

The Eagle and the Rabbit

The Romans made us stand in a row, naked, our wrists tied behind our backs. Man to man we were linked together by chains attached to the iron collars around our necks.

The tall one appeared, the one the others called Fabius, their leader. I had seen his face close up in the battle; it had been the last thing I had seen, followed by a merciful rain of stars as his cudgel struck my head. Merciful, because in the instant I glimpsed his face, I knew true terror for the first time. The jagged red scar that began at his forehead, disfigured his nose and mouth, and ended at his chin was terrible enough, but it was the look in his eyes that chilled my blood. I had never seen such a look. He had the face of a warrior who laughs at his own pain and delights in the pain of others, who knows nothing of pity or remorse. The cold, hard face of a Roman slave raider.

You may wonder why Fabius struck me with a cudgel, not a sword. The blow was meant to stun, not to kill. Carthage was destroyed. We few survivors, fugitive groups of men, women, and children, were poorly fed and poorly armed. Months of fearful hiding in the desert had weakened us. We were no match for battle-hardened Roman soldiers. Their goal was not to kill, but to capture. We were the final scattered trophies of an annihilated city, to be rounded up and sold into slavery.

Carthago delenda est! Those words are Latin, the harsh, ugly language of our conquerors; the words of one of their leaders, the bloodthirsty Cato. The wars between Carthage and Rome began generations ago, with great battles fought on the sea and bloody campaigns all across Sicily, Spain, Italy, and Africa, but for a time there was peace. During that truce, Cato made it his

habit to end every speech before the Roman Senate and every conversation with his colleagues, no matter what the subject, with those words: *Carthago delenda est!* "Carthage must be destroyed!"

Cato died without seeing his dream come true, a bitter old man. When news of his death reached Carthage, we rejoiced. The madman who relentlessly craved our destruction, who haunted our nightmares, was gone.

But Cato's words lived on. *Carthago delenda est!* The war resumed. The Romans invaded our shores. They laid siege to Carthage. They cut off the city by land and by sea. They seized the great harbor. Finally they breached the walls. The city was taken street by street, house by house. For six days the battle raged. The streets became rivers of blood. When it was over, the Carthaginians who survived were rounded up, to be sold into slavery and dispersed to the far corners of the earth. The profit from their bodies would pay for the cost of Rome's war. Their tongues were cut out or burned with hot irons, so that the Punic language would die with them.

The houses were looted. Small items of value—precious stones, jewelry, coins—were taken by the Roman soldiers as their reward. Larger items—fine furniture, magnificent lamps, splendid chariots—were assessed by agents of the Roman treasury and loaded onto trading vessels. Heirlooms of no commercial value—spindles and looms, children's toys, images of our ancestors—were thrown onto bonfires.

The libraries were burned, so that no books in the Punic language should survive. The works of our great playwrights and poets and philosophers, the speeches and memoirs of Hannibal and his father, Hamilcar, and all our other leaders, the tales of Queen Dido and the Phoenician seafarers who founded Carthage long ago—all were burned to ashes.

The gods and goddesses of Carthage were pulled from their pedestals. Their temples were reduced to rubble. The statues made of stone were smashed; the inlaid eyes of ivory and onyx and lapis were plucked from the shards. The statues made of gold and silver were melted down and made into bullion—more booty to fill the treasury of Rome. Tanit the great mother; Baal the great father, Melkart the fearless hero, Eshmun who heals the sick—all of them vanished from the earth in a single day.

The walls were pulled down and the city was razed to the ground. The ruins were set afire. The fertile fields near the city were scattered with stones so that not even weeds should grow for a generation.

Some of us were outside the city when the siege began and escaped the destruction. We fled from the villas and fishing villages along the coast into the stony, dry interior. The Romans decreed that not a single Carthaginian should escape. To round up the fugitives they sent not regular legionaries but decommissioned soldiers especially trained to hunt down and capture fugitive slaves. That was why Fabius and the rest carried cudgels along with swords. They were hunters. We were their prey.

We stood naked in chains with our backs against the sheer cliff of a sandstone crag.

It was from the top of that crag that I had seen the approach of the Romans that morning and called the alarm. Keeping watch was a duty of the young, of those with the strength and agility to climb the jagged peaks and with sharp eyes. I had resented the duty, the long, lonely hours of boredom spent staring northward at the wide valley that led to the sea. But the elders insisted that the watch should never go untended.

"They will come," old Matho had wheezed in his singsong voice. "Never mind that we've managed to escape them for more than a year. The Romans are relentless. They know the nomads of the desert refuse to help us. They know how weak we've become, how little we have to eat, how pathetic our weapons are. They will come for us, and when they do, we must be ready to flee, or to fight. Never think that we're safe. Never hope that they've forgotten us. They will come."

And so they had. I had been given night duty. I did not sleep. I was not negligent. I fixed my eyes to the north and watched for the signs that

Matho had warned of—a band of torches moving up the valley like a fiery snake, or the distant glint of metal under moonlight. But the night was moonless and the Romans came in utter darkness.

I heard them first. The hour was not quite dawn when I thought I heard the sound of hooves somewhere in the distance, carried on the dry wind that sweeps up the valley on summer nights. I should have sounded the alarm then, at the first suspicion of danger, as Matho had always instructed; but peering down into the darkness that blanketed the valley I could see nothing. I kept silent, and I watched.

Dawn came swiftly. The edge of the sun glinted across the jagged peaks to the east, lighting the broken land to the west with an amber haze. Still

I did not see them. Then I heard a sudden thunder of hoof beats. I looked down and saw a troop of armed men at the foot of the cliff.

I gave a cry of alarm. Down below, old Matho and the others rushed out of the shallow crevices that offered shelter for the night. A little ridge still hid them from Romans, but in moments the Romans would be across the ridge and upon them. Matho and the others turned their eyes up to me. So did the horseman who rode at the head of the Romans. He wore only light armor and no helmet. Even at such a distance, and in the uncertain early light, I could see the scar on his face.

The Romans swarmed over the ridge. In miniature, as if on the palm of my hand, I saw the people scatter and I heard their distant cries of panic.

I descended as quickly as I could, scurrying down the rugged pathway, scraping my hands and knees when I slipped. Near the bottom, I met Matho. He pressed something into my right hand—a precious silver dagger with an image of Melkart on the handle. It was one of the few metal weapons we possessed.

"Flee, Hanso! Escape if you can!" he wheezed. Behind him I heard the wild whooping and war cries of the Romans.

"But the women, the children . . . ," I whispered.

"Done," Matho said. His eyes darted toward a narrow crevice amid the rocks opposite the sandstone cliff. From most angles, the crevice was impossible to see; it opened into a cave of substantial size, where the elders and the unmarried women slept. At the first warning, the mothers and children had been sent to join them in hiding. This was a plan Matho had made in anticipation of an attack, that if all could not flee together, then only the strongest among us should face the Romans while the other hid themselves in the cave.

The battle was brief. The Romans overwhelmed us in minutes. They held back, fighting to capture rather than kill, while we fought with everything we had, in utter desperation. Even so, we were no match for them. All was a tumult of shouting, confusion, and terror. Some of us were struck by cudgels and knocked to the ground. Others were trapped like beasts in nets. I saw the tall rider in the midst of the Romans, the one with the scar, barking orders at the others, and I ran for him. I raised my dagger and leaped, and for an instant I felt that I could fly. I meant to stab him, but his mount wheeled about, and instead I stabbed the horse in the neck.

The beast whinnied and reared, and my hand was covered by hot red blood. The horseman glared down at me, his mouth contorted in a strange, horrible laugh. A gust of wind blew the unkempt blond hair from his face, revealing the whole length of the scar from his forehead to his chin. I saw his wild, terrifying eyes.

He raised his mallet. Then the stars, and darkness.

My head still rang from that blow as we were made to stand, chained together, against the sandstone cliff. The stone was warm against my back, heated by the midday sun. My nostrils were choked by dust and smoke. They had found our sleeping places and our small stores of food and clothing. Anything that could be burned, they had set to the torch.

The Romans were mounted on their horses. They were relaxed now, laughing and joking among themselves but keeping their eyes on us. They held long spears cradled against their bent elbows and pointed at our throats. Occasionally one of the Romans would poke the tip of his spear against the man he guarded, prodding his chest or pricking his neck, smirking at the shudder that ran through the unguarded flesh. They outnumbered us, three Romans to every captive. Matho had always warned that they would come in overwhelming numbers. If only there had been more of us, I thought, then remembered how pitiful our resistance had been. If all the Carthaginian fugitives scattered across the desert had been gathered in one place to fight the slave raiders, we still would have lost.

Then the Romans drew back, and down the aisle left in their wake their leader came riding, leading Matho behind him by a tether fitted around the old man's neck. Like the rest, Matho was naked and bound. To see him that way made me lower my eyes in shame. Thus I avoided seeing the face of the Roman leader again as he rode slowly by, the hooves of his mount ringing on the stone.

He reached the end of the row and wheeled his horse about, and then I heard his voice, piercing and harsh. He spoke Punic well, but with an ugly Latin accent.

"Twenty-five!" he announced. "Twenty-five male Carthaginians taken today for the glory of Rome!"

The Romans responded by beating their spears against the stony ground and shouting his name: "Fabius! Fabius! Fabius!"

I looked up, and was startled to see that his eyes were on me. I quickly lowered my face.

"You!" he shouted. I gave a start and almost looked up. But from the corner of my eye I saw him pull sharply on the tether. It was Matho he addressed. "You seem to be the leader, old man."

Fabius slowly rotated his wrist, coiling the tether around his fist to shorten the lead, drawing Matho closer to him until the old man was forced to his toes. "Twenty-five men," he said, "and not a woman or child among you, and you the only graybeard. Where are the others?"

Matho remained silent, then choked as the tether was drawn even tighter around his throat. He stared up defiantly. He drew back his lips. He spat. A gasp issued from the line of captives. Fabius smiled as he wiped the spittle from his cheek and flicked it onto Matho's face, making him flinch.

"Very well, old man. Your little troop of fugitives won't be needing a leader any longer, and we have no use for an old weakling." There was a slithering sound as he drew a sword from his scabbard, then a flash of sunlight on metal as he raised it above his head. I shut my eyes. I instinctively moved to cover my ears, but my hands were bound. I heard the ragged slicing sound, then the heavy thud as Matho's severed head struck the ground.

In the midst of the cries and moans of the captives, I heard a whisper to my right: "Now it begins." It was Lino who spoke—Lino, who knew the ways of the slave raiders, because he had been captured once himself, and alone of all his family had escaped. He was even younger than I, but at that moment he looked like an old man. His shackled body slumped. His face was drawn and pale. Our eyes met briefly. I looked away first. The misery in his eyes was unbearable.

Lino had joined us a few months ago, ragged and thin, as naked as now and blistered by the sun. He spoke a crude Punic dialect, different from the cosmopolitan tongue of us city-dwellers. His family had been shepherds, tending flocks in the foothills outside Carthage. They had thought themselves safe when the Romans laid siege to the city, beneath the notice of the invaders. When the Romans turned their wrath against even shepherds and farmers in the distant countryside, Lino's tribe fled into the desert, but the Romans hunted them down. Many were killed. The rest, including Lino, had been captured. But on the journey toward the coast he had somehow escaped, and found his way to us.

Some of the men had argued that Lino should be turned away, for if there were Romans pursuing him, he would lead them straight to us. "He's not one of us," they said. "Let him hide somewhere else." But Matho had insisted that we take him in, saying that any youth who had escaped the Romans might know something of value. Time passed, and when it became clear that Lino had not led the Romans to us, even those who had argued for his expulsion accepted him. But to any question about his time in captivity, he gave no reply. He seldom talked. He lived among us, but as an outsider, keeping himself guarded and apart.

I felt Lino's eyes on me as he whispered again: "The same as last time. The same leader, Fabius. He kills the chief elder first. And then—"

His words were drowned by the clatter of hoofbeats as Fabius galloped down the line of captives. At the far end of the row he wheeled about and began a slow parade up the line, looking at each of the captives in turn.

"This one's leg is too badly wounded. He'll never survive the journey."

Two of the Romans dismounted, unshackled the wounded man, and led him away.

"A shame," Fabius said, sauntering on. "That one had a strong body, the makings of a good slave." Again he paused. "And this one's too old. No market for his kind, not worth the care and feeding. And this one—see the blank stare and the drool on his lips? An idiot, common among these in-breeding Carthaginians. Useless!"

The Romans removed the men from the line and closed the links, so that I was forced to shuffle sideways, pulling Lino along with me.

The men removed from the line were taken behind a large boulder. They died with hardly a sound—a grunt, a sigh, a gasp.

Fabius continued down the line, until the shadow of man and beast loomed above me, blocking the sun. I bit my lip, praying for the shadow to move on. Finally I looked up.

I couldn't make out his face, which was obscured by the blinding halo that burned at the edges of his shaggy blond mane of hair. "And this one," he said, with grim amusement in his voice, "this one slew my mount in the battle. The best fighter among you lot of cowards, even if he is hardly more than a boy." He lifted his spear and jabbed my ribs, grazing the skin but not quite drawing blood. "Show some spirit, boy! Or have we already broken you? Can't you even spit, like the old man?"

I stared back at him and didn't move. It wasn't bravery, though perhaps it looked like it. I was frozen with terror.

He produced the silver dagger I had buried to the hilt in his mount's neck. The blood had been cleaned away. The blade glinted in the sunlight.

"A fine piece of workmanship, this. A fine image of Hercules on the handle."

"Not Hercules," I managed to whisper. "Melkart!"

He laughed. "There is no Melkart, boy! Melkart no longer exists. Don't you understand? Your gods are all gone, and they're never coming back. This is an image of the god we Romans call Hercules, and that's the name by which the world shall know him from now until eternity. Our gods were stronger than your gods. That's why I'm sitting on this horse, and you're standing there naked in chains."

My body trembled and my face turned hot. I shut my eyes, trying not to weep. Fabius chuckled, then moved on, reining his mount sharply after only a few paces. He stared down at Lino. Lino didn't look up. After a very long pause, longer than he had spent staring at me, Fabius moved on without saying a word.

"He remembers me," Lino whispered, in a voice so low, he could only have been speaking to himself. He began to shake, so violently that I felt the vibration through the heavy chain that linked our necks. "He remembers me! It will happen all over again. . . ."

Fabius removed two more captives from the line, then finished his inspection and cantered to the center. "Well, then—where are the women?" he said quietly. No one answered. He raised his spear and cast it so hard against the cliff wall above our heads that it splintered with a thunderous crack. Every face in the line jerked upright.

"Where are they?" he shouted. "A single woman is more valuable than the whole lot of you worthless cowards! Where have you hidden them?"

No one spoke.

I glanced past him, at the place where the crevice opened into the hidden cave, then quickly looked away, fearing he would see and read my thoughts. Fabius leaned forward on his mount, crossing his arms. "Before we set out in the morning, one of you will tell me."

That night we slept, still chained together, under the open sky. The night was cold, but the Romans gave us nothing to cover ourselves. They huddled under blankets and built a bonfire to keep themselves warm. While some slept, others kept watch on us.

During the night, one by one, each of us was removed from the circle, taken away, and then brought back. When the first man returned and the second was taken in his stead, someone whispered, "What did they do to you? Did you tell?" Then a guard jabbed the man who spoke with a spear, and we all fell silent.

Late that night, they came for Lino. I would be next. I braced myself for whatever ordeal was to come, but Lino was kept for so long that my courage began to fade, drained away by imagined terrors and then by utter exhaustion. I was only barely conscious when they came for me. I didn't notice that Lino was still missing from the circle.

They led me over the ridge and through a maze of boulders to the open place where Fabius had pitched his tent. A soft light shone through its green panels.

Within the tent was another world, the world the Romans carried with them in their travels. A thick carpet was underfoot. Glowing griffon-headed lamps were mounted on elegantly crafted tripods. Fabius himself reclined on a low couch, his weapons and battle gear discarded for a finely embroidered tunic. In his hand he held a silver cup brimming with wine. He smiled.

"Ah, the defiant one." He waved his hand. The guards pushed me forward, forcing me to kneel and pressing my throat into the bottom panel of stocks mounted at the foot of Fabius's couch. They closed the yoke over the back of my neck, locking my head in place.

"I suppose you'll say the same as all the rest: 'Women? Children? But there are no women and children, only us men! You've killed our beloved old leader and culled out the weaklings, so what more do you want?'" He lifted the cup to his lips, then leaned forward and spat in my face. The wine burned my eyes.

His voice was hard and cold, and slightly slurred from the wine. "I'm

not stupid, boy. I was born a Roman patrician. I used to be a proud centurion in the legions, until. . . until there was a slight problem. Now I hunt for runaway slaves. Not much honor in that, but I'm damned good at it."

"I'm not a slave," I whispered.

He laughed. "Granted, you weren't born a slave. But you were born a Carthaginian, and I know the ways of you Carthaginians. Your men are weak. You can't bear to be without your women and children. You refugees out here in the desert always travel in a group, dragging the old bones and infants after you. What sort of worthless life are you leading out here in the wilderness? You should be grateful that we've come for you at last. Even life as a slave should seem like Elysium after this pathetic existence. What's your name, boy?"

I swallowed. It wasn't easy, with the stocks pressed so tightly against my throat. "Hanso. And I'm not a boy."

"Hanso." His curled his upper lip. "A common enough Carthaginian name. But I'm remembering the spirit you showed in the battle this morning, and I'm wondering if there's not some Roman blood in your veins. My grandfather used to boast about all the Carthaginian girls he raped when he fought your colonists in Spain. He was proud to spill some Fabius seed to bolster your cowardly stock!"

I wanted to spit at him, but my neck was bent and the stocks were too tight around my throat.

"You're not a boy, you say? Then you shall be tested as a man. Now tell me: Where are the women hidden?"

I didn't answer. He raised his hand, making a signal to someone behind me. I heard a whoosh, then felt an explosion of fire across my back. The whip seared my flesh, then slid from my shoulders like a heavy snake.

I had never felt any pain like it. I had never been beaten as a child, as the Romans are said to beat their children. The pain stunned me.

Fabius seemed to revel in the punishment, laughing softly and repeating the same question as the whip struck me again and again. My flesh burned as if glowing coals had been poured on my back. I promised myself I wouldn't weep or cry out, but soon my mouth lost its shape and I began to sob.

Fabius leaned forward, peering at me with one eyebrow raised. His scar was enormous, the only thing I could see. "You *are* a strong one," he said, nodding. "As I thought. So you won't tell me where the women are hidden?"

I thought of Matho, of all his fretful plans, of my own fault in sounding

the alarm too late. I took a deep shuddering breath and managed a single word: "Never."

Fabius sipped his wine. A few drops trickled from the corner of his mouth as he spoke. "As you wish. It doesn't matter anyway. We already know where they are. My men are busy flushing them out even now."

I looked up at him in disbelief, but the grim amusement in his eyes showed that he wasn't lying. I spoke through gritted teeth. "But how? Who told you?"

Fabius clapped his hands. "Come out, little eagle."

Lino emerged from behind a screen. His hands were no longer bound, and the collar had been removed from his neck. Like Fabius he was dressed in a finely embroidered tunic, but his expression was fearful and he trembled. He wouldn't look me in the eye.

The guard who had wielded the whip removed me from the stocks and pulled me to my feet. If my hands hadn't been bound behind my back, I would have strangled Lino then and there. Instead, I followed Matho's example. I spat. The spittle clung to Lino's cheek. He began to raise his hand to brush it away, then dropped his arm, and I thought: He knows he deserves it.

"Restrain yourself," Fabius said. "After all, you two will have all night together in close quarters to settle your differences."

Lino looked up, panic in his eyes. "No! You promised me!"

He squealed and struggled, but against the Romans he was helpless. They stripped the tunic off him, twisted his arms behind his back, and returned the collar to his neck. They attached us by a link of chain and pushed us from the tent.

Behind us, I heard Fabius laugh. "Sleep well," he called out. "Tomorrow the *temptatio* begins!"

Even as we stumbled from the tent, the Romans were herding their new captives from the hidden cave. The scene was chaotic—wavering torchlight and shadow, the shrieking of children, the wailing of mothers, the clatter of spears and the shouts of the Romans barking orders as the last of my people were taken into captivity.

The bonfire burned low. Most of the Romans were occupied in flushing out the new captives. The few Romans who guarded us grew careless and dozed, trusting in the strength of our chains.

I lay on my side, my back turned to Lino, staring into the flames, longing for sleep to help me escape from the pain of the whipping. Behind me I heard Lino whisper: "You don't understand, Hanso. You can't understand."

I glared at him over my shoulder. "I understand, Lino. You betrayed us. What does it matter to you? We're not your tribe. You're an outsider. You always were. But we took you in when you came to us starving and naked, and for that you owed us something. If my hands are ever free again, I swear I'll kill you. For Matho." My voice caught in my throat. I choked back a sob.

After a long moment, Lino spoke again. "Your back is bleeding, Hanso."

I turned to face him, wincing at the pain. "And yours?" I hissed. "Show me *your* wounds, Lino!"

He paused, then showed his back to me. It was covered with bloody welts. He had been whipped even more severely than I. He turned back. His face, lit by the dying firelight, was so haggard and pale that for a moment my anger abated. Then I thought of Matho and the women. "So what? So the monster beat you. He beat us all. Every man here has wounds to show."

"And do you think I was the only one to betray the hiding place?" His voice became shrill. One of the guards muttered in his sleep.

"What do you mean?" I whispered.

"You kept silent, Hanso. I know, because I was there. Every time the lash fell on you, I cringed, and when you resisted him I felt... I felt almost alive again. But what about the others? Why do you think they're so silent? A few may be sleeping, but the rest are awake and speechless, afraid to talk. Because they're ashamed. You may be the only man among us who kept Matho's secret."

I was quiet for a long time, wishing I hadn't heard him. When he began to whisper again, I longed to cover my ears.

"It's their way, Hanso. The Roman way. To divide us. To isolate each man in his misery, to shame us with our weakness, to sow mistrust among us. Fabius plays many games with his captives. Every game has a purpose. The journey to the coast is long, and he must control us at every moment. Each day he'll find some new way to break us, so that by the time we arrive, we'll be good slaves, ready for the auction block."

I thought about this. Matho had been right. Of all of us, only Lino knew the ways of the Roman slave raiders. If I was to survive, Lino might

help me. Perhaps I could learn from him—and still hate him for what he had done.

"Fabius spoke of something called the *temptatio*? I whispered.

Lino sighed. "A Latin word. It means a trial, a test, an ordeal. In this case, the *temptatio* is the journey across the wasteland. The *temptatio* turns free men into slaves. It begins tomorrow. They'll make the men march like this, naked and in chains. They'll simply bind the hands of the women and children and herd them like sheep. By nightfall we'll reach the place where the path splits. They'll separate us from the women and children then, and some of the Romans will take them to a different destination by way of a shorter, easier route to the sea. But the men will be driven up the long valley until we finally reach the coast and the slave galleys that are waiting there."

"Why do they separate the men and women?"

"I think it's because Fabius wants the women to be kept soft and unharmed; that's why they take an easier route. But the men he wants tested and hardened. That's why Fabius will drive us on foot across the desert. Those who falter will be left to die. Those with the strength to survive the journey will be stronger than when they set out, hardy slaves worth a fortune to Fabius and his men when we reach the coast. That's how the *temptatio* works."

He spoke as dispassionately as if he were explaining the workings of a flint or a pulley, but when the firelight caught his eyes, I could see the pain that came from remembering. It took an effort of will to hold fast to my hatred for him, and to keep my voice as cold and flat as his. "Fabius called you his little eagle. What did he mean?"

Lino drew in a sharp breath and hid his face in the shadows. "He lied when he called me that. He said it only to be cruel." His voice faltered and he shuddered. "All right, I'll tell you—tell you what I would never speak of before, because like a fool I hoped that it was all past and I would never have to face it again. Once the *temptatio* begins, Fabius will choose two of us from among the captives. One for punishment, the other for reward. The rabbit and the eagle. Both will serve as examples to the other captives, clouding their minds, shaming them with fear, tempting them with hope. The eagle he'll elevate above the other captives, making sure he's well fed and clothed, treating him almost like one of his own men, testing him to see if he can turn him against the others, seducing him with promises of freedom." He fell silent.

"And the rabbit?"

Lino was silent.

"The rabbit, Lino. Tell me!"

"The fate of the rabbit will be very different." His voice grew dull and lifeless. A chill passed through me as I understood.

"And last time," I whispered, "when Fabius captured your tribe—you were his rabbit."

He made no answer.

I sighed. "And tonight, in his tent, Fabius promised that you would be the eagle. That's why you told him where the women were hidden."

Lino nodded. He began to sob.

"But you escaped him, Lino. You escaped last time. It *can* be done."

He shook his head. His voice was so choked, I could hardly understand him. "It could never happen again. I beat him, Hanso, don't you understand? By escaping, I beat him at the game. Do you think he would let me do it again? Never! When he rode down the line of captives, when he saw us standing side by side and recognized me, that was when he chose his rabbit."

"I see. But if you're to be his rabbit, then who is the eagle?"

Lino lifted his face into the firelight. Tears ran down his cheeks. He stared straight at me with a strange, sad fury, amazed that I had not yet understood.

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In the morning, the Romans fed each of us a ladle full of gruel, then led us to the place where the women and children were gathered. The elders were missing. Fabius did not explain what he had done with them, but vultures were already circling over the open space beyond the ridge.

They marched us through the boulder-strewn foothills, over rugged, winding paths. The pace was slow to allow the children to keep up, but the mounted Romans used their whips freely, barking at us to stay in formation, punishing those who stumbled, shouting at the children when they wept.

At sundown, still in the foothills, we came to a place where the path diverged. The women and children were taken in a different direction. No words of parting were allowed. Even furtive glances were punished by the

whip. We slept that night in the open, laid out in a straight line with our chains bolted to iron stakes driven into the ground. The Romans pitched tents for themselves. At some point they came and took Lino. All through the night, I could hear them singing and laughing. Fabius laughed louder than all the rest.

Just before dawn, Lino was returned. The clatter of his chains woke me. He couldn't stop trembling. I asked him what had happened. He hid his face and wouldn't answer.

On the second day we descended from the foothills into the long valley. The mountains gradually became more distant on either side until there was only harsh blue sky from horizon to horizon. The vegetation grew scarcer as the parched earth beneath our feet turned into a vast sheet of white stone dusted with sand, as flat and featureless as if it had been pounded by a great hammer.

In the midst of this expanse, amazingly, we came to a small river, too wide for a man to jump across and quite deep. It snaked northward up the middle of the valley flanked by steep banks of stone.

The sun blazed down on my naked shoulders. Though the river was only paces away—we could hear it lapping against its banks—the Romans gave us water only at dawn and sunset. We thirsted, and the sight and sound of so much water, so near, was enough to drive a man mad.

That afternoon, Fabius rode up alongside me and offered me water to drink, leaning down from his mount and holding the spout of his water-skin to my lips. I looked up and saw him smile. I felt Lino's eyes on my back. But as the spout passed between my hips, I didn't refuse it. I let the cool water fill my mouth. I could not swallow fast enough, and it spilled over my chin.

That night I was given an extra portion of gruel. The others noticed, but when they began to whisper among themselves, the Romans silenced them with a crack of the whip.

After all the others slept, Lino was taken to Fabius's tent again. He did not return for hours.

On the third day, the *temptatio* claimed its first victim: Gebal, my mother's brother. It was Uncle Gebal who had given me my first bow and arrow when I was no taller than a man's knee, and taught me to hunt the deer in the hills outside Carthage; Gebal who told me tales of Queen Dido and her brother, King Pumayyaton of Tyre; Gebal who taught me to

honor the great Hannibal in our prayers, even though Hannibal had failed to conquer Rome and died a broken man in exile. At midday he began to shout, and then he bolted toward the river, dragging along the rest of us chained to him. The Romans were on him in an instant, forcing him back with their spears, but he struggled and screamed, cutting himself on the sharp points.

Fabius himself dismounted, removed Gebal from the line, lifted him off his feet, and threw him from the steep bank into the water. Weighted by his iron collar, Gebal must have sunk like a stone. There was the sound of a splash, then a silence so complete, I could hear the low moan of the arid north wind across the sand. The captives didn't make a sound. We were too stunned to speak. Our eyes were too dry for tears.

"So much for those who thirst," said Fabius.

It was also on that day that Fabius truly set me above and apart from the others. Until then his favors had extended only to the extra portions of water and gruel. But that day, as the sun reached its zenith and even the strongest among us began to stagger from the relentless heat, Fabius removed me from the line.

"Have you ever ridden a horse?" he asked.

"No," I said.

"Then I'll teach you," he said.

The chains were removed from the collar around my neck. My hands were released and retied in front of me, and a thin robe was thrown over my shoulders. The Romans lifted me onto the back of a black stallion. Two sets of reins were fixed to the beast's bridle, one tied to Fabius's saddle and the other placed in my hands. A waterskin was hung around my neck, so that I could drink at will. I knew the others were watching in envy and confusion, but my legs were weak, my throat dry, and my shoulders blistered from the sun. I didn't refuse his favors.

As we rode side by side, Fabius tersely pointed out the parts of the harness and saddle and explained the art of riding. I had been apprehensive when they first placed me on the beast, thinking it would throw me to the ground. But our pace was slow, and I soon felt at home on its back. I also felt a strange kind of pride, to be elevated so high above the ground and moving so effortlessly forward, the master of so much power tamed between my legs.

That night I was chained apart from the others, given a pallet to sleep

on and as much as I wanted to eat and drink. As I fell asleep, I heard the others muttering. Did they think I had betrayed the women, and this was my reward? I was too sleepy from the heat of the day and the food that filled my belly to care. I slept so soundly, I didn't even notice when Lino was taken away that night.

The days blurred into one another. For me they were long and grueling but not beyond endurance. My worst complaints were the sores that chafed my thighs and buttocks, which were unaccustomed to the friction of the saddle.

For the others it was very different. Day by day, I saw them grow more desperate. The ordeal was worst for Lino. He was moved to the head of the line, where he was forced to set the pace. The Romans swarmed about him like hornets, stinging him with their whips, driving him on. Whenever anyone faltered behind him, the chain pulled at his iron collar, so that his neck became ringed with blisters and bruises. I did my best not to see his suffering.

"You're not like the others, Hanso," said Fabius one day, riding along beside me. "Look at them. The *temptatio* doesn't change a man, it only exposes his true nature. See how weak they are, how they stumble and walk blindly on, their minds as empty as the desert. And for all their sentimental vows of loyalty to one another, there's no true brotherhood among them, no honor. See how they shove and snarl, blaming each other for every misstep."

It was true. Chained together, the captives constantly jostled each other, tripping and pulling at each other's throats. Any interruption in the march brought the whips on their shoulders. The men were in a constant state of anger, fear, and desperation; unable to strike back at the Romans, they turned against each other. The Romans now spent as much time breaking up fights among the captives as driving them on. I looked down on the captives from the high vantage of my mount, and I could hardly see them as men any longer. They looked like wild animals, their hair tangled and knotted, their skin darkened by the sun, their faces beastlike and snarling one moment, slavish and cowering the next.

"You're not like them, Hanso," Fabius whispered, leaning close. "They're rabbits, cowering in holes, nervously sniffing the air for danger, living only to breed and be captured. But you, Hanso, you're an eagle, strong and proud and born to fly above the rest. I knew it from the first moment I saw you,

flying at me with that dagger. You're the only brave man among them. You have nothing in common with this lot, do you?"

I looked down at the haggard line of captives, and did not answer.

As the *temptatio* wore on, I felt more and more removed from the suffering of the others. I still slept in chains at night, but I began to take my evening meal in Fabius's tent along with the Romans. I drank their wine and listened to their stories of battles fought in faraway places. They had spilled much blood, and they were proud of that fact, proud because the city they fought for was the greatest on earth.

Rome! How the soldiers' eyes lit up when they spoke of the city. In the great temples they worshipped gods with outlandish names—Jupiter, Minerva, Venus, and, especially, Mars, the war god, who loved the Romans and guided them always to victory. In the vast marketplaces, they spent their earnings on luxuries from every corner of the world. In the Circus Maximus, they gathered by the tens of thousands to cheer the world's fastest charioteers. In the arena, they watched slaves and captives from all over the world fight combats to the death. In the sumptuous public baths, they took their leisure, soothed their battle-weary muscles, and watched naked athletes compete. In the wild taverns and brothels of the Subura (a district so notorious, even I had heard of it), they took their pleasure with pliant slaves trained to satisfy every lust.

I began to see how cramped and pitiful had been our lives as fugitives in the desert, fraught with fear and hopelessness and haunted by memories of a city that was gone forever. Carthage was only a memory now. Rome was the greatest of all cities, and stood poised to become greater still as her legions looked to the East for fresh conquests. Rome was a hard place to be a slave, but for her free citizens, she offered endless opportunities for wealth and pleasure.

As I was led out of the tent each night, not wanting to leave its cool and cushioned comfort, the Romans would be leading Lino in. I saw the terror in his eyes only in glimpses, for I always averted my face. What they did to him in the tent after I left, I didn't want to know.

IV

It was on the fourteenth day of the *temptatio* that Lino escaped.

The featureless desert had gradually given way to a region of low hills carpeted with scrubby grass and dotted with small trees. The mountains had drawn close on either side. In the northern distance, they almost converged at a narrow pass that led to the coast beyond. The river flowed through the pass into a hazy green distance where, framed by the steep walls of the gorge, I could barely discern a glimpse of the sea, a tiny glint of silver under the morning sun.

I first learned of Lino's escape from the whisperings of the captives. When dawn came and he still hadn't been brought back from the tent, an excited exchange ran up and down the line. Their hoarse voices became more animated than at any time since the *temptatio* began, hushed and hopeful, as if the prospect of Lino's escape restored a part of their broken humanity to them.

"He said he would escape," one of them whispered. "He's done it!"

"But how?"

"He did it once before—"

"Unless he's still in the tent. Unless they've finally killed him with their cruel games . . ."

The Romans came for me. As I was led past the line of captives, I heard them mutter the word "traitor" and spit into the grass.

In the tent, I glanced about and saw only the familiar faces of the Romans, busy with their morning preparations. What the captives had said was true, then. Somehow, during the long night of wine and laughter, Lino had escaped.

One of the Romans pulled the thin robe from my shoulders and freed my hands. Suddenly I had a sudden terrible premonition that I was to take Lino's place.

Instead, they placed a pair of riding boots before me, along with a soldier's tunic and a bronze cuirass—the same uniform that they wore. They handed me a saddlebag and showed me what it contained: a length of rope, a whip, a waterskin, a generous supply of food, and a silver dagger—the very

knife that Matho had given me, with its engraving of Melkart on the handle. Atop the pile they laid a spear.

I turned to Fabius, who reclined on his couch, taking his morning meal. He watched me with a smile, amused at my consternation. He gestured to the items laid out before me.

"These are the supplies for your mission."

I looked at him dumbly.

"The rabbit has escaped, boy. Haven't you heard? Now it's time for you to repay my generosity to you."

"I don't understand."

Fabius grunted. "The *temptatio* is almost over. The sea is only a day's march away. A ship will already be waiting there, to load the captives and take them to whatever market is currently offering the best price. Antioch, Alexandria, Massilia—who knows? But one of my captives has escaped. He can't have gone far, not weighted down by his chains. There's the river to the east, and the desert to the south, so I figure he must have gone west, where he thinks he can hide among the low hills. My men could probably flush him out in a matter of hours, but I have another idea. *You* will find him for me.

"Me?"

"You know how to ride well enough, and he should be easy to take with his arms bound behind his back. If he gives you too much trouble, kill him—I know you can do it, I've seen you fight—but bring back his head for proof."

I thought of Lino's suffering, of the others calling me traitor. Then I realized that I might escape myself; but Fabius, seeing the hope that lit my face, shook his head.

"Don't even think of it, boy. Yes, you might take the horse and the food and make your way back south. If you can survive the desert. If you don't meet another troop of Romans on the way. Don't think the clothing will disguise you; your Latin is terrible. And even if you did manage to escape me this time, I'll find you in the end. It might take me a year, perhaps two; but I'll find you again. There are still a few stray Carthaginians to be rounded up. My men and I won't rest until we've scoured every crevice and looked under every stone. They're easier to take every time—weaker, more starved, more demoralized. Less and less like men willing to fight, and more and more like slaves ready to accept their fate. The reach of Rome is

long, Hanso, and her appetite for vengeance is endless. You'll never escape her. You'll never escape *me*.

"Besides, you haven't yet heard my offer. Return here within three days with the rabbit trailing behind you—or the rabbit's head on your spear, I don't care which—and when we reach the coast, I'll make you a free man, a citizen of Rome. You're young, Hanso. You have spirit. Your accent will be held against you, but even so, freedom and a strong young body, and a bit of ruthlessness, will take you far in Rome. Consider the alternative, and make your choice."

I looked at the gleaming boots at my feet, the spear, the whip, the coil of rope, the dagger with Melkart—or Hercules, as Fabius would have it. I thought of Lino—Lino who had come to us as a stranger and an outsider, who had betrayed the women, who would only be captured again and forced to endure the *temptatio* a third time if I didn't bring him back myself. What did I owe Lino, after all?

"What if you're lying?" I said. "Why should I trust you? You lied to Lino—you told him he would be your eagle, didn't you? Instead you made him your rabbit."

Fabius drew his sword from its scabbard, the same blade he had used to decapitate Matho. He pressed the point to his forearm and drew a red line across the flesh. He held out his arm. "When a Roman shows his blood, he doesn't lie. By Father Jupiter and great Mars, I swear that my promise to you is good." I looked at the shallow wound and the blood that oozed from the flesh. I looked into Fabius's eyes. There was no amusement there, no deceit, only a twisted sense of honor, and I knew he spoke the truth.

V

I remember the faces of the captives as I left the tent, their astonishment when they saw the outfit I wore. I remember their jeering as I rode out of the camp, followed by the snapping of whips as the Romans quieted them. I remember turning my back to them and gazing north, through the pass in the mountains, where the faraway sea glimmered like a shard of lapis beneath the sun.

It didn't take me three days to find Lino, or even two. The trail he had left was easy to follow. I could see from the spacing of his steps and the way the

grass had been flattened by the ball of each foot that he had run very fast at first, seldom pausing to rest. Then his stride grew shorter and his tread heavier, and I saw how quickly he had wearied.

I followed his trail at a slow pace, unsure of my skill at driving the horse at a gallop. The sun began to sink behind the western range. In the twilight, his trail became more difficult to follow. I pushed on, sensing that I was close.

I crested the ridge of a low hill and surveyed the dim valley below. He must have seen me first; from the corner of my eye I caught his hobbling gait and I heard the rattling of his chains as he sought to hide behind a scrubby tree.

I approached him warily, thinking that he might somehow have freed his hands, that he might still have strength to fight. But when I saw him shivering against the tree, naked, his hands still tied behind him, his face pressed against the bark as if he could somehow conceal himself, I knew there would be no contest.

The only sound was the dry rustling of the grass beneath my horse's hooves. As I drew closer, Lino's shivering increased, and in that moment, it seemed to me that he was exactly what Fabius had named him—a rabbit, twitching and paralyzed by panic.

He's not like me, I thought. I owe him nothing. On a sudden impulse, I lifted the spear, cradling the shaft in the crook of my arm as I had seen the Romans do. I prodded his shoulder with the sharp point. As he quivered in response, a strange excitement ran through me, a thrilling sensation of power.

"Look at me," I said. The sound of my own voice, so harsh and demanding, surprised me. It was a voice I had learned from Fabius. That voice wielded its own kind of power, and Lino's response—the way he cowered and wheeled about—showed that I had mastered it on my first attempt. Fabius must have seen the seeds of power inside me at first glance, I thought. It was no mistake that he had made me his eagle, that he had separated me from the rest, as a miner separates gold from sand.

This was the moment, in any other hunt, when I would have killed the prey. A flood of memories poured through me. I remembered the first time I hunted and killed a deer. It was Uncle Gebal who taught me the secrets of pursuit—and I remembered how Gebal had died, sinking like a stone in the river. I thought of Matho, of the head that had held so much wisdom severed from his shoulders, sent tumbling like a cabbage onto the

stony ground. I clenched my jaw and crushed these thoughts inside me. I prodded Lino again with the spear.

Lino stopped trembling. He turned from the tree and stood beneath me with his face bowed. "Do it, then," he whispered. His voice was dry and hoarse. "Let Fabius win his game this time."

I reached into the saddlebag and began to uncoil the rope.

"No!" Lino shouted and started back. "You won't take me to him alive. You'll have to kill me, Hanso. It's what you wanted anyway, isn't it? On the night that I betrayed the women, you said you would kill me if you had the chance. Do it now! Didn't Fabius say you could bring back my head?"

His eyes flashed in the growing darkness. They were not the eyes of a hunted animal, but of a man. The rush of power inside me suddenly dwindled, and I knew I couldn't kill him. I began to knot the rope, fashioning a noose. Then I paused.

"How did you know what Fabius told me—that I could bring back your head for proof?"

Lino's scarred shoulders, squared and defiant before, slumped against the tree. "Because those are the rules of his game."

"But how would you know the instructions he gave me? You were his rabbit the last time—"

"No."

"But you told me, that night when you first explained the *temptatio*—"

"You assumed I had been his rabbit. *You* spoke those words, Hanso, not me." Lino shook his head and sighed. "When Fabius captured me a year ago, I was his eagle. Do you understand now? /was granted all the privileges; /was mounted on a horse; /was given my meals in his tent and told stories of glorious Rome. And when the time came, Fabius promised me my freedom and sent me out to hunt the rabbit—just as he now sends you."

His voice dropped to a whisper. "It took me many days to make my way to your people, skulking southward through the mountain gorges, hiding from Romans, living on roots and weeds. The horse died, and for a while Carabal and I lived on its flesh—Carabal the rabbit, the man I was sent to recapture. And then Carabal died—he was too weak and broken to live—and what was the use of it all? I should have done what Fabius wanted. I should have done what you're about to do. It all comes to this in the end."

My head was burning. I couldn't think. "But this time you really did escape. . . ."

Lino laughed, then choked, his throat too dry for laughter. "I've never met a man as stupid as you, Hanso. Do you think I escaped on my own, with my arms tied behind my back and Romans all around me? Fabius drove me from his tent at spearpoint in the middle of the night. The rabbit doesn't escape; the rabbit is forced to flee for his life! And why? So that you could hunt me. The rabbit flees, and the eagle is sent after him. And when you return to the camp, with my head mounted on your spear, he'll reward you with your freedom. Or so he says. Why not? He will have had his way. He will have made you one of his own. You will have proven that everything Fabius believes is true."

The heady sense of power I had felt only moments before now seemed very far away. "I can't kill you, Lino."

Lino stamped his foot and twisted his arms to one side, so that I could see the ropes that bound his wrists. "Then cut me free and I'll do it myself. I'll slice my wrists with your knife, and when I'm dead you can behead me. He'll never know the difference."

I shook my head. "No. I could let you escape. I'll tell him that I couldn't find you—"

"Then you'll end up a slave like all the rest, or else he'll devise some even more terrible punishment for you. Fabius has a boundless imagination for cruelty. Believe me, I know."

I twisted the rope in my hands, staring at the noose I had made, at the emptiness it contained. "We could escape together—"

"Don't be a fool, Hanso. He'll only find you again, just as he found me. Do you want to be his rabbit on your next *temptatio*? Imagine that, Hanso. No, take what Fabius has offered you. Kill me now! Or let me do it myself, if you don't have the stomach for it—if the precious eagle finds his claws too delicate to do Fabius's dirty work."

The twilight had given way to darkness. A half moon overhead illuminated the little valley with a soft silver sheen. The reddish glow of the Romans' campfires loomed beyond the ridge. I stared at that smoky red glare, and for a moment it seemed that time stopped and the world all around receded, leaving me utterly alone in that dim valley. Even Lino seemed far away, and the horse beneath me might have been made of mist.

I saw the future as a many-faceted crystal, each facet reflecting a choice. To kill Lino; to cut his bonds and watch while he killed himself; to turn my back and allow him to flee, and then to face Fabius with my failure;

to take flight myself. But the crystal was cloudy and gave no glimpse of where these choices would lead.

The temptatio turns free men into slaves: that was what Lino had told me on our first night of captivity. What had the *temptatio* done to me? I thought of the scorn I had felt for the other captives, riding high above them, proud and vain upon my mount, and my face grew hot. I thought of the sense of power that had surged through me when I came upon Lino cringing naked in the valley, and saw what Fabius had done to me. I was no more a free man than Lino in his bonds. I stood on the brink of becoming just as much a slave as all the others, seduced by Fabius's promises, bent to his will, joining in the cruel game he forced us to play for his amusement.

Lino had once played the same game. Lino had defied the cruelty of Fabius and taken flight, like a true eagle, not like the caged scavenger that Fabius would have made him, and now was determined to make me. But Lino had lost in the end, I told myself—and immediately saw the lie, for this was not the end of Lino, unless I chose it to be. Lino had faced the same choice himself, when Fabius had groomed him as his eagle and set him upon the rabbit Carabal. Lino had chosen freedom, whatever its cost. I saw that I faced only two choices: to take the course that Lino had taken, or to submit to Fabius and be remade in his image.

I turned my eyes from the dull red glow of the campfires and looked down at Lino's face by moonlight, close enough to touch and yet far away, framed by my clouded thoughts like a face in a picture. I remembered the tears he had wept on the night of our capture, and the lines of suffering that had creased his brow on all the nights since then. But now his cheeks and forehead shone smooth and silver in the moonlight. His eyes were bright and dry. There was no anger or pain or guilt there. I saw the face of a free man, unconquered and defiant, composed and ready for death.

The crystal turned in my mind, and I strained to catch a glint of hope; that glint was the brightness in Lino's eyes. Fabius had told me that escape was impossible, that freedom was only a fugitive's dream, that no other game existed except the *temptatio* that ground men into the same coarse matter as himself, or else crushed them altogether. But how could Fabius know the future, any more than I—especially if there were those like Lino who could still summon the will to defy him?

The power of Rome could not last forever. Once, Carthage had been invincible and men had thought her reign would never end—and now

Carthage was nothing but ashes and a fading memory. So it would someday be with Rome. Who could say what realms might rise to take Rome's place?

I closed my eyes. It was such a thin hope! I would not delude myself. I would not let wishful fantasies soften the harshness of the choice I was making. Call me fool. Call me rabbit or eagle, there is finally no difference. But let no man say that I became Fabius's creature.

I slid from the saddle and pulled the dagger from its sheath. Lino turned and offered his wrists. I sliced through the heavy bindings. He turned back and reached for the knife.

For an instant, we clutched the hilt together, his finger laced with mine over the image of Melkart. I looked into his eyes and saw that he was still ready to die, that he didn't know the choice I had made. I pulled the hilt from his grasp, returned the dagger to its sheath, and mounted the horse.

A sudden tremor of doubt ran through me; the reins slipped from my grasp. To steady myself, I took inventory of the supplies that Fabius had given me. How long could three days' rations last if I split them between us? I looked down at the clothing I wore, the uniform of a Roman soldier, and wanted to tear it from my body in disgust; but I would need its protection for the journey.

Lino hadn't moved. A band of clouds obscured the moon, casting a shadow across his face. He stood so still that he might have been carved from stone. "What are you waiting for?" I said. I moved forward in the saddle and gestured to the space behind me. "There's room enough for two. It will only slow us down if one walks while the other rides."

Lino shook his head. "You're an even bigger fool than I thought, Hanso." But his whisper held no malice, and he turned his face away as he spoke. He couldn't resist a final jab—or was he offering me one last chance to betray him?

"And perhaps I'm a better man than I thought," I answered. Lino stood still for a long moment, then his shoulders began to shake and he drew a shuddering breath. I averted my face so I wouldn't see him weeping. "Hurry," I said. "We have a long, hard journey ahead of us."

I felt him climb into the saddle behind me and settle himself, felt the trembling of his body, then spurred the horse across the valley and up to the crest of the hill. There I paused for a moment, looking to the east. The Romans' campfires flashed tiny but distinct in the darkness. The river glim-

mered beyond, like a thin ribbon of black marble beneath the moon. Far to the north, through the mountain pass, I could glimpse the black marble sea.

I stared at that glistening sliver of the sea for a long time. Then I snapped the reins and kicked my heels against the horse's flanks, turning the beast southward, and we began the uncertain journey.