It is not an attack, Sir. It is a retreat."

"A retreat?" Marcellus asked, confused. "Retreating from whom?"

He shrugged. "We don't know."

Marcellus growled, "We will. Awake the soldiers and send them out immediately. I want captives. Anyone who runs shall be slain. Get the archers on the walls."

Archers ran up the gangways and fitted their bows upon the walls as the gates of the fort opened, gushing out half-dressed Roman soldiers too eager for Gallic blood to worry about armor. Marcellus rode out with the cavalry already assembled; as the first wave of Roman soldiers rained through the gates, the archers let loose a volley of arrows, sending several fleeing Gauls into the ground, pierced by arrows. The soldiers still assembling within the camp were dressing and arming quickly, eager to join their brethren about the fortress.

The Gallic soldiers were half-clothed, weary and exhausted, some drenched in dried blood, carrying their comrades, scattering from the wide gates of the Roman fort, a mouth vomiting the gruesome realities of war. The cavalry rode through them, swords and spears glittering in the firelight of burning arrows; blood covered their weapons and the Gauls cried as they fell. Only a few Gauls offered a fight, but were too weary to resist; they were easily slain.

The Roman soldiers screamed in Latin for them to surrender or die; those carrying the wounded stopped, knowing their predicament, and the cavalry formed a cantabrian circle, creating a ring among the fleeing Gauls. Any fleeing soldiers were quickly killed by the sword or run down.

Blood sprinkled Marcellus' arms as he rode out to face the dozens upon dozens of surrendered Gauls who were being pushed back by the spears of triarii. He remained upon the horse, gave the command, looked at the prisoners, then retreated. The prisoners were marched into the fort and the gate closed.

As the sun began to rise, the soldiers who had been too late to participate in the round-up walked outside the gates, mercilessly killing the wounded Gauls lying in the grass. Hundreds of Gauls lay among the weeds as the carrion beetles began to feast. And Marcellus ate breakfast in his tent, washed his hands clean, and began the interrogations.

The Army did not march all day. Marcellus allowed the soldiers to celebrate their first "battle," and was pleased that this was the first, and yet disappointed; while the men were encouraged and convinced the strength of the gods was upon them (deciding this by the easily-won victory), Marcellus understood this was not, in the real sense, a genuine battle. It was a massacre. The Romans had been posed against no threat. He knew many ideals would crumble and many realizations would emerge over the next few weeks. Boys would evolve into men, but most of them, Marcellus feared, would only perceive the realizations for a short while before the reality of war took their lives. But go ahead, he figured, let them

celebrate. They'd been marching for weeks upon weeks and the men needed the morale. They would continue the march in the morning. Besides, he needed time to interrogate the prisoners, and it seemed—from the mouths of the captives—that Kaeso and Appius were doing quite well without him.

The captives were terrified. They had experienced the brutal total war as demonstrated by the Roman soldiers. They had been within the towns when the Romans marched through, and spun truthful stories about the barbaric nature of the Romans: how they raped the women because the women's offspring raped Rome; how they threw the babies against the walls and smashed them under their boots; how they rounded up people in large barns and set the barns ablaze; how they ravaged the crops then took off the hands of the farmers; how anyone having any relation to the Gallic volunteer army or showing any real allegiance to the subversive nation of Gaul was executed without question. These confessions made Marcellus smiled; the god of war, that beloved Mars, had been at work even as his greatest messenger headed to the capitol, where Mars' wrath would be demonstrated in a way never to be met again.

The prisoners, at the point of sword, knelt before Marcellus and told what had happened to them, why they had been caught running in the dead-of-night. Many, many miles away, Kaeso and Appius had met a large Gallic force in a mountain pass between two towns, and the onslaught had been horrendous. Although many noble Romans fell, the Gallic volunteer Army was broken and routed. The scattered Gauls fled in every direction; they had been fleeing for nearly two days, and had tried to run past the Roman fort. The guards had discovered them and then they knew what would happen. Most broke away from their comrades and ran; the others were slaughtered or captured.

When Marcellus was finished with them, he sent them out to a quarantine area, heavily guarded by his own loyal bodyguard. Hadrianus stood with the guards watching over the prisoners, and Aulus carried the captives between Marcellus and Hadrianus. One captive tried to flee, even attempting to take Commander Aulus' life as an act of courage, but Aulus blocked the blow and kicked him down, then stabbed him in the neck with his sword. The body was dragged out to the holding area, stripped completely, and thrown at the other prisoners as a message. Aulus flashed his bloodied sword and called the next captive over. No more difficulties were experienced.

Finally Aulus returned empty-handed to Marcellus as the sun reached four-o'clock. He was alone.

Marcellus asked, "That's it?"

Aulus nodded. "That was the last of them."

Marcellus sighed and stood, paced within his tent. "I am grateful Kaeso and Appius have been moving. More legions are about to join them. The Gauls do not know this, but *I* know this." Aulus was quiet as the General moved about, stroking the rough sides of his face. He looked towards the flap leading to the spot where the captives walked about and sat around, hearts racing, wondering where their fate rested. "Kaeso and Appius are the servants of Mars as well. They have received the same command as I. You know this command, Aulus, because we discussed it in the forest before we entered this god-forsaken country."

Aulus swallowed. "Yes, General."

Marcellus fingered the sword upon his belt. "Then you know what to do?"

Aulus nodded. "Yes, General."

"Have you ever fought in war before, Commander?"

"A few skirmishes. Not full-out war."

"Things change in wars like this. Ethics change. Hadrianus must understand this."

"It will take him a while."

"No. He will understand tonight. He must personally perform the acts, or he shall be considered a deserter."

Aulus felt shocked at the coldness in the General's voice. "That man is your friend—"

"And I am a servant of Mars. I have been chosen," he snarled. "Has he?"

"We've all been chosen by Mars," Aulus muttered.

Marcellus heard him. "Then tell him to start acting like it. By sundown, the act will be completed. Or he will be executed before all the ranks because he refused to play his part for the god of Mars. You are right, Aulus, in what you say: we are all chosen by Mars. Mars chooses that some of us die, that some of us live. But he requires victory; and he grants it. My men cannot live under *any* shadow of a doubt. If we do not honor Mars in everything we do, we spit in his face. Hadrianus must not spin in Mars' face, or the wrath Mars throws upon Gaul shall be thrown upon a fellow Roman."

"Hadrianus is worshipped in Rome—"

"We are in the wilderness," Marcellus growled. "This is *not* politics. It is *war*. Don't talk politics to me. My job, my destiny, is to crush Gaul, and I *will*. I will do whatever I have to do to accomplish it."

One of Marcellus' guards approached him. "General. Perhaps we should not rely so well on the words of the Gauls. They could all be lying. They could be spies. Kaeso and Appius could be utterly destroyed, and the Gauls are trying to lead us into a trap." His voice was saturated with despair.

Marcellus did not heed him. "No. These are not Gallic spies. Gallic spies do not allow themselves to be slaughtered; it is not the way it works. How many spies have you seen who are willingly critically wounded to get inside Roman walls? These men were truly frightened, truly running; it was too unorganized to *be* organized. These men speak the truth in fear for their lives."

"They could be spreading lies, General, lying to you through their teeth! Why don't--"

Marcellus cut him off, rising before him. "Their stories are similar but different in many aspects. Had they all been identical, I would know they were giving me rehearsed answers. The variations shows truth. Surely you would know this."

"I know not to trust the Gauls."

"You know to hate the Gauls?"

"It is *all* I know, General."

Marcellus grinned. "Do not let that hate only spill out here and now in frantic words. Let it flow through your arms, through your sword. For you ride with me. And you slay with me. I promise the time is coming, in fact, it has already come, that Mars will be glorified and all his servants will wear the beautiful banners of Gallic blood. Thousands upon thousands of Gauls are dead and even more wounded. They are retreating to form a defensive line around Mediolanum; Kaeso and Appius will assault the city's southern gate, but we will wrap around to the east and take them out by surprise. Yes, our changes have planned. Mars is setting Mediolanum within our hands; we shall take it soon." He smiled at this thought.

"A difficult battle lies before us?"

"No. Not a battle. *Many* battles. Many will die. Perhaps you. Perhaps me. But victory will come."

The prisoners were lined up in a line, surrounded by the entire Army outside the fort walls. Marcellus stood beside Aulus, and fifteen feet away stood Hadrianus, eyes bloodshot and face a mask of disgust. Marcellus did not care at all. He crossed his arms and signaled them to begin. Two guards walked forward, grabbed the first prisoner by the arms. The prisoner muttered in a foreign

language as he was led forward to Hadrianus' feet; Hadrianus withdrew his sword, staring into the cold steel, heart melting like snow with the breath of spring. The soldiers knocked the prisoner to his knees, and the prisoner felt the cold dew of the grass nibble at his skin. His world spun, a haze of reality; he saw the blurred red of soldiers, he saw the sword rising above him; he closed his eyes, heard the singing of the birds over the screaming heart within him. Sweat ran down him and he wanted to cry, but he held it in. He could not control his end now; the Romans had lied, and they all deserved death; yet he could control how he went. He clenched his fists and waited, an excruciating and endless wait. He could hear the soldiers walking away, and he was lost in the most lonely and miserable loneliness he had ever known. Softly the sound of the Captain moving went behind him, then stopped. He drew a final breath and the most agonizing pain he'd ever know sizzled through him and his soul screamed; the world vomited gorgeous blue as the sword withdrew and he pitched forward, lying numb across the ground, feeling the warmth gushing all over his neck, the weariness mingling with the pain and sweeping through him; he saw the soldiers standing, and the last thing he saw was Marcellus kneeling far off, locking with his eyes. He faded feeling the rage tossing away all comfort.

Hadrianus felt the bloody sword in his hand and had never felt, at the core of his being, a more horrible and miserable Roman than he felt right then. An unarmed and helpless corpse lay at his feet, blood spreading over the back of the skull. The tip of the sword had been driven in at the base of the skull, driven downwards into the spine. Blood soaked the grass and the body vibrated in postmortem convulsions. Hadrianus could feel the pleasure of Marcellus but he hated himself. The guards grabbed the body and carried it to the side. Marcellus ordered the next to be brought forward, and the Romans watched complacently as another hopeless captive fell under the blade. Hadrianus feared he could never wash the dishonest blood from his own hands. He thought of his father, how his father had been all about showing mercy to the enemy to show that Rome was more glorious and civilized, and he could feel his father's frown upon him as he drew the sword in and out of the captives one-by-one. Each slice of the sword drew him farther and farther from the bosom of his father and his spirit wept.

The last prisoner came forward. Hadrianus raised his sword, but before he could let it fall, the old man snapped his gaze over to Marcellus and said, "You shall not kill me."

Marcellus rose, infuriated, and ordered Hadrianus to withdraw. Hadrianus accepted it thankfully, hoping to purge his conscience. Marcellus moved over to the man, drawing his own *spatha* sword. He demanded of the man why he was so sure he would not slay him then and there as he had done to all his comrades. The prisoner just cocked his head, and with a strange twinkle in his eye, said, "Because you are me. And I am you."

Guards stood at the ends of the tent. Marcellus threw the man to the floor and hovered over him, the sword pointed straight at his gut. "Speak to me now what you know. Or you will die here on the floor."

"I know more about you than any Roman. I know who your father is."

"You know my father?"

"Yes." Suffocating tension, then, "He sits before you now." No trace of falsehood could be discovered in his voice.

Marcellus' grip tightened upon the handle of the sword. "Prove it."

"I was only a boy, about your age, when it happened. My father joined a raiding party and so did I. We were just looking for excitement. It is horrible, I know. I regret it now. We marched through some Roman towns and did horrible things. We entered one home and discovered... We discovered your mother. It was I who raped her. I did not kill her, but I abandoned her, and later I discovered she was pregnant with a son. I regretted what I had done, and I regret it now. I was just a boy. How can one take back those things? He cannot. My memories haunt me. I am just a farmer. I lead a simple life with a wife who does not know my past. I have three young girls of my own, and all of them have their own hopes and dreams of having a family, having a lover, having kids of their own." He smiled, thinking of them. Marcellus showed no emotion; the sword did not lower. "I have followed your progress. The news spoke of you, spoke of your flight from the same town I had entered. I used logic and know who you are. You did not slay me because you could feel something when you looked at me. This is kinship. You have been raised to hate us, to hate the Gauls, but you belong to them. We are you. You are us."

Marcellus stepped away, the sword suddenly lighter in his hands. "Do you expect compassion? Do you expect me to throw down my sword and embrace me? You act like you love me; but did you love my mother? Did you feel love as you ravaged her, as you tore open her vagina, as her screams fueled your lust? Did you love my brothers and sisters you slaughtered in that home that night? The

Gauls are Romans and the Romans are Gauls? So is it kinship love that drove you to rape our women, murder our children, massacre our towns?" He stepped towards him, growing taller in the flickering candlelight. "Was it love that took my mother from me? Was it love that sent my beloved to the grave? Is it love that sends you here—or is it fear for your life?" He pointed the sword at the man's face.

The man's face went pale.

The General smirked. "You are a farmer? Three little girls?"

"Your brothers and sisters."

"Of course." He looked at the guards, told them to leave. The man did not notice. "Why are you fighting against the Romans if you feel so shameful about your acts of childhood?"

"I fight because you invade our own land. I fight because you burn our villages and destroy our people."

"Funny, isn't it, that we fight for the very same reason?" Marcellus asked.

The man did not answer.

"This is a case of mistaken identity," Marcellus continued. "You've followed me you say, but you do not have any *clue* who I am. You cannot be my father." He raised the sword before his eyes. "I shall not slay you with my sword."

The man blew a sigh of relief. "There has always been good in you, even if—"

Marcellus tossed the sword onto the floor and withdrew something hidden beneath his armor. "Have you seen this before, Father?"

The man stared at the axe and gulped.

"So you *are* my father," Marcellus cooed. "He tried to protect his family with this. And you killed him."

"It was not I—"

"It was you. *All* of you. Every *one* of you."

The man could not find words to defend himself.

The General passed the axe blade before his face. "You should've taken the sword when you had the chance." The prisoner did not have time to cry out as the blade came down, slicing through the air, the far corner inserting in the flesh of his abdomen and drawing a deep line to the base of his ribs, and the blade finally withdrew. The man's fingers raced to his chest as the bloody line parted, curling back, allowing a fountain of blood to flow and his intestines to protrude from the cut. He looked up at Marcellus, at the axe dripping sulfuric blood, and he fell upon his side, spots flying before his eyes, his lungs asphyxiating as burning pain

spoke volumes—no, *screamed* them—in every corner of his ephemeral consciousness. Marcellus threw the axe down before the prisoner's eyes. "You cannot be my father. Haven't you heard? My father is the god of war."

The guards returned at Marcellus' bidding and saw the man on the floor. One of them drew his sword.

Marcellus raised his hand. "No. Do not finish him off. Let him lay here, pondering his thoughts, pondering his life. Let him die in a puddle of his own blood as I sit down and prepare the paperwork for our march to Mediolanum. I must write General Antonius and give him the news. I want to hear his last gasps as he dies in my own tent. Understood?"

The guard sheathed his sword. "Yes, General."

"Tomorrow our march continues. Every town will bow before us. Mars will smile this time tomorrow."

The guards nodded and left, leaving Marcellus and his father alone.

Marcellus knelt down beside his father, looked in the fading whites of his eyes. "Do not worry about your little girls. I will take care of them."

Chapter Nine: The Rape of Gaul

I

"You can't help me," she sobbed as they sat in the darkness of the room, the silence moving over them like an eternal fog. "No one can help me." He told her he *wants* to help her. "But you can't. I know what it is now. How could I have not seen it?" She wiped tears from her bloated cheeks and bloodshot eyes. "I am marked." He asked her what she meant. "The gods have favored you and Marcellus more than they've favored many men in the history of the Republic. We have not seen such great and noble men together in Rome for many years. Yet what goes up must come down; you go up and I come down. Yes, I'm the one who goes down, and it's my destiny, so I shouldn't be afraid. I can't change it, and neither can you. It is set in stone." He didn't understand and asked her to make a little more sense. "The gods favor you and Marcellus, but they have thrown disfavor upon me because I am the widow to a man who tried to stand in the way of the gods."

Antony just stared at her, then he spoke in a low voice: "Don't ever talk about Helonius that way, do you understand me? You weren't there. You didn't see it with your own eyes, you've only heard the stories. They are stories of bravery and courage, the story of nobility found in one of the most honorable men I have ever had the honor of serving with. It is in your despair that you color the story to meet your own horrific fantasy."

She did not listen. "The gods staged the rebellion so you could rise to power. It was their timing—and Helonius got in the way. They punished him with death, and they continue the curse down to me." She held back a stifled cry and touched her rounded stomach; it was almost time for her to be due. "And the curse continues on to my child. That's what these nightmares are all about. I am fearful that my baby will die in childbirth; I will never be able to enjoy life. My own existence will be as it is now: dark and hopeless."

Antony put a hand over her mouth. "Don't listen to those lies. The gods favored Helonius, favored him even more than they favor me. For now I am miserable, except when I am with you, for you are the only one who brings me true joy. And Helonius is walking in *Elysium*, complete and whole, existing in a paradise we can only dream of and long for. The gods have great favor for Helonius even now, for he died protecting me. And the gods have deep favor for

you as well, for it is your son—if it *is* a boy—who will become heir to the House of Julii and perhaps even change the course of Rome's history for the good of mankind everywhere."

But she did not listen. She *could not* listen. She only knew the nightmares, only knew the shadows haunting her everywhere she went, only knew the stagnant depression fermenting within the marrow of her bones. This was all she knew and she desired to curl up and die. She looked at Antonius with those weary, sleep-deprived eyes and crooned, "The gods favor me deeply, Antonius? Then how come all the prayers and sacrifices do nothing? They are ignoring me. I cannot believe their favor rests upon me. No. I am cursed to the ends of the earth, and my child with me. I fear with reason that the baby in my womb will not see its first year."

Thousands of women raped and no one to help them.

Celesta cried beside him now, and he shivered at the thought of the dream.

The screams of the women carried over the city, the bloods washing the street like a new rain.

He wanted to vomit. *What does it all mean?*

One thing was for sure: the doctor's herbs were not working.

II

The smoke rose above the treetops, thick black plumes smelling of burnt vegetation mingled with the scent of broiled pigs. Yet no pigs churned within the fire; the cackling flesh belonged to men and women locked inside homes as they were torched. The Roman soldiers walked around the two-story farmhouse, covering their eyes from the blaze as the flames took over the sides and engulfed the innards. The screams of the burning had died long ago and now all that remained was the awful scent wafting from the flames and smoke. Soldiers sat around in groups, huddled together, talking low, looking at the singed crops and the gutted livestock lying in pools of blood about the scorched fields. The doors on the houses lay splintered and fallen, and many bodies of men and women littered the street, impaled or slashed or throat slit. Most of the soldiers kept their heads bowed, their eyes never turning from the sound of crackling fire and the gentle sobs of the women and children taking refuge out in the forest, away from the legion.

Marcellus sat upon his horse, stared into the fire, felt the flames upon his face. He rubbed his hands together, joyful.

Aulus at his side spoke. "So should we be leaving, General? We have only marched seven miles--"

"We marched seven miles and sacked a town," the General replied. "The men are tired. Let them rest."

Aulus paused. "Here, General?"

Marcellus threw a look his way. "Is there some problem with that?"

The second-in-command licked his lips. "Most of these men are not as... stout-hearted as you. This place hurts them. They've been forced to take the lives of innocent people and have blood on their hands, blood, General, that will never wash away."

"Tell them to lick the blood off their fingers and enjoy it. They *should*."

Aulus drew a deep, frustrated breath. "General. I do not mean this in offense, but you are ruthless."

Marcellus glared.'

"Ruthless," Aulus explained, "because the gods have commanded it. I honor that. I am not condemning you. But, General, you have this other-worldly connection with the gods that these men don't have; a connection no one here but *you* has. We'd call you insane for saying you speak with the gods, for claiming you've been chosen and all, but you prove it by your actions. There's something in your eyes that make us trust you, something that inspires allegiance and devotion. But, General, although you have been chosen," he said as he waved towards the soldiers mulling about, "these men have not. Not specifically; as a whole, as the Army of Rome, yes, but not as individuals. And *as individuals* they do not enjoy what you are making them do, they want battle, not slaughter. They don't see this as honorable--"

"*It is honorable!*" Marcellus snarled. "How come you cannot see this?"

"I do." A hand again to the soldiers. "*They* don't."

"You want me to just abandon this town?"

"Not abandon the town. Get closer to the next one. Allow the men to sleep in the woods, where this is but a memory, not a place inhabited by the angry ghosts of the men and women they killed." He did not allow, *And in doing so allow the inhabitants who have fled to return so they can bury their dead and mourn appropriately*. He knew Marcellus wanted the bodies to rot upon the streets and make use as piecemeal for the carrion birds.

Marcellus did not answer before a shout rose up among the soldiers. He and Aulus turned their horses around to see squatting Roman soldiers leaping to their feet, some tripping over one another. Marcellus followed a fleeting figure run around the cobblestone side of a house, and the soldiers ran after them, disappearing from view, shouting. Marcellus coolly turned his eyes upon the other side of the house to see three nimble children, dressed in ragged and muddy clothes, running to the edge of the burnt field and kicking up a cloud of ashes as they raced for the tree-line. The Roman soldiers, weighed down by their bags and a hard day's work, could not keep up and faltered, some collapsing, winded. A little girl looked back and shrieked as a Roman soldier was nearly upon her; he tripped on a broken stalk, twisted his ankle and fell into a cloud of ash, letting out a cry as he took the dive. The one girl and two boys who had been in hiding inside a cellar were halfway across the field.

Marcellus grabbed his sword. Aulus' heart fluttered in alarm and said, "General, *please*. They're kids!"

"If they were in hiding," Marcellus demanded, "how could they kiss the boots of Rome?"

Aulus had no answer.

Marcellus speared his horse with his legs and took off around the burning house, entering the field and pushing the horse onward as he drew out his *spatha* sword and held it before him. The children felt the earth shaking and glanced back to see the lone horseman with the horsehair helmet bearing upon them with a sword already coated with dry blood. The children tried to run faster but were no match for the horse. Roman soldiers stood at the edge of the village, gaping in shock; Aulus covered his eyes, unwilling to see. Hadrianus stood in the shadows, just staring with a bitter heart as Marcellus rode down two of the children under the horse's hooves and cut off the head of the little girl with a single broad stroke. His heart turned sour as the little girl's body spun into the earth just at the edge of the trees and her bleeding little head rolled into the forest.

Marcellus' horse trotted around the body of the girl, then moved over to where he had run down the two boys. One was still breathing, barely, crushed ribs coming up in bloody swells from his chest. Marcellus leapt off his horse and stabbed the boy in the face, ending it there. He pulled out the sword and a plume of blood sprayed his leg. He mounted the horse and rode back to the village.

Hadrianus watched without a teaspoon of enthusiasm. Hidden in the shadows, he did not have to conceal the scowl upon his face, the hate for that horseman, and

he wanted like never before to wrap his hands around the General's throat and strangle him so hard that the screams of all the innocent men, women and children he killed came from within, their souls tormenting his for eternity upon eternity. But Marcellus was greeted with cheers from the men as he announced that they would be staying inside the village, and any soldier could have any girl they desired for the night before they moved on. He sat proudly upon his horse as soldiers poured into the woods, seeking out the hiding villagers. Hadrianus wanted to vomit.

III

Antonius paced outside the room, hearing only the soft whisper of the wind and his footsteps across the knobbed cobblestone. Completely absorbed in his thoughts, he did not see the peering eyes coming around the corner; they quickly vanished as he nonchalantly turned his head, and they did not return. He leaned against the wall but was too agitated to relax; he threw his ear against the door, strained to hear, but could only hear whispers and echoes. Footsteps came towards the door and he backed away, staring at the handle as it turned. The door opened and the doctor stood there, face downcast and shoulders slumped.

Antonius probed him with his eyes.

"Well," the doctor said. "She's lost lots of blood. It will take her some time to regenerate it."

"How is the baby?"

"The baby will be okay... As long as *she* is okay. I don't want to alarm you, General, but there is a very low chance that she will survive the night. Only a miracle can save her now."

Antonius stumbled backwards and fell against the wall, knocked senseless.

The doctor wrapped his hands together. "We have done all we can do. It is up to chance now."

Antonius shook his head. "There is nothing--"

"No. Nothing else." He licked his lips. "I am terribly sorry. I pray the gods will save her."

Antonius nods and turns away, making his way down the corridor, one hand running against the cool wall. He remembered it all so well, a movie running over and over in his head. He could not bear it if she left. First Helonius, then his father, now her. He wanted to look up to the skies, ball his fists, scream curses

against the gods. But he could not, for all he knew were the recent memories playing terror and horror over and over in the cranks and nooks of his brain.

He remembered being awakened by a scared servant, and he remembered being driven out of bed and dragged down the hallway towards Celesta's room. He had not heard her screams, but had heard her sobs laced with bitter commands to leave. His eyes turned upon Celesta's open door and he could see a servant standing by the bed, his shadow cast over the sheets. Antonius hollered for the servant to listen to the lady's commands; the servant eyed him then respectfully jumped out of the way, revealing the horror before him. The sheets were covered in blood and Celesta lay within them, her wrists exposed, pumping blood all over the place. A bloodied dagger lay at the foot of the bed, the blade drenched in her own blood. She screamed at Antonius to leave her alone and he screamed for a doctor. Celesta fought him as he wrapped cloth around her wrists, and he was forced to punch her unconscious so she wouldn't resist so much. As they loaded her upon a cart and quickly raced through the abandoned streets dotted with night-crawlers, Celesta began to moan, then speak, lost within fleeting dreams.

"No... Get him... Take him... My baby... Let me see... Just raise him into the... There's my baby..." Her words became frightened and Antonius looked at her face as it contorted into a mask of horror. "No... That's not mine... He's not mine... I tell you, he isn't mine!... Oh God, that came from me... Came from me... No..." Scrambled words thrown together told him what she saw within her dream; he believed she was reliving the dream that made her take up the knife and cut her own wrists. He believed it was the infant inside her that forced her to such extremes. Her child had grown white enamel horns from the top of its head, its eyes glistened yellow like a snake's eyes; the baby was a bastard-child, maniacally laughing at its mother and reaching at her with blood-soaked claws.

Antonius could not simply return to his manor and await word of Celesta's healing—or passing. He turned the other direction upon the street outside the home of the doctor, and masked in shadow and a cloak, moved about like a beggar, trailing no notice from the night-crawlers lurking in the shadows and alleyways. He knew exactly where he was going. He would figure out what was happening to her; he would plead to the only ones who could help her survive, he would end this nightmare by asking that it be put upon him instead. The mighty

General would rather his life end in the cesspool of Hell than Celesta suffer anymore.

IV

The Roman Army marched down the road, coming to the next town. The point urban cohort stopped before the gates and the rest of the Army followed suit. Marcellus had been riding at the front of the line with Aulus to his right and Hadrianus on his left. The small town was surrounded by a wooden, spiked palisade and the gate was closed. Protruding spikes at the top of the perimeter wall prevented soldiers from climbing over. Marcellus looked up to the sky as if heeding the attention of the gods when the sound of creaking wood came forth; Aulus pointed and Marcellus followed. The mass of two thousand soldiers behind them tried to see over each others' heads as the gate began to slowly swing open. Marcellus leaned forward upon his horse, expecting either a surrender or a full-out charge by peasants armed with pitch-forks, but all that stood under the open gate was a single man.

Aulus gaped at the gate-man. "He's huge."

Hadrianus agreed. Muscles bulged from every part of his body and he looked to be seven feet tall and three feet wide. Each thick arm held a gruesome sword and dark eyes glared at the Roman soldiers. He stepped out of the shadow of the gate and spoke in a loud voice. Marcellus calmly watched as the man announced, "You want this town! You must get through *me* before you lay a finger on this town. Send out your greatest warrior. He wins, you have the town and my corpse. If I win, you take his corpse with you and move on. It is a fight to the death." He spit upon the ground and kicked his feet at the dirt, spraying it up. "So who shall fight me?"

Hadrianus spoke low. "We should just move on--"

Aulus looked at him as if he were insane, then to Marcellus, "Let our men charge him. We do not need a duel."

Marcellus eyed him and gave off a wry smile. "Wouldn't it be interesting?"

"We could lose the town, General. It could be a staging point for an attack against our flank."

"I do not plan on losing the town," Marcellus breathed.

The man raised his arms, sword blades pointing to the vibrant sky. "Will no one fight me?" he roared.

The Roman soldiers drew stagnant breaths, blood running cold at the Gaul's voice.

Marcellus looked back at them. "Cowards, all of them."

Aulus urged, "Let us order the charge. Or bring up the archers. A javelin could even--"

Marcellus sliced him off. "No. I will show these men what true courage really is."

Aulus drew his head back. "General, no."

Hadrianus said nothing.

Marcellus dismounted, grabbing his *spatha* sword.

Aulus leapt off as well, stepped in front of his friend. "Don't ruin everything. Without you, these men will fall apart. Division will ensue. You can't do this."

"I am." He shoved Aulus out of the way.

The man with the swords crossed them before his big head and grinned through broken teeth.

Aulus dove ahead of the General again, facing him. "I can't let you do this."

"Commander Aulus--"

"In the name of Rome, Marcellus, back off!"

Marcellus violently grabbed Aulus by the collar, lifted him off the ground, snarled in a gutted whisper, "Who do you think I do this for? Look at our men, Aulus. Look at them. They are fearful, they are ashamed, they do not understand what they're doing here. The threat of division is already ensuing, can't you see it? It exists within my chosen few." He spoke of Hadrianus, although Aulus didn't catch it. "I do this not for my own glory, but for theirs. To show them who I am, to remind them that I am chosen by the gods to bring their wrath upon all of Gaul."

Aulus was quick. *"Are you?"*

Marcellus tossed him to the side. "Do not get in my way. I consider you too good a friend to toss away."

Aulus stood by in shock as Marcellus walked within ten feet of the man who brandished the swords.

The Gaul looked at Marcellus and laughed. "So small for a General, aren't you? Is this mockery?"

"This is what you wanted," Marcellus said. "My name is General Marcellus. What is yours?"

“My name? My name is asked of me from a Roman General?” He laughed. “I am honored.”

“I always desire to know the names of the men who cross me—and the men who die.”

“Then you are in for a surprise,” the Gaul sneered. “Your precious Mars cannot save you now. A fool.”

Marcellus glared at the man, then surprised him by tossing aside the sword. It landed in a clump of weeds. “Keep your swords. I fight with all that is on me.” He turned, revealing only his armor. He took off his helmet and placed it upon his sword, then laid his cavalry shield beside it. He knelt down and rubbed dirt upon his hands. The Gaul taunted him but Marcellus did not hear the words. When he stood, the Gaul was twisting the twin swords in his hands.

“Say when,” the Gaul said. “I am ready for all your pitiful soldiers to watch as you beg for mercy.”

“I beg you give no mercy, for neither shall I.”

Marcellus glanced back at Aulus, whose hands were clasped against his head. He looked over to see Hadrianus earnestly watching. The General faced the Gaul who waited in the shadow of the gates. “Your town is mine,” he said, “and your body shall be fed to the swine.”

The Gaul laughed, but the moment his laugh exited his gullet, the Roman was already running for him.

The man took a defensive stance and prepared to swing as Marcellus came upon him. Marcellus’ arms pumped back and forth and one reached under his loose armor but the man did not notice. The other arm reached to the other side and the man noticed a flash of movement; then all he knew was the excruciating pain emanating from his chest. He looked down to see a Roman *pugio* dagger sticking out of his chest; his arms went limp and the swords felt so heavy. He raised a lead-filled head up as the swords fell from loose fingers, and the Roman was already there, raising an axe upwards; the man could not react, so drained of power from the dagger in his heart, as the axe blade fell upon his scalp, splicing the bone and slashing his brain. A spurt of blood ran between Marcellus’ eyes, down his nose and over his chin. He ripped the bloody axe from the skull of the man and the man fell backwards. Marcellus bent over and drew his knife from the man’s gut. Blood ran down the blade and dripped in thick beads from the tip. He stood on the other side of the gate, inside the town, and could see hundreds of eyes staring at him from the windows of the cottages.

Aulus and Hadrianus rode up, completely out-of-breath in awe.

Marcellus turned his back to the town and looked at the two men on horseback. "Hadrianus," he commanded, "retrieve for me my sword, shield and helmet." The Captain nodded and rode out under the gate. Only Aulus remained with him as the Army began to march toward the gate. Marcellus looked at the faces in the windows, then returned his sight to the Commander, and in a low voice, gave him the command. "Burn everything that stands, set fire to the crops, slaughter all the livestock. Dash the infants on the rocks and cut open the pregnant women with swords." He kicked the dead Gaul in the side. "This man's ignorance has riled the mane of Mars."

V

Antonius knocked on the door, the echo of his bangs resonation echoing down the narrow streets. As the noise died down he could hear coughing within a nearby home; a dog walked across the street, looking at him with morbid yellow eyes. A drunk commoner lay against a building, eyes rolling inside his head. Antonius drew the cloaked disguise tighter and knocked again, flinching with each beat. The man was stirring. Wanton light came from around the bend of the street and he could see dark shadows approaching. He quickly raised his hand to knock but the door opened. He lowered his hand and looked into the sleepy eyes of a wily old man. Antonius did not know what to say. The man leaned out the window, saw the night-crawlers approaching, and quickly grabbed Antonius by the cloak and pulled him inside, shutting and locking the door. Antonius breathed easier. He was completely unarmed and he knew what night-crawlers would do to those roaming the streets.

The old man lit several candles. Antonius could hear the drunk moaning as he was robbed.

The old man flashed a candle before Antonius' eyes, drawing his attentions. "General Antonius?"

He was taken aback. "You recognize me?" A horrible disguise...

"No. But I knew you were coming. Please. Come." He took him down a narrow corridor.

"You knew I was coming," Antonius said, ducking under a low beam. "I told no one--"

"You need not speak to the gods for them to hear your craziest thoughts."

Antonius paused. "You spoke with the gods?" he demanded, disbelieving.

The man nodded. "Are you surprised? If so, then why have you come to see me?"

Antonius could not answer.

They entered a room filled with low stone pillars and plush couches. Bowls of water lay at the foot of the couches so visitors could wash their feet. The man did not ask Antonius to sit down, but turned upon the General and demanded of him, "What can I do for you? It is late and I have many duties tomorrow..."

"I'm terribly sorry for interrupting you," Antonius apologized. "I just need you to--"

"Talk to the gods?"

Antonius nodded. "Something like that."

"Everyone wants me to talk to the gods, wants me to get the gods to bless them. Is that what you want?"

"No. I want answers."

The man smiled. "Answers. A noble quest. But a greedy one."

"One I deeply love is on the verge of death. I want to know if she will survive. I want to--"

The man snapped, silencing him, "No! You do not want to know if she will survive. You want to know why she has the dreams, why she's terrorized in her sleep. You wish to know if there is a reason, a rhythm and rhyme for it. These are the answers you seek. It is good you seek these, for it is an honorable quest."

Impatience chewed upon Antonius' mind. "Then you can tell me--"

The man laughed. "No. I don't have that kind of knowledge. And you are not fit to speak with the gods. You may be *chosen* by the gods, if you fancy those words, but they do not want conversation with you. As you know, they are too busy up north." Marcellus. "But there is one who can give you these answers, one who is, I hate to admit, greater even than me. Do you wish to speak with him?"

He did not think before his mouth answered. "Yes."

"Then follow me," the man said, walking to the side of the room and mysteriously opening a hidden door. Antonius stepped close but the man got in his way, palms out before him, a roadblock. "Be warned, General. Once you commit to this, you can never turn back. You will perhaps discover things no mortal is to discover, and you will have answers to the future, answers that were supposed to come once the future has become past. It is a dangerous route to

walk. What you discover beyond this dark hallway will forever change who you are and the way you look at your world. Are you sure you wish to continue?"

Antonius felt something he had not felt for a long while; he felt courage and excitement. The priest's words did not turn him from the door, but made him embrace it. His words drew him close and made his passion for truth all the more intimate. He did not consider if these words were spoken to have the effect they did, but he did not care. He drew a faltering breath, heart melting in suspense, and said, "I am ready." He never could've known what he was getting himself into.

They entered into a solemn room; Antonius marked the animal skins hanging from the walls, covering the windows. There was no furniture in the room save for a ledge at the back and a hearth built into the floor. It seemed the hearth had not been used for some time, as all that lay within were crusty ashes; the dampness of the room, as if it were infested with mildew, did nothing to dispense the acrid feeling of decay. The wizened old man lit a fire upon the hearth, allowing warm light to flow through the room, illuminating the slimy stone walls. Antonius had felt the corridor sloping down to the room and imagined they were in what had one time been a wine cellar. The General sat beside the fire and let it warm his hands; the old man opened several bottles by the ledge and poured their contents into a rugged wooden bowl. Antonius tried to see what entered the bowl, but the man's back was turned to him and his hands were veiled in shadow. Antonius closed his eyes and the old man told him to take off the cloak. Antonius silently obeyed, setting it beside him. He looked around the room, at the insulating animal skins. The tingly cold melted into a fluttering warmth as pale smoke curled along the ceiling before vanishing.

The old man returned to the fire and sat down, the bowl in one hand and a spoon in the other. As he used the spoon to mash the contents together, he explained, "My father taught me this trick before I ever became a priest. It is considered to be bad magic by some, a wicked way to conjure up the mean-spirited gods. I don't believe any of it. All the ingredients come from the earth the Rome-favoring gods created, and I find that this simply opens a portal directly to the gods so they can speak and show you what they must. It can be a joyful, exhilarating experience, or a terrifying one. It all depends on what the gods desire to reveal to you."

Antonius mentally chewed over the words. "What am I in for?"

The man shot him a stoic gaze. "How can we know? We'll find out."

“What’s in it?” Antonius curiously asked as he continued to mash.

The man replied, “Herbs and mushrooms, and a plant from Asia called opium.”

“I’ve never heard of it.”

“It is rare in these parts—and expensive. The gods revealed the secret in their mixing to my grandfather’s grandfather. It has been passed on by generation to generation through our line of priests. Only a few have been able to taste its sweet nectar, and of those, a minority have gone completely mad. I warned you, Antonius, and I warn you again: the ways of the gods are unfathomable and we can never really know what to expect when we taste their honey—or, as it could be, their venom.” He tossed the spoon aside and held the bowl out to Antonius. “Here you go, General.”

He took the bowl and sniffed it. “Do I eat it?”

“Yes. Do not mind the taste. It is absolutely horrid.”

“How much do I eat?”

“All of it, but not too much,” the man said with a wry smile. “Too much can kill you.”

Antonius drew a deep breath. “Can I have the spoon?”

“Certainly.” He handed it over.

He scooped some of the green/orange gunk into the spoon and placed it into his mouth. He wanted to puke it up, but the man reached over the fire and pressed two fingers against Antonius’ mouth. “No, no. You must chew and swallow. It is tempting to spit it out, but if you really, *really* wish to know the truth, you must chew—and swallow.” Antonius nodded and forced himself to chew, stomach souring and threatening to explode. He swallowed it and felt sick to his stomach. The bowl had barely gotten a dent from his scoop. The old man said, “Continue. Eat it all.”

Antonius tried another spoonful and spit it out. “I can’t. You don’t understand—

“No, I do. I’ve done it as well. Many times. And you must finish it.”

His heart raced, his head splintered, the world spun, nausea assailed. “I can’t—

“If you want answers,” the man told him forcefully, “you must eat it. I cannot help you if you do not eat. No one can help you if you do not eat.”

Antonius steeled himself and forced the food down. It was the longest five minutes of his life.

Three-quarters of the way through he felt something odd. It made him pause. He felt... serene. Despite the bitter aftertaste in his mouth, he wanted to laugh and dance and sleep around. He wanted to shout. He took another spoonful and the

feeling intensified. The man told him to keep going, but Antonius found it to be hilarious. He dropped the bowl and laughed hard. The man violently slapped him across the face, handed him the bowl, and told him to eat the rest. Antonius sang to himself as he slurped down the food. Yet the more he ate, the more the changes came: he began to feel lightweight, like he was floating, and his hands lengthened so much that his hands and the bowl and spoon seemed miles away. He felt as if he were floating through the ceiling, disappearing from the room, and he saw the bowl was empty. He fell back onto the cold floor, the whole time feeling as if he were levitating. The man hovered over him and knelt down, saying, "Sleep and listen." The words sounded like trumpets and they hurt Antonius' ears. "Sleep and listen," the man said again, and Antonius wanted to tell him to be quiet, but the man's hand came out and twin fingers shut the General's eyelids, and he was submerged in darkness.

The visions came to him, shooting before him rapid-fire, and before he could comprehend what he saw, another vision passed before him, much more intense than the next, demanding his full concentration; yet the moment he turned his concentration upon it, the vision had vanished and been replaced; he could never keep up and was forced to just *watch*, experiencing no stream of conscious, feeling only emotion. He saw the sands of Egypt stained red and littered with thousands-upon-thousands of bodies as gigantic formations of Egyptian and Parthian spearmen went head-to-head in the shadows of the pyramids. He saw spearmen training in ancient Greece, trotting in formation in the golden fields under a ripe sun, laughing and calling out to one another and boasting about how many men they will kill come the next war. He saw the burning walls of the city of Carthage, the Roman soldiers trying to scale the walls and using siege-works to get over them, but being riddled with arrows and fought off by thousands of Carthaginian soldiers; he saw the fierce and legendary elephants of Carthage storming through Roman troops, simply knocking them to the side, crushing them underfoot, and sometimes the elephants would even wrap their leathery trunks around a Roman soldier, or get their tusks under a soldier, and hurl them into the air so that when they landed they would be broken, shattered inside-and-out. He saw the green armor and shields of the House of Scipii in the snowy passes of Dacia, and he could see the Dacian volunteers launching guerilla attacks upon the Roman soldiers, then fleeing before the Romans could react; dozens to hundreds could be left dead in the attacks, forever lost amidst the wintry rocks. He saw

massive triremes upon the sea, cutting through the water, laden with hundreds upon hundreds of soldiers. More triremes appeared from the opposite direction and the two forces clashed together, ramming one another or boarding one another with weapons flashing. Men cried out as they drowned in the water, weighed down by their armor, and entire ships went up in flame. He saw a hawk descending from the sky and falling upon a field-mouse; he heard the scream of a horse as its flank was turned beet-red under the teeth of ravaging wolves.

Now he stood alone, amidst trees ripe with olives. He turned back and forth, felt completely alive, completely whole, and the air tasted like a sea of flavor. He saw he was surrounded on all sides by rows upon rows of olive trees. As he turned a shadow fell upon him, and he looked up. He did not feel terror or excitement, only felt recognition. He could not speak, but could only be spoken to. Helonius stood in the shade of the olive trees and spoke: "I have heard Celesta's cries, but she does not realize what is really happening. Neither do you, my beloved friend. What I tell you is absolute truth, and you must listen to me. You cannot speak because you will ruin what I have to say. Now listen to me. Listen to me!" he roared and Antonius felt his blood curdle. Helonius walked towards him, growing taller and mightier, darker and more sinister. "Celesta has been chosen by the gods. She is a prophetess. You wonder what she is prophesying. You shall know. You must piece together the prophecies and lay them before the Senate. Their hearts will be hardened by the gods and they will not listen. They will mock you. But you still must do it. If you do, you will attain the favor of the gods more than you could ever imagine, and in time will understand your true title, the name given to you by the gods: the Sword of Rome." His terrifying appearance shriveled to that of a boyish man, and he spoke gently now. "I want you to look after Celesta. Keep her safe from whatever may happen. She means more to me than anything, and while I look forward to her joining me here in paradise, I wish in no way that her arrival come prematurely."

Helonius had disappeared. Antonius could feel his body being tugged in every direction and the orchard vanished as well. Now he was spinning in a quiet blackness; the silence was torn apart by the sound of raging fires, wailing infants, women screaming and the cackle of battle. He sees his own father and mother's graves dug up and their remains urinated upon by Carthaginian soldiers as all of the eternal city of the seven hills is engulfed in flame. The people of Rome either

fall and kiss the feet of the Carthaginians, handing themselves over to be squandered, raped, sold off to slavery and pillaged, or they fall upon the swords and spears of the invaders. He sees Celesta screaming as her newborn infant is taken from her and thrown from the balcony, to be splattered on the rocks below. He sees himself crucified upon his own manor wall underneath his father's mounted sword, and as the darkness envelops him again all he hears in Celesta's shrieking as she is raped again and again and again...

VI

The Second Legion continued their march into Gaul, destroying every settlement they came across, paying back the Gauls for decades upon decades of harassment and abuse against their neighbor Rome. Marcellus' fame grew among the soldiers, and this inspired him to countless horrific deeds in the name of Rome, inspired by the god of Mars. The soldiers rallied behind him, but Hadrianus remained collectively silent. Aulus kept a close eye on Hadrianus, worried because he could see Hadrianus going crazy—it was visible in the Captain's eyes—but he feared telling Marcellus because he knew the frightening measures the General may take against the Captain. As spring turned into summer and the season grew hotter, the soldiers' thirst for battle intensified. Scouts continually reported finding no Gallic forces ahead of them, as they were assembled around Mediolanum. Marcellus began every day in an hour of prayer, begging the gods to speak to him, and hearing the commands of the gods. Some soldiers found it difficult to believe a mortal man could do some of the horrid things Marcellus did, and the phrase *in the name of Rome* took on a new meaning:

Marcellus had the cows at a town gutted and all the children stuffed inside to suffocate to death.

He forced women to be restrained by soldiers as their children were raped by the older Roman men.

At some settlements that resisted, he would take all the men and line them against the wall and order the archers to run them through. He would have their bodies torn apart and have the blood wiped all over the doors of the homes, a stain that would serve as a message till the houses crumbled.

In one town he ordered all the hundred-or-so villagers to be tied together in a knotted circle, placed in the middle of a field, and set the edges of the field ablaze. He watched from the rooftop of a cottage as the fires grew closer to the mourning

villagers, and eventually engulfed them, turning the men, women and children into ashes and bones.

Pregnant women were ripped open with swords, their developing babies yanked out and suffocated with their own umbilical chords, then placed on javelins that the Roman soldiers spiked into the ground as they left the towns.

Once all of the men in the village were tied between two trees, and below them was a large vat. Their bowels were ripped open with a curved harvesting blade and they were forced to look down into the vat and watch as their blood and entrails splashed around. They were cut down and thrown into the grass to quickly die. A large pile formed and the vat eventually brimmed with blood at the edges; Marcellus ordered the men to wash their weapons and armor in the blood, and he dipped a large cup in the blood, took a wild drink, and forced every other Roman to drink the blood of the barbarians, and in doing so become more powerful than the barbarians could ever hope to be.

On an overnight stay Marcellus had all the girls of the town strip naked and serve him and his officers supper; as they ate, the girls danced, and when they were told to leave, they were grabbed up by frantic, deprived Roman soldiers and taken out into the woods to be ravaged and strangled, their bodies left for the wolves and blue-beetles.

A little boy offered to be Marcellus' slave; Marcellus told him to bow down and kiss his boots, and when the boy did, Marcellus stomped so hard on the back of the boy's head that his face crushed into the ground and lay quiet in a pool of frothing blood.

All the while Hadrianus grew crazier.

At night, he tossed and turned, filled with horrible visions, wondering how the gods could order such a thing. He even approached Aulus, but before he could speak, Aulus told him to leave. "I don't want to know anything. You're the one carrying the issues. You back off." He did not want to cross Marcellus, who slept three tents away and, unknowingly, was not oblivious to Hadrianus' loyal backsliding.

VII

The servants had returned her to the manor, laying her within her own bed to heal. Antonius positioned a servant inside the bedroom at all times to make sure nothing went wrong, and the doctor promised the General he would make daily

visits to check on her progress. "I did not expect it," he told him, "nor can I explain it. She is doing much better than any patient I have ever seen. Despite the loss of blood, she is healing quite nicely. Either she has miraculous bones producing miraculous blood, or an even greater miracle has happened: the gods smile upon her even in her suicidal trappings. Either way, General, it is a miracle..." The doctor looked at her wrists, scowled, said, "The scars will never go away. You are a man of war, certainly you know how blade wounds never vanish but are upon the flesh for eternity." Antonius knew all too well; at the doctor's words his arm throbbed, and he gritted his teeth, hearing that awful name repeated in his own conscious: *Silvanus*.

"And the child?" Antonius hesitantly asked.

"As long as your mistress survives, so will the child."

The doctor abandoned them and Antonius asked all the servants except for the one watching over Celesta to leave the manor for the day. They left happily, and Antonius locked the door behind them. Lost in the silence of the manor, hearing only Celesta's deep breathing down the hall, he stood by the couch and stared at the sword hanging over the mantle, his father's sword. Now he knew why it called him, why it whispered his name and drew his attention. The gods had placed him here not out of a curse but out of divine knowledge of a horrible future. Celesta's words were as prophetic as her dreams: "Your passion doubles everyday, every hour. It is overcoming you and you cannot stop it. You think it is a curse, but perhaps it is truly a blessing, because the hour of your abandoning the sword has yet to come." He thought she was speaking nonsense then, but the dreams! He remembered them all, wincing with their prophetic onslaught, and his heart yearned to know what they meant, what they signified, but for the grace of all the gods, he could not figure it out...

Celesta giving birth in a chorus of screams, the baby dead within her womb.

She sees the baby dead in her arms, flames choke the window, bloody infant handprints cover the walls.

Celesta swims through a sea of dead babies, cannot find her own.

She is being raped and her baby is being ripped apart by dogs.

Thousands of women are raped, thousands upon thousands and no one to help them.

Celesta gives birth to her baby, but it is a bastard-child: horns, yellow eyes, bloody claws.

Antonius' head pounded and the silence only echoed the thunderous beating of his heart. He needed noise, so he went onto the deck, and as the sun set in west, he looked out over the beautiful city surrounded by seven hills. He closed his eyes amidst the flowers and potted plants, leaned over the balcony, wrapping his fingers over the cool railing, and listened to the noises of the children laughing and men returning home to their families, markets closing up for the day and butchers closing shop. A pair of Senators walked down the street, whispering to one another, and Antonius watched them dully. He turned his back to the city and looked at the blooming flowers, the stamens and petals, the pistols so beautiful. He ran his fingers over their blooms, caressed the stalks, smelled the nectar, smiled. Such a beautiful, ignorant thing in a harsh and unforgiving world.

Screams. Fire. Blood. Rape. Dead babies. Bastard-child. Rape of thousands.

In the name of all things sacred, what did it mean?

Dead baby in her arms. Flames at the windows. Sea of infant corpses. Bloody handprints on the walls.

It made no sense; none of it fit together. He pulled at his hair and wanted to scream.

Slimy horns, yellow eyes filled with rage, bloody claws reaching for her throat.

Bastard-child.

The realization came. The gods spoke, turning it inside-out and revealing the black-and-white for color.

Antonius fell against the plants, knocking several of them over, spilling the soil; his back came to rest against a white column, and cold sweat popped over his brow. *Screams. Bastard-child. Rape. Dead babies. Fire. Blood. Rape of thousands. Fire at the windows. Dogs tearing her baby apart. A sea of corpses.*

"Oh God..."

VIII

They cried out to him from the walls, singing their awful sonnets so loud he had to clasp his hands about his head to try and ward them off. He could not eat, could not sleep, could not even march right. Words of another invention slid from his tongue, and his heart fluttered like the valves of an organ. Every day he grew weaker, more exhausted, but he could not find resolution. They would not leave them alone. He would lie in bed at night, and by candlelight, as the rest of the encampment slept, he would look at his hands, he would imagine blood dripping

down his fingers, the blood of women and children. He would close his eyes and open them again and the blood only appeared more intense. Not even the waters of the ocean could wash the blood from his hands. He fell beyond crying, beyond simply ignoring them. No. They were out to get him, their mockery running deep into his soul, a scimitar of vengeance. He cried innocence but knew it to be a lie. He saw inside himself, the core of his existence, and saw only cowardice. His eyes had been burned by that which he saw: women raped, children ripped apart by dogs, men skinned alive and their flesh fed to their families by sword-point. He always stood by and watched, hating it all, but fearing Marcellus and his anger. Now the innocents turned their own spirit swords against him, and when he tried to evade the blade, he failed, miserably. For he had the power to stop it. Yes, he had the power. But his own fear, the selfishness for his life, drew him to drink from the deep cup of cowardice. No more, he vowed. He could not take it. The mockery of the corpses in the fields, the spirits swirling around him at night, the screams of little girls as they are ravaged found even in the laughter of wine. It consumed him. His hands shook, his throat warbled, he could find no rest. No rest. Hadrianus knew what he had to do.

As summer threatened to evolve into winter, a scout returned to the camp in the middle of the night, breathless. Marcellus was awakened and had one of the soldiers bring the cold scout some hot soup and bread. Marcellus set him down within his own tent, and as the soldier drank the soup with frost-bitten fingers, he told what he knew: "The Gauls are setting up a defense six or seven miles from here as the crow flies. As the fox runs, it will take nearly two days to reach them. These rocky foothills are hindering our advance. We must work around them, General, or our men will be tired from the climbing." Marcellus agreed with the older scout's wisdom. How many Gallic soldiers were present at the defensive line? "I am not sure, General. It was night-time, and all I saw were there torches." How many torches? "Over two hundred, General." What do their defenses look like? Marcellus mentally scoured for weak spots and opportunities to break through the lines easily. "I am not sure. It seemed as if they were just building a simple camp. Maybe, General, they do not know we are coming." Perhaps not. Marcellus felt the warmth of the soup wafting up against his face. He pushed the thought of food away from his mind. The scout thought of something to say: "There were signs as if the Gallic Army had been marching north." Marcellus chewed on his words. They were marching away... Then no defense... They were

exposed... We can meet them in battle! He thanked the scout and dismissed him. He closed the tent flap, approached his bed, then rushed back to the tent, opened it, and called for the scout. Do you wish to do more service to Rome? The scout said certainly; there was no false pretense in his voice. Marcellus asked if he would be so kind to scout out the territories beyond the Gallic Army, see where they were headed, find out where the Gauls and Romans could connect. The scout was overjoyed even though the journey would be over a possible two nights. Marcellus kissed the soldier on the cheek and dismissed him with honor.

Although the scout had not been around in the morning to share the news, somehow it had spread throughout the camp before Marcellus had even arisen. The soldiers were putting on their armor and gathering their weapons for battle. The General walked through the camp, smiling at them all. He shook their hands and saluted, told them he was fine of his men. A soldier asked if they would see battle this day. He shook his head. "We will give the running cowards another day to stockpile the wrath of Mars upon them. We will make them shudder with fright in their sleep once more, and then they will taste the steel of your swords." Some of the soldiers became disheartened at the news of no battle that day, but Marcellus told all of them, "I guarantee you battle! And I guarantee you victory! Every one of you who is not chosen by Mars to be a legend will return home as a hero to wives and girlfriends awed at your bravery and skill." The men and boys grinned at his words.

Aulus found Marcellus during lunch. "General. We have not torn down, we have not marched."

Marcellus laughed. "I have it all under control."

"The enemy is slipping away," Aulus growled, hovering over the General's table. "We're losing time."

Marcellus set his cup of wine down, rubbed his hands together. "A great warrior once hunted an elephant. While he could've reached the elephant at any given time, he decided to stay back, let the elephant make its move. He stayed in the shadow of the elephant, low, meek, humble. He did not threaten the elephant. He was not a coward, nor was he foolish. Instead he was a great warrior with great skill, but with even greater wisdom. The elephant reached a water hole. As it bent down to drink, the soldier—armed only with a bow and a small dagger—charged from the underbrush, screaming at the elephant. The elephant, so frightened by the man's sudden cry, charged into the water to escape. The water was deep and

the elephant was slowed down. The man tossed his dagger to the ground, drew his quiver of arrows, and fired so many shots upon the shore without threat to himself that the elephant's carcass eventually floated to him under the noonday sun, pierced by his hundreds of arrows."

Aulus just looked at the General, eyes spiked with confusion.

Marcellus sighed, took a draft of wine, explained. "The enemy is walking into a trap we have laid. We will catch them off-guard. Do not believe me? Have you eaten?"

"I'm not hungry."

"Then get to work. I have a new order for you: gather all the engineers you can and bring them to my tent in half an hour. Also grab a cohort of soldiers and arm them with saws and axes. The soldiers may think they get to simply laze around, but I assure you, there is work to be done."

In the excitement and salivation for battle, no one noticed the steep clouds building over the dark forests surrounding the fort. It wasn't long before it started sprinkling. Soldiers looked up and shielded their eyes as fierce lightning broke through the clouds, snaking this way and that. The rain grew harder and the soldiers drew their equipment into their tents and sat on their cots, setting their helmets at the feet and tossing dice for entertainment. Marcellus was not stopped by the rain. Though it drummed on the sloped roof of the tent, the canvas creaking in the wind, such to the point of it being difficult to even hear his voice, he spoke to the crowded engineers and let the chosen cohort of strong soldiers remain outside in the rain under the booming thunder.

"They make them in the city," Marcellus told them. "You've all seen it, perhaps you've built one or two." He held up a large piece of parchment, the light from several golden candles illuminating the marks. "It is crude, I know, but you guys know what this is. It's powered by a twisted spring of animal sinew ropes, and the throwing arm is held in tension by the sinews. When pulled back and held with a catch, it can throw a boulder quite a nice distance. We're not going to be using boulders, however. We're going to be hurling a device called a firepot. We light it on fire and the onagers throw it; when it hits the ground, it explodes in a giant ball of flame. I know we don't have the nice lumber they use in the cities to build these things, but right after this meeting, you will each take a number of soldiers and start cutting down trees to build them."

Someone stood up. "General. Onagers are very poor at hitting infantry, and--"

"Tell me, Soldier, if I wanted, could I knock down a wall with this thing?"

The engineer paused. "Yes. That's what they're used for, General. Not killing infantrymen."

"I want to be able to fire these so they will knock down a wall."

The engineer smirked. "There are no towns for miles in any direction--"

"Who said anything about towns?"

"You have a town, you have a wall. No town, no wall."

"You are absolutely right," Marcellus said over a peal of thunder. "But I ask you again, *Who said anything about a town?*"

Grave silence. The engineer apologized and sat down.

Marcellus accepted his apology, and told the man, "I am putting you in charge of building the onagers and leading the onager crews. What is your name, Soldier?"

"Maximus. I am a centurion for the second hastati cohort."

"You have my authority on this matter."

Maximus beamed.

"Stop wasting time!" Marcellus shouted, his voice blending with thunder. "Get to work!"

As the engineers filed into the rain and grabbed their soldiers, Aulus snatched Marcellus. "Onagers?"

The General grinned. "Really, it just came to me. Genius, really."

"No. Friend-to-friend?"

"Of course."

"Off the record?"

"What is it, Aulus?"

Aulus licked his lips. "Marcellus... This is stupid. We can't use onagers in this battle area."

"You think I'm wasting your time?"

"No, I think you're wasting *Rome's* time."

He took a long sigh. "You keep forgetting about the elephant."

"The elephant? What in the name of Jupiter does the elephant have to do with--"

"Do you remember the elephant?"

"I don't *care* about the elephant. I *care* about this Army. I care about Rome."

"As do I," he said, putting a hand on his friend's shoulder. He closed his eyes, listened to the rain. "What is the time?"

"Six o'clock." He breathed easier, aggravation flowing out of him.

"Supper time. Wonderful. I want you to find Hadrianus. Where has he been?"

"I saw him walking around a few hours ago. Just walking the walls. Haven't seen him since."

"Well find him. Have him arrange a special dinner for the officers. I want some of that native beer, with some of our catches and pillaged food. I want the officers to smile. If my plans go wrong, half of them will be dead by tomorrow. I want to make this a night they can remember for as long as they live, however long—or short—that may be."

Aulus nodded. "Okay. I'll do it." He headed for the door.

Marcellus called after him. "Aulus?"

"Yes?" he asked, spinning around to face the General.

He smiled. "Trust me."

Aulus left thinking the General had referred to the onagers. He did not realize that there was more going on in the General's head than he could possibly foresee. Tonight *would* be a night *all* of the officers remembered—as long (or short) as they lived.

Torches lined the walls of what had once been a tribal meeting center in the village now completely empty of villagers; they had either been slain or kicked out after kissing Marcellus' name. Where the tribal leaders had once met to discuss issues pertaining to the Gallic peoples and various Gallic tribes, now sat Roman soldiers, dressed in loose clothing and leaving their weapons and armor at the door. Rain drummed on the roof but the atmosphere was billowing with excitement; all the soldiers were jumping at the bit for contact with Gaul, and they huddled in groups, masked in shadow, discussing the coming days, betting on who would be scoring the most kills, tossing around death-jokes.

Marcellus entered the building, dripping rainwater, setting his shield, helmet, armor and sword upon a rack. All the soldiers turned and cheered, most saluting with a fist upon the chest. The General beamed, grinning ear-to-ear, opened his arms in ecstasy to accept all those who were prepared to sacrifice everything for the glory of Rome. Mars, he promised, would not abandon them. He had spoken with the gods and had been promised a glorious victory. "Mediolanum lies just north of us, right across the Padus River. We will wipe out the foolish Gauls who *think* they have a chance at standing against us, and after we cross the river, we are but a stone's throw from the walls of the city. All of you shall walk those

walls, I promise, and the Gallic King's head shall be placed on a pike and we shall drink his blood, the blood of Kings!"

The officers all cheered once more.

Marcellus spoke again. "As we speak, our engineers are building catapults to completely annihilate the Gallic resistance. The Gauls do not expect this from an Army such as ours, and we will catch them off-guard. Tomorrow the earth will weep for the lost, but the god of Mars shall smile upon us all, I swear it. All of Gaul will bow before us or taste our steel in their bodies; the time for war is at hand and we *will* drink the blood of Kings!"

The officers' voices drowned out the meeting hall. Outside, lay soldiers gathered in the rain, trying to catch a glimpse of what was happening.

Marcellus walked from the center of the room, around a wooden table, and took a seat in the ornate chair once reserved for the Gallic warlords, the warlord who had tried to rise a rebellion against Rome but had been trampled under the hooves of the cavalry. His body rested on a broken pyre outside the smashed town walls, eyes plucked by crows and flesh peeling in the drizzling rain. Now the 'god-forsaking' Roman General took his seat of honor, Aulus and Hadrianus flanking him. He beckoned the other officers to sit at accompanying tables around the room, saying, "Why wait until Mediolanum to drink the blood of Kings?" He snapped his fingers and several soldiers entered the room, placing goblets on the tables. All the women had been run out of town so Marcellus designated soldiers to serve the Republic by working as servants to the officers. As the first trail of servants left, another batch entered carrying jugs of wine; the soldiers, weary from the marches and burdened with the excitement of news, found solace in the drink, and watched greedily as the red liquid—symbolic of the blood of the Gallic kings soon to ornate their swords—splashed about in the wooden cups.

No one came to serve Marcellus.

A servant bowed before the General. "We have a special drink prepared for our wonderful General."

Marcellus smiled. "I prefer to drink the same drink with my men. There is to be no favoritism in my Army. We are all noble Romans bleeding in our hearts for the Republic. I would rather suffer no drink than take a special drink in front of my brothers-in-arms."

The servant stood. "Your request is granted."

Before the servant could withdraw, Hadrianus quickly stood, a nervous glitter in his eye. "Our General speaks foolishness. If he were but a man, his words would

be accurate, but let us not forget, he has been chosen by the gods. He is the son of Mars! His own divine apprenticeship can be seen in his humility; were he to flaunt pride, we would know it were an illusion, but he converses with the gods, and has been put in his place. Let him not honor himself with special drink, but honor the gods." He raised his own goblet. "Let us *all* honor the gods."

The officers at the tables raised their own goblets. "To Marcellus." "To Rome." "To Mars!"

Marcellus shot a wry glance to Hadrianus, then sat down. "Bring me my drink, then."

The servant left. The General told Hadrianus, "Your beautiful words astound me. It's no coincidence that your father is such a weighted philosophizer. Does he use colorful words?"

"Words to the benefit of Rome," Hadrianus replied.

"The benefit of Rome," Marcellus echoed softly. "In the name of Rome, we do what must be done."

Hadrianus' face lit up for a brief moment. "Whatever must be done, General."

The servant returned with a goblet adorned with jewels. He told Marcellus that it had belonged to the chieftain warlord of the settlement. Marcellus humbly took the cup, the white wine frothing. The servant backed away, returned to his quarters outside the main hall. Marcellus rose the cup to his men. "Then we drink!" The men lifted their goblets. "In the name of Rome, and in thanks to Mars, we honor all who have fallen, all who will fight, and all who shall fall. We are legends and heroes all, favored by the gods. Never, friends, forget this."

The officers would not drink until Marcellus took the first sip.

The General pulled the cup away from his lips. "My humility, as my dear friend Hadrianus has said, shows that my stature in the gods' eyes is not a myth. Yes, they have shown me where I stand. I am not a god, I am not to be worshipped. I am a tool and I take my position with honor. Yet it would not be possible for me to do the will of Mars, would not be possible for me to serve Rome as the gods call, without such loyal friends as Hadrianus and Aulus. They mean the world to me, and I don't know what I would do if I lost them," and throwing a rancid glance to Hadrianus, "or if I learned their hearts were steadily set against me in deceit laced with love."

Hadrianus did not react. He simply stood stoic. Aulus saw something was going down: he could not take his eyes off Marcellus.

Marcellus turned to Hadrianus. "I beg of you, dear friend, drink the blood of Kings!"

Hadrianus did not have time to react. The next thing his mind caught was the General's free hand going for his collar and the other hand raising the goblet. Hadrianus' eyes turned into brilliant saucers as the General's strong hand twisted his head back, the opposite wrist twisting just right to drop all the wine into his mouth. Hadrianus made scratching noises in his throat; officers leapt up, surprised at Marcellus' brutality; Aulus jumped up, reaching for his sword, but an unseen force froze his hand. Marcellus hurled Hadrianus onto the table; Hadrianus' legs and arms flailed, kicking goblets of wine and candles upon the floor. The candles went out, wax spilling and hardening, and the wine formed blood-red pools in the cracks of cobblestone. Marcellus hovered over his friend, eyes piercing like the most fierce hawk as quivers ran up and down Hadrianus' arms and legs; his mouth moved in ragged gasps and he struggled to breathe, fingers curling up and down in a frenzy.

Marcellus' eyes swept the gut-wrenched, jaw-dropped onlookers as Hadrianus struggled for air. "My enemies speak evil of me, 'When will he die, when will his name be no more?' And if my enemy comes to see me, he speaks lies and vanity, his heart gathers iniquity to itself, and when he goes abroad, he speaks his deception. All who hate me whisper together against me; against me they plan my disgrace. 'An evil disease,' they breathe, 'will come close to him, and now that he lies down, he will rise up no more.' Yes, even my own beloved friend, in whom I passionately trusted and loved, who did eat from my table, has lifted his hand against me."

Hadrianus' body was convulsing so horribly the table shook. Aulus had backed away from the table, gawking at his friend who began to foam at the mouth, blood coming from his eyes, nose and ears. Mucus-drenched foam ran down his cheeks and splattered upon the table, pulsating as if living creatures swarmed within.

Marcellus raised his hands toward the ceiling, looked to the roof covered with rain, and prayed aloud, "But you, O Mars, have mercy on me, and raise me up, so that I may requite them. By this I know that you favor me, because my enemy does not triumph over me. And as for me, you uphold me in my integrity; you set me before your face for all eternity. Blessed be even your name, O Mars, god of war, for ever and ever."

Hadrianus' eyes rolled into the back of his head, the whites stained crimson.

Marcellus reached down, and from under the table, withdrew his father's axe.

Servants leapt away as the double doors burst open; the blast of wind from the opening doors extinguished the candles spread about the walls, submerging the room in murky darkness. The servants clung to the walls as the overpowering figure stalked past, eyes gleaming like fire and lightning wed under a blood-red moon. An axe glittering with the precious breath of foreign princes dangled from hot-blooded fingers as he raised a booted foot and kicked open the back door to the kitchen. The preparer of the drinks whirled around and opened his mouth in shock; the General did not give him a second's notice, and with no dithering finding room in his soul, he marched towards the wine-man.

The prey dashed around a table covered with expensive basins of Gallic beer; the General did not change his course but viciously kicked the table over, the spilling wine knocking the wine-man off his feet. As he lay upon the cobblestone, he saw the General stepping over the fallen table; he tried to stand, to kick his feet, but one of his ankles roared in submissive agony, already swelling from a disjointed fracture. He raised his hands, tried to apologize, but fear locked his fate. Marcellus angrily hurled the axe down, into the man's stomach, and ripping it out, drew a spray of blood. The man cried out and the axe came down again and again. Onlookers crawled against the walls, behind the tables, the body of the wine-man out-of-view, seeing only Marcellus stained by the bloody fountains gushing with each axe-strike. Marcellus struck once more and dropped the bloody axe to the ground, his own hands burnt maroon.

The General stared at the carcass for many moments, feeling complete satisfaction, and turned to face Aulus. He panted with beautiful exertion as he extolled, "Have this man's body as well as the corpse of Hadrianus quartered and sent to the corners of the village as a message to all who dare oppose Rome and its warrior."

IX

Every eye in the rectangular room fell upon him, and as he stepped up to the podium, he could feel the weight of their judgment, their condemnation, their disappointment in the leader of Julii who had made himself absent over the last several days. As Dionysius of Scipii and Cicero of Brutii were given warm applause and prodded forward to humbly discuss the issues of their Houses, Antonius was given no such welcome. Even the leader of the Senate, a friendly

yet quiet old man, did not look the former General in the eyes. Antonius did not carry a parchment with him, but stood before the podium empty-handed, exposed before all of the Senate. He closed his eyes and tried to imagine the children outside climbing in the fruit trees as the leaves were turning color, but the thought translated into a horrible vision of the very same tree, stripped bare with the rotted skeletons of children, slashed by swords, dangling from the skeletal branches. He drew a breath and opened his eyes. Everything fell back into place. The distant sound of innocent laughter floated in from the ceiling windows, children playing tag in the gardens.

"I do not wish to defend my absence," Antonius told them, speaking loudly and with clarity. "I only desire to bring forth to *your* eyes what I have discovered. The last week or so, as Celesta has been recovering from an attempted suicide, I have been faced with many unanswered questions about her life, my own life, and the life of Rome. I adore her, I take honor in my placement here in this wonderful Senate, and I would sacrifice my life for Rome. My allegiance to Rome is the deepest allegiance a mortal man could muster." They were waiting. He drew a stagnant breath, wishing his heart would not deny him. "As many of you know, Celesta has been suffering many horrible dreams unnatural to the state of all mortals. The doctors have been perplexed, and they even recommended I take the issue to a priest. I did not, I am afraid, listen to the doctors' words, but when Celesta was miraculously recovering from her attempt at suicide, I made my way to a priest. My meeting with him convinced me that Celesta is not cursed, but blessed, whether we can really see it or not. She is a prophetess."

Murmurs rustled through the Senators. Dionysius was laughing quietly to himself. It irritated Antonius, but the General continued. "These dreams are prophecies. They—"

"Prophecies?" A Senator interrupted, standing. "Prophesying your fortune?"

Antonius shook his head. "No. A prophesy of *mis*fortune."

The whispers went quiet.

"Her dreams of prophesy are giving us hints towards our future. Blood, screams, infant corpses, rape, the rape of *thousands*, and the birth of a bastard-child..."

Another Senator stood. "You are grieving and trying to find consolation. Do we all agree?"

The Senators nodded.

Antonius licked his lips. "I thought of that. But this has brought me no consolation, only distress."

“What, exactly,” the Senator demanded, “is the prophecy all about?”

He took a festering breath, closed his eyes, opened them: “The rape of Rome.”

The Senators stood, infuriated. Dionysius and Cicero nearly fell from their chairs.

The leader of the Senate leapt up to the podium, grabbing Antonius by the cloak. “Blasphemy!”

Antonius ripped away, spat, “I shed my blood for Rome, and I will do it again!”

“You will *not* have the chance,” the leader said.

“I shall!” Antonius declared. “For war against the gates of the city is at hand!” He faced the frenzy mass of Senators and shouted what he had discovered. “The screams and blood in her dreams prophesy the waste, death and terror that will overcome this very city! The dead babies signify the vast number of innocents who will lose their lives. The rape of thousands indicates *thousands* of lives, while not ended, are ruined. The rape that took over Celesta in her dreams tells us that Rome will be ravaged and destroyed...”

“And the bastard-child?” Cicero growled impatiently.

The once-wily room turned vacant of noise, not even the thumbing of the heart.

Antonius turned and faced the entire Roman Senate. “The assimilation of Rome and Carthage.”

The Senators looked at one and another, confused. *Carthage?*

Brutii smirked. “Carthage?” The war was going well...

Antonius faced the skeptic. “Your House, Cicero, the House of Brutii, is losing the war. Carthage’s armies are vast and far outnumber us. In anger, they will retaliate, and as your broken troops flee for Rome, Carthage will take to the sea and invade our nation—and win. *Unless we make a stand!* Unless we pull our troops from Dacia and Gaul, and even Carthage, so those already in Africa will be able to stand at our gates instead of being eaten by the birds in the desert. We must prepare to take a stand and get the women and children out of the city.”

Cicero did not voice his own concerns. He simply threw on a happy, apathetic face and told Antonius he was completely wrong. “The war is going well. Carthage is on the brink of falling.” He didn’t mention the countless triremes coming into port carrying bloodied and out-of-action soldiers forever locked with memories of war and destruction, memories to haunt them in the quiet of the night. “It is true what you say, Antonius, the Carthaginians are throwing everything they have at us. And the battles are hard and wearying. My soldiers, in

their dedication to Rome, spend days on end with never-ending fighting outside the gates of Carthage, turning the fields red with Greek blood. The farmland vanishes underneath carpets of bodies. But most of the bodies belong to the Carthaginians, *and their numbers are dwindling*. Brutii stands strong! The Senate sent me to take Carthage!" He swept a ringed hand out to the pearl-robe Senators, and glaring at Antonius, "And now you condemn me for doing just that! Get out of my business, Antonius. Stop trying to take over the Senate and play the game your way. I know what I am doing with *my* armies. You worry about your little war with Gaul while I take on the greatest enemy Rome as ever faced." He walked towards Antonius, snarling, "Carthage will fall and the soldiers of Brutii will walk the walls and raise a Roman flag in the city square. I swear it."

Antonius did not back down, nor did he falter. "Your pride will be your downfall."

Before Cicero could respond, Antonius turned, stepped off the stage, and proudly walked past all the stunned Senators and left the chamber.

News of Antonius' declarations quickly filled the streets. His message of Carthage coming to Rome was laughed down by everyone, and Antonius' name turned to a mockery. The Senators and House leaders of Brutii and Scipii helped start the rumors to fuel the bad reputation upon Antonius, hoping to ignite a fire so large that Antonius could never walk with honor again. They sent out brutal and humiliating lies, circulating them through the streets via spies, proclaiming that he and his former second-in-command's widowed wife were in an intimate, sexual relationship. They turned his prophecy message into an attempt to clear her name—and his—by saying that she—and he—has been chosen by the gods. Antonius could not walk outside his manor without catching wry whispers and hidden glances. His soul burned but he could not lash out. The guards at the Senate chamber would not let him enter and he was given "temporary" leave, though Antonius feared he would never enter the Chamber with honor again. He simply stayed inside, met with dreams of destruction just like Celesta, and both of them were kept awake at night, struggling together to overcome and understand the fright of the unending dreams. As the rumors of their sleeping together grew, Antonius' dreams were filled with Helonius' sword coming down upon him; he would try to plead innocence, but was never able to say it before the cold steel came upon his neck and he awoke in a shivering sweat. He began to hope that Rome would be attacked and destroyed: it would be the only way to save not only

his reputation, but the reputation of Celesta and her to-be-born child. This only made him feel worse and he was forced to crawl into the depths of despair that come in genuine fear of being abandoned by the gods for your deep-seeded wickedness.

X

Marcellus had been waiting in his tent, pacing back and forth, counting the seconds, the minutes. He shooed away any visitors until the one he wanted returned. His face was pale as ash and Marcellus could read the grimness. He demanded to know what had been found.

The scout saluted and stood in the tent entrance. "They found Marcus." He reached into a leather rawhide bag on his side and withdrew a man's head, the base of the neck scorched black and the face white and crawling with maggots. The hair seemed to froth with disease. "They desecrated his body," the scout said with a tear in his eye, letting the head drop back into the bag. He nodded to blood on his breastplate. "I slew three of them just to get his head. I believe it needs to be given an honorable burial, General."

Compassion for the scout swept through him and he said, "And I promise, it will be done, as soon as we are done here. Now, tell me, where are they, how many, what are we looking at?"

The scout shared what he had found. Maybe a thousand Gallic soldiers, mostly volunteers picked from scattered settlements yet untouched by Roman hands, had gathered perhaps five miles from the camp. They had dug in at the top of a large hill and were awaiting the Roman soldiers, looking to use the hill as an advantage against the enemy soldiers: the Romans, in climbing with all their gear, would become exhausted and would slow in their ability to wage war. He bragged about having taken the clothes of one of the Gauls he had slain and walking about the enemy camp, talking with the volunteers, as he knew their native tongue, hence his being chosen as a scout. The Gauls were eager but ill-trained; the closest to actual killing most had gotten was hunting deer and rabbit in the forests. The leader was a brash but wise man, experienced from the past wars, but not talented enough to stand up against the god of Mars.

Marcellus thanked the soldier. "Now go. Bury our hero, who will drink the blood of his enemies in the afterlife. Bury him and rest. I will put out the purple banner; there will be war tomorrow."

Chapter Ten: The General Who Became a Legend

I

The Gauls had gotten word of the approaching Romans; the echo of the enemy's march spread through the villages, traveling upon muddy trails through the winding forests, carried by horseback by men garbed in green and brown tunics, carrying swords and axes. Men received the news before their huts, and kissing their wives and children goodbye, pledged allegiance to the ancestors and the gods, and joined war-bands running down the roads by day and night, sunshine and storm. The weather did not favor their movements, as a constant downpour all but broke many spirits, overflowing riverbanks and even washing out an entire village; the inhabitants cowered beside the road as Gaul volunteers, led by tribal leaders, marched by. Many of the villagers, having lost everything except that which all Gauls held in common – bereft hatred for everything Roman – took up arms and pledged loyalty to tribesman they'd never even met. Abandoned and left for fate beside the road, the wives and children prayed their husbands favor from the gods, attributing the village's wash-out to the infringing Romans. The numbers of the Gallic volunteers escalated from mere dozens to hundreds and thousands; finally they all converged in a small village, waddling about in the rain, huddled in groups, trying to protect their fires. Volunteer scouts on horseback were dispatched by King Rodez, a wild man with wild hair and a temper rivaled only by the most severe drunkard. Night crept over the sleepy village and he ordered the fires put out, despite the incessant rain and blistering cold; soldiers crowded together, outside and in the buildings, wrapping themselves tight in their clothing and clutching their weapons close. Rodez paced back and forth inside a single hut, surrounded by his close friends, and awaited the news of the scouts. Watches were posted about the village and into the trees; hours passed until the scouts returned. Rodez' bodyguards allowed the scouts to enter the hut; the dim candlelight silhouetted the water dripping from their narrow faces.

Rodez glared at the pair of scouts and demanded, "What news have you of the enemy?"

The scouts replied, "The Romans are camped sixteen miles from here. They are headed straight for this town, following the main road."

"Is this all? Do you have numbers?"

They nodded. "A few thousand. Not extremely large."

"Do you imagine it to be a point force?"

"No. We went beyond their flanks. No sign of any pursuing Army."

Rodez nodded. He looked between everyone within the hut. "We could've ended this tonight! Had I known, we could've swept down upon them and massacred the lot!" He shook his head and scanned their faces, perhaps looking for disloyalty or a temperate disagreement. He found none. "The Romans will burn their camp to the ground soon. What is the time?"

"An hour before sunrise."

He cursed. "Then they are already marching. Awake our soldiers! Scouts! Have you surveyed the land?"

"We have found a formidable defense position."

"Defense? No! We shall bring the fight to them!"

It has been said by warrior poets, extreme in their skill and experience, that no words can describe that haunting, foreboding feeling that touches the one who stands upon the field of battle, eyes turned upon the sun, unknowing if he shall live to breathe another day. What words can begin to hint at the marvelous complexities of the human mind, the sheer brilliance of terror; a gut-wrenching abomination that courses through the blood of every known living thing. Even the most hardy and hardened shake in their capillaries as they feel the wind against their skin and wonder if such beautiful feelings will embrace them again. All laughter and joking subsides as the King puts them into formation, throwing them together in rough groups, swordsmen and axe-men, spearmen and the like. Some are separated from their friends and family in those first moments, surrounded by strangers, and the realization comes as a throbbing pain, starting in their feet and traveling up the spine, shivering its way through the tendons in the neck, and finally screaming in silent rage at the base of the skull. One closes his eyes, tries to feel sane again, tries to remember those left behind, a soft bed, a warm meal. The rain falls and the deprivation draws ever deeper; he realizes how weak he truly is, how much strength has left him, and he listens only to his beating heart, hears only the grunts and coughs of those around him, the jingling of weapons, the dripping of rain at his feet. If he were to open his eyes, he would see his breath fog before him, and would feel the icy tendrils of the morning run through him like a cold sword.

He would look from his perch upon that hill, clothed in trees, and peer down into the valley, a wasteland of rain-swept grass, mud gurgling at its pores. At the foot of the hill, a small plain, then the dense forest, masked in fog and veined rain. King Rodez paces before his comrades, sword in his hand, rain sliding down his face. He breathes in the frosty air and tries to clear his mind. The silence is screaming. Then he hears it. He turns his head, disbelieving for a moment, and his blood runs cold. He strains. Yes. Yes, there it is. He kneels down in the grass to concentrate on the tree line at the base of the hill, and sensing their leader bowing to the gods, all the other Gauls kneel as well. Rodez pays no attention, peering at the tree line, trying to hear, cursing the noise of the soldiers behind him. He cocks his head to the side and snaps, "Quiet!" As soon as the word leaves his mouth, he sees movement in the trees, and there it is: he sucks a deep breath and feels the iced blood run thick as molasses. A grin escalates over a bleeding-heart face: *Yes. Here they come. Here they are. Into a trap.*

Rodez stood, and the Gallic volunteers, numbering in the thousands, did likewise. They looked down upon the trees and held their breaths. The rain came down in a constant drizzle, raising waves of fog and mist, and they struggled to see, struggled to make sense of the blurred shapes of red coming from between the thick trees. Rodez stood at the lead of the ragtag Army and smiled to himself. It was a beautiful sight. Yes, here they were. The hastati marched past the line of trees, onto the open plain, their brilliant red *scuta* shields facing the Gauls. Hundreds of them lined up against the trees, lines running deeper into the forest. Rodez thought he saw Roman cavalry behind them, but could not be sure. Every part of him wanted to throw all of their might against the Romans, and he had to fight from unleashing all the power at his fingertips down that hill. *Patience. Patience. Let them come to you. You are defending – they must come. They must come.*

The hastati, numbering in the thousands, froze at the tree-line. He could not make out the individual soldiers, but he could see the shields, faintly. He knew that behind those shields were javelins and thrusting swords. He did not fear them. His men did not fear them. Fear could not sway the heart of one protecting his homeland. His family. His heritage. His gods.

Movement flickered between the hastati and several Roman soldiers without shields moved in front of them, huddling together. He licked his lips. *What is this we have here?*

One of his companions said, "What are they doing? Aren't they going to march?"

Rodez did not look back. "Indeed. They have no choice. None at all."

The new soldiers without shields began to march across the plain, then up the hill. Excitement coursed through the Gallic lines.

Rodez turned and ran over to his comrades. "Why isn't the infantry marching?" he snarled.

"They are, sir."

"Those soldiers do not have shields. They are not infantry. Fools!"

"Sir..."

"Archers. Roman *archers*. They will keep their distance--"

"The rain will harm their accuracy."

"But it will not block the arrows! Most of my men do not have shields! They'll run us through!"

"Do you wish us to attack, sir?" someone said. "We would lose our advantage--"

"No. We *cannot* attack! Not fully, anyway. It would ruin everything."

"Sir," someone said, stepping forward. "Perhaps the cavalry?"

Rodez glanced behind him, through the rain, to the archers moving up the hill. Only a few hundred. "Cavalry? Yes. Yes, send the cavalry. We will let them fire a single volley. As they reload, we will charge. Is this understood?" The captains surrounding him nodded their heads. "We will see who takes the glory from this field."

Marcellus watched from the trees, peered over the heads of the hastati, saw the archers moving up the hill towards the Gauls. A smile stretched over his war-hardened face. His scouts had let the enemy scouts through the picket lines, allowing the enemy to size him up. He knew he had the advantage now – whoever was leading the volunteer Gallic Army was convinced he had surprised Rome, when truly Marcellus had been prepared – even prepared for battle upon this hill. He knew it was the only good defensive position the Gauls could conjure, and if they did not take it, imbeciles they were. Now he smiled to himself. Imbeciles none the less. He had them right where he wanted them. The archers continued the march, nearly being lost in the rain.

He heard the rain thumping on his helmet as he kicked his horse in the side, leaning forward over its soggy mane, pushing it between rows of hastati. Roman soldiers saluted with a fist over their breasts and kneeling beside their shields.

Marcellus brought his horse to the rear of the line, where seven onagers had been assembled. The massive assemblies of wood would hurl stones at the enemy – except he had the onager crews build firepots, canister filled with oil, and torches were lit. He nodded to them as he rode past, saw their expressions, the eagerness and tiredness rolled into one. He felt it, too. Many weeks of marching, feet blistering open, leg muscles on the verge of collapse. No warm food for days upon end, the rain falling as sharp as steel and cold as winter. His knuckles broke and crackled in the cold and dark lines cut across his palms. He felt the spear at his side, clutched his shield close, and rested in comfort knowing the sword was strapped to the horse's saddle.

He stopped the horse next to the onager captain. "Fire on my order."

"Yes, sir," the soldier replied. "The rain won't do much to accuracy, and it won't hurt the flames."

"The enemy will pursue the archers with their cavalry. The enemy is overly jealous and poorly-trained, if trained at all. They will overpower whoever is leading them and charge down the hill after their cavalry, thinking they have the advantage. The archers will release a volley before fleeing in terror, and our infantry will act as if they are retreating. This will drive the Gauls to bitter insanity, and they will push ever harder down the hill. Our onagers are trained to spray their loads all across the hill – top, bottom, middle. The enemy will be all over it. I will give you the command and you will release. Be sure to ignite the firepots beforehand, as the firebombs will destroy morale. As they are thrown about in chaos, I will order our infantry to charge. The cavalry and I will flank the sides of the field, slaying any Gauls who try to flee. Is this understood, Maximus?"

The captain grinned. "Rome, sir."

Marcellus thumped his chest. "Rome."

The archer captain shouted, "Halt!" He looked down the lines as they stood upon the hill, waited until all the holes in the line had been filled. He turned his face into the rain, blinking away the water, and commanded, "Load your bows!" The archers dug into their satchels, drew bolts, and fitted them into the sturdy bows. The captain gripped his sword, knowing full well the cavalry attack to come. "Aim!" The archers aimed their bows into the sky. "Draw!" They drew back, the sinewy cables whistling in the wind. He stared at the stoic Gallic lines several hundred yards away, upon the hill. His heart pounded and his blood ran like ice-

water. The Gauls would send cavalry racing *downhill* and they'd have to hold their ground for yet another volley. He knew Marcellus to be genius, but for a moment, if just a flicker in time, he doubted it all. "Archers!" he screamed down the lines, yelling to keep his voice over the howling wind and rain, "Fire!"

The sound of slicing air shook all around him and several hundred arrows snaked into the sky, blending into the rain.

He ran down the line as the arrows fell upon the Gauls: "Reload! Reload!"

Rodez did not move as the arrows came down. He stared at the archers down below, filled with an abominable hatred. *These men come against my nation, my land, my brethren, my family.* The arrows rained down around him. Soldiers screamed, falling to the ground, blood gushing from wounds, steaming in the rain, just as breath fogs. An arrow sliced past his ear and stuck into the ground, the hilt snapping. He swung around and saw the carnage: dozens of soldiers had been struck down, pierced in the arms and legs, the throat and face, chest and abdomen. Blood stained the earth and some groaned for help, eyes fogging upon death's doorstep. He looked over them and yelled to the rear of the formation, "Cavalry! Cavalry!" He waved his arms and heard the thunder of horse's hooves. The Gauls spread apart, letting the cavalry charge through, some of those downed by arrows being trampled under the animals' hooves. They broke in a charge down the hill. Rodez knelt upon the grass and watched as the horses, spewing mud and clumps of grass into the air, bore upon the Roman archers.

The cavalry raised swords and spears, their horses panting from sheer adrenaline. The archers hastily reloaded and raised their bows, facing the enemy coming towards them. The lead cavalryman heard the Roman order: "Fire!" and split-seconds later hundreds of arrows screamed past him. He hugged the neck of his horse, looked back to see soldiers flung off their mounts, impaled; horses screeched, collapsing into the earth, shorn with arrows. A horse tripped over another fallen horse and the rider was propelled to the ground, neck snapping with a violent twisting sound. The other horses jumped over the fallen and rushed the enemy. The Gallic volunteer raised his sword with a brilliant shriek.

The Roman soldiers shimmered, then broke apart, scattering down the hillside. Driven mad, the cavalryman urged his companions forward, and they rode into the archers, slaying them with their swords and spears. Archers collapsed to the ground to be trampled. The archers threw down their bows and drew short swords, thrusting them into horse's sides and into the riders. The archer's captain

thrust his sword into the neck of a horse and sent it to the ground; the rider rolled over the earth and stood to see a Roman sword driving towards his eye. That was the last he saw. The Roman captain screeched as a spear pierced his side, shattering organs and driving out the other side. The spear broke and he fell to his knees, completely impaled, blood dribbling from his mouth.

Rodez saw the Roman archers scattering for the woods, the cavalry at their heels. He shook his head, couldn't believe it. The Roman infantry were... *retreating*? An infernal joy jumped about within him, raging despite the cold and wet, but in the next instant it broke apart when he realized something was wrong. Several thousand Roman infantry retreating because of a few broken archers? No.

The soldiers behind him yelled about themselves. "The Romans flee! They retreat even now!"

Rodez tried to watch them retreat but could not because of the trees.

The trees.

The cavalry were pursuing the archers down towards *the trees*.

An instinctive cry broke from his mouth: "No..."

"Run them through!" someone screeched, and Rodez found himself surrounded by hundreds of Gallic volunteers swarming down the hillside, breaking formation in the frenzy for Roman blood. They imagined their wives and girlfriends cheering them at their victory, hailing them as heroes and warriors; they imagined the glory and honor. They imagined Roman blood on their hands. And they rushed for the trees.

Rodez turned, drawing his sword: "No! Stop! Do not go! Do not pursue them!"

No one stopped. The last few Gauls ran by him and he turned, staring down the hillside, thousands of volunteers stretching across the hillside. The cavalry was nearly upon the trees, the archers all but eliminated. Rodez did not care about the archers. "Stop!" he screamed, but his voice felt weak and shaky. He felt alone, abandoned, upon the hillside, the only one not driven by madness. He stood amidst those bodies dropped by the arrows, felt the rain upon him, saw his men spreading over the hillside. They were running on pure adrenalin and there was no one to fight. They would be weary, so weary that when the time came, they would collapse. He could see it all now. So horrible. He sat upon the grass and bowed his head. *How could it come to this?*

Marcellus could feel the earth shaking as the enemy drove down the hillside. He spurred his horse deep into the woods, towards the onagers. Wan light spread

through the trees, cast by the tarred firepots cast aflame. Smoke rose between the trees, incense to the gods. The hastati continued to retreat, even quicker now, per order, but they betrayed their feelings – had their heads not been turned from the enemy, one would see bitter smiles incensed with Roman glory, prepared to strike into the heart of the Gallic nation. Soldiers manned the onagers and held torches to light the artillery shells. He pointed to Maximus and yelled, “Fire!”

Maximus cut his arm through the air; the onagers close to him released. Marcellus gazed skyward as the firebombs careened between the trees, arching over the “fleeing” Romans, and diving through the sky towards the hillside. The Gauls upon the hillside looked up to see the burning balls of fire raining down upon them; shouts went out and they scattered, but the giant fireballs smashed into the earth, sending shockwaves of dirt and flame rolling over the enemy troops, vibrant explosions rippling from the shattered rock. Gauls were completely crushed under the artillery, or mauled by the shrapnel from the blast, twisting and turning and collapsing. Others were splashed with burning tar from the explosion and twirled around, dropping their weapons and shrieking as the fire scorched their bodies to the bone. The other onagers opened up, seeing their counterparts engaging, and several more firepots fell upon the hillside, wreathing it in smoke and flame. Gauls scattered, broke apart from their comrades, tried to make sense of what was happening. The front Gallic lines, completely oblivious to the carnage behind them, charged at the rear Roman infantry.

Marcellus grinned and kicked his horse towards his cavalry, shouting, “Ride! Ride!”

The Roman infantry suddenly turned around, facing their shields towards the enemies. The Romans grinned at the sight: the hillside peppered with dozens of smoldering fires, scorched bodies and corpses bleeding from shrapnel wounds. The wild faces of the Gauls fell apart when they realized that the Roman infantry had not been fleeing; the Roman commanders gave the order and the front lines drew their javelins and hurled them into the closing Gauls. The enemy fell upon the earth near the tree line, some trying to draw javelins from their bodies, others dead as the javelins pierced vital organs. Those not mown down by the javelins raised their axes and swords and held out their spears and rushed the Roman’s shield wall. The Romans gripped their swords in their right hands and braced for impact with the left, holding the shield.

The Gauls smashed into the lines, most thrown back by the shields, knocked in a daze, only to be met with startling and vivid pain as cold Roman steel drove

through their bodies like a knife through butter. Some Gauls managed to wedge between the shields, and they slashed the Roman soldiers' throats with their swords; blood sprayed upon the shields as several Romans fell, but most of the Gauls were hurled into the earth. Holes in the Roman line were filled as the Gauls moaned and writhed upon the earth. A Roman captain thrust his sword into the throat of a crippled Gaul and left him to drown in his own blood.

Onager shells roared overhead, hammering the hillside. At the sides of the hill, Marcellus and his cavalry could be seen flanking the enemy. Most of the Gauls were wreathed in the smoke from the artillery, fumbling about, trying to find their friends, mourning the lost, trying to discover where they were, in what direction the enemy lay. The sky completely blurred from view due to the smoke, and the fire bathed the hill in an infernal heat. Rain did nothing to suave the Gauls lost within the maze of burning shells. More and more fell upon them, spraying the hillside with bodies and burning shrapnel. The command went out across the Roman line, and the march commenced. The first few hundred Roman cohorts began the slow and steady march up the hill, the onagers firing a few more rounds until the threat of hitting the Roman infantry became too great. They simply smiled at the hill drenched in fire and smoke.

The onager missiles shrieked like banshees, then the earth broke into a million pieces as the massive balls of fire tore through the scattered troops. Entire men were crushed and burnt to charred bones under the massive burning firepots; others were hit in the face with the blast of fire, any exposed flesh doused in third degree burns. Gauls ran down the hillside bejeweled in smoke, following the men before them; they were glued in their own little worlds, eyes burning with putrid smoke, bloodshot and tearing; they could only see a few feet ahead of them, the air being so saturated with fire and ash. Through the smoke could be seen the twisted heaps of broken stone, the tar still burning, sending off bursts of white; bodies with the flesh burnt off lie upon the ground, and corpses missing arms and legs – or arms and legs alone – lay in the muddied grass. A soldier walked about in the smoke, dazed, holding his own arm, blood gushing in a red fountain all over the grass. Another lay upon the earth, legs crushed under a piece of a fragmented firepot; he screamed, flailing arms afire, flesh peeling to reveal pale white bone. Gauls hunched over, vomiting up gray bile, the smoke festering inside their lungs. And the onagers continued to fire, the shells breaking men apart and sending many more flying through the air, laden with fire or shrapnel, to be lost in the

drenching smog. And then, all at once, the firing stopped. Gauls huddled together, faces scorching hot amidst the maze of burning shells and strewn corpses. They heard that sound, the sound of marching, the clattering of metal and wood: the Romans approaching. Shouts rang out and the Gauls began to flee up the hillside, trying to navigate the maze of death, stumbling over horrors too gross to inscribe. And the Romans continued to march, slaying all who dared oppose them.

Tears slid down Rodez's face, blending with the rain. Smoke filled his lungs, caught in the breeze and blown up the hillside. From the smoke came Gallic soldiers, most limping, bleeding, covered with blood. Bloodshot eyes, stinging from the smoke, trudged in retreat. Some carried companions: limbless, bloodied, battered, crushed, even headless. Rodez simply sprawled upon the grass and cried towards the gray sky as his own men struggled past him. He heard something to his left and looked, wiping away the tears and rain; one of his friends knelt beside him, blood gushing from his arm in several places, the flesh embedded with smoldering shrapnel. The eyes were distant, forsaken. He muttered, "We did not know..." and stood. He limped away, revealing a twisted ankle. Rodez looked downward to see another friend, this one with his face completely black, charred beyond comprehension. The entire right side of the body was all but incinerated; the clothes had burned away, and the skin around the bone had shriveled into ribbons.

Movement to his right caught his attention, and he saw the Roman cavalry, laced in their chocolate horses and red shields, bearing upon him. He stood upon weak legs, feeling the rain, all measures of hopelessness, consumed by the sorrow of it all, and raised his sword. He stared at the hundreds of cavalry cutting towards him, slaying all those fleeing, and he felt enraged; all the bottled emotion swept out and he charged the horses. The first to reach him tried to cut him down with a spear, but he side-stepped and struck with his sword, drawing a line across the Roman's arm, cutting to the bone. The sword smeared with blood. He raised it to assault another but a spear pierced his gut; the end snapped and the rider who had slain him galloped past. Rodez dropped his sword and fell to his knees, fingering the wound, feeling the blood; a wounded tiredness, a peacefulness, unleashed, and he lay upon the grass, heard the sound of horses, felt the rain upon his face, closed his eyes, and let himself leave.

The Roman infantry climbed the hill, stepping over the scorched and bleeding bodies, meandering around the smoldering fires from the onagers' mouths. The hillside that had once been covered with dandelions and wildflowers now held graves of thousands of Gallic soldiers, torn from all innocence and left to rot upon the field. Any Gauls discovered were mercilessly slaughtered – including those who were injured, those crying for help, those surrendering. Romans came across the enemy trying to carry their broken from the field, and ran them down, slaughtering them with their short thrusting swords. The heat caused sweat to cascade down the Romans' faces and bodies, already stifling hot under the helmets and armor. Hundreds of Gauls were massacred upon the hill and left to be trampled underfoot. Eventually the Roman front lines emerged from the smoke at the front of the hill, running into the Roman cavalry. Hundreds of Gauls who had been retreating had been killed, and now Marcellus, his side drenched in blood from the thwacks of his sword, smiled at his fellow Romans, raised his spatha, and gave a quiet pledge: "Rome."

The Roman infantry grinned under their sweat and cheered: "Rome! Rome! Rome!"

II

The bodies of Gauls were strapped to stripped trees, doused in oil, and lit afire, spreading light throughout the small valley where the Army had built the fort. Soldiers hugged each other, danced, sang songs to the gods and drank pitchers of pillaged Gallic beer. The stars glowered under the smoke of the burning corpses serving as lanterns. Marcellus with Aulus at his side walked between the tents, admonishing and thanking the soldiers, promising them future glory, drawing them to consider the spoils they would receive and the wonderful tales they could tale the wives and girlfriends upon returning home. Aulus was absolutely mesmerized with Marcellus' dealings with the soldiers; he spoke to them gently, with love and tenderness. Not a hostile word came from his mouth, and the fingers that had wrapped around a bloody sword twelve hours earlier now touched the cheeks of young men. The lips that had breathed fire now kissed the hands of noble soldiers. The eyes that had gone mad upon the scene of bloodshed now sparkled with childish delight. Aulus had never seen anything like it; it overjoyed him and frightened him at the same time. The General completely turned into a

different person during war. Charming, lovely, charismatic to his own—and a bloodthirsty, slaughtering tyrant to his enemies.

Marcellus turned to his second-in-command. “Find Maximus. The onager captain.”

Aulus nodded and slipped away. He returned with the centurion.

Marcellus took Maximus’ hand, shook it warmly. “It is a pleasure to see your smiling face once again. You have done well today, and you will be rewarded.” He cast a glance over to Aulus, then back to the beaming centurion. “Look me in the eyes, Captain. Are you listening to me?” Aulus wondered what was going on; Maximus nodded, but his smile faded, doubt creeping in. Marcellus’ maniacal eyes were beginning to swim. The General said, “I am humbly asking you to become my third-in-command to replace my former servant, Hadrianus. Do not fear this position, nor fear me. The only ones who would do well to fear me are the enemies of Rome. Hadrianus was not a true Roman, but you, Maximus, have displayed your nobility in your fierce and loyal acts of courage and command. Men look up to you and you speak up when you have a concern. This is honorable and wonderful. Maximus, if you accept, I will no longer be simply your superior, but your superior *and* friend. You must decide now. The position *must* be filled, and you are my first-choice.”

Maximus was silent but his bursting eyes spoke volumes.

Marcellus laughed. “Then it is done. Drink up! Be merry! Who knows if we will live to see another night?” He laughed and slapped Maximus on the back. “Now get out of here.”

Maximus scurried off, running between two ashen corpse-lanterns.

Aulus snapped, “What are you thinking? He has no training.”

“Nor did I,” Marcellus said. “But I believe he is made for this position. Do you doubt me?”

Aulus didn’t lie. “No. I have learned not to doubt you.”

His friend smiled and squeezed his shoulder. “Gentleness, my friend. The gods favor us.”

Three soldiers appeared from the haze of the lanterns. They were completely dressed; no celebration waited for them. “General,” they said, “the second Gallic line is stretched then, but it seems as if they are holing up in a town called Clastidium for a defense. It is on the main road to Mediolanum and there is no short way around it. If we are to reach Mediolanum in tune with General Kaeso and General Appius, we will have to sack Clastidium. If we go around, they will

be playing guerilla warfare on us the entire way. We can't go around, we can't bypass."

Aulus asked, "How many?"

One of the scouts shrugged. "No way to tell. They're all inside the city walls. We couldn't get in."

Aulus cast a cautious eye to Marcellus, who said, "Then we'll assault them. We will give them as little time to prepare as possible. Cut the celebrations short. We must march before sunrise. We will catch them just as they are waking up."

III

Dark clouds had drawn over the heavens come dawn, and the Roman soldiers awoke to see a day foreboding rain and thunder. Marcellus rose early, drawing up his armor – a helmet with horse-hair, metal armor, a short gladius sword on his waist, a long spear in his hand, and the octagonal cavalry shield he would carry into battle. He dressed inside his tent, and closing his eyes, stepped outside. Roman soldiers were waiting for him. He looked them all in the eye and asked, "Have they departed the city?"

The soldiers looked between themselves. Marcellus drew a sharp breath as if to say, *Speak!* One of them broke the awkward silence. "They do not seem deterred. We outnumber them by three-fourths, and yet they do not look upon us with fear. Instead they pull their shields and arms close, and are determined not to abandon the city. They are prepared to fight to the death."

Marcellus nodded, and looked again at the sky. He did not know whether this was a bad omen or not, but he wasn't willing to question the day's events in front of these men. So he forced a smile, a guttural laugh, and finally a command: "Bring me my horse."

An hour later, 600 Roman legionaries marched through woods and vale under pale skies. Birds took flight and deer scattered as they marched towards the city of Clastidium. Farmers with their families huddled inside their homes as Romans passed on the main road – watching out of a window, a young farmer with his wife would describe the Roman infantry as a most fearsome sight to behold – all dressed in deep satin uniforms, holding their scuta shields (four feet tall, two and a half feet wide, curved at the sides) on their left arm and javelins in their right. Eyes did not flinch or dance, muscles did not falter, the lines did not break. Every

footfall fell with a deepening regularity, enhanced by months upon months of marching. Once the 600 infantry passed, the Roman horsemen followed: hundreds upon hundreds, all carrying spears in their right hands, octagonal, maroon shields strapped on their left arms, and horse-hair helmets fluttering in a stale breeze. The horses neighed and chattered, the hooves clomping upon the earth, sending up low clouds of groveling dust.

Upon his horse, Marcellus rode directly behind the infantry, peering over their helmets as Clastidium came into view. He had half-expected King Britomarus and his 10,000 armed barbarians to be stuffed away within the city walls, yet he had known the pride and bloodthirstiness of the Gauls would find them outside the gates – and he saw them, 10,000 in all, positioned right outside the low wooden palisade of Clastidium. Small fires burned within the city, pallor smoke rising like incense to the gods.

Marcellus ordered a halt and studied the Gauls, spotted Britomarus. It was not hard, for he spared no expense in his battle dress: his stature rose above those of his comrades, and Marcellus knew it would be true even if the King were not mounted; his armor sparkled under the blotted sun, adorned with an array of gold, silver, all kinds of bright colors, embroideries – one would say his armor ‘gleamed like lightning.’ Most of the barbarians wore dirty trousers and light cloaks, most stained with grime, others white as freshly-fallen snow. Those on the front lines wore gold torcs and armlets. Marcellus’ eyes were drawn to several hundred Gauls who wore nothing, absolutely nothing – only their arms and shields. These men who had tossed away their clothes did so in zealous overconfidence; they would be more efficient, since much of the ground was overgrown with thorns that would catch on clothes and impede on the deadliness of their weapons. These Gaesatae did not then realize the error of their ways; this foreknowledge caused a brutal smile to crease Marcellus’ lips.

Marcellus looked over to the soldiers about him, all who carried horns. “Let us march until I say halt.” A horn blew, echoing over the trees and past the walled city, and the Roman infantry began again to march; as the first line of infantry advanced, they colored their fear as best they could, for the thought of dying would touch the heart of the bravest of men, and yet they could feel the sheer energy pouring off of their leader, who knew nothing except Roman glory and bloodshed. The gap between the two armies began to close, and that’s when the shouting started.

A wild din of trumpets and horn blowers tore through the air like Zeus' thunder: the entire army lurched forward, yet did not charge, and cried out in all sorts of manner, shouting war cries amongst the trumpets and horns, and the echoing countryside broke over the Roman soldiers. This did much to drain the color of the Romans' faces as their ears burned and went sour with the indescribable outpour of noise. The naked soldiers – all in the prime of life and in excellent physique – pulled their shields away from their bodies, exposing themselves and screaming at the top of their lungs, beckoning the Roman army forward. King Britomarus opened his own mouth and hollered incantations down the Romans' throat. The Roman army stood still, Marcellus watching with dire complacency as the Gauls howled and sang and brandished their spears, thrusting the spear-tips toward the weeping sky.

The ancient historian Livy said of the Gallic warriors that would've been present at Clastidium: '...they are given to wild outbursts and they fill the air with hideous songs and varied shouts.' Of the Gauls in Asia he wrote: '...their songs as they go into battle, their yells and leapings, and the dreadful noise of arms as they beat their shields in some ancestral custom – all this is done with one purpose, to terrify their enemies.' The brutal *loudness* of the Gauls contrasted sharply with the silent advances of the Greek armies, of whom the Romans were, in some ways, an enhanced photo-copy.

But now it was the trumpets Marcellus hated the most. The noise of the trumpets thundered louder than any lightning claps he had ever known, the very number of trumpeters and horn blowers incalculable. Ancient historian Diodorus Siculus writes of the trumpets peculiar to the barbarians: '...for when they blow upon them, they produce a harsh sound, suitable to the tumult of war.' Now the Gauls, looking upon an army outnumbering them by three-fourths – if you count the Roman horseman – cheered sounds of triumph, chanting in their native tongues: "Victory! Victory!" The leaders of the Gauls ran up and down the lines, encouraging their men with declarations of triumph.

Their great stature, their wild cries, their gesticulations and prancings, the clashing of arms and blowing of trumpets – all combined to terrify and confuse the Romans now standing before Clastidium. Strabo said of them: 'The whole race is war-mad, high-spirited and quick to fight, but otherwise straightforward and not at all of evil character.' Marcellus knew that those before them were not some hideous demons riding from the depths, but men with families – wives and sons and daughters, fathers and mothers. He knew they knew fear as much as the

Romans did – and he knew, in all his Roman honor, that they would fall as quickly as the Romans would.

Marcellus looked up and down his lines, at his infantry and horseman, and saw their faces go ghostly white, and a grimace cut across him. He kicked the sides of his horse and sent it forward through the ranks, towards the front of the infantry. The shouting grew louder as he drew closer, and suddenly his horse, inspired with fear, ducked out of the infantry formation, kicking towards the forest. Seeing this, the enemy cried all the louder, and the Romans watching, for a brief moment, felt all courage sap from their hearts as marrow sapped from bones. Marcellus, quick on the beat, gave a low curse, yanked on the horse's reign, and setting his spear in a holster on the saddle, rose both arms and shield to the sky, closed his eyes, and prayed for victory from the sun. This brought courage back into the Romans, even more so, and they began to holler and cheer, pumping their javelins in the air or banging them against their leather-covered shields, meeting the thumping vibrations of the enemy's spears-on-shield foray.

Marcellus kicked his heels into the horse, riding along the sides of the Roman infantry, meeting the cheers of his soldiers. He kept his face stoic and determined, and this instilled more bravery into his men. The horse wheeled about the front of the Roman lines, and he turned his back on the enemy: this alone boosted the morale of the men higher. He rode before them, staring into their eyes, meeting as many as he could there upon the field, and using the shield-bearing arm, he waved towards the naked barbarian horde and all their screaming cacophony. He shouted above them, voice crackling: "These are the men who rush against you in battle, who raise loud shouts, clash their arms and long swords, and toss their hair. Look at their lack of hardiness, their soft and flabby bodies, and go to it!" The Romans roared, matching the barbarians in intensity. Marcellus silenced them. "Our enemies fight bare-headed, their breasts, sides, thighs and legs are all bare, and they have no protection except from their shields; their weapons of defense are thin spears and long swords. What injury could their long hair, their fierce looks, the clashing of their arms and the brandishing of their arms do us? These are mere symbols of barbarian boastfulness!"

King Britomarus rode before his men, spoke to them in a loud voice, and wheeled his horse outwards, to the middle of the no-man's land. The warfare of the barbarians found its roots deep in tradition, and Britomarus prided himself in tradition: he would ride forward, challenge the bravest of the enemy to single

combat. Now his horse reeled backwards, kicking its legs into the air, and he fished his spear into the air, eyes ablaze with pristine fire, and he screamed that if there would be a man brave enough in all the army to do so, ride out and face him. The Roman soldiers, hearing his challenge, quickly silenced, hearts quickening, blood thinning. No one moved. Marcellus wheeled his horse about. King Britomarus began to mock the Romans, hurling insults upon the finest Rome had to offer, and praising the virtues and victories of his own slain and passed ancestors. He leaned forward in the saddle, holding his spear taught, abusing and belittling the Romans, trying by words to rob them of boldness of spirit.

The Roman soldiers gasped as Marcellus pitched his horse forward. His own eyes smoldered and energy coursed through him, a severed live wire of surging adrenaline. He drew his spear in his hand. The inferiors of the Roman army cursed Marcellus as he charged after the King – if Marcellus fell, the Roman army would delude into chaos, and no doubt Britomarus would charge and slaughter them in the ensuing confusion. Marcellus knew all of this, but was propelled over fear and into the realm of heroism: he did not fight for his own glory, or for honor, but for Rome. His entire soul burned with passion for Rome, and to hear this rat of a man calling curses upon the Light, drove him forward, beyond all reason. Britomarus raised his own spear, continuing to taunt the Roman: Marcellus breathed hard under the helmet, cold sweat stung his eyes, he kicked the horse so hard it drew blood on the hide, but this only sent the horse faster upon the plain. Britomarus gritted his teeth; Marcellus' eyes spoke of a deep hatred. Britomarus' armor shone like the sun god himself, and Marcellus let out a war cry that rippled over the now-silent ranks of the opposing armies.

Marcellus was dwarfed by Britomarus' mere shadow, for Britomarus was a man of extreme height, a goliath of the Gallic lands. Britomarus' horse flinched as the other horse drew upon him, and the armies drew fragrant breaths: Marcellus twisted his heels into the horse, drawing it to the side; Britomarus' spear-tip flashed past Marcellus, and Marcellus thrust his spear between the armor plating of the Gallic King. The right breastplate shifted and Britomarus grunted; he twisted upon his horse and fell, flailing, upon the ground, his own spear lost. His horse, fearful of the commotion, galloped towards the forest. Britomarus lie upon the ground, fingers curling, his head twisting back and forth, blood seeping through the pierced armor.

Marcellus drew his horse upon him, and he twisted the spear shaft in his hands. He forgot of either army, and shoved the spear downwards, piercing the King,

causing a brutal shout to slip the King's bloodied lips. He spit blood as Marcellus yanked the spear out; Marcellus locked eyes with the barbarian King, and with a wicked smile, slashed open the King's throat, leaving his body writhing in the grass, staining it red with steaming blood. Marcellus jumped off his horse, oblivious to the two armies, and, hunching down next to the fallen king, ripped the blood-soaked armor, laden with jewels and embroideries, from the Gaul, leaving him in his blooded tunic, quiet and motionless upon the earth.

Raising the bloodied armor towards the muddied sky, Marcellus proclaimed loud enough for both armies to hear: "Oh Jupiter Feretrius, who beholds the great deeds and exploits of generals and commanders in wars and fightings, I call you to witness that I have overpowered and slain this man with my own hand, being the third Roman ruler and general so to slay a ruler and king, and that I dedicate to you the first and most beautiful of the spoils! Therefore grant us a like fortune as we prosecute the rest of the war!"

Sensing this a call to battle, the Roman infantry surged forward, drawing their javelins. The barbarian horde rushed forward as well, spreading out from the city, 10,000 strong, minus one. Marcellus tossed the armor over the back of his horse, mounted, and stamped his feet into its side, racing back to the Roman lines, leaving the corpse of the King still bleeding upon the field. He passed the Roman infantry, who came to a halt, watching with infinite intensity as the barbarians charged towards the lines. The infantry held their shields in front of them, created a wall of red shields, and hurled the javelins into the air.

For the naked Gauls, events now took a turn for the worse. Discomfort and distress ran through them like the searing wind in an awful winter. The Gallic shield could not cover the entire body, and because they were naked and bigger than most, the javelins raining down amongst them struck home more often than not. Unable to ward off the javelins throwers because of the distance and the broad number of javelins falling upon them, the naked warriors fell beside their King, many crying and moaning as they bled, pierced and broken. Riddled by despair and distress, some either rushed the Roman line in wild rage, only to be pierced and hacked by the Roman short (willingly tossing up their lives), or they faltered and retreated through the rushing comrades, throwing everyone into confusion by their manifest show of bare cowardice.

Having thrown their last javelins into the oncoming men, the Romans now drew their short swords and, with cries that would shake fear to the ends of the earth,

with howls and screams of rage that sent birds flying from the trees, they charged, swords upraised, shields before them, and this in itself – a mass organism of Roman glory and honor – pushed some of the enemy back.

Marcellus gave out the cry and the entire Roman cavalry charged, pushing between the Roman lines, quickly crossing the no-man's land, and thrust against the barbarians, swathing through them in a bloodbath of swords and spears and the din of metal-against-metal and the gruesome tearing, puncturing and shattering of flesh and bones. Barbarians fell to the earth, faces bloodied and bruised, and Roman horsemen were thrown from their horses, to be hacked and cut apart by the barbarian swords and spears. Marcellus rode into the fray, the same spear that had fallen King Britomarus now slicing down the King's men. The spear broke and Marcellus tossed it away, using his feet to kick away the enemy and his gladius as a weapon to thrust into their faces.

The Roman infantry joined the melee, tearing the barbarians down at the back. The barbarians who had not fallen fled for the city walls, but Marcellus drew up a contingent of cavalry and sprinted in front of the gates, blocking the way. Meanwhile, cavalry on the flanks rode into the fleeing hundreds of barbarians, breaking them apart; cavalry and infantry from the rear closed in as well and made short work of the remaining barbarians. Marcellus, at the gates of Clastidium, gazed into the surrounding countryside, seeing the flickers and glints of barbarians running into the woods, and gave the order to hunt down and kill all escaping Gauls.

The Roman soldiers stood amidst the fallen, friends and enemy, and bloodied and battered, rose beaten shields and blood-red swords into the air, chanting victory. Marcellus bathed in the lime-light, joining the chant, running through the Roman ranks, inspiring devotion. Blood dripped from his horse, from his own clothes, and gleamed in his eye, but he remained untouched. That day Marcellus departed the status of even an infamous General and became a true legend never to be forgotten.

IV

As the victorious Army celebrated the victory and mourned the dead in the captured town, Marcellus and his officers took over the tribal meeting center near the town square, converting it into a temporary head-quarters. An officer came before the General. Marcellus asked what his matter was, and the man replied,

“There is a soldier in my cohort. He is an older man, he served in the second Gallic war. In the war he was captured by the Gauls, nursed to health, and sent home by a very caring and sympathetic Gallic warlord. This man sees how we are treating the Gauls, torturing the leaders and killing the prisoners, and his own sympathy travels to the enemy. I fear... My men fear... We fear he may be considering becoming a spy for the Gallic militias.” Marcellus asks how the centurion knows this, and he responds, “This very-talkative man has become very closed-off, secluded. He does not celebrate, and he wept last night as he looked upon the carcass-lanterns.” Does he not worry about his consequences upon his family? “His family died in a plague that the Senate of Rome did not care much about to fight. It was only concentrated in a few small towns, but his two sons and wife died.” Marcellus nodded; What is his name? “Bantius.” Marcellus stood, said, “I go to my tent alone. Bring him to me.”

Bantius entered the tent, his chest vibrating with the pounding of his chest. The world spun about him; the laughter of soldiers outside, the hum of the horses in the stables, the birds outside the camp, all of it blurred and meshed together. He pitched against a wooden post inside the tent, wanting to vomit all over the floor, somehow keeping it in as bile crept up the back of his mouth. He looked up with glossy eyes, seeing Marcellus, the great war hero, coming from behind a flap in the tent. The veteran soldier wore his shield and sword and helmet, but the General wore nothing except a tunic and sandals. Bantius expected – *knew* – Marcellus would call for his guards, have Bantius stripped down, drag him to the middle of the camp, and have him executed as a sign to all who would dare plan against the might of Rome. Yet Bantius saw something different in this man’s eyes, something he could never have expected – love, not hate; acceptance, not condemnation; joy, not anger; calmness, not rage.

Marcellus sat down in a wooden chair, pulled one in front of him, motioned down: “Please.”

Bantius hovered, unsure, and wobbled away from the wooden post, falling into the chair, caught in a daze.

Marcellus’ words dripped with kindness offering a rival to that of Hannibal: “You can easily understand that many of your countrymen are jealous of you, from the fact that not a single citizen of Rome has pointed out to me your many distinguished military services. But the bravery of a man who has served in a Roman camp cannot be hidden. Many of your fellow-soldiers tell what a young

hero you are, and how many perils and dangers you have undergone in defense of the safety and honor of Rome. I am told you did not give up the struggle on the field of battle during the second Gallic war until you were buried almost lifeless, beneath a falling mass of men and horses and arms.” He grabbed Bantius’ hands, noted how cold and clammy they were, sweat dripping onto his own calloused, aged fingers and palms. He spoke with an ardent fervor that dripped out of the tent: “May you long live to do still more gallant deeds! With me you will gain every honor and reward, and you will find that the more you are in my company the more will it lead to your profit and promotion.”

Bantius felt a broad smile light up in his eyes and upon his face. Marcellus made him a present of a worthy charger, and bringing the quaestor out of the shadows, where he had been hidden from Bantius’ view, Marcellus took a wooden box, opened it before Bantius, and presented him 500 silver coins. That this took Bantius’ breath away would be a grave understatement. With Bantius still in the room, Marcellus hollered for his guards and the magistrate who accompanied him during all public appearances; Marcellus then declared, “Do you see this man here? His name is Bantius, a Roman of whom I would like to see more the likes of! He fought hard and barely survived in the second Gallic war, and now fights alongside us here. Whenever this man wants to see me, let him pass.” He looked Bantius in the eye and said in a low, stern voice: “For we are not soldiers, nor are we friends, but brothers who take up arms for our mother Rome.”

Marcellus did not go to sleep that night. He paced in the shadows of the meeting hall, under the gentle whispers of glowing candles. Maximus had retired, lovingly pressured to leave by Aulus, who himself stayed with his friend in his agony. A storm rolled over from the east and quiet thunder blended with the romantic tapping of rain upon the slanted wooden roof. Aulus found a loaf of half-eaten bread and began picking at the stale crust, peeling at the barley in his mouth; Aulus sat cross-legged in the middle of the chamber, sword across his lap, fingers tapping the blade. Eventually the doors flung open; Marcellus leapt to his feet. Aulus had finished off the bread and was just wiping crumbs off his plate.

The scout, freezing and dripping water, ran up to the General, saluted, and said, “A great battle lies before us. The enemy has dug in on the only pass into the city. These are trained soldiers, led by a commander under script by the King of Gaul. I know only this: there are at least two or three thousand of them, and they lay within ditches. Behind the ditches is a palisade wall, and upon it are ready to fire

several hundred archers. Just beyond the fort is the river Padus—and Mediolanum on the other side. You can see the city's lights from atop one of the hills."

"We cannot go around it?"

"No, General. We must wipe out all resistance or they will attack our flanks."

Marcellus closed his eyes, drew a deep breath, opened them. "We fight again tomorrow."

The scout had left the chamber. Before Marcellus could leave, Aulus grabbed him by the shoulder. "Wait."

He turned. "It is late. We both need sleep. Let's talk in the morning—"

"No," he said, shaking his head. "We've fought two days in a row. Most of the soldiers didn't have to exert much energy the first battle, but it was a hard fight this morning. We lost many good men and our men are tired. They celebrate because they think they can sleep come morning. But now we're going to be marching out at sunrise and our men won't be well-rested. What do you think will happen when we launch against several hundred archers and enemy soldiers waiting in ditches? You think we'll succeed, Marcellus? You think our men will be able to handle their friends falling by the arrows, then take up the sword against the soldiers in the ditches? All of our formations will be shattered in the ditches. It will be chaos. Tell me it's not crazy to fight tomorrow."

Marcellus sighed. "It's crazy. You're right. How could I be so foolish?"

Aulus exhaled. "You're welcome."

"And so are you." He headed for the door. "Now get some sleep. We have a war to continue tomorrow."

V

He could not believe that he stood here. His mind would not allow such a belief, would not acknowledge that this was "for-real." He always knew it would come, always knew he'd stand here, or at least stand somewhere in the defense of his native land. His uncle told him that the Romans, the savage brutes that they were, would never cease to harass Gallic lands. The Romans were greedy pig-whores who raped the land and its inhabitants in the name of justice. Over the last few weeks, he and all his brothers-in-arms had received reports of a large Roman force moving in on the city from all directions. The King did not waste time in fortifying defensive positions; his mistake was keeping the trained militia within

or near the city and surrounding the outlying hills with volunteers. The Romans had broken through the ill-trained volunteers and were now marching up the pass. From his vantage point, through the tendrils of mist still wafting off the mountains, he could see the shimmering red armor with the red shields, banners so small in the distance flapping in the wind, cavalry walking the flanks. Yes, he knew, this was it.

The Romans would not flee. They were just miles from the city, and they would not simply turn and walk away. The warlords under hire of the King spoke to every soldier under their command, speaking to them bravery and courage, admonishing them to great deeds, not letting them forget that they were the last stronghold between the Roman whore-mongers and the beautiful city of Mediolanum.

His own commander had come to him last night as they were sitting around the giant torches. He would pull a soldier away from the huddle about the fire every so often, then when they returned, another soldier was beckoned into the shadows. He had never known his commander-warlord too well, and when the soldiers before him returned, he could see the eyes were excited but the faces pale. He could read their expressions and feel the sweltering aura of doom simply washing over their souls. As he walked, the dark seemed to drape around him. In the cold shadows, his warlord turned, faced him, and spoke:

“You have served me well, and you have served the King well. Not all the glory of the soldier is found in his fighting. A man’s honesty, a man’s nobility, these are characteristics of a noble soldier. You, Vocontii, have showed yourself to be a true soldier. You may only be twenty-one, young compared to many of the men around you, but I have no doubt of your courage and skill, and I know you will bring glory to the people of Gaul tomorrow when the Romans bring their pride and arrogance against us. When the King hired me, all of you signed up under me. You were proud to commit yourselves to the King’s service. Now he has sent me and you against the Romans. We are his point-force. We are his prided soldiers. Let us show him that his pride is well-placed and not to be doubted.” A pause, then, “Look where you are standing.” He did. “It is just grass now, but this time tomorrow, it shall be stained red with Roman blood, and we will be dancing around these very torches, celebrating the defeat of Rome!”

He had not slept well that night. And now he stood, watching. Yes, yes, the Romans were coming.

The Romans had the disadvantage; the only direct path to the river that needed to be crossed for a direct march into Mediolanum went through a narrow, four-hundred-meter, or one hundred twenty feet, pass. On either side of the pass were craggy mountains laden with broken trees and vines sliding down their rocky slopes. The Roman Army, because of time, could not go around the craggy cliff-face; it stretched so long and intersected with so many other obstacles that it would take days to reach Mediolanum, and they only had two nights before the other legions would touch the city's walls. Therefore they had no choice but to assault the pass, where, wisely, the Gallic King had stationed nearly four thousand of his trained warriors. The pass was completely blocked by a high wooden palisade; at the top of the forty-foot-tall palisade was a walkway where forester archers could shoot arrows upon the Roman infantry, and ballista captured in previous battles and wars set on fifty-foot-towers, aimed perfectly at the stretch of bare land leading right to the fort. Before the fort were several ditches containing skilled swordsmen, ready to leap up as the other soldiers were being broken. The King had placed one thousand spearmen in a standing position before the fort, on level ground with the Roman march, to hold the line and slay as many Romans as long as possible. Now the Romans were inching towards the pass; the Gallic archers were ready to fit their bows. The swordsmen itched for war. The soldiers on the front line of their spear warbands wrestled with the knowledge that, unless a miracle was granted unto them, they would be some of the first to die, and the sunlight on their faces would be the last sunlight they ever knew.

The young soldier clutched the wooden spear shaft in his right hand and held the shield in his right. While it took all his energy to move his view away from the distant marching enemy, he found his eyes trailing down across his bare chest, over the rough linen of his pants, and he saw his bare feet imprinting the mist-soaked grass. The King prided them but did not offer them clothes on their backs or adequate shoes. Feelings of betrayal crept within, wondering why he would be raising his shield for such a greedy King, but they were squashed by the always-present eyes of the Gallic gods, who searched all hearts and minds and offered their favor upon the noblest of soldiers. He looked up again, gazed between the craggy rock walls of the pass, and saw the Romans, their red uniforms and banners shimmering in the slight breeze rustling between the two cliff-walls, and he saw them freeze, and finally stop. The soldier beside him licked his chops, squinted, took a breath, acknowledged, "They've stopped." The young soldier

only heard his fellow's words, for his eyes were riveted upon the enemy. How long would they be forced to wait?

The infantry had frozen and Marcellus led his bodyguard cavalry to the front of the first line. All the Roman soldiers admired him and their glowing eyes revealed it. He looked over them, locked eyes with as many as he could, and could feel the brute energy, the mangled excitement. Every one of them would die for him; this in itself was a gift from the gods.

Aulus and Maximus rode beside him. Marcellus wheeled his horse around and stared across a plain caked in mist, saw units of soldiers standing far-off in front of the fortifications. The walls looked to be only centimeters tall from his distance. He looked up into a cloudy sky, and his head turned, peering into the distance, dark storm clouds gathering over the forested hills. Aulus tried to read his thoughts but for the life of him could not.

He spoke, almost to himself. "Five hastati cohorts, ten urban cohorts, two triarii cohorts and two archer units." He looked at the horses surrounding the formation. "Not to mention six hundred cavalry soldiers." He went silent under the helmet, looking at the distant enemy, then at the sky, thinking.

Aulus followed the General's eyes to the horizon behind them. "It's a storm. We should've waited. But, no, you didn't wait. You *had* to march. We *had* to fight today. Now we'd better get moving before the storm hits. Why waste time?"

Marcellus grinned. "Thunder scare you, Aulus?"

"Scare me? Only the confusion scares me. Do you want us running around like blind dogs against a well-trained, entrenched, fortified, and outnumbering enemy?"

Marcellus laughed. "Wouldn't it make the day more interesting?"

Maximus swallowed. He knew the chaos a storm would wreak. Yet only Aulus had befriended the General enough to show voice: "More interesting? Are you out of your mind? I vote we turn around and retreat. Find a way around. Conserve our energies for Mediolanum. Attack them from behind!"

"We can't. The river blocks us. It can only be crossed here. And, have you forgotten, Aulus, that General Appius and General Kaeso are converging on Mediolanum, two parts of a *three-part* prong attack? If we don't show up, we could render victory futile."

"I'm not against the plan," Aulus growled. "But *your* plan of attack is madness."

Marcellus just shook his head. "The storm will truly show the authority of Mars."

Aulus winced. "We're waiting for the storm?"

Marcellus nodded. "They're fortified, entrenched, they're well-trained, they outnumber us. The storm is our only hope."

How long would they wait? The commander of the Gallic defense walked the ramparts upon the fortifications, covering his eyes and peering down upon the Roman soldiers in the distance. The forest archers had all sat down, leaning against the wooden stockade, some were even sleeping, thinking the Romans wouldn't come. The commander knew better, but he could not figure out why the enemy was waiting. Time slipped by on a greasy cord and the Roman General just sat on his horse! Shadows began to drape over the forest, stretching towards their wooden palisade and the glistening river only a mile behind them. The storm clouds only stacked upon each other, building higher and higher. Columns of rain could be seen in the distance, illuminated with peals of lightning. Why weren't they attacking before the storm?

He looked down from his elevated position and saw the swordsmen sitting in the trenches. Every now and then one would climb out of the ditch and run between the standing war-band units, seeing if the enemy had moved, then returned to the ditch to spread the news: no movement. The commander admired the war-band who remained standing even when the swordsmen told them they could sit. On one side of the coin, it made the commander smile (the position of war-band fell behind swordsmen in the militia's pride ladder, yet the spearmen still found ways to exhibit genuine pride), but he also felt disgruntled: when the enemy *would* march, and despite rumors, he was absolutely *sure* they would, the war-band's leg muscles would be tired and the line would waver. He considered going down and ordering them to sit down for the sake of the King, but at that moment an archer beside him called his attention: "Look!"

Marcellus had waited until the shadows of the storm clouds were nearly touching them; a great wind tore across the valley and sent trees bending over nearly-vertical. Horses screamed and soldiers held hands over their eyes to prevent themselves from going blind by kicked-up dust. Marcellus' horse reared up and he drew his sword, pointed it to the sky, and maniacally laughing, announced, "Mars smiles upon us! His signature surrounds us!" And with the wind still

raging, he pressed his cavalry unit to the front of the Army, where hastati units had sat down. As he raced past, they leapt to their feet, inspired by his sword standing taught in his hand even with the blazing wind. He cried out, "Mars speaks: 'I AM HERE!' Do not fear!"

The commander could not believe it. Finally, the Romans came! They began to make their way towards the fort, their sides completely encircled in dust. Through the screen of dust the commander could see the faint images of horsemen running back and forth. He squinted, in awe. "The dust does not seem to leave them. It is as if a tornado has fallen right on top of them. I've seen nothing like it." The archer beside him looked to the sky, the frothing storm moving overhead, now devoid of rain, but could say nothing. The commander drew a satisfying breath. "It is obvious that the gods favor *us* today—look at how they blind the Roman barbarians! Captain Galo, order your archers to string their bows!"

The Roman soldiers thought all favor from the gods had left them. Their faith in Marcellus, the feared and revered General, began to waver. Marcellus forced his horse to gallop faster and faster, making Aulus and Maximus work all the harder to keep up, as he ringed the entire 2000-man Army marching into the throat of Gaul. He yelled victory and chanted Rome, but his words were barely heard over the whirlwind. The soldiers began to falter as they drew nearer to the enemy.

Vocontii, the young soldier who had proudly stood with his comrades for hours upon end while the Roman soldiers awaited the storm, now felt the first throngs of panic as the enemy Army, clothed in a whirlwind sent from heaven, drew closer. He could feel the energy intensifying all around him. Spear shafts began to clink against shields as soldiers began to shake. Vocontii did not dare close his eyes, kept them trained on the incoming soldiers, on the dust that seemed to create an ephemeral tornado, the shadows of horsemen just beyond the dust-threshold. His hypothalamus gland was stimulated, brain flooded with chemicals such as adrenaline, noradrenaline, and cortisol. He looked down to see the center of his chest moving in and out, not with each breath, but with a rapidly-growing and furious heartbeat. The energy made him light-headed, and for a moment he wanted to bend over and puke, but his muscles wouldn't let him: as he stood and the panic developed, his muscles went rigid; it even became hard to breathe. Numbness overtook him and all he knew were the wild thoughts of his head,

envisioning his own death as the Roman soldiers came upon them, seeing his body pierced with a sword and dropped to the ground, bleeding everywhere, people stepping all around, a chaotic mess. It horrified him. He saw all his buddies lying dead and his own body being mutilated by crows. Sweat dripped from his brow despite the cold wind from the storm, and he struggled for breath, eyes flashing in rhythmic motion. His abdomen screamed in agony and he wanted to buckle over and puke, but all he could do was tremble and shake, knowing – oh God! – here they come...

“The gods truly favor us!” the Gallic commander shouted gleefully to himself. He turned and screamed to the archer captain, “Release arrows!”

The archer captain raised his own bow dipped in tar and shot it into the air. The signal was followed by nearly a thousand metal-tipped wooden arrows taking to the sky, hurling over the swordsmen and war-bands, and falling towards the enemy. The Gallic soldiers saw the waves of arrows flinging over their heads and leapt up, shouting in mockery at the Romans. The war-bands banged their spears upon their shields.

All illusion of disfavor on the Roman Army crumbled as the arrows tore into the whirlwind. The blasting winds swept up the arrows and snapped most of them in half; the others were thrown off-course. The war-band stared in shock as the enemy Army continued to plow on, unscathed, as arrows plunked into the ground right in front of them. The commander on the palisade rubbed his eyes, taken aback, and screamed for another volley to be launched. The same result. He balled his fists and made the mistake of cursing the gods; the next volley entered the whirlwind and the wind took it up only to spit it back out, raining it upon the war-band and the swordsmen.

The soldier beside Vocontii grunted and stumbled back. Vocontii turned and followed the man’s eyes down to his chest. An arrow had pierced the hairy skin and blood trickled out. Vocontii’s mouth dropped open in shock and the soldier likewise dropped both his shield and spear. With one hand he tried to balance himself as he weakly grabbed the shaft in his hand and pulled it out. He let out a single cry as the arrow withdrew, then a torrent of blood unleashed upon his chest. The man looked at Vocontii with fading eyes and collapsed upon his own armaments, staining them with his crimson tide. Vocontii’s little, horrific world

grew much larger as he realized dozens of men in his unit had been pierced and fallen; more were wounded and angered. He could hear the commander upon the ramparts telling the archers to stop firing.

The whirlwind had completely blocked the Roman soldiers from injury; the god of Mars, when spit in the face by the Gallic commander, had mercilessly turned the enemy's arrows upon themselves, slicing through their ranks! Now thunder roared and the whirlwind died to reveal the Roman soldiers only three hundred feet from the reforming Gallic war-bands. Now Marcellus was at the center of the Army, hollering for the hastati to charge. The thunder boomed so loud it drowned his voice and called the earth to shake. The Gallic soldiers gaped down at the ground in terror as if it were to open, and several of them collapsed to their knees, thrown off-balance. "Mars is with you!" Marcellus shrieked. "Forward! Forward!" The trumpets sounded. The soldiers could not be held back. The hastati charged across the one-hundred feet, shields in one hand and short thrusting swords in the other, charging the battlefield, no-holds-barred.

The shaking of the earth had been so violent so as to lift the corpse's body off the ground. Vocontii tore his eyes from the corpse and looked across the stretch of grass between the enemy and them and was absolutely surprised to see the Roman infantry simply charging. Tunnel vision grasped onto him and, without thinking, he held his oval green shield before him and his spear pointed outwards in a defensive position. He could see the enemy coming upon them only to be thrown back by the spears, impaled and tattered. The Roman soldiers did not fear the spears but kept coming, only seconds away from impacts, shields forward and swords ready to break flesh and rip organs.

The hastati were only seconds away from the enemy when an enormous peal of thunder sent large rocks rolling off the cliffs and buckets of water fell right atop the palisades, a torrential downpour that swept the grass straight off the earth in seconds. The war-band was completely dazed, the defensive formations shredded. The soldiers tried to realign themselves as the rain completely blinded their vision but the screams of the Romans resounded in their ears, followed by the horrifying sounds of war: sprays of blood, the soft slurp of broken lives, grunts and cat-calls, metal-on-metal.

Vocontii was able to orient himself despite the rain just as he could see an enormous Roman soldier rushing at him. He did not care that his comrades had fallen back because of the rain; he only leapt forward, barring himself with his shield, and thrusting the spear-tip into the enemy's face. The spear drew a dark line over the Roman's cheek then entered the eye socket; the Roman made no noise, simply fell, the spear ripped from Vocontii's hands. He ducked down to avoid the thrust of a Roman soldier; he hurriedly grabbed the sword of the man he'd killed and used it to parry another strike, then deliver a lethal blow into the neck of an attacker. Blood painted his green shield as the Roman body fell back. Vocontii was not aware of space or time, only of his own need to survive. Two Roman soldiers leapt over their fallen brothers and struck; Vocontii used the sword to parry one blow and the shield another, then killed one soldier with the sword and tripped another with his feet, driving the bottom of the oval shield into the man's face to shatter the skull. Yet before he could look up enormous pain swept through him, and he found himself looking into the eyes of a boy about his own age. He felt the blade churning inside him, felt it sliding out, the edges continuing to sever his innards. He saw the blade dark with his own blood, and the young man smiled a gruesome smile and moved away to fight elsewhere, leaving Vocontii on his knees, staring at the melee, losing consciousness, fading into oblivion. He didn't even notice the horsemen ride up to him and nonchalantly cut off his head with a *spatha* sword.

Somehow, through the rain, the Gallic commander could make out the details of the battle.

It horrified him.

The hastati threw themselves against the fear-ridden spearmen; while the spearmen fought valiantly, they were crushed under the bravery and courage of the Roman soldiers. As the remaining spearmen spilt blood and took blood to hold the line against the hastati, ten urban cohorts were steadily marching towards the ramparts, and cavalry were following behind. The commander saw the General's cavalry enter the fray, and even saw the General take off the head of a fallen soldier. As all of this was unfolding, the trenches were being flooded with rainwater. The mud caked onto the swordsmen's feet, slowing them down, and they were weighted down under growing depth of water. Swords and shields were lost at the bottom of the trench, now a cesspool, and all organization was lost. Swordsmen were climbing from the arctic muck only to be faced with Roman

soldiers breaking through the war-band defensive line. Completely unarmed, they were forced to flee back into the trench and search for a weapon or be slaughtered. The urban cohort suddenly ran forward, held behind the battling hastati, drew their javelin, and hurled them over the heads of the hastati, raining them down upon the spearmen and the muck-infested swordsmen. Bodies collapsed to the ground or disappeared under the flooding sediment, lost to be encased in mud and buried until their bones were dug up thousands of years later by wizened old archaeologists who liked to tell too many stories to their rich grandchildren.

The swordsmen commander had to watch as his friends waded out of the muck only to either be slain by the enemy or grab a spear and try to hold the line. Moving about in the trench neared impossible as the rain came down and seemed to come off the cliff-faces in a waterfall aimed directly at the sides of the trench. The commander waded through the muck, broad-blade sword in hand, boots slurping. The water rushed past as if it were a creek, icy as snow; he could feel bodies under the water bumping into his legs, cold fingertips brushing against his skin. He quickly set his sword upon the bank and lifted himself up to climb out and join the fight, as hundreds of swordsmen were doing at that very moment. He looked up and saw something black falling towards him; he did not know what it was until it struck him in the back, severing his spine right at the shoulder-blade; he screamed out and felt all movement cease. His body went numb. He felt nothing, not even the blood trickling down his back. He stared at his fingers as they released their grip upon the tufts of grass above the trench, then he was sliding back, completely powerless. Water wrapped around him and he sank to the bottom, the weight of the javelin and the shield strapped to his side carrying him down to the bottom. He struggled to swim but his body would not react: the javelin had completely paralyzed him. He lay at the bottom of the trench-turned-creek, fighting suffocation. Were he to open his eyes, he'd be able to see hundreds of bodies sprawled upon the trench-floor in both directions, weighted down by armament. Javelins spliced the water all around him and he heard more splashes mingled with screams. He sucked in a single breath, filled his lungs with water, and the last thing he was conscious of were the hundreds of feet splashing all around him. A sword pierced his gut but he couldn't feel it. Not because he was paralyzed, but because he was already dead.

The Gallic infantry could not hold the line. They completely fell under the wearied hastati and retreated into the trenches, running through the archways of the palisade. The hastati retreated and the urban cohort took their place, pursuing the fleeing soldiers and slaying any wounded they came across. The Romans waded through the trench and threw themselves upon the stairs of the stockade, fighting off the archers in the walls. Several soldiers on both sides fell. The Roman cavalry raced forward as urban cohort soldiers placed giant onager firepots against the palisades, lit them, then retreated. The firepots would explode, completely breaking the fortress walls, sending them crumbling. The entire fortifications were wobbling as a handful of firepots lit apart. One of the ballista towers fell, crushing all the Gallic soldiers huddled above and within, smashing anyone—Roman or Gaul—below.

The firepot explosions lit up the air and flung debris in every direction. The Gallic commander refused to move, but drew his sword to fight off the invading Romans. He and several Romans blocked one of the main stairways, slaughtering any Romans to come through. They were too focused on the stairwell to look behind them and upon the next tower, where Roman soldiers attacked and threw Gallic soldiers from the ballista. The thrown soldiers landed upon the spikes of the palisade, completely impaled, arms dangling, pale faces looking into the brilliant lighting and torrential rain. The commander was too busy protecting his own skin and vengefully slaying the Romans to see his own mortal enemy turn the ballista upon him. He heard a shout and saw two of his comrades flung to the ground, a single bolt having passed through them. He turned to see the Romans reloading another bolt. He raised his sword in rage just as a Roman soldier grabbed his head and twisted, breaking his neck.

The palisade went up in flames. The Roman soldier leapt off the walls and watched as it completely tumbled to the ground in a maze of fire and smoke and broken bodies. The fleeing Gauls were stopped short as an earthquake opened a fifteen-foot chasm between them and the river. Completely cut-off from escape, they twirled around to see the Roman cavalry, flanked by the blood-soaked infantry, coming from the ash and flames of the smoldering fortifications. The Roman General rode proudly upon his horse with a stale grimace. Behind the Roman infantry who were behind the cavalry, Roman archers found position. The Roman General raised his hand and the rain completely stopped; the storm ended

and the sun broke through the clouds. The humbled Gauls threw their weapons down and raised their hands in surrender.

Upon his horse, Marcellus looked at them all and said, "Mars spares no one."

The Gauls looked at one another in fright, trying to understand, refusing to understand.

The cavalry retreated behind the infantry and took place behind the archers. The infantry set their shields before them in a defensive position; with the high rock walls, the earthquake chasm, and the Roman's shield barricade, no route of escape was presentable. The Roman archers fitted their bows, took aim, and fired.

Marcellus watched with a placid stare as the Gauls shrieked for mercy, dozens of them falling under the arrows. They ran about, trying to dodge the second volley, but half of them were sent to the ground. Some leapt into the earth, deciding on suicide rather than being killed. Desperate ones ran towards the Roman barricade, pleading for mercy, only to be slain at the feet of the Roman soldiers. The last remaining Gauls, knowing their plight, unanimously grabbed their thrown-down weapons and charged the Roman line. At the archers' command, the Roman infantry fell upon their shields and the archers unleashed. Nearly a thousand arrows swept horizontal to the ground and the bodies of the last Gauls were pierced by dozens upon dozens of arrows each. Every Gallic warrior had been slain.

The earth shook again, large thrusts of ground throwing the corpses into the chasm.

Silence. The Romans did not move despite the miraculous cleansing of the bodies.

Mars was not finished: the chasm closed in on itself, the rocks crushing any Gauls who may have still been living despite the fall. The gap to the river was closed. Their path was open.

To this day, archaeologists still cannot explain how so many bones appear to have been squashed together by sheer rock between the hills facing the river of Mediolanum.

Aulus and Maximus, whose own swords dripped blood and whose horses panted, looked upon Marcellus with a new light. The god of Mars had done the will of this man! Maximus leapt off his horse, threw off his armor, shield and sword, ripped his own cloak, and fell before the General. "Have mercy on me!" he cried. "I am but a mortal, not a god like you."

Marcellus smiled at the man, revealed a bloody cut on his arm that stained his forearm completely red. “Am *I* not mortal? Stand up. *I* do the bidding of the gods, not the other way around!”

VI

Vocontii’s corpse was stacked along with every other one upon the burning remnants of the once-towering stockade, now completely leveled to the ground, a mess of charcoal timber and polished bone. The bodies of the Romans were placed on the northern side of the devastation, laid to rest in massive graves. The survivors toiled till nightfall, then they doused the bodies with oil and lit them. Despite the victory, the soldiers stood by mournfully, watching as their friends were consumed by the fire. Marcellus walked amongst them, congratulating them in victory, consoling them of their own inner turmoil. He would wave to the chaotic flames of the Roman dead and promise, “I do this so that they will not be excluded from the great victory that lies ahead. Their names shall go down as soldiers who fought against Gaul and won it from the hands of a barbaric King. The god of Mars will blow their ashes to all the corners of Gaul, a divine act in honor of their bravery. So do not despair. For these men who shed their blood not only for you and me, not only for Rome, but also for the honor of Mars, will not be dishonored. Mars smiles upon them now as they walk through *Elysium*, and he honors them even more by spreading their Roman nobility through even the darkest parts of Gaul.”

He really burned the bodies to prevent the spread of disease. Tomorrow morning they would cross the river, which lit like a wavering gossamer ribbon under the moon shining through tattered clouds. Enough time to bury the bodies appropriately did not exist, and to leave the bodies for the carrion-birds was to advocate the spread of disease. So Marcellus had the four-hundred-odd slain Roman warriors burned in a giant pit, and the flames fed them light all night long, as the soldiers fitfully slept in the grass, knowing what difficulties would face them tomorrow.

Marcellus stood with Aulus on a single rise overlooking the river. Had he looked over his shoulder, he would see his soldiers spread out like a ruffled blanket, some trying to sleep, others struggling in nightmares, others shedding tears for their lost brothers-in-arms. He did not look back, though, but instead looked forward, across the river, to an array of several shimmering lights. Aulus

cocked his head, trying to figure it out, but Marcellus beat him to it. "Torches. The King has somehow heard of his defeat and sent his soldiers to guard the river."

Aulus shook his head. "No Gauls escaped. How could—"

"No Gauls we know of," Marcellus corrected. "The commander could've seen his defeat coming and dispatched a rider to Mediolanum." He cursed under his breath. "Now another obstacle is in our path. These pitiful barbarians challenge Mars over and over, and it nips at his patience. How will he defeat them tomorrow?" He balled his hands into fists and knocked them together, trying to think. "No doubt they have more men in the trees, and undoubtedly archers to fire on us." He pointed at river. "See the flat plain leading to the river, just over this rise? The archers will have a perfect shot upon us. And the river, too. We can't cross it without a bridge and they've apparently destroyed it. It's a chicken-slaughter."

Aulus bit his lip, hiding a smile. "General? Might I make a request?"

"If it's not too burdensome," Marcellus answered wryly.

"I think I know how we can defeat them without even crossing the river."

Marcellus cast him a disbelieving stare.

VII

Moonlight gave way to sunlight and the mist of the night rose from the earth. Hours passed as the Gallic general across the river patiently waited, his swordsmen and war-bands waiting in the forest, his forester archers assembled to fire upon the plain as the Romans surged for the river in a desperate attempt to cross. The General knew from scout reports that the Romans were attempting a three-pronged siege on Mediolanum, and he knew that as his own men waited to do battle with Rome, two more Gallic armies were countering the marches of Roman generals Appius and Kaeso. The Roman Army before him, whose leader was a feared man by the name of Quintus Marcellus, had no choice but to cross the river at this point. The King's siege engineers had blown the bridge and now the Romans would have a difficult—no, he acknowledge with an uncanny smile, an *impossible*—time crossing the river. He would send the trained swordsmen and war-bands in to finish the Roman Army off. Their bodies would be tied on the towering walls of Mediolanum, inspiring fear in the enemy and boosting morale for the King's armies.

The Gallic General did not know how many Romans had been killed in yesterday's attack. By the giant column of smoke rising below the single rose that led to the plain, the General could easily calculate that up to half the Roman force was destroyed—and how many more wounded? The odds were in *his* favor. He did not pay particular attention to the rumors that came in the night; it had stormed all evening, and no matter what the scout said, he could not believe that a tornado had protected the Roman armies. Even when a few stones fell within the city with a small seismic quake, he did not attribute it to Rome but to the random sighing of mother Earth.

And here they came! He rode proud upon his horse as the first Roman banners came over the rise of the hill, nearly five hundred Roman infantry with three hundred cavalry following making their way down the slope. They marched in precise rhythm, a proud feat they learned in the god-awful towns they grew up in. The Gallic General shook his head. They would not be able to protect themselves from their arrows. He watched the eight-hundred soldiers crest the hill and march onto the plain, growing larger. He could not read their faces but he did not have to.

He turned his head and gazed at the captain beside him. "Light!"

The captain shouted the order.

A line of tar in front of the archers was ignited with a torch; the line erupted in flame. Every spaced row of the archers had its own line of flame, and all the arrows within their sheaths were dipped in tar. Following the captain's command, they lit the arrows on fire. "Draw!" They fitted the arrows on the bows and drew them back, the burning tips raised into the air and facing the enemy. The General brought his hand down hard; the captain shrieked, "Loose!" Both him and the captain looked to the sky as the arrows unleashed, flying over the river and falling onto the plain, scattering in-between the Roman ranks. The General smiled, seeing enemy soldiers falling.

Maximus rode through the ranks, the horse leaping over fallen bodies. The Romans hesitated for a moment but he raised his spear, crying for them to march on. His words inspired them and they continued to march, stepping over the bodies of their comrades who found an arrow pointed at them. The sound of splicing air came and the second volley was upon them. Maximus felt an arrow rush past his ear, blowing the tufts of hair sticking out from under his helmet. His horse whinnied, an arrow sticking out of its foreleg. Maximus saw soldiers get

thrown back by the arrows, or collapse to their knees, wounded. The soldiers paused again. Maximus' own heart hammered and his voice quivered, not hiding his own fear: "On! On!" He waited for the third volley. He squeezed his eyes shut and made his horse run; he heard the arrows all around, heard the shouts and cries and the sound of arrows sticking into shields or impaling flesh. When he opened his eyes, he saw more soldiers turning the earth red. Now he hollered, "Testudo! Testudo!"

The archers were refitting their bows as the General leaned forward. The Romans were making odd movements. The forester captain asked, "Are they retreating, General?"

The General shook his head: No. "Then what is it they are doing?"

The General told the captain that they were performing the *testudo* move: they gathered together, holding their shields before them and above them to protect themselves, using the shields as a tortoise-shield. Helps protect against arrows.

"They're not retreating?"

"No," he answered. "They're too stubborn. And too proud. Pride will kill them. Continue firing."

The captain yelled, "Loose!" a fourth time. More arrows lifted off into the atmosphere.

Maximus felt wholly unlucky he was not in *testudo* formation. Him and all his cavalry were fully exposed. For a moment he wondered why Marcellus chose him to lead the attack, then he made the connection: Aulus had come up with the plan, so he was off the hook. And Marcellus, well, he had the epic role. Maximus just had to survive long enough. He wished he had never spoken up in that meeting so seemingly long ago.

He looked into the air as the arrows came down then lowered his head, staring at the mane of his horse. He could hear the arrows plunking into the shields, the spear-tips piercing the hide-covered wood, coming inches from the soldiers' faces. Many soldiers were almost leveled by the force of impact with the heavy, burning arrows. Maximus opened his eyes to see a horseman at his feet, pierced through the throat, helmet lopsided. The horse was galloping away to the east. Maximus thought, *Poor fool*, then reached up and felt an arrow stuck in his helmet. He pulled the helmet off and gasped in pain; there were speckles of blood

inside the helmet, and as he touched his head, it felt warm. He cursed and placed the helmet back on, just then hearing the shouts of alarm.

A horseman ran past him, staring at the scattered testudo formations. Some of the shields were burning. The horseman stared at Maximus, mouth agape. "I've never seen anything like it! It's a curse from the gods, no question!"

Maximus knew differently, figuring it out quickly. "No. The shields are touched with oil from last night's burnings. The flame is lighting the oil traces." He looked to the opposite bank. He saw the next volley of arrows rising. He muttered under his breath, "Marcellus did not think of *this*."

The archers were laughing. "Look at their shields burn! We shall cook them alive!"

The General didn't understand how it was happening, but didn't try to figure it out.

The archer captain said, "Look! The gods do not favor Rome, they favor us!"

"You are correct," the General said. The volley of smoldering arrows landed amongst the Roman soldiers. More shields went up in flames, and shields were beginning to catch fire if the ones next to them erupted. The testudo formations were breaking apart. The archers released another volley as the General hollered to the captain on the other side of his horse, "Ready the swordsmen to advance!"

The horseman who had been speaking with Maximus was flung from his horse, chest opened up by two arrows. Maximus could not watch the man fall, nor could he watch the crumbling testudos, because his own horse screamed as an arrow entered its eye. It shivered and fell; Maximus kicked away and landed hard, rolling over the soft earth, rolling atop an arrow and snapping the shaft in half. He got to his feet as another volley came towards him; he leapt behind his horse, using it as a barricade. Arrows peppered the horse's gut, issuing rivers of blood, and arrows landed beside him, outside the shadow of his hiding place. He leapt to his feet to see several horsemen down, the infantry breaking apart, throwing their shields away in panic, some soldiers trying to strip their armor as the clothes underneath lit afire. Chaos erupted everywhere. More arrows were coming down. He did not look for cover, and for this he let out a shout as an arrow pierced his leg. He fell to the ground, grunting as blood covered his hands as he tried to pull the arrow out. He broke the shaft in half. He would have to be content with that.

All he knew was that the plan was falling to pieces. This was *never* supposed to happen.

“Swordsmen, march!” the captain hollered.

From the woods emerged hundreds of soldiers garbed in lime cloth and wearing deep blue and red paint on their hairy chests and ogre faces. Long, thick swords held in two hands rose up like scimitars of the ancient East, and they ran towards the river, jumping in, wading across as still another volley of arrows was released. The swordsmen captain stood on the friendly bank, waving his men on, shouting, “Send the Romans home this day! Send them to their precious *Elysium*!” He laughed as he spoke, completely taken with madness.

Injured soldiers were crying out for help. Maximus limped over to a horseman pinned under his horse. Maximus tried to lift the downed horse, which had been pierced in the throat by several arrows. His adrenaline enabled him to raise the horse just enough to see the leg smashed, bones sticking from the flesh, lying in a pool of blood-soaked grass. The horseman stared at Maximus, knowing the end had come. Maximus shook his head, apologized with a thought, and let the horse back down. The man screamed at Maximus but he could do nothing.

The cohorts had completely broken. Soldiers were running around in circles, trying to figure out what to do. Burning arrows continued to land, falling young boys to the ground. Smoldering shields were tossed away, leaving the combatants without defense from arrows. Panic ensued, intensifying as they realized hundreds of Gallic infantrymen were crossing the river, climbing onto their bank, and running across the field. Maximus limped around, shouting at the men, “Retreat! Fall back! Now! *Fall back!*” There was no hesitation; the infantry and cavalry sped towards the hill, Maximus limping behind them, unable to keep up.

The swordsmen were overly joyful that the Romans were running. It was no longer a battle: it was a hunt! The Gauls gripped their swords, cast away their shields in excitement, and charged after the broken Romans as fast as possible, inspired with the thought of avenging all their brothers and sisters, all the innocents lost at the hand of the imbecile ‘Quintus Marcellus the Famed.’ The archers hastily reloaded and fired without order, desperate on falling as many of the enemy as possible. The Romans were broken, tired, some even exhausted of

energy, running up the hillside. The swordsmen eagerly gained, salivating at the mouth, thirsting for Roman flesh.

Arrows rained down like the fires of Hades. The men to Maximus' left and right twisted around, screeching, and fell to the ground. Burning pain lit through Maximus as an arrow entered his shoulder, just outside the armor. He sagged forward, onto his knees, seeing spots. His neck felt like iron and his head like lead; the world turned shadowy and he could see the Romans fleeing up the hillside, and more arrows fell on them, breaking more routing soldiers down. Some soldiers were just cresting the hill. Maximus tried to stand but collapsed; he turned around and saw the swordsmen only one hundred feet away. Blood was spilling out between the armor and he could feel a burning warmth spreading through his arm. Nonetheless he crawled over to the body of a Roman soldier and grabbed his short thrusting sword, drew it close to him. The swordsmen were almost on him.

The General felt content. "This day is ours with certainty. We shall run them down. Captain, your archers can retire. They've done *very* well. Courier! Send the news to my King: the 'immortal' Marcellus shall taste the lies of his immortality tonight as he swings from the city walls, and all his men with him! He is utterly beaten."

The courier grinned upon his horse and took off with the news.

The General told his second-in-command, "Look over the advance. I will see to the King myself." He turned the horse and rode away, oblivious to the routing Romans and the bloodthirsty swordsmen preying upon them.

The swordsmen had dissolved from their units into a chaotic mess; most swordsmen rushed right past Maximus, ignoring him because he was wounded, but some tried to finish him off. As a swordsmen brought his blade down, Maximus blocked with his own short sword and with a swipe of his injured leg, gritting his teeth in the pain, he knocked the soldier down, stabbing him with the short sword. He quickly grabbed the Gauls' long sword and used it to slash open the side of a passing Gaul; the man's innards spilled out from his bare stomach, and he tripped over his own intestines, fell to the ground, and tried to crawl to safety. Two Gauls converged on Maximus and he fought hard, strength leaving quickly, to fight them off. They fell at his side but his strength had vaporized. He

fell into the grass. A Gallic warrior with mean eyes and evil countenance ran towards him, swinging the blade in menacing wide arcs. Maximus knew he could not defeat him. He closed his eyes, held his head back, and shrieked, "Marcellus! Ride! Ride!"

At that moment the world turned upside down. Three hundred horsemen erupted over the crest of the hill, the General wearing armor stained with blood from the day before, his sword polished to-a-T. He bent forward on his horse, screaming as loud as he could, "Roma victo!" as he and two hundred ninety-nine other horsemen fell upon the stunned swordsmen, slicing through them with their swords. Marcellus slashed his spatha sword to his right and left, slicing back and throats and cutting off heads. He heard the cry of his friend and galloped forward, kicking his horse hard; the swordsmen raised his sword above Maximus, who was too weak to fight off the attack; Marcellus simply drove the horse into the man, broad-siding him, knocking him down and trampling him under the hooves. Several more Gauls came after the General but Marcellus downed them, covering his blade with blood and locking in the steel the screams of eternity.

"Aulus!" he screamed, pointing at Maximus. "Get him out of here!"

Aulus dismounted, grabbed Maximus, placed him on his horse, and climbed back on, Marcellus protecting him the entire time.

"Go!" Marcellus ordered.

Aulus turned his horse away and rode over the hill as hundreds of fresh Roman infantry, who had been hiding in the shadow of the hill, crested the rise and charged the shocked swordsmen. They knocked the enemy down with their shields and trampled them underfoot, finishing them off with their swords. The cavalry pressed through the tattered Gallic army, wasting them with swords and spears, spilling their blood everywhere. The swordsmen freaked and began to retreat. The Romans charged after them. "Rome!" was their valiant cry.

The archers could not believe their eyes. A surprise attack! The tables had turned.

The archer captain's voice quivered in fright. "Fit your arrows! Loose them! Don't stop!"

The archers obeyed, sending a foray into the sky. The burning arrows fell upon the Romans but they did not stop. In fact, it seemed they ran all the harder.

The archer captain swung, staring behind him, but the General was gone. The King would not be happy.

Marcellus did not care about the arrows falling around him. He knew Mars had his back. He sent a soldier to the grave then did a 180 degree turn, screaming, "Halt!" The horsemen reeled back and the infantry froze in place, leaning upon their shields, pouring anxious sweat. The swordsmen continued to run, looking back, thankful that the Romans had given them some mercy. Marcellus rode in front of the infantry, watching the archers fit their bows. "Steady, Men! Steady!" The arrows came upon them; the soldiers raised their shields to protect themselves. Marcellus raised his shield at the right moment and it caught twin arrows. Several soldiers pitched forward, emptied of life. Marcellus tossed his shield and sword to the side, and from his armor withdrew a small torch. Using flint, he quickly lit it and galloped hard towards the river.

The archers strung their bows, staring at the lone horsemen charging the routing swordsmen.

The mortified captain snarled, "Bloody fool. Archers! Slay him!"

They were more than eager. The arrows flew over the river, over the heads of the swordsmen, bearing upon the lone rider.

Marcellus ignored the arrows. Mars had his back! The archers were no doubt shocked as the arrows landed all around the rider but did not slay him; the path of his gallop could be seen as an area clear of arrows surrounded by blankets of arrows. Marcellus trampled a swordsman and hurled the small torch over his head. He did not wait to see what would happen, knew too well, but turned and ran in the other direction, kicking his horse painfully in the ribs.

The archer captain leaned forward. "What is it that he threw?"

The archers couldn't place it. One of them muttered, "How did he *live*?"

Screams rose, incense to Mars, as the torch touched the earth. In an instant the plain seemed to light on fire, a ravaging inferno spreading its arms in either direction and stretching to the river, engulfing all the swordsmen who could not reach the water. They twisted and turned, burning alive in the oil-drenched fields, near enough to the bank so as not to be touched by the Gauls' own burning arrows. Only a few made it to the river before collapsing, in so much agony that they simply burned to death. Of those who dove into the waters, half of them were

covered in oil-laced flames, and the waters could not quench the fire. They floated downriver, their screams echoing against the cliff walls. The archers just stared in horror at the massive wall of flames and the shadows of men burning within.

Marcellus grinned, pleased, and cast a look over to Aulus, who was smiling also. Maximus, behind Aulus, managed a smile as well.

Archers behind the hill fitted their bows and released. The arrows issued over the flames, over the river, and came down upon the archers who had so mercilessly broken the Roman ranks. The enemy archers, inspired to fear by the infernal flames and driven mad by the arrows coming down on them, ran if they were not killed. Several archers fell beside their own stock of arrows, kicking their legs in the grass as they drowned in their own blood. The captain turned to run but was pierced in the back; he fell, saw the grass, felt himself hitting, then all he knew—or didn't know—was blackness.

VIII

By the time the General had set off from Mediolanum, night had fallen and he was much too euphoric over wine. The King had celebrated news of the victory and the General had been the center of attention. The King had gladly handed the General fifty of his most elite swordsmen, then instructed him, "Return to the River Padus, collect the Roman dead, and bring them back so they shall wreath the walls when the sun awakes!" The citizens of Gaul had cheered the General as he rode horseback with the fifty swordsmen draped in gold cloaks following on his heels. As they marched through the fields surrounding Mediolanum, through the scattered urban settlements, they were cheered on, until eventually darkness completely covered them and they were lost in the winding trails of the forest, lost in silence, moving stealthily, their minds taking them to the past or future, oblivious to the present.

As the General neared the river, he smelt something odd. He couldn't place it. He looked to the trees but all he saw was darkness. Pitch blackness. Dark clouds covered the moon. The soldiers were tired, and the General leaned back, told them, "Take a small break. Rest your legs before we begin stripping the bodies." They carried themselves to the side of the road and sat down, cross-legged. The General moved his horse slowly forward, searching for some soldiers on guard, to announce their arrival. Before he got too far, he heard the complaints of the men:

"It's raining. Our blades will rust." The General glanced back, but couldn't see them in the darkness. He looked up, muttered to himself, "Odd. I feel nothing."

Then the road erupted into light as the trees seemed to burst into fire, the leaves crackling and the branches sputtering. The oil on the trees lit like a rabid creature, sending the frightened swordsmen scrambling away from the road. The light lit up the source of the "rain": the swinging corpses of the Gallic officers, the arm pits stabbed and still dribbling blood! The General spun his horse in circles, horrified. The swordsmen shouted, raising their swords, feeling the weight of the dozens of lifeless eyes dangling from tight nooses. The General writhed to face the river and saw a lone figure standing in the light of the fire: a young man who looked to be the son of a god, wearing polished armor and carrying a polished sword in his hand, the bronze horsehair helmet shining like purified gold. He commanded the soldiers to throw down their swords and the General to come forward.

The Gallic General, realizing what had happened, snarled, "We will never do such a thing!" The swordsmen behind him rushed forward with their swords, bearing their teeth and flexing their muscles, throwing out a vicious war-cry so as to frighten the lone warrior.

The soldier was not disturbed. "You *will*. Or you will all be slain!"

At his words, the sound of rustling came from the sides of the forest, and archers pointed their bows at the swordsmen and General; they'd been hiding in the branches of the trees, untouchable by the swordsmen! Roman infantry filed in from the rear, cutting off the escape; they placed their shields down as a barrier and held their swords at the ready; the second and third rows lifted their *pila*, ready to throw. The swordsmen turned round and round, seeing the swords, the shields, the arrows and javelins, knowing their impending doom. Yet they did not drop their swords.

"I swear by the god of Mars," the Roman leader announced, "that if your men surrender, they shall live."

A pause.

"But you," he continued, "no matter what your course of action, shall die tonight. I swear it."

The General bit his lips. "We will not throw down our arms! Elite! Charge!" He reared back the horse, gave a war-cry, and charged. At that moment the archers unleashed; dozens of swordsmen collapsed to the ground, driven-through. The other swordsmen saw their broken comrades and threw down their swords, raising their hands, deciding they'd rather live than die.

The Gallic General galloped towards Marcellus, kicking the horse hard in the ribs; he drew a spear around, shrieking in rage; just as he fell upon the Roman, Marcellus leapt to the side and drove his blade upwards. Blood gushed in a rhythmic fountain and the horse pitched forward, throat slashed; it slammed head-first, propelling the Gallic General against a tree.

Marcellus stepped over the dying horse and approached the General, who was crawling into the forest. He bent over, grabbed the General by the boots, and dragged him into the clearing. He kicked him in the side, made him roll over, and placed the tip of his sword against the man's throat. "Your men will be stripped naked and marched in shame to the city, where they will take their places of honor next to your King, acknowledged as his great 'elite' warriors. My only request is this: your name, before I run you through."

The General spat on Marcellus' boots. "Rot in Hell."

Marcellus smiled. "We all shall." And he killed the General right there.

Chapter Eleven: Shadow Whispers

I

Beauty. She could not remember the likes of it for such a long time. It all seemed so foreign, so strange, as if she were an alien stepping into a strange new world, a passenger from some distant time, a traveler crossing the earth. The vapors of the past swam around her, and she even bathed inside them; no longer did she seek, but she experienced. She smiled and opened her hands, closed her eyes without fear of the dark. Birds alighted on her arms, the flowers of the field tickled her bare legs. She did not need to open her eyes to know where she was. She knew it all too well. The scent of heaven enveloped her, running like porous energy through her veins. The birds on her arms felt light as they sang, and she could do nothing but dance around in the field, the trees along the edges of the field shining in snow-white lace. The sun warmed her face and suddenly the birds were gone; her own child was in her arms, smiling at her, giggling, squeezing its hands into fists and laughing, beautiful brown eyes absorbing all the brightness of nature. The child was so beautiful, so wonderful, the epiphany of grace, the conclusion of blessing, the perfect ending to any classical story. And she held the baby in her hands, and she smiled at it.

“Celesta.”

She looked up. He stood in front of the trees, across the field. Warmth drained from her. The baby was quiet.

The man cocked his head to the side and smiled. “Celesta.”

She clutched the baby close to her chest and ran through the field towards him. Turtledoves flocked into the pale blue sky.

The man put his hand out. “Stop.”

She slowed down.

“Come forward no more.” His voice dripped with sincerity and honesty.

She felt compelled to stop. The baby looked at the man, and the man looked at the baby.

“What is his name?” he asked quietly, smiling.

She answered.

“Varius,” came the reiteration. He smiled, heart pounding so hard to touch the infant. “Varius.”

“Hold him,” she said, stepping forward.

The joy drained from the man's lips. "Stop! What did I tell you? Keep away from me!"

She felt something different this time, another aspect to his voice. Something she couldn't place. Anger? No. Resentment? No. The answer was not to be found in his voice, but in his eyes. Eyes have always been called the windows of the soul, and once again this was proved true. She did not read anger, nor resentment, or anything of the sort. What she saw frightened her.

"Not a step closer, Celesta," the man ordered. "Not a step closer."

Fear.

She took a step backward, felt relief. "Why won't you hold our child? Why won't you let me hold *you*?"

He shook his head. "I cannot touch you. You cannot touch me. You cannot cross the void."

"The void?"

A cold reply: "The void is what separates us."

"There is no separation," she argued, a tear willowing in her eye. "I can reach you."

"No you cannot."

Her emotions stepped in the way. "Why won't you hold me?" she cried. "Why did you leave me?"

"I didn't leave you," he tried to calm. "I want to hold you--"

She sat the child down in the grass. "Then hold me!" She came towards him.

He put one foot in front of the other. "Celesta!" he hollered. "Stop!"

She didn't listen, shook her head, tears a billowing fountain. "Helonius! What is wrong with you?"

He screamed at the top of his lungs, sending the birds in the trees blasting into the sky. "*Stop!*"

And she crossed the void.

A flash of light, a blinding howl, and shivering darkness. She felt the warmth peel from her and she stood stark nude in the wintry snow, the ice crystals scarring her bare feet. She tried to open her eyes but ice caked them close; she swiped the ice away with a finger and saw Helonius before her, except now he was transformed: a rotting skeleton, crawling with maggots, a knife in his back. His mouth was opened into a scream and a snake crawled in and out of an eye socket. Beyond him all the leaves on the trees were gone, the trees stripped bare and covered in snow. The flowers and grasses of the meadow were replaced with

rocky stubble strewn with snow. She twirled around and a scream exited her throat; nooses were tied to the limbs, and infants and small children swung from the nooses, eyes vacant of life. Thousands upon thousands of nooses, dozens tied onto every branch. She fell to her knees in terror and wrenched her head to the sky: the sun boiled and hundreds upon thousands of men, women and children were hovering in the sky, being ripped apart by dogs. She cried out and turned her head to the earth to evade the horrible sight, but she saw her baby standing in the snow. Except the child's skin was pale and mottled, stricken with blue veins; its eyes glistened evil and its mouth revealed hundreds of tiny fangs. It screeched and leapt upon her; she fell back into the snow, and was surrounded in dust. As the infant sank its fangs into the soft of her neck, she realized that it was not snow that covered the earth, but the ashes of millions of innocent people burned alive.

Her eyes opened. All was dark and dumb. It took her several moments to orient, as she moved her mouth and felt the tear-soaked pillow contorting to the impression of her head. It took all the effort she had to lean upon a single elbow and cast a look to the window; only darkness came through, laden with the heat of approaching fall. She lay upon the couch in the living area and had no idea of what time it was. She could hear Antonius sleeping in the other room. She lay on her back and stared at the ceiling, the dream going over and over in her head. She placed her hand upon her womb and felt the little child playfully kick. Vomit crept into the back of her throat at the thought of a little fanged cretin swirling inside her womb.

"More bad dreams?" he asked when he entered the living area and found her sitting on the couch, eyes bloodshot and sunken.

She couldn't lie to him. The morning light coming through the window had seemed like an eternity to come. As one walks through the valley of death, awaiting salvation in the morning, a wait so short yet so long, that she suffered and it finally came, and she could feel the first faint breaths of life.

Antonius walked to the double doors and opened them, revealing the balcony and all the plants. The sun rose in the east, shedding light and shadows over the hills surrounding the eternal city, the hills covered with small crops of villages and tilled farmland. Already the town had come to life. He cast a look back to Celesta and went onto the porch, leaving her alone. He returned and shut the

doors. He'd had enough with the city, enough with Rome. It ate him, consumed him. "I didn't sleep too well, either."

His dreams had not ended. They got worse and worse. Celesta envisioned the worst for her child: not death, but mutilation. He, a warrior, dreamt only of defeat and blood and triumph over Rome. He wanted to tell himself it was the amuck mind of a paranoid war-monger, but he could not throw off the feeling that it were prophecy. The situation with Carthage kept getting worse and worse. Even though he'd been unofficially kicked off the Senate floor, as he knew he was all but welcome for his "blasphemies", he had informants who gave him the news. The truth did not go well, and yet the public heard of Carthage's impending downfall.

"You should go into the city today," Celesta suggested. "Get out of the house."

He laughed the idea off. "I don't think it would help much."

"Antonius--"

He glared hatred. "The Senate has turned the people against me. My honor is ruined, my family name trashed. I can't step foot outside these doors without feeling the contempt and bitterness. The great warrior who saved Rome from the tyrant Silvanus now turns his back on Rome and cries out for Carthaginian victory."

"That's not what you did."

"But that's what *they're* being told. Does the truth matter?"

"Yes," she hotly growled. "It pains me to say it, but I fear you will gain your honor once more."

"I don't want honor," he said. "I just want my life back. I wish I never would've spoken up."

"You are a warrior," Celesta comforted. "You had to speak up. You're a true Roman--"

"Roman?" he puffed. "What does that mean anymore?"

II

King Vlatucias had gone to sleep last night half-drunk with wine, celebrating the Romans' defeat. When a slave woke him up, he was met with a headache not unlike a saw going over and over across his brain. The slave was talking but the King was not listening as he was led to the roof of his palace. The morning sunlight made him stumble back down the steps and collapse onto the stone floor, a hand racing to cover his eyes from the searing light that chewed through his

brain. A no-nonsense slave would've let the King be, but for some reason the slave had been adamant, taken the King's hand, gently tugged, and beckoned him back up the steps. The King had grunted but he found his way onto the roof, where the warmth of summer flooded over him. It took him several moments for his eyes to adjust, but from atop his palace, he could easily see out over the wooden walls surrounding the city. Even with his blurred vision he could discern it.

He scanned the horizon, jaw dropping like stone. The slave was completely forgotten as he spun about on the balls of his feet, rotating upon the palace. They surrounded the walls, half-hidden in the forest. The front doors of the city were wide open, men, women and children flooding inside from the neighboring fields and villages. His headache grew worse but it didn't bother him. He tried to count the numbers, tried to imagine the strengths, felt anger towards the man who had promised him victory, saw now it had been a lie, a myth, a deception.

The slave spoke, although the words went in the King's one ear and out the other: "They came with the dawn, all at once. Three legions. They have been burning the villages, but they've let the occupants flee to the city. They are positioned on three sides; the side that faces the river is left open. We have no reason to doubt that another legion could be waiting beyond the river in case we try to escape."

Three legions. His brain reeled. "Six thousand enemy troops."

"We have over ten thousand," the slave comforted.

The King swallowed. "Not trained. These soldiers have fought many battles." He looked the slave grim in the eyes. "We are their prize for which they have fought so hard." He looked at the Roman infantry moving through the trees, setting up camp. "Do we have any siege equipment?"

"I will relay your order."

"Have they made any demands?"

The slave shook his head. "No."

"Of course not." He wept inside. "Surrender is all they want. Submission. Assimilation."

"They *did* bring us... a gift."

The King eyed him. "A *gift*?"

A scowl covered the slave's face. "That's what they called it."

The door to the room opened and the King entered. The soldiers in the room all stood in honor. They were dressed in armor, carrying swords, shields and spears. The King looked straight past them to see several men shivering under blankets. At first he did not recognize them, but as he drew closer, the candle-light brought out the details of their faces. Their teeth chattered as they gripped the blankets around them tight, the rough cloth sticking to the contours of their body. They looked up at the King with sadness, disgrace, humiliation. Yes, the King recognized them.

One of the armed soldiers stepped forward. "Great King, these noble men were ambushed by the Roman Army. It appears the General returned to the city before the battle was even over. He acted prematurely and it cost him his life. He was slain, but these soldiers were spared."

The King knelt before one of the soldiers and stared into his eyes. The soldier looked away.

The armed soldier spoke: "Unarmed Roman soldiers delivered them to us as the legions converged on the city. They were inside a cage constructed of hewn wood, and they were hanging naked by their feet."

The soldiers looked down at the cold floor in the somber candlelight.

The soldier leaned towards the King and whispered, "They have been totally disgraced. Ever since childhood, all these men knew and know has been warfare—and honor. They have lost their honor and their status of warriors has been destroyed. They cannot walk without the shadow of their defeat following them—and with the shame of hanging naked before all of Mediolanum not far behind. For lack of a better statement, Great King, they have lost all will to live. They just want to die."

The King found himself taken aback. "You're mistaken—"

"I am a warrior. I have always been a warrior." He looked at the shivering men. "I am empathetic of these men. You, a great man of diplomacy, cannot fathom what they are experiencing. Their world has been turned upside-down, their life's obliterated."

The King swallowed hard. "The Romans surround our city and could begin the assault any moment. I need as many fighting men as I can, and these men are the best—"

"Not anymore," the soldier said. "Young children would fight better."

"They are virtually unharmed—"

“Physically unharmed. But their hearts have turned to stone, and the heart of a warrior is his skill and talent. They will not fight. They *cannot* fight. They’ve been crippled.”

“What would you have me do?”

“It is not my call-“

“I’m making it your call.”

“I cannot command-“

“Advise me. Grant me advice is all I ask.”

The soldier drew a deep breath. “Tell my men to leave their swords upon the floor. And we all leave. We return in ten minutes. Everything will be taken care of.”

The King had joined his military advisors many moments before, and only now did the unarmed soldier open the great oak door to reveal the stone room draped in candlelight. His soldiers behind him filed inside and they all swallowed hard and bowed their heads in honor. The bodies of the naked men lay in pools of blood scattered throughout the room. The soldier could envision it clearly: the most disgraced and most brave of the prisoners taking the swords up first and slicing their guts open. Then the swords would be picked up, used by another soldier, and gradually passed through the ranks until all of them were dead. The soldiers walked between the bodies, searching for their swords. They would clean them in the water trough and seal the room shut for all eternity, an act of honor to those who kept their honor by taking their lives.

The city of Mediolanum had erupted into chaos. Families retreated inside their homes, jobs were completely abandoned. The people from the fields and villages outside the town held their children close as they streamed inside the city, seeking a haven from the barbarian invaders. The Romans burned every village they came across and sacked all the wheat, hoarding it for their own feed during the upcoming siege. King Vlatucias met with his advisors and everyone screamed at one another for an idea of how to repel the enemy; the dozens of warlords who served under the King made their presence known, fully armed and dressed for battle, as the King’s henchmen went through the city forcefully recruiting any men and boys old enough or at least able enough to take up a spear and fight. All the Gauls feared for their lives, reliving the tales that had come from the south:

the tales of rape and murder and brutality, the tales of babies being killed and children being trampled by horses. Some families committed suicide.

Meanwhile, the Romans surrounded the city on three sides, leaving the path to the river blocked. While it was the easiest route for the Gauls to take if they fled, it would turn into their demise: Marcellus had quickly rebuilt the walls in the pass before the Padus, and anyone going that direction would be stopped short and forced to surrender—or be slaughtered. Kaeso covered the northern slopes of the city, Marcellus the eastern slopes, and Appius the orchards and fields to the west of Mediolanum. All the legions built their palisades in case of a counter-attack, laden with ditches and spikes. Beyond the palisades, onagers were hastily constructed by siege engineers to begin the attack when ordered. Some thought the siege would last a while, others believed it would last only a few weeks, if that. It *could*, they knew, last up to several seasons. Marcellus encouraged every soldier in his legion, then took a stand with Aulus upon the palisades to watch the sun's rays alight over the city walls.

"What do you think our friendly King is doing right now?" Marcellus asked.

Aulus wryly smiled. "Defecating in his pants."

III

"Why won't the gods leave us alone? Haven't they done enough to shame our names?"

Her voice was all but drowned out in the thunder. Rain fell upon the eaves and lightning flashed across the distant hills, spreading brilliant tendrils across the fields and into the hearts of the woodlands. Antonius and Celesta stood on the villa balcony, under the stone overhang, listening to the rain and thunder, watching the peals of lightning and sweeping their eyes over the sleeping city. The city slept, and yet they could not. Sleep had become albeit foreign, something of the past, something meant for kings and queens, gods and goddesses, a favor poured upon those rich in heavenly favor. What a tragedy! To enter into the greatest gift given to mankind, and experience it with the terror of the most wicked curse. How much can the mortal mind take? How many sleepless nights, how many dreams filled with bloody horror, until the psyche goes mad and the person is locked forever behind the gates of Hades—even before death takes them? How long until a person goes stark-raving insane, losing it all?

"I can feel it," she breathed, standing so close to him. "I fear the day more than I fear the night. It is in the night that I am comfortable with, because I know what has come and can taste what is coming. The daylight hours are filled with loneliness, depression, anxiety—wondering about the future, wondering about the coming night..." Her hand fell to her stomach and her throat tensed. "Wondering about my child."

Antonius looked at the profile of her face.

Lightning sparkled in her eyes as she looked at him. "Oh, what I wouldn't do to hold him again."

The General winced and turned his head back to his gaze out over the city. He closed his eyes and heard the rain, but at the same time he was standing in that large room, surrounded by clatter, hearing Helonius' shouts as he fell under the blade. He had to open his eyes, open those weary eyes. No wonder he could not sleep. Every time he closed his eyes, Helonius was there. Watching him. Imploring him: *Why?*

"Sometimes," she said quietly, "I forget what he looked like." A tear swelled and broke. She wiped it away with the back of her hand. "Maybe I am just too tired, maybe it's the constant fear... But it doesn't feel right, it doesn't feel pure. I feel as if I have abandoned him."

"You've abandoned no one. He's never abandoned you."

"But *everyone* has abandoned *us*. Our friends, our neighbors, all our loyalties have been destroyed by the public. We have no one but ourselves, and the child. I fear the nature of my child: how will he or she be raised? Will my child be taunted by the other children, mocked for all his or her life? It hurts me so much to think it. I wonder what would've happened if this war had never started, if Gaul had just stuck to their own territories—"

"Don't mix politics into it," Antonius warned. "The war would've happened anyway. The Senate is simply hungry for blood."

"Then how come we who serve Rome with all our beings are the ones to reap the ill wheat?"

He had no answers.

She leaned in close, put her head on his shoulders. "Everyone has abandoned us."

He didn't contemplate his words. "Do you think Helonius has abandoned you?"

He could feel her tense against him and he cursed himself. Her reply: "I don't know *what* to think."

IV

Noon came. Marcellus stood upon the ramparts under construction and stared at the city, whose gates had shut hours earlier as the last straggling peasants ran for cover. He knew what to expect, knew the King would not simply surrender without a fight. A great fight lay before them, but he believed his men could handle it—and the god of Mars would breathe his spirit into them. He felt comfort at this thought as he stared at the quiet wooden walls, the tops lined with outward-poking spikes. They would knock the walls down with onager fire and use the holes to invade under cover of archers and artillery. He did not know how long it would be. Sieges could last months, even years.

Aulus came towards him upon the wooden walkway. “General, the onagers are ready.”

“Ordinances loaded?”

He nodded. “Yes, sir. They fire on my command.”

Marcellus grinned as he stared at the godforsaken city. “Commence.”

The day-to-day business of Mediolanum had been shot. No one worried about making a profit or cutting deals, not even the cutthroat merchants. The stress and worries that had accompanied the simple folk yesterday were forgotten in the chaos and fear that had marched in that very morning. The marketplaces were filled with peasants sitting around, stocked like sardines, and the buildings were crammed, too. Men and boys had to hide from the authorities or else they would be dragged to the King’s palace and handed a spear and shield and thrown in groups. Most of the men—*young and old*—salivated at the thought of going to war against Rome for the defense of their land and the vengeance for their people. Women told stories they’d heard of the Romans marching, barbaric stories, and some shook their head, said, “It cannot be true. Man in all his wickedness could do no such things!”

An officer of King Vlatucias stepped into one of the many winding streets, and over the tears of the children and the whispers of mothers, he climbed atop several wooden crates, and with the sun warm on his back, hollered, “All men aged twelve to fifty are ordered by King Vlatucias to come forward or be punished! It is now time to take on your role in the defense of our glorious nation!”

A boy in the crowd, having just turned thirteen, felt a surge of adrenaline and stepped forward. His mother grabbed his arm and yanked him back. "Do not go!" she cried out. "It is a death sentence!"

"Mother," he told her, "I must do my duty as Father has done."

The officer made the command again. Several men came forward. The boy itched to go.

"The Romans are savages," she pleaded. "You can't go. You don't understand--"

Suddenly a shout rose above the street. The woman shrieked and pulled her son down. The people in the street ducked and the officer fell off the crates, lying sprawled on top of several people. There was the sound of cracking stone, then silence. The boy felt choked by his mother and writhed away, standing. His mother joined him as the people in the street got up. As they tried to figure out what had happened a scream ran through them and several people scattered away from the middle of the street. The boy ripped away from his mother and ran forward. A fleeing woman hit him with her elbow, drawing blood across his lip, but he did not mind. He pushed through the crowd and found what they were staring at.

The crushed and battered head of the Gallic General, severed at the head and crawling with insects. An eye dangled from the socket.

The woman found her son and ripped him away, but the image was already engraved in his mind.

The officer ran towards the palace with his new recruits. The boy had no desire to follow.

Fury spewed like acrid sulfur from the King's eyes as he paced about the war chamber. The advisers watched him coolly. "Do not take it personally," one of them told the King. "It is an act of intimidation, nothing more. They are simply trying to frighten us--"

"*It's working!*" the King snarled. "They threw one of my best Generals over the city walls. In six pieces!"

One of the advisors opened his palms. "But it hasn't hurt us."

"Hurt us?" the King glared at him. "Hasn't *hurt* us? Dozens of my most elite soldiers just committed suicide because they suffered defeat. They could not handle the scent of defeat. It psychologically destroyed them. The Romans are trying to instill fear in the *troops*, not in the people! The more our soldiers fear, the more their skills are deprived! If arms and heads and torsos are being flung

over our city walls, how do you expect the structure of the Army to remain intact, the courage and ideals of honor to remain steadfast? These men say they do not fear death, and maybe that is so for some of them, but the majority of mankind fears death more than he fears his own gloomy future. Having dismembered, bloodied body parts thrown into the street and through butchery-shop windows isn't helping us too much."

One of the advisors stood. "Great King. The Romans will not stop the intimidation. A great battle was fought just miles away, across the river. It is with sorrow that I remind us all that one of our great armies was defeated. I say this, Great King, because we all know the mechanics of war, know how the vultures swarm and eat the rotted flesh of the dead. Nothing new lies under the sun; the Romans will commence to hurl our rotting soldiers over the walls. The basic infantry may think themselves safe from the torture of being dismembered, because they've seen it only with a high-status General. But what, Great King, will they think when they see boys and men just like them, bloated to the sides of cows, thrown over the city walls? When a bloated body like that hits the ground, it ruptures and spits nasty, god-awful excrements all over the place. If we don't want our Army to be weakened completely, we must attack *now*."

The King walked to a long window and looked out at the people packed in the street. He closed his eyes. "Attack now? Send my entire Army against the Romans?"

The advisor did not sit down. "My apologies, but no. We will not defeat them. Not now, anyways."

He turned and faced the advisor. "So why attack?"

The advisor beamed. "Send some of your best soldiers against one of the weakest, most un-skilled troops in the Roman Army. Completely decimate them, load up on their scalps or something of the like, and quickly hoof it to the city. The remains of the slaughtered Romans will be passed out to be felt and touched and mocked as we tell the people that three times as many enemies were killed and the Romans standing shaking in fear."

"Harass them, inspire fear in their troops. Bolster our own morale and courage."

The advisor nodded. "Exactly!"

"Now the question," the King mused, "is who do I send?"

V

Night in Rome came quickly, as it always did, and children made their way inside, merchants moved out of the street, and windows and doors were boarded up and locked. The farm equipment found sleep inside the barns and the crops sparkled under the moon and stars. In distant villages, women slept peacefully for once, knowing the Gallic terrorists had been pushed back by the Roman Army, and as they lay in bed they listened to the insects and the howling coyotes and thought life could not be better. Yet in the heart of Rome, in a room filled with candlelight, the insects could not be heard, the moon and stars were veiled by stone walls, and the only audible noise was that of her beating heart; and if one listened close enough, the beating of the little heart within.

Celesta met nightfall with love and hate. Love, because the stress and anxiety of *awaiting* nightfall during the day had passed, and she stood upon the threshold. Yet hate, because it was the fear of night that drew her to fret of its haunts in the daylight. She lay in her bed and stared at the ceiling, wondering how night would take her, wondering what dreams would meet here, wondering how she would deal with it all: silent sniffles, tears, ultimate terror, cries and screams? She'd seen it all. There was no hope that the horrible dreams would pass her by; they came every night, mostly variations of old nightmares, sometimes something knew. As she lay in bed that night, she did not expect her dreams to take such a violent and foreboding course as they would in an hour to come.

For when she finally lost consciousness and died to the realities of Rome, she found herself standing upon a shore, feeling the sand between the toes of her bare feet. She did not have to look around to know where she stood: she stood upon the banks of the Italian peninsula, where she had grown up, just outside the city of Rome. Here she would sit on the beach and watch the waves curl against the beach, watch the ships on the horizon, and contemplate what life would've been like if she'd been a seagull, so carefree, yet trapped in a meaningless existence. This was a place of absolute peace. Yet it held even more meaning to her, something deep inside her that could never be spoiled.

This is where she'd met *him*.

Before he was in the Army, while he was just a young boy who had come out with his father to sell tigers from Asia. She had come upon the scene of the dealings and they had run to the ocean together, his being quite bored with the twin merchants yelling at each other and the tiger roaring in the background. He'd thought the tiger would be interesting, but after watching it pace in its small bamboo cage and roar every fifteen seconds, he'd lost virtually all interest. And

does the ferocity of a tiger draw a boy's eye—or the beauty of a girl? She smiled upon the beach. They had stood here, just ten and twelve years old. An eternity ago.

“Celesta.”

She turned, shocked.

The boy stood on the beach, profiled against the incoming waves. She wanted to speak but found no adequate words.

The boy did not move, but his eyes burned as his lips poured out words of fire: “Get ready.” An arm waved out over the surf. “Here they come.”

She turned to face his finger and the beach fell away from her. She found that she was hundreds upon hundreds of feet in the air, the wind tore and ripped at her clothes, and the Italian peninsula was lost behind her. Nothing but shark-infested seas were beneath her and her heart beat faster and sweat popped over her brow.

Antonius had heard a commotion, and beckoning the servant away, quietly entered Celesta's room. She lay in her bed, bathed in candlelight. She seemed to sleep peacefully, and a smile crept over her lips. This made relief flood over him: *at least one of us can sleep*. He went about the room, blowing out the candles, and as he leaned down next to the last one, he saw Celesta's face contort into a face of fear. Agony swept through him and he reached forward to wake her, but she writhed away, her eyes popped open, and she leapt into his arms, sobbing. He held her close, refusing to let go, as she cried into his shoulder. A servant entered, but Antonius shook his head and the servant left. After he was able to get her to calm down, he had her sit back down on the bed, and between sobs, she told him:

“I was flying through the air. Above the ocean. Right off the coast of Rome. There was nothing but ocean in every direction. And then...” She struggled for words, but “Words cannot describe how many of them there were. How many... ships! Giant vessels, bigger than any of the Roman vessels I've ever seen. Hundreds of them, maybe thousands of them. Each full of soldiers. But they weren't our soldiers. They were armed differently, and they wore white uniforms, and upon their flags was an upside-down golden crescent moon. Their ships were headed straight for Rome. And Rome slept.”

He stood upon the balcony, under the roof of stars, and he balled his fists, whitening the knuckles.

She stood right behind him, lost in thought as well.

After a while, Antonius said, "I do not doubt the truth to your vision. But the question is *when* will it take place? Not now. As we speak, Rome is fighting a war with Carthage. The Carthaginians can't mount such a vast fleet against us. Not yet, anyways. But Brutii, even with some help from Scipii, is having a hard time against the Carthaginians. The Senate acted foolishly, sending forces against Carthage, Dacia and Gaul all at once. And now I hear they have their sights upon Germania, Espania, Briton! Fools!" Anger burned, a fountain of youth within. He wanted to scream. "I have told them this would happen, and they throw me from the meeting-place, give my name a bad rap, trash my life, and keep the public ignorantly blind. The consulate should've stepped up and said something. Where has he been all this time? He's been a recluse, not showing his face at the meetings. Rome is in the hands of the Senate, and there's no check or balance of their powers of control. And this is where it's gotten us."

Celesta finally spoke up: "You have to tell—"

"Tell them *what*?" he growled. "That you've had another bad dream? Come on! Celesta! They don't care about your dreams! They only care about their own personal agendas."

"Antonius, if you don't tell them, Rome will be caught with its pants down."

"If I tell them, Rome falls under attack and we're kicked out. If I don't tell them, Rome is under attack and I may still be allowed to fight in her defense."

"Do you think this is all about you regaining your honor—honor that you never really *lost*?"

"This is about my love for Rome! And this is about reality. Prophecy is prophecy. The gods do not lie. Whatever they say will happen will happen, no matter what course of action we do or do not take. It is inevitable. Your dreams will be fulfilled. Rome will fall under attack. And I think you are right: the time for my taking up my sword again may not yet have come."

VI

Evening drew closer, and still no movement beyond the city walls. The entire Roman task force—three legions—waited in the trenches and upon the ramparts, in tents and foxholes, tossing about stories, writing letters, quietly anticipating what would happen over the next several days. Scouts up on the bulwarks kept vigilant watch upon the city gates and walls, reporting any movement. So far,

nothing. They couldn't even speculate about what was happening within the walls.

The Generals all gathered together underneath a single canvas tent, each General carrying with him the second-in-command. General Kaeso stood with a veteran named Sulla. A young soldier fingering his sword stood in Appius' soldier; the young man went by the name Gracchus. And Marcellus entered the tent with Aulus on his trail. Appius and Kaeso were swapping their tales of victory and valor from their march to Mediolanum, but Marcellus did not join in. He broke up the conversation: "Stop wasting time. We have a nation to conquer."

The Generals glared at the nineteen-year-old General. But Marcellus didn't back down. "The more time we spend gallivanting around and boasting about our successes, the more and more we risk defeat. We need to act as soon as possible. We need to act *immediately*."

Appius licked his lips. "General Marcellus, are you advising we storm the city walls now?"

"No," Marcellus answered.

Appius breathed a sigh of relief, and it could be seen etched on Kaeso's face as well.

"We need to assault at daybreak. The enemy soldiers will have been up all night, everyone will be tired, they won't expect it."

"A sudden and direct attack as you propose," Kaeso said, "is unc customary. Because it is foolishness."

"Logic says we will win," Marcellus argued. "And even more—the god of Mars takes up arms with us."

Appius cast a look to Kaeso, then said, "This is a combined operation. We must decide how we take Mediolanum, and we must decide *together*. I, for one, do not desire to attack so suddenly. And I wager that Kaeso doesn't like the idea, either."

Kaeso proudly crossed his arms. "It is madness."

Appius spoke up. "I have taken part in many sieges. They take months if they are to be successful. By cutting off trade and water supply, we will deaden their hearts, wither their strength, and the thought of a wet throat and full stomach will make them more eager to surrender. If we attack soon—tomorrow!—they may be tired, but they will be strong against us still."

Marcellus didn't hesitate. "Things are different now."

"How so?" Appius inquired.

"The god of Mars travels with *me*."

Kaeso shook his head. "Madness..."

Marcellus faced him. "Was it madness that kept you from pursuing Decimus when he was captured?"

Appius turned his eyes in disgust and Kaeso threw up his hands. "Enough of this! General Marcellus, your arrogance is unlike anything I've ever seen."

Kaeso mumbled, "You cannot attribute luck to a mere god—"

The room silenced. Appius felt a deep shadow as Marcellus growled, "Mere god?"

Kaeso realized his mistake, but his own pride kept him from turning away from it. "No god can protect us if we storm the gates premature. It is not their will—"

"Do you claim to dictate the will of the gods?" Marcellus demanded hotly, stepping towards him.

Kaeso stood firm. "No. But you do."

"I don't mock the gods in public—or private." He looked to Appius. "Two out of three votes warrants a plan? Here are our choices: follow me, and we attack at daybreak. Follow Kaeso, attack sometime far, far away. But if you claim allegiance to *my* plan, you bathe in the favor of Mars. If you follow Kaeso, I fear the god of Mars may turn against us all for such a sly and wicked comment."

Appius swallowed, not knowing what to think.

Kaeso paced back and forth in the shadows of the tent, shaking his head. "This is lunacy..."

"General Marcellus," Appius said, trying to ward off his psychological attack...

Marcellus broke his line of thought. "Do you fear the gods?"

Kaeso looked up. Appius' throat felt dry.

"Don't answer that," Kaeso snarled, joining them with several leaping bounds. To Marcellus: "His answer has no bearing on his decision."

"As for you," Marcellus said, "the god of Mars declares his verdict: you shall die a lonely and violent death in the snow. This is your punishment for mocking his name. And many more men shall die because of your foolishness." Kaeso stood shocked that a fellow Roman would say such a thing. Marcellus glared at Appius: "Do you desire a mutual fate?" He held out his hand. "Take it. I extend my hand, and I do it only once. Take it now. Join me, Brother. Let us fight together."

Appius swallowed hard. "I am between a rock and a hard place."

"Make your decision wisely," Marcellus ventured.

Kaeso sat upon a chair. "I can't believe any of this. Fear and intimidation. This is not the way--"

Appius broke him up. "We'll attack at daybreak. I'll send the order to ready the artillery."

Marcellus took the General's hand. "It is done."

VII

A knock at the door one night summoned Antonius from his sleep, and he found a courier waiting in the shadows. He handed the forsaken General a telegram and scurried away. Antonius curiously watched the young soldier disappear into the streets, then he drew back into the manor, shut and locked the door, and took a seat in the main hall, lighting a candle so he could read the telegram. He unrolled the papyrus and read the hastily-sketched words. The letter came to him from a Captain Horatius of the Brutii Army. The writing was sloppy, and Antonius soon learned through the text that Horatius had written it upon a voyage from Carthage. Antonius tried to think if he knew of a Captain Horatius, but it did not ring a bell. Maybe he had met the man sometime when they were training in the past years. He'd met lots of soldiers. His eyes continued rolling across the text.

Beloved General Antonius: I hope my letter has arrived to you. I was forced to send it through other hands, as your name is despised for the most unfortunate reasons. My name is Captain Horatius, and this is all I can tell you, for fear this letter may end up in the wrong hands. It is very important you take these words to heart.

News of your blasphemies upon the Senate floor reached me just as we came into port several days ago. To be quite frank with you, it frightened me, but not because a man had made such abominable comments, but because your words were coming to life before my very eyes!

The House of Brutii brings more ships home than it sends out, and the voyages are perilous, with the Carthaginian Navy nipping at our heels. We have taken the city of Carthage three times, but the Africans are always able to take it back. All the peasants and simple-folk hate Rome. I have personally seen Carthaginian children take up rocks and throw them at our soldiers as we march

through the towns. As our numbers are vanquished, Carthage's Army strengthens with each passing day. Fields outside the city are turned red with blood, and the brown earth is covered by a carpet of corpses. Women stand upon the walls of Carthage and molest our soldiers with sensual words, causing the sexually-deprived men to go insane. They strike us physically and psychologically. They have sent thousands of cavalry against us, and hundreds of elephants have trampled thousands of our noble soldiers.

It is a losing battle. The ships departing Rome and heading for Carthage are bound with soldiers walking to their deaths. I have been on three voyages there and back and have seen enough ghostly carnage to last a lifetime. I cannot eat without throwing up. If you walk to the docks when the House of Brutii's ships come in, you will see that hundreds of wounded will come off the ship. We don't bother bringing the bodies home. It spreads disease, and there are simply too many of them.

I have seen too many young boys just sixteen or seventeen years old slain on the battlefield, many of them never knowing what it is like to hold a woman. This is not right, General, even if the god of Mars sides with us. And even that, General, do I begin to doubt. We cannot win this war. And if the rumors are true, the moment we completely retreat, the Carthaginians will stretch out and strike at Rome in vengeance. Your forces lie in Gaul and the House of Scipii's forces are poised to take Dacia. Even with all the troops home, I do not know if we could withstand the Carthaginian attack.

The letter abruptly ended. Antonius read through it once, twice, then put it over the candle, let it burn.

Celesta entered the room, a robe wrapped around her. He didn't notice her so she silently watched the parchment burn. As the last of the parchment dissolved into ash, she saw Antonius lean forward and cup his head in his hands. He could hear her footsteps as she came near, could feel her presence as she knelt down beside him. She put her hands against his, and he looked up at her, and she saw an unbelievable sight: tears in his eyes.

"They're coming," he told her, fighting off the brutal emotions. "They're coming. All of them."

She drew a stale breath. "The Carthaginians?"

He nodded. Wind blew at the double doors. Rain began to fall.

He let his head fall again and he stared at the shadows of his lap, places the candlelight could never reach. The tears burnt in the back of his head and his throat bobbed. He cried not for himself, not for the soldiers, not for the fact that the Senate had stabbed him in the back when all he desired to do was help, but he cried because suddenly he saw so many people—women laughing, children playing with toys in the streets—and he remembered sitting in the garden outside the Senate chamber, speaking and giggling with the kids as he played their games with them. And he could see the city burning, and he could hear their cries; it was as real as any dream, as any prophecy, except now he could not deny it, could not fight it off. It would happen. His eyes had beheld the truth. Carthage would defend and succeed—and when Rome put up a defense, Rome would not succeed. Rome would fall. It would all be over. The Roman people killed, scattered, enslaved, the city burnt to the ground, the Republic just a shade of a pleasant memory in a black-and-white nightmare.

Celesta put a hand through his hair and put her forehead against his. He felt her against him and the tears slid down his cheeks, dropping like blood into his lap. Celesta whispered into his ear as she stroked his hair, told him it would be okay. He turned his face aside of hers and felt her breath. She continued to whisper, and her voice ran through him, comforting him; a churning heart fluttered and calmed. The wind died down. All because of her whispers, those gentle whispers. *Everything would be okay.* The words resounded within. *It'll all be okay. Rome would fight—Rome would fight, fight well, and win.* A sly part of his heart broke: *And we will take it back to them. We will defeat them. Rome will conquer.* He breathed easier with these thoughts, and he felt energy at the thought of his sword, imagined driving it into another man's flesh, protecting the city, protecting his homeland, protecting that which he would sacrifice everything for.

He whispered back: "I'm so scared."

Her face hovered inches away. "You don't need to be scared."

He swallowed hard, trying to recollect himself, focus. "It's going to be so hard—" "We're going to be all right," she said in a quiet voice. "Rome will win. Rome always has." She wrapped her arms tighter around him, then moved onto her knees; he leaned forward, able to wrap his arms around her, embracing, and their faces were right next to each other. He could feel the breath of her nose upon him,

and she could feel his staggered breaths against her ear. He looked straight into her hair and tried to breathe straight.

He opened his heart. "I feel so alone."

"You're not alone," she said slowly. "I'm here. I'm right here."

He turned his head against hers, and she against his, and then he knew nothing else. *You're not alone.* He could feel her breath upon him, and it felt sweeter than any touch. *I'm here.* He could feel her back tensing, could feel the spine against his fingertips, could feel the bulk of her stomach against him, and then he felt something different, something that began in his mouth and traveled to his stomach, a swirling emotion that made the world fall apart into oblivion. *I'm right here.* Her tongue wrapped around his, he tasted the sweet intricacies of her lips, and he could feel her body groaning against his, her arms groping at his back. *You're not alone.* The goddess of beauty and the god of war. *I'm here.* The goddess of Venus. The god of Mars. They became one; once apart, now together, and he felt the robe fall off, felt her bare body against him, and he could think of nothing else. *I'm here. I'm right here. You're not alone.*

The candle glowered, throwing their silhouettes upon the wall.

The man and women lay on the ground, shedding off their clothes, moving atop one another, the sounds of their pleasure blending with the wind. The wind grew stronger, the wind mightier, and as the woman gasped and cried out in pleasure, thunder shook the manor, and all of Rome shuddered.

VIII

"Will no one go?" the voice boomed throughout the stone chamber.

Twenty men stood about the round room, dressed head-to-toe in bronze body armor, wearing an assortment of wild helmets, some with plume horsehair crests or wild feathers sticking between bolts, and while most held long swords upon their sides, some carried pikes. One carried a two-bladed axe, and another a wrought-iron pitchfork. The King turned about in the center of the room, eyeing every soldier, looking deep into their eyes, searching out courage, discovering fright. It frightened him. These were the greatest soldiers in Mediolanum, the cream-of-the-crop, vintage warriors who had served in the other Gallic wars. Most had been in direct conflict with the Romans sometime in their lives; some had suffered defeat and escaped, others known nothing except victory. Yet the

past had no bearing on them now; all that drove them were the stories, the memories.

"No one else?" Desperation clung to every syllable from his mouth.

But no one came forward.

Stories of the Roman brutality flooded their mind. Marcellus' brutal acts rang in their ears: torturing and murder of civilians, massacre of infants, how the Romans had raped the women and pillaged the towns, burning them to the ground. And they remembered the naked elites marched through the front gate, stark nude in front of all the Gallic peasants, and they remembered the broken body of the Gallic soldier that had been thrown over the walls. Would they offer themselves up for such a barbaric sacrifice?

The King's eyes flashed red with anger. "I thought I stood amidst men. I stand amidst *cowards*! I do not ask you to defeat the Romans before the moon rises full; I simply inquire who will summon the courage and bravery to deliver a lethal blow to a regiment of soldiers, take a prize of their flesh, and flaunt it before all of Mediolanum, so we can mock the Romans and inspire bravery in even the most mortified of hearts. Any soldier who marches forward now will experience the greatest honor achievable, and if he falls, he will be a legend to be reckoned with." He could see contemplation fluttering within the eyes. Then he added, as if to clench the deal, "Fight for me this night, and you will have my favor for as long as you live, no matter what."

Silence. Vlatucias led the words drip in.

The warrior with the axe stepped forward and bowed before the King. "You have my axe, Great King."

Vlatucias smiled. "Will you send your unit against the Romans, to instill their hearts with trepidation?"

"Gladly, Great King! My axe goes before you and the worthy ones of Gaul."

"Then rise," Vlatucias commanded, and the soldier stood. He approached the soldier and looked at him hard in the eyes. "I have not seen the likes of you for a long time. It cheers my heart to see such a soul in my midst. Now I implore you, General, to send your cavalry against the Romans, show them the true viciousness of Gaul, show them we will not be easily defeated! May the ancestors favor you, keep you safe, and may your axe speak the desires of the gods."

IX

Celesta didn't know she'd fallen asleep. The emotional high rid her of many memories, such as crawling to the bedroom, climbing onto the bed, sneaking under the covers, and fondling and touching and feeling and kissing before exhaustion overtook. She didn't know Antonius slept beside her, his arms around her, feeling her each and every breath. All she knew was the sound of the waves, the cries of the birds, the peacefulness of the ocean; that wonderful feeling of sand between your toes.

The young boy approaches her, smiling all over. She turns and smiles back. His eyes! So strong and vibrant, cloaked in mystery, begging exploration. He made her salivate, made her heart race. The child walked with an aura she hadn't seen in any boy since the dawn of existence. She reached out for the boy, and opening her mouth to call out his name, was thrown back by a sound coming from behind her:

"Helonius!"

She turned and saw a little girl with wild strawberry hair running across the beach. The girl passed right through her; Celesta spun to see the girl leap into the boy's arms, and the two of them fell upon the beach, holding hands and lying all over each other. The girl was so beautiful, yet so foreign. Celesta hadn't seen a girl like this before, and was horrified that the boy was paying her so much attention. Anger welled within her and she wanted to scream and kick and lash out.

Suddenly the little girl was quiet. The boy leaned forward and looked right at Celesta: "This is what you wanted."

Her mouth dropped open in shock. The little girl turned her head and laughed at her. Helonius stood. Celesta waned him to come to her, she wanted to ask him so many questions, unfold so many mysteries, but Helonius ignored her, and when she turned, she saw a knife in his back; the back of his white tunic was drenched in bright red blood.

She awoke with a start, sweat dripping off her forehead. Her heart hammered as she looked down and saw Antonius' bare back towards her. She felt the blanket contorting around her body and felt the General's hairy leg against her own smooth calf. She pulled it away and shed off the blankets, revealing her naked body. Shame gloated and made itself present in the shades of her face; she felt awful in the heart of her gut and slid off the bed, keeping her eyes from Antonius and she walked out of the room and into the main hall. A knot formed in her

throat when she saw their clothes thrown about the room. The candle was glowing low, the sputtering light reaching up and igniting the sword hanging on the mantle. She couldn't stand it and walked out onto the balcony, closing the door behind her. The moon and stars were veiled by dark clouds and the air smelt rich with iron from the recent rains. Lightning flashed over the distant Mediterranean Sea and thunder inched over the frothing waters.

She closed her eyes to reorient and saw the little boy.

This is what you wanted. A knife in his back.

A tear wallowed in her eye. *I didn't want it.*

This is what you wanted.

"No... No, this isn't what I wanted." She spoke out loud, to no one... No. She spoke to the voice.

This is what you wanted.

"I didn't want this... I didn't want you to go... I didn't want you to leave me."

This is what you wanted.

"I never wanted this to happen. Never wanted any of this."

This is what you wanted.

A waterfall of tears splattered at her feet. "You abandoned me," she sobbed.

This is what you wanted.

"You abandoned me," she cried, louder. "You abandoned me--"

This is what you wanted.

"*You abandoned me!*" she shrieked, throwing her hands against the railing, lifting her voice to the sky.

A knife in his back.

She collapsed to the stone floor, amidst all the dying flowers, and soiled the earth with many tears.

X

The surgeon led them forward through a maze of cots. Upon the cots lay stripped Roman soldiers, most asleep, some staring at the top of the canvas tent, hardly any were talking. Some had arms or legs missing, and all had bandages covered with crusting dry blood wrapped around them. Even the cots stank of old blood. Aulus could hear the screams of a man in a sectioned-off tent, could see dancing shadows as surgeons worked on a wounded Roman soldier, whose horse had gone crazy and thrown him into a tree.

The surgeon led them into a cordoned room. The dark canvas held out most light, so he lit a candle, extinguishing the darkness, which crept into the corners of the room, fleeing the flame. Maximus opened his eyes and turned his head, saw two of his friends standing with the surgeon. The surgeon turned to Marcellus and said, "I will be waiting outside. Take as long as you want."

The General gave him thanks and the surgeon slipped from the room.

Maximus propped himself up on his cot, wincing in slight pain. "I see the faces of victors."

Aulus blushed. Marcellus walked forward and knelt beside the cot. "My good friend, how bad is it?"

Maximus shook his head. "Not too bad. I can't remember them operating on me. The surgeon says the pain knocked me out."

"I can imagine it."

Aulus stepped forward. "You behold the faces of victors, but the same would be true if you were to gaze into a mirror. *Our* victory is *your* victory. Without you, we would've been decimated. We did not expect the shields to catch fire. Many soldiers have spoken of the panic they felt, the great desire to run, but more than one soldier told me they did not flee, because even though you were virtually unprotected, you showed no fear of the Gauls and kept the formation moving forward even as the barbarians unleashed arrows in our faces. Such bravery is owned by only a small few."

Marcellus agreed. "Had Hadrianus been in your position, he would've turned and fled like a whipped dog. Now I see what the gods ended his life and put you in his place. The gods search the hearts of every man, and when they searched your heart, I have no doubt their own hearts stirred with excitement—and even envy. I commend you, Brother, for your great and noble actions, for your steadfast courage and how you so proudly and defiantly stared death in the face—and laughed! You mocked death and it could not capture you. Such a man is protected by the gods. We share much in common, Maximus, for I, too, was stricken with the arrows of Gaul! And I stand before you now, a proud and honorable man, and you join me at my side."

"I am honored," Maximus breathed, "to have served Rome in such a way."

Aulus beamed. "Your battle wounds will be the envy of many women."

Marcellus' face ignited into a grin. "And my envy increases."

Maximus laughed but it hurt. "My friend, Aulus, thank you. Thank you for saving me when I thought all was lost. I could feel death's jaws tightening around

me, but then I saw the shining ones whom belonged to the gods, riding on horseback. The Romans surrounded me, and a great leader fought off the enemy hoard as a loyal friend, more interesting in loyalty than soaking his sword in blood, picked me up from the earth, and carried me to safety. You missed an epic and legendary battle, Aulus. And you missed it all for me. I am ever so grateful, ever so thankful. My life is in your hands. To you I owe it all.”

Aulus spoke. “I had no other desire than to see you to safety. The war was forgotten when I saw the arrows sticking from your body.”

Maximus nodded. “The arrows... The surgeons said they missed my vital organs. Had they struck in other places, even just centimeters to the left or right, I would’ve bled to death, as so many of our companions have done over the last many weeks.”

“You were without question spared by the gods,” Marcellus affirmed. “For their plans for you do not end.”

“I am honored to serve the gods. Honored they have chosen me, called me out by name.”

“That they have.”

Aulus took Maximus’ hand. “Our love remains with you. But we must go. There is much to be done.”

“Then I am thankful I lie in this cot.”

Aulus left the room and when Marcellus stood at the door, he looked over his shoulder to Maximus and said, “I regret to inform you that you will be unable to participate in the fall of Mediolanum. We will take the city with the sunrise.”

Maximus showed no disappointment; his eyes ignited with wicked rage and he admonished, “Give them Hell, General.”

XI

Antonius doesn’t know Celesta is out on the balcony, lying in a puddle of tears. He doesn’t know anything except that now he stands in the great hall at Segesta, surrounded by officers of the victorious Roman Army. He can hear their laughter and he sees the girls dancing, can feel the burn of wine sliding down the back of his throat. He knows who sits next to him, drinking wine as well. It is a moment of joy, a snapshot of eternity, as they bathe in the glory of victory and the peaceful tranquility. Yet it is not to last. Another figure enters, a mere shadow with form, who speaks not in syllables but in guttural sounds. He stares right at Antonius

with brilliant, evil eyes. Antonius lets the words travel through him, mold him, draw him up, and he finds himself abiding in them; something cold in his hand; no, it is warm. He looks down. A crude dagger with a twisting blade. The sounds from the shadow turn him around, and he sees Helonius merrily enjoying the food and dance. No one seems to notice the dark shadow, and no one notices the knife in Antonius' hand. He acts without thinking; the blade comes down, sliding easily, and the skin cuts like wet paper. Helonius leaps to his feet, face ashen, and turns around. The blade is no longer in Antonius' hand, but gushes a fountain of blood, wedged into the small of Helonius' back. Antonius realizes what he has done. By the curse of the gods he has taken the life of his friend. The shadow mocks him, curses him, shames his name. The officers in the room leap to their feet, crying out condemnation, drawing their swords.

Helonius falls to his knees, blood squirting from the edges of his lips. "Backstabber," he muttered in shock. "I never thought you could do this... Not in all the days and nights of eternity... Not this... Not *this*."

Antonius wants to help, wants to erase what he has done. But it is too late. The deed is done.

Helonius falls against the stone fireplace, and as his consciousness wavers, he looks deep in Antonius' eyes and proclaims, "Your fate is sealed. May the gods have mercy on you—and all of Rome."

He awoke. Sunlight came in through the broad window and the birds sang upon the manor's ledges. Antonius closed his eyes, drew deep breaths, and the dream returned in all its vivid fullness. He slid from the blankets, standing naked, and as he quickly dressed, he knew what he must do. He entered the main hall. He could see Celesta asleep upon the porch, breathing easily, collapsed in exhaustion. Her cheeks are burnt red as roses; he knows she's been crying. He quietly walks to the mantle and takes his father's sword. "For the protection of Rome," he muttered, and entering the bedroom, he shut and locked the door. A tear swelled at the crest of his eyes. "God save her the sight."

XII

The Roman camps had settled down. Most of the soldiers had retreated into their tents; several guards patrolled the camps and walked the ramparts, keeping an eye on the city walls, which were completely doused in inky blackness. Dark clouds

blotted out the moon and stars, blinding the scouts upon the walls in an unstoppable darkness. The torches about the camps were dying down; Appius fell asleep in his cot, and Kaeso stared at the ceiling, insides brewing over Marcellus' bitter foreshadowing. Aulus retreated to his own tent beside Marcellus', and Marcellus spoke a few comforting words to his night guards before retreating into his tent, and under the smoldering flames, settled himself down to pray.

Lifting his head upwards, eyes glazing over the smoke curling upon the canvas ceiling, he spoke from the depths of his heart, "I feel your touch beckoning me forward, feel you telling me that you wish us to act soon. The other Generals do not agree, but it is I you have chosen, not them. I rest in the courage of your bosom; your great strengths you've displayed over and over, and I know without a shadow of a doubt that the city will fall to us tomorrow; but not to the glory of Rome, but to *your* glory. I ask that you give me the strength and courage to do what must be done, and bless my men, and the men of Appius and Kaeso. Bless us all noble Romans, who seek your face in deed and honor. I humbly implore that you watch over Maximus and Aulus, my closest friends. They mean the world to me."

The gates of the city opened and the riders exited before it had raised to full height. The gate began to close as they swarmed down the road and cut through the fields; the soldiers lay low upon their black stallions, clothed in black clothes; they held the reins with one hand and carried their weapon with the other. Their insides burst with excitement, adrenaline surging through their bones, and masked in deep shadows, the scouts upon the walls didn't see a thing, but rubbed their hands together in the chill, blew into their palms, and looking to the city, saw it standing still and unassuming.

Aulus snuffed out his candle and slid the journal bag into the pigskin pouch. Bags drew his eyes down and lying upon the cot felt so good. His insides churned, a bitter mix of excitement, anticipation, suspense. He was eager to fight, yet he would remain happy if they were to give the city ample time to surrender before knocking down the gates and spilling not only Gallic blood but Roman blood as well. Aulus did not blind himself to the realities of war: death would come. Soldiers sleeping throughout the tent would dream their last dreams, hope their last hopes, fear their last fears. Aulus knew he could easily be one of them.

Marcellus did not run from a fight, and unless otherwise ordered, Aulus would be right at his side.

The lead horseman gripped the axe tight as they bore upon the ditches. The ditches were completely unoccupied, and he saw a small opening between two wooden palisades. He led the horsemen smoothly into the ditches and out again, the trained horses pulling off the maneuver with ease, and they passed silently between the two palisades. Only ten feet away, upon the walkway, a soldier stared at the city, thought he heard something, but threw it off. The lead soldier could see two young Roman soldiers carrying nothing but sheathed short swords standing next to a torch. They neared the first encampment and he prepared to strike. His men spread out, entering the camp through different avenues. The two soldiers heard the galloping hooves and turned just as the axe swung down, smashing one in the face; the other fell under the horse's hooves. Hardly any noises. Blood dripped from the axe. One of the riders raised a horn to his lips and gave a thunderous cry, drawing the Romans out to play.

The horn ripped through Marcellus' prayers. He remained stoic beside his bed for several moments, then he heard the shouts of men and the familiar sound of tearing flesh quite close. He picked up a horse galloping around the back of his tent; suddenly the tent flap behind him whipped open, and he spun around to see one of his night guards standing there; Marcellus was jumping to his feet as the guard exclaimed, "The barbarians are coming through on horseback! There's so many, they're dressed in black, we can't-" He gave out a cry and pitched forward, a black shadow shimmering behind him for just a moment; he landed on his face, a bloody sash woven over his back.

Marcellus ran to the side of his tent, grabbed the *spatha* sword, and without giving wind to armor or shield, he ran out the tent door, throwing his sword up and across in an arch, slicing open a Gallic soldier rushing past. The soldier shrieked and fell off his horse, landing hard, and as the horse ran away, Marcellus twisted the sword handle in his hands, inverted the blade, and stabbed the man right in the chest. When he looked up, the fires of the torches illuminated the landscape, and his face shone red with rage.

The camp found itself thrown into ultimate chaos. Sleeping soldiers heard the horn and the shouts and cries of their companions, and half-groggy, disheveled

and confused, they took their swords or spears and went out of their tents, often to be cut down before their eyes could adjust to the fluttering torchlight. A crow flying overhead could see by torchlight the horsemen rushing between the tents, the frenzied Roman soldiers grouping together en masse, yelling at each other, trying to find organization as the horsemen would sweep through them. Yet while some Romans were easily slaughtered, others put up a genuine and mean fight. Gallic soldiers fell, too, and horses were slain. Aulus could be seen outside his tent, fighting off the horsemen with two swords, one being his own and the other that of a fallen comrade. Marcellus burst out of his tent and tore down a rider, executing him on the spot. The crow would be gifted with the sight of Marcellus rushing a horse head-on, then jumping out of the way and slicing at its legs, causing it to pitch forward, snap its neck, and throw its rider so violently to the ground that it broke many bones in his body. Across the encampment, bands of experienced triarii formed a double line, facing their spears outwards, some of them wielding shields. One line faced one direction of the avenue and the other the opposite direction. A pair of Gallic horsemen came around several tents and ran right into the triarii's spears; the triarii shuddered under the impact, a spear broke, and the riders were thrown off their horses, into the mass of men, and before they could stand, impaled with spears. The Gallic riders began to realize the tide was turning, but locked in their bloodlust, refused to retreat. A passion for Gaul drove them on, driving many to their disheartening deaths.

A Gallic soldier shrieked as Marcellus' sword sang a fine tune, and he fell off his horse, landing upon and collapsing a tent with terrified Roman soldiers inside. The horse continued to gallop and by the firelight Marcellus stepped in front of a pair of horsemen with blood-soaked swords, and without moving his eyes from the incoming enemies, roared to the soldiers in the tent, "Out and take up your sword for Rome!" The Gallic horsemen gave out a searing war-cry; Marcellus knelt down and twirled in a circle as they passed on either side; his sword slashed the hides of the horses and they stumbled to the ground, innards flopping out, the riders tossed from their mount. Marcellus turned and stood to see the Roman soldiers from the tent grabbing the weapons of fallen comrades and storming the dismounted riders; one grabbed a torch out of the earth and brought it down upon a squirming Gaul, cutting off all moment. A grin slid across Marcellus' mouth and he rushed a rider, taking him down.

Aulus slashed the twin swords in all directions, slaying riders left and right. A pile of corpses formed at his feet and blood seemed to steam from every part of his body; not *his* blood, but the blood he had revealed with the wicked thrusts and slashes of his swords. Seven Gallic horsemen rode towards him, bearing their weapons: six swords and an axe. The soldier with the axe wore brilliant green face-paint that sparkled in the torchlight. Aulus knew he could not win this battle. With a prayer to the gods, he took the swords in his hand and charged the galloping horses, swinging his blades, screaming, “Roma victo!”

The cry of his friend tore his eyes in the opposite direction and he took off. Marcellus downed a rider who crossed his path, then squirmed through the ruins of what had once been a polished Roman camp, leaping over broken bodies and dodging a squadron of tents lit on fire, men screaming inside. He burst around a tent to see across the way Aulus running head-first into a group of horsemen. Marcellus watched in horror as Aulus slew three horsemen, but then dropped one of his swords as an enemy sword cut open his arm, revealing a fountain of blood. Aulus screamed and twirled around, downing the rider who had wounded him. At the same time one of the other riders slid a blade over his unprotected back; Aulus screeched in burning agony and, dropping his sword, fell to his knees. Pain was all that filled his consciousness as the leader raised the axe above his head then brought it down, right into the Roman’s skull, splitting the bone and splicing the brain. Aulus twitched, made strange noises, then fell quivering to the ground, body going into spasms.

Marcellus screamed and, blinded by unfettered rage, rushed forward.

The Gallic warrior grinned as he saw the General coming at them. “Petty fool,” he muttered. To the last two standing comrades, “Run him down!”

The Gallic cavalry smirked, mocked, and ran their horses towards the General.

Marcellus did not back down. As the first horsemen reached him, he swiped the sword up, slicing open his chest in a brilliant red gash, and threw his body to the ground to avoid the sword of the Gaul’s partner. As the Gaul he’d sliced fell, groping at his wound and screaming foreign curses, Marcellus leapt upon the back of the other horseman, and taking him by surprise, pulled back his head and slit his throat. Blood covered the mane of the horse as the General jumped down and

ran towards the Gallic leader, leaving two dead men in his wake and showing not an ounce of exhaustion.

The General was amazed that the Roman had taken down two of his fellow warriors, but he believed the Roman could not take *him* down. He kicked the horse in the side and readied the axe. In a foreign tongue Marcellus could not understand, he yelled, “Death to Rome!”

Marcellus didn’t stop running. He swung his sword in the air and as the leader fell upon him, he hurled it through the air, the blade spinning. He dove to the side to avoid the axe blade and the sword impaled the rider right in the chest. The rider dropped the axe and slid off his horse, landing hard in the dirt, under the torchlight. Sweat already popped from his brow and he looked down, the movement excruciatingly painful, and he discovered the blade had cut clean through him, the tip sticking out his back. He gasped for air, felt himself suffocating as fluid filled his lungs.

Marcellus glanced over to the fallen leader, then stood, brushed himself off, walked over to the collection of corpses forming a ring around Aulus’ body, and picked up the two swords Aulus had painted red. He marched over to the leader, grabbed him by the neck, and as he screamed in pain, Marcellus positioned him upright against a fallen torch. The man’s vision was fading and he felt weak and vulnerable; Marcellus held the two swords in two hands, and said in a low voice, “Death to Gaul.” The Gallic leader opened his mouth to beg for mercy but the swords came together, the blades meeting at his neck, and the Gaul’s head flopped backwards, landing in the cool earth. The carved neck bubbled and steamed with blood.

The Gauls saw their leader slain, and filled with doubt, broke apart and routed through the same way they’d come in. Marcellus grabbed one of the Gauls’ horses, grabbed the head of the fallen leader, and kicked the horse through the scattered carnage. The horsemen were halfway across the fields between the ditches and the city walls when the General reached the ramparts, the bleeding head in one hand and his sword in the other as he screamed for the ballista to aim upon the city gates. “Wait till they are upon the gates, then unleash Hell!” He commanded; he leapt off the ramparts, landed upon the horse, and with several

kicks dashed through the ditch and was tearing up dirt across the fields towards the city.

Gallic warriors on the city walls saw the broken cavalry streaming for the city gates. Filled with terror, they cried out, "Raise the gate! Raise the gate!" and began to crank the giant turnstiles. The city gate clanked as it began to raise; the horsemen came to a halt before the gate; all were sweating and many were bleeding. The gate was only a few feet off the ground; the cavalry kept throwing glances back towards the Roman camps, alight with fire, seeing soldiers scurrying back and forth. "Just a moment!" the soldiers on the other side encouraged. "Just a moment-" But a moment too late: the air split apart with the sound of whooshing air, followed by the echoes of impaled flesh and men shrieking in agony. Four-foot-long arrows ripped through their bodies with such force that they lifted many riders off their mounts and impaled them upon the raising gate. The horses scattered into the darkness, to either reign in the woodlands or be captured by Roman soldiers and integrated into the Army. The soldiers beyond the gate were horrified to see bloody bodies sprawled upon the ground, and many more nailed to the gate, some still moaning in agony. One of the soldiers on the wall cried out, "A rider approaches! A rider approaches!"

Marcellus rode towards the city, and under the eyes of over a hundred Gauls on the walls, tossed the Gallic leader's head over the walls. It landed in the middle of the street with such force that both eyes popped out in a spray of blood. Marcellus paced before the walls and screamed, "This time tomorrow, the walls will be ours!" Before anyone could contest, he dashed into the darkness, lost in the night. The leader's head was taken to a very ill King who was lost between desperation and rage. When told what the mysterious rider had said, he tossed it over his shoulder and said, "Nonsense! No General in his right mind would conduct an assault so early. We have nothing to worry about. Sleep easy tonight. There will be too many worries come morning."

XIII

The loyal servants placed the food upon the table, saying nothing. She waited for several minutes before drawing a slave to her, and after taking a sip of bitter wine, said, "Go find the General. I don't know where he's gone off to." The servant

nodded and dipped away. She continued to drink the wine and the worry grew. She saw Helonius again, in the hands of another, an image no wine could domesticate. The irony of such a thing. She squeezed the wooden cup as if trying to break it, then relaxed, set the cup down, and balled her fists. She breathed easy, telling herself to calm down, get a grip. Just a dream, just a dream—but a dream with truth laced all throughout. The pain again.

The servant returned. “The General cannot be found.”

She frowned. “Has he left the manor?”

“No. None of the guards report anything.”

“Then he still has to be here.”

The servant shrugged. “He doesn’t seem to be here.”

Celesta stood. “We’ll have to—”

Another servant entered, face ashen, voice silent.

The woman demanded, “What have you on your lips?”

“The door to the guest bedroom is locked.”

A ball knotted in her throat. That is where they’d slept last night. She followed the servants to the doorway. They knocked, but there was no answer. She placed her ear against the door, yet heard nothing. Saying not a word, she ducked away, then returned with a skeleton key. Placing it in the lock, she quickly twisted it open and pushed her shoulder on the heavy wood. The door slid open and the sunlight from the single window bathed the room.

“Oh my God,” she gasped.

Antonius sat with his back to the door, head hunched over. She could see the handle of a sword pointing towards his stomach. Horror gripped her and she leapt forward; “Antonius!” She spun around him and he looked up at her, tears staining bloodshot eyes; the tip of the sword was pressed against his stomach, and his hands were wrapped around the blade. She quickly took his hands in hers and squeezed them tight, her own tears matching his.

Antonius drew a deep breath. “I stabbed him in the back. I stabbed him in the back.”

“Antonius—”

“I betrayed him. He was loyal to me to death—and I turned my back on him in my weakest moment.”

She didn’t know what to say, but he seemed to have more than ample words.

“He was a better man than I’ll ever be. More loyal, more brave, more honorable. Where is my loyalty? Where is my bravery? Where is my *honor*?”

She gently and friendly kissed his hands.

"Because of what I've done, Rome will be punished."

Her eyes fell shallow in confusion. "Rome pay for your mistake? No."

"The gods knew what I would do. They're punishing Rome, using Carthage. All these dreams, all these nightmares, all these lives that will be lost—It's all because of *me*. I hate the day I was born. I wish it never would've come. Oh, to have been aborted as an infant, to fall and die in a freak accident as a child, anything but to sit here now with the fate of a worthy nation crumbling upon my shoulders."

Celesta refused to believe. "Do not listen to these lies! Rome will not suffer because of you."

"Celesta—"

"We made mistakes," she cut him off. "I mourn what we've done even now. An act of passion, an act of normalcy, trying to hold onto what we've lost. In our weakness we succumbed. But, Antonius, we are repentant. We are sorrowful. No one knows, and yet the truth hurts us. The gods honor such remorse. And they honor you. No man or woman is without error. A great and noble man is one who, despite his error, continues to pursue the gods, continues to fight for justice, does not get bogged down in his own failings, but years to hold others up. Antonius, Rome will not fall because of you."

Her words cut through him like a double-edged sword:

"You may very well be the only hope Rome has."

XIII

Marcellus gazed upon the face of his beloved and turned his face in mourning. Maximus stood at his side, barely able to walk, and he wept tears. They could hear frightened weeping outside the tent. Marcellus pressed his fingers to Aulus' eyes, closed them shut, and said, "Beloved, my dear friend. We've had many adventures together, haven't we? My adventure continues here. All the adventures here, however, simply form a prologue to the greatest adventure of them all, the adventure you now walk. How jealous I am, Aulus, how much I envy you. To walk the golden fields, to see those loved ones you lost... I ache to be in your position, but the gods have asked me to fight for them at least one more time. I cannot wait till the day we speak again in person; until then, enjoy paradise without me. I am sure it won't be too hard... We will assault the Gauls

immediately. I don't have the patience to wait till morning; by the time the sun rises, I want the city to be mine. Mine and yours, Aulus. This battle belongs to you."

Maximus and Marcellus exited the tent and stood outside. Crying soldiers were dragged from the ground and taken to a field hospital, and the bodies of the dead were thrown into piles. Maximus breathed on his hands to warm them. "A gloomy and cold night."

"It is going to get much warmer, I assure you." He peered straight into his eyes. "Get suited up for battle. Ready my horse. Make sure the onagers, ballista and infantry are ready to fire and advance on my signal. I must go and speak with Kaeso and Appius—though with the tide of things, I am sure it will not be a problem."

"We attack tonight, General?"

Marcellus nodded. "It's come to this, Maximus. The next several hours will be some of the most intense hours you will ever face. Intense not only for you, but for me as well. Tonight the fate of Rome is sealed. Rome's territory is about to grow. When the Gallic King surrenders or we slay him, Gaul and all its peoples become ours. They will bow down before us, driven by the stories of our barbaric atrocities. I have simply done what is needed. I hope you see that?"

"It is clear, General."

"Good. And I ask you to do what you must. Are you willing to sacrifice your life?"

"My life and the lives of all my men, General."

Marcellus grinned. "And so it begins!"

Chapter Twelve: "The Sun Has Risen"

I

Soldiers dumped buckets of water upon the burning tents and collected their dead comrades, setting them within the trees of the forest. The corpses of the fallen Gauls were gathered and burned, their armor and weapons scrapped. Marcellus helped Maximus mount his horse and told him, "Ride to the onager and ballista captains. Give them my command: aim at the city walls and fire on my signal!" Maximus nodded. "Now go!" Marcellus hollered, slapping the horse. Maximus gripped the reins and the horse bounded away.

He rode through the scattered camps. Soldiers outside the ravaged tent stood about with shields and swords, some half-naked, trying to find out what was happening. Some yelled out questions to Maximus as he rode by, and the Roman commander shouted, "Prepare for war!" as he rode past. The Roman soldiers cheered and anxiously dressed, excited for bloodshed and revenge. Maximus rode to the walls, quickly dismounted, and rushed up the wooden stairs leading to the ramparts and towers. He limped as he ran about the wall, grabbing the captains and giving them Marcellus' news.

Kaeso and Appius met Marcellus upon the ramparts, demanding to know what was going on.

"We go to the enemy tonight," Maximus told them boldly.

Kaeso cursed. "We cannot advance under nightfall! The siege hasn't even gone for a full day!"

"Marcellus orders it and *he* is in command," Maximus said. "His Army marches. Do you wish to share in the glory? Then march with him!"

Appius said, "To march under fall of night into a fortified stronghold is madness."

"Then stay behind," Maximus counseled. "But how shall you feel tomorrow when we occupy the city? How will you feel as we march in song back into Rome? What will you tell everyone, what great stories will fill their mind about the fall of Mediolanum? Sure, General Appius, you have fought bravely in many battles leading up to this point; but is that enough? We stand upon the threshold; behold, the climax of all we've been fighting for. This is the moment of importance. Will you fight or hide in the trees? It is your decision. And may the gods bless or have mercy upon you depending on your decision."

He rushed past them and vanished into the shadows before they could respond. Appius and Kaeso, lacking all understanding, mounted their horses and galloped to their respective camps, ordering the troops to awake and form up for battle.

Marcellus quietly moved the body from the front of his tent then entered into darkness. Without lighting any candles, he silently dressed, putting on all the armor of war: *Montefortino* helmet adorned with a plume of red horsehair, a maroon, cloaked and hooded *paenula* jacket draped over his shoulders, *caligulae* boots upon his feet, bronze breastplate and armor on his arms and legs. He sheathed his long *spatha* sword upon his side and took up the diamond-shaped cavalry shield that had been painted with Gallic blood so many times. He knelt beside the cot and folded his hands upon it, staring into the darkness. The sounds of the soldiers assembling outside entered his ears, and when he closed his eyes he could see Aulus being slain. It made his tears threaten to water but he held it back. He'd lost so many, so many close friends, more than he could count. How many more would be counted within the next few hours?

All he'd worked for, all he'd fought for, all the pain and marching and betrayal he'd endured came to climax at this very point: with the fall of Mediolanum came the fall of Gaul and its subordination to Rome. He delighted in the irony: Gallic lusts inspired their defeat. The bastard-child of Gallic sperm grew up to be the sword that subdued the nation. His innards burned with passion as he began to pray, rolling words from his heart, praying for strength, honor, victory, communing with the gods and sending his prayers like incense to his mother and girlfriend in *Elysium*. "This battle I fight... I fight for your vengeance."

He prayed, "Accept me soon. For I fear I may join you tonight. Yet I do not fear it. I embrace it. To be with all those I've ever loved, to be reunited with all those who have been taken from me. The honor is mine that the gods have drawn me this far, and I am fully ready for them to expire my life for the sake of Rome. May my name be honored as I enter the golden fields of *Elysium*."

He stood, gave no last look at the bed and exited the tent. He was convinced he would not see another night past this one.

Marcellus rode to the ramparts and climbed upon them. Maximus stood with the captain in charge of the artillery. The three of them saluted one another and the captain gave Marcellus the full report: "Not much going on inside the city, General. It seems pretty quiet. We have reason to believe, however, that their

numbers reach into fourteen thousand.” Maximus’ face paled for a moment, but regained its color. The captain continued, “The artillery is poised upon the battlements, and once the walls are down and our men entering the city, the range of fire will be raised to the middle of the city.”

Marcellus nodded, contemplating. “We will march forward as the walls are being pounded, then storm within. In case the tide turns... Have soldiers here ready to perform a strategic defense.”

“We have archers upon the walls,” the captain said. “If the enemy comes to us... He shall be slaughtered.”

Marcellus grinned. “Arrow.”

An archer came towards him, handed him a bow. Marcellus took it honorably and the archer handed him an arrow burning brightly at the tip. He fitted the bow, aimed, and released. It fluttered into the air, sparkling bright, and upon the signal, Hell erupted.

II

The historian Josephus, when recording details of the Roman siege of Jerusalem, found himself horrified at the carnage displayed by the Roman artillery as they bombarded the city. In almost a weeping yet shocked tone, he describes such gruesome scenes from the streets of Jerusalem such as a pregnant woman who found herself impaled by a ballista bolt: the bolt struck through her stomach so hard as to pierce right through her and shoot the unborn baby out from her back. Stones thrown from catapults like the onager could hit the earth with such force so as to hurl a full grown man a quarter of a mile through the air.

The wooden huts of Mediolanum wouldn’t be able to withstand the blows of the Roman artillery. Even the more expensive building, such as the King’s palace and the military courtyards, as well as the homes of wealthy villagers, would, after a few blows, threaten to fall apart; even the stones in the walls and the wooden support pillars inside the rooms couldn’t hold off catapult stones. It was this night that the city was packed; the streets were bare, as the soldiers had forced all the villagers into any building with room. They were packed into courtyards and on rooftops, shivering in the cold. Babies were held by their mothers, cooing softly as they were rocked back and forth. Little children too young to know what was going on lay in the courtyards, sprawled in the grass, looking up at the stars and laughing, telling stories and tickling one another. Dense patrols of soldiers

marched through the streets, the others getting rest while they could. King Vlatucias angrily yelled and ranted at the handful of cavalry soldiers who had escaped from the Romans, most of them beaten and bloodied and tired.

The sun hid its face from the earth and the moon smirked upon the town.

The Gallic soldiers on the wall watched the burning Roman camp slowly being put out. Because of the darkness, they couldn't see the Romans assembling in the forest, gathering together in full armor: shields, helmets, swords, javelins, spears. The Gauls imagined the Romans half-sobbing in terror as they felt the brutal force of the night attack. They thought they would reconsider moving on the town. Huddled in groups on the ramparts, they told stories of how cowardly the Romans were, of how they were little boys peeing their pants. They mocked the Romans, the Roman way, and the way the Romans twisted the will of the gods, saying the gods serve them and them alone. As they stroked the blades of their swords, held the shafts of the spears, and leaned against the sides of the wooden towers, something sparkled overhead.

The conversation on the walls ceased as they stared in wonder at the light overhead.

"What in the name of all things sacred is it?"

"It's coming towards us--"

"No, it's falling shallow."

It sputtered into the ground.

Someone scratched a mop of hair. "A burning arrow? Is it a sign of surrender?"

The line of trees burst with light, radiant brilliance spewing into the forest. It took the Gallic soldiers a moment to understand, but at the appropriate time it rushed at them with full horror, the complete realization. The firelight bleeding into the trees revealed thousands of soldiers in formation just beyond the fortification walls, beginning to move forward into the ditches. One of the Gallic soldiers turned and yelled to the patrols below as the sources of light upon the trees leapt into the air, immersing the forest in blackness again, shrouding the marching Roman soldiers.

The soldiers' faces lit up with light as the firepots hurled from the onagers swept overhead. One of the soldiers peering up into the sky screamed as a ballista bolt ripped through him, hurling him over the walls and landing impaled in a courtyard, the oblivious children screaming at the bleeding body tangled in a tree.

The firepots screamed overhead; the soldiers upon the walls turned their heads to see firepots landing in the streets, erupting in fountains of fire and shrapnel. A

patrol of soldiers was half-decimated and scattered, half the soldiers twirling around in the street, shrieking and on fire, others burning and collapsed; limbs were ripped off and bodies shredded by debris. The rest of the patrol ran through the city, terrified. Another firepot smashed into the roof of a building covered in peasants; the roof caved in and the building imploded, the peasants disappearing in the smoke and fire.

The soldiers heard a screeching noise and whipped around to see a firepot falling right towards them. They screamed and leapt off the walls in a panic, most landing and breaking bones; one just stood in shock upon the wall until his life came to a violent end.

Maximus watched the first dozen firepots from Marcellus' legion fly into the city, and could see plumes of brightness beyond the walls. Moments later the echoes of the explosions drifted over the fields and into the ranks of Roman soldiers, invigorating their hearts. Maximus smiled as a firepot smashed into the walls; the walls took fire and chunks careened to the earth. "There," Maximus commanded, pointing. "Focus the firepots on that wall. We'll enter through that gap!"

King Vlatucias heard the explosions and felt the vibrations running through his palace. His angry words to the cavalry soldiers vanished and he raced up a flight of stone steps and exploded onto the palace rooftop. He saw the fires raging within the city, the scattered Gallic troops, refugees scrambling from the rooftops in fear, filling the streets. Part of the wall was aflame. He heard explosions to his right and rear, and spinning around upon the rooftop saw firebombs coming from the other Roman camps, landing within the city. His heart broke and wept as he saw several fleeing refugees engulfed in flame, and a building of high stature decimated. A ring of peasant huts burned and children screamed from within the flames, women falling on their hands and knees, sobbing. Anger rushed through him as firepots from the southern camp flew against the wall, weakening it even more; a firepot seemed to be coming towards him but fell shallow and burst in a courtyard, slashing all the inhabitants with fire and shrapnel. Children riddled with debris screamed and cried as blood soaked their poor clothes. Enraged, with veins throbbing and eyes reeling, Vlatucias screamed to his stunned advisors, "Get me my Army!"

Onagers hurled firepots overhead and ballista hurled their giant bolts into the city. Marcellus rode before the troops who had filed through the trenches and assembled in the fields before the city. To approximately 1300 soldiers, Marcellus bared his soul, and riding before them, spoke courage into their hearts: "Roman brothers! I come before you today not as a General or a Lord over you, but as a friend, as a comrade, as a fellow soldier who makes his heart hard and prepares to bloody both sword and shield."

He looked into their eyes as they stood proud before him. "Darius! I remember how bravely you fought the day we assaulted the Gauls with our onagers. How inspiring it was to see you break from formation, and in your glory, slaughter *fifteen* Gallic soldiers!"

He saw another soldier he knew. "Sextus, how hard my heart broke when I heard your brother fell by the Padus River. How great and bravely he fought; now I ask you to carry his honor with you into battle, and avenge his death!"

And again, "Varinius, you descend from a family of noble and honorable soldiers who have served Rome in every way. So far I have seen nothing of difference within you. Carry on your family's legacy; serve Rome well today and make your ancestors proud!"

He cried out loudly to them all, "Ignorance will not serve us! Many will die today. We all go into battle knowing the threat—but embracing it with rebellion! I may fall from my horse and leave my spirit in Mediolanum—and you may, too. But not even death can separate us from our destinies: proud and honorable men who will one day, perhaps today, be kissed by the gods and so fulfill our glory in *Elysium*!" Cheers erupted at the bright prospect even as burning onager shells whistled overhead and burst in the city.

Marcellus shouted again and their shouts waned. "General Appius and General Kaeso march with us tonight! You are surrounded by thousands of your brothers, from all the cities of Rome: Messana, Croton, Tarentum, Capua, Arretium, Arminium, Patavium... and the greatest of them all, the eternal city of the seven hills, Rome herself!" The soldiers in his legion, most having been born and raised in the heart of Rome, exploded in cheers.

They silenced with his voice. "We must attack the walls and bodies of the enemy, which they will yield to bravery, to the sword, to despair. This very day we must decide for us either a complete victory... or complete death!"

The Gallic soldiers had lain awake in their cots, shaken wide-eyed by the quivering of the earth and the nearby screams of the falling artillery. One end of a single barracks burst apart in flame, dozens of soldiers vanished under the rubble, many more broken and burning. The soldiers all leapt from their cots and rushed out into the street; a ballista bolt fell upon the first ones so hard it snapped off two heads and impaled another man into the wooden barracks. The officers loyal to the King rode through the streets on horseback, daring the artillery, screaming for the peasants to flee and ordering the soldiers to suit up for war. The trained soldiers were ready quickly and running down twisting streets, through alleyways and around courtyards to reach the place where the gate threatened to collapse. The untrained soldiers took longer and were locked in sublime confusion, sometimes even grabbing two shields instead of shield and spear. Men who were in the streets with their families were torn away and given a spear, and boys were grabbed from the crowds and forced to join the gathering Army. Vlatucias was dressing in his armor and picking up his sword as a firepot smashed his palace, caving in one side of his room; submerged in dust, he fell to the floor, coughing madly, eyes burning, and when the dust thinned, he saw the town spread out below, hoards of soldiers filling the streets as they raced for the gates under the illumination of fire and flailing artillery. One of his advisor's legs lay next to him, but he didn't care. He stood and saw beyond the walls the Roman Army advancing on the walls. And in the next moment, under a display of fire and brimstone, some of the walls smashed apart and the Romans were given a route inside.

III

The trained soldiers, many of them veterans of the earlier Gallic wars, took their places before the shaking walls against Marcellus' legion. Warlord captains hired by the King took positions throughout the lines, echoing the King's orders: "Defend your lives! Defend your freedom! Defend your families! Defend your nation! *Defend your King!*" The warriors gave a vivacious war-cry that made the blood run cold in anyone within earshot. The front line of soldiers were warbands armed with spears and shields painted forest green, and banging the spears upon their shields, they issued malicious chants against Rome. The troops who were still filing in from the center of the town heard the war-cry, heard the chants and crashing of arms-on-shields, and feeling their blood pump faster at the rebellious

bravery of their kinsmen, they ran forward, eager to join the mob. Nearly three thousand soldiers stood before the quivering gate of the city, beckoning the Romans on with the clatter of their weapons and the voices they raised to the gods.

Marcellus had joined his cavalry at the rear of the Army. 1100 infantry soldiers, 1300 with his cavalry, marched in formation towards the gates as the onagers and ballistas continued to pound the town and its walls. Hastati, principes, and spear-armed triarii formed the bulk of the Army, and Marcellus was proud of them. He thanked the gods for their favor and prayed they would not be forsaken. Even if doubt for his own life bit at him, he did not doubt the gods would secure Rome victory. As he marched, bathed in the light of a burning town and firepots shrieking overhead, he could see his near-a-thousand troops approaching the city walls, he could make out Gallic soldiers scrambling upon those very walls threatening to collapse, and he could see the King's palace burning in several places. He prayed Vlatucias was not dead—the King deserved to see the destruction of his nation. Marcellus' legion would invade through the southern wall as Appius and Kaeso shattered the city with firebombs; as the bulk of the enemy were drawn to the south, the other two legions would concentrate half their fire on the walls (half the firepots would continue to strike the town so as not to let on to the fact that they were preparing to invade). Once the walls were down, Kaeso's men would attack the flanks of the enemy as Appius went straight for the heart of Mediolanum, in a hopeful bout to capture the King himself.

The wooden foundations of the wall wobbled back and forth, throwing several soldiers down into the gathered troops below. The archery captains stood in the towers, gripping the wooden rails for support as the towers weaved back and forth, and cried out, "Archers! Rain fire! Rain fire!" The archers who could summon the courage to stay upon the walls fitted their bows, aimed, and fired upon the advancing Romans only a scant one hundred meters from the city wall. They could see the whites of the Romans' eyes glowing under those sulfuric helmets! The arrows arched into the air then fell upon the Romans; several fell but they continued undeterred. The archers saw the vast Army coming straight towards them, felt the walls falling apart, and found themselves filled to the brim with terror. They rushed into the towers to escape even as the captains screamed for them to halt and pepper the Romans. The harsh words of one captain were

silenced as an onager smashed into the tower; his shrieks were lost in the tumbling stone tower and his body crushed under tons of hewn stone.

The arrows sliced through the ranks, and several soldiers were pierced through the throat, hit in the face, impaled in the limbs. Many collapsed into the grass, brains pierced by the arrows, and yet others dragged themselves on until collapsing further down the march, exhausted. Still others simply cursed, yanked the arrow or arrows from their flesh, and giving out a vicious war-cry and raining curses upon the Gauls, continued the march. Marcellus could see the archers scrambling from the battlements and he gave off a wicked yet serene smile with the demolition of a Gallic stone tower built into the wooden wall. A few more onagers smashed into the walls and there came the sound of roaring thunder and a blast of choking dust. Dust stung the eyes of the enemy and swept towards the marching Romans. Now that the wall had fallen, Marcellus gave the cry, "In the name of Rome, *charge!*" Trumpets blasted throughout the ranks.

The dust felt like bitter acid in their eyes. Some dropped their spears to rub their sockets and yet others vomited as dust entered their lungs in a giant hailstorm. As the dust began to thin and the soldiers realized they and all their arms were covered in dust, the sound of the Roman trumpets met them and they forgot their distress. Through the haze they could see the Roman formations coming quickly, blending together towards the three-hundred-foot gap in the wall. In the dust they were simply a mass of shimmering shapes coming closer, growing larger, and the Gauls held their shields out before them, positioned the spear-tips facing outwards, and throwing their fears and inhibitions to the wind, bared their teeth and begged Roman blood.

IV

The Romans ran and threw their javelins at the same time, slaughtering dozens of Gallic soldiers. As the Gauls fell, the survivors did not flinch but screamed for the Romans to come. Expending their javelins, the Romans drew their swords, held their shields before them, and swarmed into the Gallic lines. The Roman shields clashed upon the Gallic shields, and bodies were pierced with spearhead and stabbed at sword-point. The war-cries decimated into the steady yet chaotic roar of battle: shouts, screams, the sound of splitting flesh and gurgling blood, shields

catching the weapons of the enemy, swords and spears clashing together. The Gauls shoved their spears into the faces of the Romans and the Romans dodged spears and slashed at the necks and chests of the half-naked Gallic warriors. Standards bobbed in the fray as smoke wafted from the scuffle; more Gallic soldiers leapt into the battle and Romans climbed over their fallen comrades and threw themselves into the ranks of the enemy, fighting with a fervor bestowed by the gods.

Marcellus watched with his cavalry from afar, the unit pacing back and forth before the city walls to prevent them being easy targets for the archers. As he lost sight of the actions of the individual soldiers, due to the billowing smoke and grime, he felt an arrow whiz past his face and cried out, "Octavius! Ride forward and give the order to take the walls! If we do not take the walls, the enemy will continue to harass us with their arrows." The young trumpeter kicked the horse and rode towards the walls; moments later he was flung from the saddle and landed hard in the trampled grass, his arms quivering, an arrow in his chest. He cried out for help. Marcellus cursed, rode forward, and as an arrow pierced the knee of his horse, he leapt down, grabbed the horn, and gave the order with a series of short blasts.

The call rode through the troops. They fought hard against the defenders and carved a path to one of the towers, ringing it with corpses and broken shields and spears. Holding their shields to their side, they kicked down the doors to the tower and stormed inside. Several Gauls coming down were shocked to see the Romans standing in the entryway, and before they could draw their daggers to attack, the Romans swept over them and used their bodies as a red carpet to the roof. They threw open the door to the wooden palisade and charged the archers on the walls, cutting through them. They offered a feeble fight but the Romans slew them. An archer tried to stab a Roman but the Roman ducked and tackled the archer in the gut, ramming him off the sides of the wall. The archer flailed his arms as he fell impaled upon the swords of his comrades. Seeing the Romans pouring onto the walkways, the archers suffered faint hearts and scurried towards the next tower; right as they reached the door it burst open with several Roman soldiers who charged. The archers were caught in the middle and either fought to the death, slaying many Romans, or leapt from the walls, either to their death, injury, or escape.

Marcellus could see shapes flitting about on the walkways between the towers and he smiled when he saw a Roman standard rise high and wave back and forth. To the rider next to him he said, "We have the walls." An intent glare at the gap showed him the Romans pressing onwards across a field of piled corpses, the earth burnt red with the sun's tears. He shouted to his two hundred cavalymen, "Victory or death!"

V

Vlatucias stood in the lower courtyard, dressed head-to-toe in ornate battle armor, his prized sword at his side, a sword handed down to him generation-by-generation. It had touched much Roman blood and his heart pulsed at the thought of its legend being reborn. The garden sat atop a second level of his palace, and from his position he could see out to the city walls and watch the carnage at the gates. The smoke rising from the city half-blurred his vision. A firepot rushed overhead, smacking him with burning embers and heat. The loyal soldiers behind him ducked in fright but he stood still. He could see larger shapes rushing through his gathered troops. "Cavalry. The enemy has brought horses. We have our own horses." He looked to one of the soldiers. "Take your cavalry against theirs and slay them!" The soldier nodded and ran into the building. As the soldier vanished, a slave rushed to the King. He knelt down in submission and said, "The Romans are attacking the western and southern walls. These walls, Great King, are not defended!" Horror flooded Vlatucias' heart and in a rage he shrieked, "Send anyone you can to the walls! Block their entrance! We outnumber them four-to-one! We have the numbers to repel them, *so let's do it!*"

Marcellus' horse shone like the sun, its eyes radiant as the stars. Marcellus' eyes were like torches, flames of fire sending lightning-fear into the hearts of all, and he wore the name: *the son of war*. He was clothed in armor soaked with blood, and on his head a crescent of blood rose like incense to Mars. The horsemen behind him fought bravely, drenching their swords and spears with Gallic blood; the horses trampled the enemy and the heroic General cut a swathe through their ranks. Out of his mouth came virulent vanities, and in his fist he carried the fate of Gaul, written upon the blood on the blade. He treaded the winepress of fierceness, walked the garden of Mars, and gave its fruit to those whom Mars scowled upon.

And in his eyes was written, a plaque woven into his soul: *The Great Warrior whom the gods adore*. Just under equality with the gods, he fought as if he were one himself, representing his way with trampled bodies. He carried the cavalry on, and breaking through the edges of the enemy, galloped down a narrow way. The Gauls, seeing the carnage inflicted by the two-hundred horsemen, felt fear and, knowing their line was being castrated by the Romans, fled into the city. The Romans chilled the enemy's blood with a vicious war-cry and gave pursuit. The fleeing Gauls passed through a second line of spears and many Romans fell upon them, but the second line broke as well, and the Romans stretched deeper and deeper into the city.

Captain Troyes sat on his mount before the gathered three-hundred horsemen in the military stables. They had dressed for war and were eager for the fight. The Celtic horsemen wore bronze helmets and chain-mail armor. They sat upon horned saddles, and all of them proudly displayed gold torques and bracelets. In one hand lay the long Celtic sword and in the other the 8-foot-long Gallic spear. Ornaments draping the horses' harnesses depicted human heads, symbolizing the Gallic roots of Celtic head-hunting. On their legs were leather breeches and leather shoes. Some of the veteran soldiers carried round shields upon their mounts. They sat peacefully upon their horses, breathing easily and hiding the excitement raging through their blood. Troyes could taste this excitement and spoke: "The King asks for our assistance in this time of need. The Roman invaders have set their eyes on Mediolanum... My friends, *they shall not have it!*" The horsemen cheered. "Will you serve your King?" "*We will!*" "Will you serve your nation?" "*We will!*" "Will you sacrifice your lives?" "*If needed!*" Troyes kicked open the door to the street, revealing fleeing Gauls. Raising his spear, he cried out, "Death to Rome!" And they charged from the stables.

The western gates, poorly defended, crumbled, and Kaeso's soldiers sprinted inside, en masse; Gallic troops charged from down the street and the Romans and Gauls clashed in a gruesome bloodbath. Appius' northern wall broke apart and his cavalry entered first, running down troops clinging to the walls. The infantry poured in behind and, moving between the horses, charged upon the Gallic soldiers. The Gauls' fourteen-thousand-strong Army found itself breaking and spread thin.

The King rubbed his temples as the reports of the broken and destroyed units came to his ears. A priest sacrificed his life to the gods, begging their favor on Gaul, finding no other hope. He fell into a puddle of his own blood as Roman soldiers broke down his door and stormed inside, ransacking the wooden cottage.

The Gallic cavalry thundered around an arch in the road and saw peasants diving into the street as the Roman cavalry came towards them from down the street. Troyes roared, "Come and taste it, offspring of swine!" He kicked the horse harder and lowered his spear before him, ready to impale the Roman cavalry. The soldiers flanking him did the same thing, forming a wall of sweeping spears heading straight for the Romans.

Marcellus' horse rode close to the wall, and sheathing his sword, he reached down and yanked a ballista bolt from the side of a wooden hut. A woman inside was crying but he went by too fast to look. He raised the heavy, four-foot-long ballista bolt in his hands and screamed, "Roma victo!"

The Roman soldiers broke into cottages, homes, marketplaces. They destroyed everything they could find, except under the orders of Marcellus and the other Generals, left the unarmed villagers alone. Children clutched their parents and cried in terror as the Romans broke their furniture and set fire to huts. Box-carts in the marketplaces were turned over, their contents spilled all over the place; a sacred grove was trampled by Roman boots; innocent bystanders were forced to watch as the Romans climbed the wall to a courtyard and proceeded to wipe out cowering soldiers hiding amongst the civilians. Yet at the Temple to Camulus, the Temple of the Gallic god of war, the priestesses within did not surrender so easily. Many Roman soldiers fell to their wicked curved blades. As Mediolanum burned behind them, soldiers watched in terror as their comrades were torn to pieces by the priestesses guarding the Temple.

Kaeso rode forward on his horse and gave the call: "Who shall take this Temple? Who shall be remembered this day in all of Rome?"

A young soldier stepped forward, fire in his eyes. "I will, General."

Kaeso looked at the young boy. "And what is the name of the great warrior before me?"

His arm moved to the side, the sword in its hand scarred with blood, and kneeling down before the General, said, "I am called Manias."

Troyes didn't back down but ran his horse harder. Marcellus raised the ballista bolt and with a wicked shout, hurled it overhead. It spit horizontal threw the air; Troyes' eyes widened and his jaw dropped split-seconds before the bolt passed through his chest, shattering his ribs and piercing heart, stomach and lungs, and erupted from his back. He fell backwards off his horse, landing hard on his back and vomiting blood. His end came not by ballista bolt but under the hooves of his horsemen charging the Roman cavalry.

Marcellus drew his sword and with a shout the Romans and Gauls clashed. Marcellus hacked his sword left and right, slashing open arms and throats, stabbing soldiers in the pelvis, groin and legs, even cutting off a head or two. His face was stained maroon with blood but he cared not. It only colored his vision red.

He let out a hoarse wail as a spear thrust into his shoulder; the spear broke and Marcellus angrily brought his sword upon the Gauls' helmet, the metal breaking and the blade entering the scalp. Marcellus yanked the sword out and a fountain of blood sprayed his horse as the body collapsed to the ground. The Gauls broke and routed; Marcellus yanked the spear-tip from his arm and felt blood stream down his side, underneath his armor. "Rome! Forward!" They ran down the enemy cavalry and made way for the palace.

King Vlatucias' elite cavalry couldn't hold up against Marcellus.

None of Gaul could withstand the wrath of Mars.

VI

Vlatucias hollered to those around him, "I want my royal guard upon the palace steps! Do not let any bloody Roman into my home!" The soldiers nodded and departed. The onager fire had ceased as the Romans were snaking their venom through all parts of the city, yet the palace was already drenched in smoke and ruins from several hits. The King's throne room remained intact, and in here he vowed to make his last stand, if it were to come to that. To two of his most loyal companions, "Stay here with me. Be my sword and my shield. Protect your King—as I have protected you all these years." The men vowed to protect him, even to the death.

Manias gave a wicked holler, and with dozens of companions, stormed the steps of the Temple, bearing his sword before him. The priestesses with their curved

blades came out to meet them and the Romans clashed. A woman raised her scythe to bring it down upon Manias, but Manias shoved his sword into her breast, leveling her. Another priestess swung her curved blade at his head, but he ducked and kicked the woman in the gut, knocking her down, then slammed the curved bottom of his shield upon her face, breaking it in. The priestesses fought bravely, taking down many noble Roman soldiers; and Manias, seeing the onslaught and filled with anger, charged through them, cutting each down, inspiring such fear that they poured inside the Temple. Kaeso watched in amazement as Manias hollered to the surviving Romans, "Come! Inside! Let us desecrate this Temple that belongs to their forsaken gods!" The Romans cheered and they rushed into the Temple, amongst the wooden pillars, a bear rug carpet, a statue of bronze surrounded by an altar with incense holders. Before the bronze statue stood a beautiful woman whose eyes burned like azure ice. Three Roman soldiers ran past Manias and attacked; her blade flashed and the bodies fell, spraying the altar and statue with steaming blood. The other priestesses stood behind her, using her as their defense, and seeing the quick carnage which the head priestess carried out with such ease, the Romans' hearts flustered. Manias looked the woman deep in the eyes and let her know he was not afraid.

The royal guard upon the palace steps stared at the two-thousand swordsmen in the city square before the palace. The sounds of war grew nearer, closer, and they could feel the noose tightening around their necks. Suddenly from aside the palace walls came a horrendous cry, and the royal guard turned to see horsemen riding upon the steps, their horses draped in canvas sheets of blood; the royal soldiers cried out and charged the horsemen; "Defend the King!" came the shout. Marcellus rode before his soldiers and trampled the royal guard, destroying them with the sword. As the two-hundred-odd cavalry took the palace steps, the royal guard fled. Marcellus turned his horse around and saw the Gallic soldiers in the town square staring at the Romans in shock; *they'd just dispatched all of the King's men!* Marcellus knew they would not attack. He dismounted and, throwing away his shield and bearing his sword, he called, "Cyriacus! Deodatus! Come with me!" And the three of them broke through the massive front doors of the palace and entered after the King.

Manias took his sword and ran after the priestess. She wielded two giant scythe swords slick with the blood of his comrades. She let out a wicked laugh but it did

not deter Manias; she swung her blades at him and he fell to the ground, swinging his blade upwards, slicing off one of her hands. She shrieked as her hand with its sword clattered to the ground, then spliced open Manias' arm with a cackling cry. Manias dropped his sword; blood gushed from her wrist as she raised her scythe to slice it on him. The Roman quickly grabbed the fallen scythe blade and as she brought hers down, he writhed out of the way and sliced her leg. She fell backwards and he leapt up, striking her arm; she dropped the other blade. She stumbled over the altar and collapsed before the statue; he lifted her up with one hand, grabbed her hair by the other, and exposing her throat, took the sword and slit it open. Her blood sprayed all over his face so he twisted her around and threw her upon the altar, blood staining the statue of Camulus.

The priestesses in the back of the Temple saw Manias' bloody face, and knowing they did not have a chance of success, took their own curved blades and slit their throats wide open. One of them mourned before completing the dirty act, "The gods have abandoned us!" And she slit her own wrist and came to an end in the shadow of Camulus.

Marcellus, by lead of the gods, came upon the throne room. "Knock down this door!" Marcellus hollered to the two horsemen with him. Deodatus spoke: "These are solid oak doors. We cannot break them down by mere manpower." Marcellus cursed and ran down the hall; he returned dragging a massive statue of the former King. Cyriacus and Deodatus took the statue with him and they banged it against the door, dust falling from the ceiling.

The King's heart began to pound. He got up from his throne and walked around the *magaron*, a Greek style he'd adopted several years ago; it lay in the center of the room and consisted of four columns and a fire-pit in the middle with an open ceiling for letting out the smoke. At the moment it was unlit and Vlatucias peered around a stone pillar, seeing the two guards standing back from the door, holding their broad swords at the ready. The door splintered at the sides; Vlatucias took his own sword. "Rome shall never have me," he snarled, "nor my people, *my* people!"

The door splintered open, falling into the room. Cyriacus and Deodatus leapt back, dropping the statue, and drew their *spatha* swords. Marcellus was a step ahead of them, already having abandoned the statue and entered the room, no

weapon in hand. The King's loyal soldiers standing on either side of the door rushed him; Marcellus ducked to avoid the swinging blade of one of the soldiers and the blade slashed off the head of the other soldier. As the headless body fell, Marcellus grabbed the sword and drove it up into the other shocked soldier, the tip piercing the spine. The man fell back, left to drown in his own body fluid. Marcellus turned and glared at the King, drawing his own sword.

The King walked around the columns and gravely said, "Gaul will never surrender, not even if you take the city."

"Are you so sure?" Marcellus sneered.

Vlatucias did not answer, but using his sword, beckoned Marcellus forward.

The Roman legend answered the call.

VII

The bodies of the priestesses covered the floor of the Temple, the Roman soldiers meandering about, looking on them and shock. The most beautiful girls of Gaul dead at their feet. Manias had raised a Roman standard within and now the flames outside the walls, the amber glow of the broken city, washed over his face, his features, and he shone like a demigod.

Kaeso dismounted and walked up the steps, meeting Manias in the Temple, and with wide eyes, said, "It is an honor to have you in my Army."

Manias met Kaeso's eyes and said, "It is an honor to serve you, General."

"But not me," Kaeso corrected. "Rome."

Manias glanced behind him, saw the Roman soldiers walking among the bodies lying in pools of blood. He felt the blood of women all over his face and in a low voice, nodding his head, and with glowering eyes, he affirmed, "Rome."

Marcellus charged the King, swinging the sword. The King parried and threw Marcellus back; Marcellus fell against the wall, stunned under the King's brutal strength.

"You shall not have me," the King roared. "I will slay you before you can cut me a scratch!"

"If it is the will of the gods," Marcellus grunted, "so be it." He stood. "But Gaul *will* fall."

He stormed the King again, striking not once but three times; the King parried quickly, but Marcellus' blows were so strong so as to knock him on his back upon

the ground. Marcellus flipped the sword in his hand, a show of talent, and the King scurried backwards in a crab-crawl. He got to his feet and bore the sword before him.

"You have failed your people," Marcellus taunted. "We have taken the walls. Our men are converging on the city center. Your soldiers will surrender."

"My men will never surrender!" Vlatucias hollered, erupting in fury. Marcellus parried and with his sword threw Vlatucias against a pillar where he fell to his knees, the wind knocked from his lungs.

Marcellus held the sword at an angle from his side. The King grunted, "No matter what you think, my men will never throw down their weapons to *Rome*."

The Roman did not think twice. "Then they will be slaughtered."

Kaeso's Army converged upon the city square, several fleeing Gallic swordsmen and spearmen in flight before them. They were cut off by Appius' Army coming from the other direction, themselves pushing a horde of routing soldiers into the city square. The fleeing enemies bound together and, frightened, formed a group, watching in terror as Kaeso and Appius' men spread around the courtyard. Marcellus' bloody soldiers flowed into the square as well, and together the two-thousand soldiers that remained in the Roman Army, the rest having been slaughtered or left at camp, surrounded the Gauls in a noose.

One of the Gauls lifted his spear high and shouted, "We will fight to the death!"

Appius ordered the blasting of the horn.

The noise of the horn wafted into the throne room from high windows.

"Hear that?" Marcellus taunted. "It is the sound of your men's surrender."

"You are mistaken," the King said. "My men will fight to the death."

"Then I assure you," Marcellus sneered, "that to the death they will fight."

And they continued to battle within the throne room, dodging pillars, parrying blades, hacking and thwacking and trying their hardest to kill one another. And from the windows as they fought came the screams of a thousand men.

The war-cry wafted from the soldiers in the square, and as the Romans began marching forward, tightening the noose, they charged in bloody wrath. The marching Romans paused; the first line set their shields down before them, knelt behind them, and stuck javelins up between the shields. The soldiers behind them held their shields in front of their bodies and had their swords at the ready. The

Gauls threw themselves upon the ranks and were struck down by the spears or the sword. Thinned out, the Gauls stood no chance of victory, and the sounds of their cries and death floated over the city, chilling the hearts of the villagers—and enraging the King within the palace.

The King throws himself at Marcellus and strikes hard; the blade cuts across the Roman's face, drawing a deep red line that burnt like acid. Marcellus gave a shout and fell back, feeling blood washing across his face. The Gaul laughed and raced at him; Marcellus threw him back against a pillar, and before the King could stand, Marcellus brought his sword upon his leg, piercing the muscle. The man screamed and dropped his sword, crippled. Blood soaked his trousers; Marcellus wiped blood from his forehead and put the sword-tip at the King's throat. "Your men have died. And now you shall go with them."

The Romans cheered, swarming the square. Appius' men raised a Roman flag in the square and the bodies of the fallen Gauls were trampled. The civilians inside the homes and the routing soldiers hiding inside the buildings for fear of losing life itself shivered at the chants of victory, and the burning city sweltered in the darkness as the sun began to rise.

"Please," the King cried out, a tear breaking across his cheek. "Mercy. Mercy..."

Marcellus cursed the man. "*This* is not the way of a King."

Vlatucias whimpered, "Spare my life. Please, I beg you, I beg Rome! I will kiss your feet, I will bow down to Rome, I will surrender my people. Just spare my life."

Marcellus lowered the sword and grabbed the King by the scalp. "You will pay for your cowardice." He dragged the King from the throne room, leaving a line of red blood out the door, down the hall, and towards the open front doors of the Temple, Deodatus and Cyriacus walking right behind him.

The Romans cheered at Marcellus' arrival, and began screaming his name, a sacred name, as he stood upon the front porch of the palace, amidst the littered bodies of the elite royal soldiers. The Romans raised bloodied shields and bloodied swords; many panted in exhaustion, many more bleeding themselves. But they forgot all their worries, all their fears, all their pain, and with a great chorus of voices praised Marcellus, praised the gods, and praised the victory.

Marcellus raised the ashamed King before the soldiers. "Behold the Great King!"

The Romans mocked him in laughter and the King felt shame like he'd never felt it before.

Marcellus had Deodatus hold the King, and drawing his *pugio* dagger, slashed his throat. Blood washed down the King's throat and drenched his shirt. His eyes rolled into the back of his head and a swollen tongue filled with blood hung from his mouth. Deodatus threw the body down the steps, where it landed at the feet of the Roman soldiers.

Marcellus raised his bloody sword and dagger and cried, "*Roma victo!*"

VIII

Maximus rode into the city the next afternoon. He found the King's body hanging from a Roman flag, left to rot before all of Gaul. Two vultures were lighted upon the shoulders and pecking at the swollen cheeks; insects formed a hovering cocoon around the corpse. The city lay half in charred ruins, but after the night-time victory, the soldiers had proceeded to put out the flames. The fallen Gallic warriors were burned out in the woodlands and the three-thousand Roman soldiers who had been killed were laid in peace within an abandoned field outside the city walls. The people of Gaul were rarely seen, living in the shadow of fear, not leaving their homes for fear of being slain by the Romans. They weren't aware that Marcellus had issued a decree: "No citizen of Gaul is to be punished unless the life of a Roman is endangered. If there is an issue, bring yourself and the accused to me and I will judge justly. Any infraction will be met with punishment." Fearing the crisp truth to Marcellus' words, the Romans made sure the Gauls had nothing to fear. Yet the peasants looking out their windows, seeing the Roman soldiers patrolling in groups of twenty or thirty, didn't dare risk it.

Marcellus had taken up residence in the King's throne room, but did not sit on the throne himself. No one was to sit upon the throne, for as Marcellus said, "Gaul is no longer an Empire. It is a Republic. There will be no King. In due time we will elect representatives for Gaul, and build a town counsel." That was far in the future, as the trust of the Gauls still needed to be won. Marcellus' reputation was a blood-thirsty women- and baby-killer still held strong.

Maximus left his horse in the town square and entered the palace. The soldiers let him through, seeing his official insignia, and two guards at the throne room

greeted Maximus with salutes. Maximus saluted back and entered. Marcellus stood with Kaeso, going over some details about the restoration of Mediolanum, and Maximus hovered in the silence until they were finished. As Kaeso left he nodded to Maximus, nothing more.

When Marcellus saw Maximus his face brightened. "Maximus! My friend! Come here! How are you feeling?"

"Very well," Maximus said. "My pain has diminished since the victory."

"A blessing of Mars, no doubt," Marcellus said, overjoyed and bubbly with glee. "How are our soldiers on the frontier?"

"Sad they did not get to participate in such a victory. But overjoyed for Rome."

"Tell them they played a vital role. They were my best defensive warriors. I thank them for the encouragement they brought to our troops, who knew, in their fear, that their flanks were protected by the finest Rome offers."

Maximus swore he would. "I see your face."

Marcellus touched the stitches and winced. "A noble wound. From the King himself."

With a crooked smile, "Was this before you strung him up for the vultures?"

The General laughed. "This is a great day." His countenance flustered. "And a sad day as well. Do you know how many of our men died in the last twelve hours?"

Maximus said, "I spoke with Appius on the frontier. He said three-thousand Romans."

"One thousand of them came from our legion," Marcellus said. "Of the eleven hundred men who entered Mediolanum, only eleven remain alive. And many of them are wounded. I am simply thankful I had men on the walls, worthy men who will stay with the legion until their careers end."

Maximus said, "All of those who fell, they fell in honor."

"And the gods do not forget them."

A man entered the room, with a young soldier at his side. "General Marcellus," Kaeso said, "I introduce to you one of the bravest soldiers I have ever known."

Marcellus and Maximus turned their heads to see the young man kneeling in submission.

Marcellus grinned. "Stand, Friend of Rome. Why does General Kaeso bring you here with such gladness?" Kaeso began to answer, but Marcellus said, "Please, let the boy speak. He deserves it."

The boy said, "I assisted in the capture of the Temple of Camulus—"

Kaeso interjected. "Assisted? A humble boy! He captured it almost single-handedly, slaying the war-skilled priestesses and inspiring such fear that many of them committed suicide rather than face him!"

Maximus nodded, said, "Quite a feat."

Marcellus asked, "What is your name?"

"Manias," the boy replied.

Marcellus repeated the name under his breath. "It is an honor to know you. I am so thankful the gods have blessed us with such warriors. For your bravery, I will grant you one request, anything you desire. What will it be?"

The boy spoke quickly. "I wish to return home, to my family."

Kaeso drew confusion. "Return home? The gods have blessed you with such a talent for warfare, and you wish to serve them by returning *home*?"

Marcellus raised his hand. "General Kaeso, that is enough." To Manias, "Friend, you wish to return home, as do I. All the family I had was slain by the Gauls. My mother was helpless and yet slain, and my beloved slaughtered in her own home. I wish to return to them, but I cannot. I often wish death would overtake me so I could see them again. They are always a heartbeat away. Dear Manias, it is because of the desire *not* to fight that I have been chosen to fight. Blood-thirsty war-dogs are often the first slain in war, yet those with something to live for—really *live* for—fight more bravely than thirty hired men. Rome desperately needs men like you in these troubled times. I guarantee, however, with General Kaeso's consent, that you may return home for a few week's leave."

Manias nodded, expressionless. "Thank you, General Marcellus. It is an honor to serve Rome."

IX

The boy and Kaeso left, leaving Maximus and Marcellus alone. Marcellus stared at the door, closed his eyes, and said, "Curse the day I was born!" The words of Manias had awoken deep pains and the sweetness of the victory waned under the overcoming despair. "Maximus, Maximus... Rome needs heart-broken men. Rome needs desperate men. There will always be a war to fight, always a nation to conquest, always an enemy to defend against. There is always someone to die, someone to fall under the sword. This is nothing new, Maximus, and as we celebrate this victory and pretend we've conquered the world, we are blinded by our ignorance. Rome will need us again and we will fight again. Many of these

boys celebrating now will, in time, fall to the blade. It is all so fruitless, yet no necessary. For if our men do not die, then others will die, defenseless people. If only the world were not so cruel, Maximus, *if only*. But its cruelty continues, and cruelty must be met with cruelty. There is no other way."

Maximus broke in. "Perhaps there *is* another way, General."

"Another way?" Marcellus crooned. "What other way?"

"The way of love," Maximus said.

Marcellus didn't understand. "Love? What has love ever done for anyone?"

"It is love that makes you fight. Love for your family. Maybe we need, now, to look at Gaul as our family, and love them as we love all of Rome?"

Marcellus shook his head. "You are crazy, Maximus. Absolutely crazy."

"Maybe," Maximus said, "maybe not." He waved a hand towards the tall windows. "Outside this room is a city. And outside this city is a nation. All these villagers have ever known is starvation and cruelty. The King was a brutal man who demanded allegiance in his subjects. He made them love him, but it was not love. It was fear. If they did not fight for him, he would kill them. If they did not grant him offering, he would starve them. This is not the love I speak of. I am talking about a practical and real love, a love that is action. If we treat them as if they were Romans, and give them all the blessings of Rome, they will see the paradise it is compared to their former life, and clutch on. I firmly believe it will work out a lot better for *all* of us if we don't lord over them as their King did."

Marcellus pursed his lips. "I will think about it."

"That is all I ask," Maximus said. "Forgive me, but I must return to the frontier."

That night, as Maximus walked through the camp to his own tent, he was accosted by the General. Marcellus drew him aside, eyes afire. "You were right!" he exclaimed. "I was deep in prayer, and the gods came to me, laying everything out clear before me!"

He spoke quickly and Maximus asked him to slow down; "I can barely understand you..."

Marcellus took several deep breaths, then continued: "I know why the gods have chosen me! I thought I was cursed to belong to Gaul and belong to Rome—"

Maximus interjected, "What?"

"Maximus, my dear friend. I am Roman. Yet I am also Gallic. My father was a Gaul and my mother was a woman who was raped. The cruelty of the gods

spurned my existence. I always thought the gods had chosen me to meet cruelty with cruelty and destroy Rome. No! I wept tears within the city tonight, as I realized the gods have chosen me because Gaul is precious to them, just as Rome is precious. The gods wept as I killed babies and allowed women to be raped. I was supposed to die this day and return to my family in *Elysium*, but the gods have punished me by making me live. Now I cannot know when I will see them again. Hadrianus, the poor man, he was more a Roman than I. He, too, was intimate with the gods, and they tried to speak to me through him. But I was stubborn and I wouldn't listen. So I had him executed. In the name of the gods, I had their messenger *killed!*" He clenched his fist. "Hadrianus came to me in a dream tonight, and he told me he has forgiven me. His father died in Rome of sickness, and now they are together. He is very happy in *Elysium*, and he prays that I will honor him in my dealings with Gaul."

Maximus tried to understand but it was all too much. Marcellus' countenance had completely changed; his philosophy had pulled a one-eighty, from a way of hate to a way of love!

"I cannot change my past," Marcellus said, "but I can change what happens from here on out. The gods have not abandoned me, even if they discipline me. I am still needed. My failure in the beginning prohibits success at this very moment. Whence I brought destruction and death, now I bring restoration and life. As you said, Maximus, Gaul is not to be lorded over, but to be given all the blessings of Rome with all Roman privileges and freedoms. They will not be slaves. They will be free! And we will not call them Romans; we will call them Gauls! For the gods do not desire assimilation, they desire unification. Gaul and Rome will unite as allies, we will fight the same enemies, trade our goods, and our people will love and accept one another. It is the desire of the gods."

Marcellus turned and headed into the shadows. As he left, he threw over his shoulder, "There is much to be done; here are my orders: bring all the peasants to the center square. No one is to be absent! My dear friend, the darkness has gone down and the sun has risen."

And Marcellus was gone. Maximus stood alone in the darkness. A smile creased his lips.

X

All morning the Roman soldiers went house-to-house, gently bringing the citizens out to the center square. None resisted for fear, but yet fear gripped them all. Mothers held their sobbing children, eyes hollow and vacant, and men kissed their loved ones, whispering sweet nothings. By three in the afternoon over nineteen thousand civilians were gathered in the town square; the Romans formed a ring around them, facing their shields before them. The stories of Marcellus' brutality ate at their minds and they feared the worst. Everyone hushed, hearts ceased to beat, as Marcellus exited the palace and stood upon the great steps. He looked out at them and could feel the fear—and hate—in their eyes. He did not loathe them for it; no, he knew with shame that he deserved all of it. He deserved a cruel and acrid death—yet the gods continued to bless him when he did not deserve it.

"Citizens of Gaul!" he said loudly so all could hear. All became quiet; no speaking, not even the songs of the birds, interrupted the General's presence. "I know what you are thinking now. The stories of my atrocities committed in the name of Rome and in the name of Mars resound within, and you are inspired with fear." He let it sink in, then, "This is not what I desire! As long as we cooperate *with one another*, no harm will come to anyone. We have not only taken Gaul, we have liberated you! Liberated you from a tyrannical oppressor who forces you to serve in his armies and starves your children. We mean you no harm." He spread his arm outwards.

All the Roman soldiers set down their shields, sheathed their swords, sat down themselves.

The General said, "Citizens of Gaul, we have liberated you. The gods chose us to bring you into the light!"

A brave soul shouted, "We will never assimilate!"

Marcellus laughed. "Assimilation is not our goal! Gaul and Rome are to be distinct, and yet be one. We are to be allies, friends, and you will receive all the blessings of Rome, all the freedoms Rome enjoys, while you can still live in your cities, worship your gods, and live your lives in peace. All the brutality and warfare that has led up to this point has resulted because of one man's selfish greed and cowardice. It was the will of the gods for him to be deposed, and he has. This means *the war is over*. I will have no more killing, no more death! We are free men and women!"

No one said anything. They did not know what to believe.

Marcellus began walking down the steps. "Every one of you may return home. You may return home to your families, to your farms, to your lives. You may exit

this city and never return. We will not force you to feed our soldiers, we will not turn you into slaves.” He stopped before them, and looking at every one of them, said, “A new rule of life has emerged. There shall be no more King. No one to lord their will over you. Instead there will be a fifty-man counsel deciding the workings of the city and of Gaul, and these twenty men will be chosen from among you. While our presence remains to make sure there is no resistance, our way of conduct is now a way of restoration and life, not destruction and death. We embrace you not only as friends, but as family, and you are free men and women.”

The civilians chewed on the idea, beginning to realize the greatness of the moment.

Yet someone lashed out, “My family is dead! They were killed in the shelling of the city!”

“My heart weeps,” Marcellus said, vacant of pretense. “I truly do. Many lives were lost because of the horrible actions of one man. As you all know, this war began because your King ordered attacks against Rome. That is why we are here. To stop him. We have seen horrible things, how the King has made twelve-year-old boys fight in his Army with no training. Your sons have fallen over our swords because of your wretched King! Yet none of this is an excuse for your personal losses. I have lost many friends in these battles, and my mother and beloved were taken from me when our family was, like you all, caught up in war. I understand you. I weep with you.”

Someone else: “You destroyed my crops! You killed my children in the south!”

Tears speckled Marcellus’ eyes and the people—not to mention the soldiers—were taken aback by this, the son of the god of war, crying! “Listen to me! The gods have spoken to me, and they frown upon what I have done. I was led amiss and many lives were lost because of it. The gods continue to punish me for my barbaric ways, and I am learning that the way of the gods is a way of love. My friends, I pray for your forgiveness.” And to the shock of the entire earth, he knelt before the peasants, who stared in amazement. “Forgive me for my sin,” he said. “I will leave this city soon enough, leave it in the hands of the Gauls. For this is a free Gallic nation, not a slave of Rome, and it shall be governed by Gauls. I will leave in shame for my acts, and none of you will hear of me again.”

XI

A week later, the officials elected to represent Gaul had been chosen and assembled in the throne room, with Marcellus, Appius and Kaeso presiding. The Gauls had taken warmly to his proposals, and the evening of his speech there had been much celebration. Little children even threw rocks at the King's corpse. Women kissed Marcellus and thanked him, and Gallic soldiers who had survived bowed down to the General and asked to serve such a great man. The Roman soldiers grew from approximately three thousand that day to eight thousand as Gallic warriors took on the status of Gallic mercenaries fighting for the freedom of Gaul and other nations. The Romans and Gauls embraced one another as brothers, and throughout the rest of the week there were countless parties, celebrations, and drinking of wine. The peasants returned to the fields, and the Roman soldiers helped them rejuvenate the crops that had been trampled. Many families adopted soldiers into their home, gave them food and rest, and thanked them for what they'd done. Marcellus was taken aback by it all.

Maximus had said, "It is a great thing to be a skilled warrior. It is even greater to be a beloved leader."

"I never would've thought this to be possible," Marcellus said. "My words have never—"

"Careful," Maximus warned with a smile. "This is not your doing. It is the doing of the gods. You are their vessel. Without gods, man is nothing."

Now the three Generals approached the elected officials and gave them the run-down: "You will be in charge of Gaul, in charge of everything from training soldiers to fight in the Roman-Gallic legions to deciding how to best save the grains over the course of winter. Your power is distributed throughout all of you so that no one can become a tyrant like King Vlatucias. You will be Roman-Gallic citizens, awarded the best of each nation. If you accept, step forward!" All the men stepped forward and knelt down, pledging allegiance to Gaul and to Rome.

Appius grinned and said quietly, "We are witnessing a miracle here, Marcellus. Thank you."

Marcellus and Maximus sat down to feast, but Marcellus wouldn't eat. Maximus felt the tension. "My friend," he questioned, "why don't you eat? How can you be depressed! The soldiers love you! The people love you! Dear Marcellus, the *gods* love you! You are a man of such blessing and favor. I envy you—and yet I see in your eyes that you are locked in despair."

"No amount of celebration," Marcellus told him, "can erase me desire to see my beloved family again. Every moment I wish I would've fallen in battle. It is painful to know that I could be in the arms of my beloved at this very moment, but instead I am in a world of pain and suffering. This rejoicing is just for a moment, Maximus. The tide will change—and I fear it shall change shortly."

"Shortly?" Maximus mocked. "Marcellus! Gaul will not turn against Rome! You have brought Gaul to life! From death to life, Marcellus! From the womb to the air, from the darkness to the light, from the winter to the spring! A beautiful summer lies ahead of us."

"It is not Gaul which I fear," Marcellus said. "I was visited with a dream last night..."

A Gallic soldier ran over to him. "General Marcellus, there is a messenger here for you. He is very tired and says he has ridden straight from Rome. He gives you this." He held out a rolled-up parchment.

Marcellus took it, broke the seal, rolled his eyes over the letters forming words, the words forming sentences... and the sentences breaking his minute joy to absolute despair. Maximus could see the growing apprehension over Marcellus' face and he himself stopped eat. Marcellus sat in shock for a moment, then leapt to his feet, rolling the parchment back up. He commanded the soldier, "Summon General Kaeso and General Appius. I will meet them in the praetorium immediately." The soldier nodded and ran off.

Maximus swallowed in aggravated suspense. "Marcellus?"

Maximus' eyes burned. "Ready the Army! Prepare to march!"

Epilogue: The Eve of Fulfillment

I

late fall

News of the sack of Mediolanum and the surrender of Gaul reached Rome in a fanfare of praise. The decision and judgment of Marcellus met both joy and disposition in Rome; some called Marcellus a friend of the enemy, others half-worshipped him. Antonius knew Marcellus was marching back to Rome under order of the Senate; his spies inside the senate chamber told him there was much grief brewing in Carthage and things looked more and more grim. Celesta's stomach continued to grow and her nightmares flourished; so did Antonius', and no amount of herbs from underground doctors could soothe him. It was in his despair for life and for Rome that, with one visitor, his world completely changed.

The knock open the door came and the servant opened it to find a scrawny little man with a white beard standing before him, flanked by several Roman soldiers in purple cloaks. The servant knew who it was immediately and almost collapsed. The old man laughed and asked if Antonius were present; the slave beckoned them into the living quarters and disappeared, finding the General at Celesta's bedside. "General Antonius," the slave said, "someone is here to see you."

Antonius could see the excitement written over the slave's face. "Lead me to them."

The slave obeyed, and when Antonius entered the room, he stopped short, staring at the old man, the man who had all but vanished from the eyes of the public; he had, in many ways, become forgotten, or evolved into a myth. The man who had control of the Senate, the man who, were Rome not a Republic, would be Emperor. His royal bodyguards didn't acknowledge Antonius' presence and Antonius could feel their power coming over him. "Consular..."

The consular approached Antonius and touched him lightly on the shoulder. "You have endured much. And for this grief I apologize. I may not be in the limelight anymore. My age permits me from fanfare, Antonius; but my eye is constantly on our borders and my ears on the lips of the senate. I know the trouble brewing, and I know that you know, as well. Even though Gaul has become a protectorate and things are looking up for Rome and her borders, we should not

lose sight of our southern border, where a great threat grows with each passing day.”

“Carthage,” Antonius said in a low voice.

“Yes. Your predictions were correct. I am *so* sorry you have been treated as you have. You are a great man, Antonius. Rome needs you now.”

“Consular...”

“No, Antonius. Listen to me. By next spring, our spies in Carthage tells us that the enemy will sail the wine-dark sea and land on our coasts for a direct attack on the city. Thousands upon thousands upon thousands of troops at our front-door. I have already ordered many legions to return from distant wars and from frontier forts. We must give up a little security in our provinces and protectorates to protect the *heart* of Rome.”

“This is why you ordered Marcellus down here.”

“Yes. That was *my* order.”

“Have you come here, Consular, to simply apologize?”

“Dear me, no!” the wizened old man exclaimed. “Cicero and Dionysus, the leader of Brutii and Scipii, are too obsessed with themselves and selfish to be granted control of the operation in defending Rome. It is a sad fact of history that the best and most honorable men also suffer the most. You, Antonius, have suffered. Your gold has been proven pure in the fires.”

Antonius winced, remembering the night he had broken his promise to Helonius: “I will take care of your wife.” His words flashed like a searing brand in the back of his mind.

The consular continued, “I extend to you dictatorship powers for the defense of Rome. We need great men to defend Rome, and I know no warrior more pure in skill, heart and mind than you, Antonius.”

The regret, the pain, the shadows of his past...

“Do you,” the consular begged, “accept?”

Antonius swallowed hard. “With all my heart... No.”

The consular was taken aback. “Antonius?”

“I am not the man fit for this job,” he replied.

He shook his head. “No. You are the *only* man fit for this job!”

Antonius snarled, “I do not accept. I will not have the blood of Rome on my hands!”

The consular did not know what to say. “Antonius. You may very well be the only hope Rome has.”

He said nothing for a while, then, "Please, leave. Celesta is sick."

The consular nodded. "Then we shall go. But I will be gravely up-front with you, Antonius: you disappoint me. I fear you may be the only hope Rome has." He and his guard headed for the door.

Antonius gazed upon the sword hanging on the wall, his father's sword, and felt the desires build within. He heard Celesta's words: "Maybe the time of your abandoning the sword has yet to come."

As the consular stepped through the doorway, Antonius shouted, "Consular! I will take up the honor. I will fight in Rome's defense."

Antonius, Cicero, and Dionysus stood before all the armies present in Rome, numbering into the thousands, and in front of thousands upon thousands of spectators standing upon the walls surrounding the military complex. The consular came forward and put a wreath around Antonius' neck, saying, "I grant you dictatorial powers over Rome. Your love for Rome, your devotion to Rome, and your passion for its people find favor in the eyes of the gods, and they guide you. All of Rome is subordinate to you. Your word is to be carried out to the letter no matter the opinions or prejudices of others. May the gods bless you and keep you... And may all of Rome smile upon you."

Cicero of Brutii came forward, eyes downcast in shame. "You have my sword and shield."

Dionysus of Scipii then spoke: "And you have my sword and shield as well."

Thousands of voices from the assembled Roman soldiers arose and spread through the seven hills: "You have our swords and shields!"

After the ceremony, the consular pulled Antonius aside. "All of Rome is looking to you."

Antonius looked to the brilliant clear sky and the vibrant sun. "I will not disappoint them. When Carthage comes, she will be sent back home, fleeing in terror."

The consular's face slouched. "I hope so, Antonius. I really hope so."

The shame returned, sour in his stomach. *I hope so, too.*

II

Mid-winter

Snow draped the trees in ivory lace and crunched under the soldiers' boots as they walked. The earth had grown starved and cold, with each breath seizing the lungs, every step aching the bones, every face forward gnawed upon by arctic wind. However, the vengeance of winter did not harm their spirits. Although many came to know frostbite and many more spent endless nights sleepless and shivering, teeth chattering, all had absorbed the news of Carthage's eventual march on Rome, and all thirsted for a fight. Even the Gauls. Having been granted the freedom of the Romans while being allowed to keep the title of Gaul, as well as the prosperity of peace and absence of war, the Gauls were content to be a protectorate. The soldiers who had died against Rome were not forgotten; Marcellus took plunder from the King's palace and handed it out to those who were in some way harmed or widowed because of the war, and he apologized and blamed it upon the greedy King (and with the King gone, he and all the Romans came to realize the soldiers served him in fear, not in loyalty, and that they would even be thankful he had died!). The landscape had changed dramatically as they neared the city of Rome, and it was not long before Marcellus, leading the ten-thousand-man Army, was greeted with familiar sites.

The Romans marched straight through Marcellus' hometown, which he had abandoned not too long ago. Peasants came from the houses and looked in awe and glee upon the Romans, yet did not favor the Gauls too well. But when the Gauls bowed before them and apologized for the terrible past, and sensing the great love between the Roman and Gallic soldiers, the peasants came to enjoy them. Marcellus allowed a three-day stay in the town, greeting his old friends and acquaintances, catching up, mesmerizing them with tales of heroic battles and deadly traps he'd fought through.

One morning he snuck from the house he was sleeping at, dressed warm and tight, and crept outside. The snow continued to come down hard and yet he walked the mile to his destination. He stood forever upon the road, letting his eyes just fall over the remains of what had once been such a lovely place. The foundations of the old house had been overgrown with weeds, which had shriveled and died and gone brown, and now snow covered it completely. He found where he had lain his mother, and kneeling down next to it, felt such a well of emotions that he could not speak. All he could do was, with trembling fingers and fluttering heart, withdraw the axe from under his clothing and set it upon the grave. And the only words he managed were: "Now I know what I must do."

III

early spring next year

Much had changed in Rome. The armies that had been sent for had arrived, including Marcellus' Army of ten-thousand, a worthy and terrifying sight with its battle-hardened Romans and newly-converted Gauls. Antonius had been nearly completely absent because of his duties, preparing for the defense of Rome. He found himself in constant meetings, often presiding at the Senate, and he spoke many times with the generals of the legions, especially Marcellus, whom he had grown to love as a brother. Antonius' new decree had rang out just weeks earlier: "I beg all Roman citizens not serving in the coming defense to go to the frontier towns." He said he wanted this for more efficient use of the city for military dealings, but it was just another grim reminder that the city would be a war-zone and Antonius wanted as little civilians as possible to be killed. So as Celesta lay within her bedroom, expert doctors all around her, speaking comforting words, Rome's streets were flooded with refugees, families saying farewell to their sons, brothers and fathers serving in the war, and looking north from the city came the landscape riddled with rivers of people snaking into the forests with carts and wagons and giant knapsacks.

"Any day now," the doctors told her. "Any day now."

Her stomach had grown smooth and round, the baby inside enlarging with each passing day. Her nightmares had reduced, a small gift from the gods for which her life had become three thousand times better, and with Antonius in charge of the defense of Rome, she felt at peace and free to have the baby. She thought that with Antonius in charge, she had nothing to worry about. And so she pushed notions of war from her head and continued to tell herself she had the blessings of the gods.

III

three weeks later

The city had been all but evacuated by the commons folk, yet many remained to help in treating the wounded and, if necessary, defending the city at all costs. Many in Gaul and Rome had elected to serve in the defense of Rome (the Gauls

loved their new freedoms and did not desire to lose them to the Greco-Carthaginians), swelling the army to nearly two hundred fifty thousand armed troops. Antonius' plan of battle was to meet the Carthaginians at the ocean, then on the fields, and then, if necessary, within the city. He had made the order and several ditches filled with water had been put around the city with movable bridges spanning them; between the ditches and at the foot of the city walls were fire-sharpened spikes to trip up the enemy as they would advance under archer fire. Antonius hoped his plan would work, and constantly went to the gods in prayer. The beach was lined with spikes and wells and booby-traps; and since the beach was on a depression against the deeper shore line, the Carthaginians would have to battle up a steep slope against the Roman war machine. Onagers and ballistas were upon the city walls and on rooftops, in streets and courtyards. The city was filled with soldiers sleeping and eating, talking and training, readying themselves for battle. Antonius had decided Kaeso would lead the beach defense with Marcellus on his rear. These good leaders, he hoped, would inspire the Romans to victory... and death.

The nights had been growing warmer with the deepening of spring and the scouts brought hurried news: "The Carthaginians are loading their ships! They shall be on our shores in a week!" As the preparations had all been made, Antonius simply took the news to the generals and told them, "We will keep three legions on the field at all times in case they arrive early. But on the morning of this time next week, General Kaeso and General Marcellus will leave the city walls and march to the beachhead for our first defensive maneuver."

Kaeso and Marcellus bowed: "It is an honor, General," they echoed.

The morning of the planned enemy assault came. Antonius had stood upon his balcony that very morning and watched twelve thousand Romans march from the city walls to defend the beach-head (he had strengthened the legion size from two thousand to six thousand due to the shortages of well-talented Generals). To see them marching filled him with both dread and excitement. How he yearned to be down there, to be marching out of the city, to know he would be able to bloody his sword on the cruel invaders? His heart leapt at the thought, but he told himself, "The gods have positioned you where they want you. You are their tool and, as the consular said, you are the only man for the job."

As Kaeso and Marcellus streamed into the fields and along the Tiber River, heading towards the beach, Kaeso entered the living area and put on his armor, took up his shield, and removed his father's *spatha* sword from the mantle, sheathing it at his side. He took the helmet, and looking into the shadowy eyelets, prayed, "Bless us, gods of victory, and bless me, my ancestors." He put the helmet on and at that very moment his eyes burned crimson. The warrior had returned.

In the next room, Celesta screamed. The doctors coached her on. "It's coming," they told her. "Push! Push! It's coming!"

Upon the beachhead, Kaeso and Marcellus could see the tops of the ships coming over the watery horizon. Kaeso swallowed hard and Marcellus' heart hardened. Thousands upon thousands of ships heading straight for the edge of the Italian peninsula. They had never imagined so many...

The doctors urged her on. "Harder! Push harder!"

Celesta cried out, pain cutting through her. "I can't... I can't..."

"It's head is coming through," a doctor said. "Miss, push! Push! It's almost over."

Her cry shook the manor.

Marcellus rode upon his horse before his troops. "I have bled with you!" he cried out. "Now bleed with me!"

Kaeso faced his own troops and shouted: "Friends of Rome! This will be a terrible day; not only for the Carthaginians, but for us as well! Do not be deceived: many shall die this day. Death comes to us all. What decides whether we are men or not is how we meet that death. We shall not fear death; we shall embrace it. We shall kiss it. We shall smile as we fall! Many of you will not walk back to your friends and families, but the stories of your valor and strength will! You who survive will be heroes; you who fall will be legends! Look forward! Grit your teeth! Take up your sword and shield! Remember who you are: Romans! And even more: you are the sons of Mars!"

Horrendous, thundering cheering washed over the ranks; the man turned, faced forward, face aglow with an unhindered lightning. Far across the breaking waters, spreading over the horizon, were hundreds – thousands – of slender enemy ships,

heading straight for the shoreline. Each ship was loaded with a hundred soldiers or more. He felt the breeze and wished for better days, but knew they would not come. Not today. For today, many would die.

She cried out once more, then bitter relief washed over her. The doctor raised the squawking infant into the air and Celesta looked upon it with great joy. She panted in the under wash of pain and feebly asked, “What is it?”

The doctor walked around the bed and put the infant in her arms. “It’s a girl.”

Antonius felt it was time. Looking back at the room where he heard Celesta’s soft laughter, he walked to the front door, exited, and closed it behind him. The time of peace had ended; the time of war—the time to die—had returned.

A Note from the Author

A week after finishing this magnificent work, I enrolled in a Greek and Roman History class at my college. I fell in love with this class, and my passion for ancient history ignited. As I learned more and more about Rome in the second semester, I realized how many errors *The Sons of Mars*, and its counterpart, *In the Name of Rome*, contains. One of my dreams is to write a work of historical fiction, but I've discovered that these two works do not do justice to history. There are historical errors on every page.

I hope this won't be a nuisance to you enjoying this book. As I classify this work into a genre, I keep it away from historical fiction, and place it in epic fantasy, for that is what, at its heart, it really is. So I ask you to take off your critical lens and just enjoy the story, full of all its twists and turns, *and* its numerous errors! It is akin to a *Lord of the Rings* set in ancient Rome. And those books are awesome.

