

In the Name of Rome

a short story by A.J. Barnhart

The gruesome realities of our world's brutal past are brought to life in this majestic epic of honor, glory, and strength. From the snow-laden mountains of Macedonia to the sun-burnt fields of Germania, this story will take you on an unforgettable journey through not only the sword of the Roman Army, but also into the deep reaches of the unfathomable human heart.

“Thy walls shall shake at the noise of the horsemen, and of the wheels, and of the chariots...”

- Ezekiel 26:10, *KJV*



MATRIS VOMICA

A MOTHER'S CURSE

A SMALL TOWN SOUTHWEST OF PATAVIUM, VENETIA PROVINCE, ROME¹

The exact day and location was unknown. No one could really get it down to the letter. The only word was, "Soon," and that meant anytime from a day to half a year. Up until that point, every day had been lived with a certain dreaded expectancy. The father toiled the earth, himself wondering when the time would come. He felt the sweat dripping down his face as he plowed small strips of earth against the towering mountains of northern Venetia. Mother kept to herself indoors, working around the house, trying to keep her mind off it. His brother constantly hugged his side, and he spoke in rambling sentences of jealousy. And yet the one they were coming for feared the most. He did not want to go. He wanted to stay, to stay with his father and mother and brother. He had finished schooling, and wished no more than to work his fields with his father. Work the fields. A simple life.

So it was one morning they came. The dirt road met a bridge crossing a broad stream. The sound of the hooves resounding on the wooden boards caught the ears of the father. He did not look, and yet he already knew. He let his hands off the plow, felt the sweat cascading down his face, and walked towards the small outcropping of stone buildings called *home*. He could smell sweet roasted duck coming from the oven, and his little boy was collecting vegetables from the garden. He, too, stood at the sound of the hooves. He ran over to his father, and Dad picked him up. The boy saw them. Eight strong, the mighty horses, draped in flowing manes and bearing valiant soldiers colored up in red battle dress, carrying shields at their sides and short swords in their sheaths, rode upon the hearth of the home, stopping at the gate. One dismounted.

The father set down his son. "Go tell them."

He nodded and entered the house, yelling, "Mommy! Mommy!"

The father walked across a cobblestone path to the hobbled gate. The dismounted soldier said, "Is this the home of *Miles gregarius* Polio?"

The father answered: "Yes. Our son is on his way. Where is his destination?"

"Patavium. He will be stationed there under town watch."

"Town watch? Town security."

"Yes. But do not worry. He will not be there for long. The town watch is made up of the fresh recruits – at least by order in Patavium. Your son will be placed in a unit and be deployed. Where to, who might tell? Britannia? Germania? The land of the Spaniards? Maybe Greece or Macedonia."

"I was not aware we were engaged with the Britons and Germanians."

"It is a recent development. Many armies are moving through that land."

Inside the house, the older son's footfalls echoed through the quiet kitchen. Mother held back tears, and the little boy watched from the shadows. His mother told him to wait. A great dread, a depression he hadn't felt in so long, settled over him like a bad dream; his heart burst. This was

¹ Present day northern Italy

his home, his land. He was not meant to be a foreigner in strange lands, but a commoner, a simpleton. His mother picked something up, something large, and as she stepped out of the dim shadows, he saw it was a dull red shield. Tears tripped over her cheeks as she handed it to him. He was surprised at how lightweight it was, constructed out of metal and wood.

She kissed him tenderly on the cheek, and said, "Do not forget us. You will be in our hearts and minds."

"And you in mine," he said back. His voice cracked. "I will return."

"Do not make promises now. Now is not the time."

"I *will* return, mother."

She nodded, holding back a flood of desperate tears. "Son... Come home with this shield – or upon it."

The young son, holding the sword against his left arm, squeezed out of the small doorway and walked upon the stone steps. Every step felt heavier than the last. His eyes glazed over the beautiful mountains, the fields he had tilled so many times. His eyes swept over the road that led to the nearest town, where he had spent much of his days relaxing with friends beside the pools, skipping through the boring lessons at school, spending the days as if there were no tomorrow. Now he knew there always was a tomorrow. It always came. You can't escape it.

His father gripped his son's arm, nodded, and stepped away.

He was pulled onto one of the horses. He held the shield close. He sat behind a Roman soldier, and he locked into his brother's eyes. He stood in the doorway with Mother. The horses trotted away, and Mother, Father and Brother were lost in the rising dust from trotting hooves.

The girl stood beside the market as the band of cavalry rode past. She was seventeen years old, running errands for her parents, and yet her own heart spilt with bitter emotion. She wanted to collapse against the pillars of Sextus' trade shop, to curl up and cry herself asleep. He looked back at her, and they locked eyes for just a moment. Then the cloud of dust enveloped the cavalry and they disappeared around a wooded bend, and deep down, despite all flickers of any inanimate hope, she knew she would never see him again.

TWO YEARS LATER

The sun was high, the air warm, teeming with wonderful expectancy. Four hundred soldiers stood shoulder-to-shoulder, facing a great gateway leading to the sea, and to an awaiting trireme to bound them to faraway and mystical lands of Macedonia. The four hundred soldiers did not flinch, did not move. They stared at that gate, a million thoughts rushing over their minds. These men were anywhere from seventeen to thirty-one. They had been gathered all throughout the Roman provinces, assembled at Patavium. All had spent time in the town watch, spending hours upon hours every day practicing until their reputation truly did proceed them: warriors worthy of the glory of Rome.

Now the warriors' muscles clenched, their blood ran like hot syrup, and their breath came in ragged waves. For now all the training would be put to the test. This was a baptism of fire. Four hundred soldiers, none who have ever killed a man in their life – except for the unit commanders, some who had served in Germania, others in lower Spain, still others who had served some time in Macedonia itself – gripped their shields close, felt the cool hilt of their short stabbing swords, and dreamed of glory and honor, strength and heroism. They would be told in the legends of the future. Their names would saturate every household in Rome. The great warriors who would slay the Macedonian savages.

The trumpet blast echoed across the ranks, and with a shout the first line of units marched towards the vast gate. The chant rose, lifting to the wind, carrying over Patavium harbor. The cry had been heard many times. Most of those who had sang it had never returned home.

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)



Winter, 217 B.C.

Rome is home to rich mines of tradition and history. The legends of the city's founding are held in almost religious regard; the founding of Rome itself is shrouded in mystery and intrigue. Legend cries that the Romans can trace their ancestry back to Aeneas, the hero who escaped from the fall of Troy. In history's pages, the founding of Rome was a violent one – Romulus murdered Remus for jumping over the walls of the city, and then named himself King and renamed the city in his honor.

The powerful patrician families are descended straight down the line from the first followers of Romulus. The great families are the House of Julii, the House of Brutii, and the House of Scipii. At the heart of it all is the S.P.Q.R. – Senatus Populusque Romanus; the Senate and the People of Rome. The S.P.Q.R. is made up of members of the three houses and represents all the people under Roman authority; orders, missions and commands to the people and armies come from the mouth of the Roman Senate.

The Julii have been a struggling Roman family all through Roman history. Their star has been bright, but never the brightest. Their fortunes have risen and fallen with the tides, and now in this time of history begin to fall once more, the bright flame of Julii flickering in a cold wind. The other factions and families of Rome look down – if ever so slightly – on the Julii. The Julii have had to adjust to the realities of politics and power, cultivating popularity with the common people, the mob. The rule of Rome may now lie in the Senate, but the leaders of Julii know that to win the people is to win Rome. Julii is driven by an eager desire to satisfy the people no matter the cost. The head of the Julii family, and the governor of the Julii capitol Arretium in the province Eiruria, is driven also by a lust for power.

The Brutii family had a violent upbringing. The founding of the Republic of Rome involves them closely, as they have been at the heartbeat of Rome for centuries. Brutii claims to be the 'Father of the Republic' amongst the families. The father of the Brutii family, Lucius Junius Brutus, pretended to be an idiot to avoid being killed by Lucius Tarquinnus Superbus – Tarquin –, the last King of Rome. Brutus managed to lead his people in expelling the hated king after the rape of Lucrece. Brutus took the title of the first praetor, a ruling office before the consummation of the consulship. He even had his own sons executed for plotting the restoration of Tarquin to power. Being blood-ancestors of the founding fathers of Rome, the Brutii claim more authority over the workings of Rome, and that is why they control southern Italy, home to the Roman capital: Rome.

The Scipii descend from the adventurers, exiles and warriors recruited by Romulus to help establish the city of Rome. While they are not regarded as a first-rate family, they are still eager to show off their true Roman glory. Optimists, they are aristocrats to the highest point, and have been for many generations. The Scipii have enormous denarii on the back of their hands, and

they spend it lavishly. Hungry for Greek learning and culture, they continue to surprise the rest of the conservatively Roman world.

By the year 217 B.C., Oppius Silvanus, the leader of the House of Julii, has a vast army at his disposal, stretching from the far reaches of Britannia, down into the Spanish mountains, and even to the peninsula provinces of Macedonia. Brutii and Scipii – not to mention most of S.P.Q.R. – are beginning to see Silvanus for who he really is – a leader thirsty for power. Silvanus has openly declared war against the Spanish to the southwest, and Britons to the northwest. He has also delivered several armies to regions of Macedonians, aiding Brutii in their struggles against the Macedonian cultures. His banner is ‘Roman glory,’ but he commits such atrocities as to be branded a barbarian, if not for the refuge of his royal name. He orders mass executions, allows the rape of women, and even the enslavement of children from foreign nations and cultures. He is a ruthless tyrant with leagues of soldiers at his disposal. The Britons and Germanians, the Egyptians and Parthians, the Greeks and Carthaginians quake at the name of the Julii.

The Julii reign encompasses the provinces of Aquitania, Narbonensis, Transalpine Gaul with its beautiful city Massilia, and Lugdinensis, Central Gaul, and Armorica with its town of Condate Redonum on the Briton border. Julii also stakes Roman garrisons in Cicalpine Gaul, Venetia with Patavium. The Julii province of Umbria borders the Brutii province Latium, in which the city of Rome and the Senate reside. Expansion and bloodshed has drawn Noricum, Illyria with its once-Macedonian city of Segestica, and Dalmatia under Silvanus’ fingertips. Julii maneuvered around Brutii’s own military forces to conquer Paionia with Bylazora, and Dacia, where the chief city Porrolisum suffers under a cleaving plague. Thessalonica in Macedonia fell to the Romans last summer, and already Julii has sent Roman forces south to Thessalia in a siege on the city of Larissa.

In Spain, the Julii captain Manius lays siege to Carthago Nova; another army, led by Captain Amulius, camps outside the city Osca in Taraconenis, besieging the city and its Spanish inhabitants. Julii’s invasion of Spain has triggered violent rising-to-arms in Spain, and Brutii, Scipii and the S.P.Q.R. demand Julii to retreat back into the lands conquered from the barbarian Gauls. Julii refuses, brewing contempt amongst the other families, and drawing the ideology that Julii’s interest is not in the spread of justice and civilization through the light that is Rome, but that he carries a personal agenda of bloodlust and power – a claim that makes many Julii supporters in the Senate staunchly silent.

To make matters worse, at the same time Silvanus ordered Manius and Amulius to invade the territories of Spain, he authorized the invasion of Britannia. Rome had been on good relations with the Britons until Julii decided in his infinite wisdom to garrison forces at the borders of Armorica, Central Gaul, and Lugdinensis. In the summer of 218 B.C., Captains Servius, Decius, and Placus invaded the provinces of Belgica and Germania Superior. Placus besieged Samarobriva in Belgica, and Decius besieged Trier in Germania Superior. Servius marched his men into Agri Decumantes, en route for the town of Mogontiacum. Captain Aulus replaced Servius’ army in the Briton countryside of Belgica. Captain Spurius boarded a fleet of Tirenese – massive ocean-going vessels that could transport troops, cargo, or ram into the sides of other ships to sink them – and landed in the countryside of Britannia Superior, marching for Londinium.

The bloodiest of all battles continued to be waged in Macedonia, amongst the provinces of Illyria, Paionia, Macedonia, Dacia and Thrace. Julii and Brutii forces found themselves in brutal combat with more and more Macedonian troops as those Macedonians from Tribus lazyges to the north and from Aetolia, Attica, Peloponnesus, Thessalia and Laconia in the south on the Mediterranean formed troops and marched them vigorously and courageously against the weakening Roman forces. Captain Galerius, camping in Tribus Lazygnes, keeps scouts posted and soldiers wary as Macedonian forces scour the land. Captain Kaeso, suffering a bloody victory a week prior, struggles in the mountain passes of Thessalia, north of Larissa, where Captain Herennius prepares an assault on the city.

It is between the snowy mountain passes, at the camp of Captain Kaeso, that our story begins. Freezing, starving, weak and weary, Romans, far from home, dreaming of friends and family, wanting nothing more than to taste the wines of their homeland, push towards salvation – and into the mouth of the enemy.



RECTUS UT HABITUM CRUOR

VALLEY OF BLOOD

SOMEWHERE IN THESSALIA, NORTH OF LARISSA

Groans blended with the sighing wind as he tossed and turned in the bed, twisting the sheets around his form like some decrepit Egyptian corpse. Sweat dripped down his face, bleeding from every pore and recess on his countenance, staining the sheets as he struggled for breath in the chilly night air. The silence roared, singing death cries and battle hymns: screaming and yelling, clash of metal and blood being spilt. Men crying for their mothers, grown men sobbing like babies. Arms and legs. He looked down and saw the sheets were lacerated with blood, and ember eyes stared from the shadowy corners of the room.

The large front door burst open, the lock shattering. The doors slammed against the stone walls with a defiant crash; the man leaned forward in blood, huddled in the blankets, and saw the horse at the door rear up on its thick back legs, the front legs kicking. Its feet and sides were sprinkled with blood like freshly-fallen Iberian snow. The horse gave a shriek of war, and the rider, clothed in darkness, stared at the woken figure with golden, burning eyes. He rose the spear in his hands. The horse's front legs connected with the wood floor, and the horse galloped to the bedside. The man in the sheets tried to scramble away, but the spear came down, stabbing icicles of pain into his side. He screamed and felt blood gurgle from the wound. The spear lifted, the iron point dabbed in blood, and fell again, in his leg, piercing bed sheets and flesh. The sheets spread red with color as the spear came down and down, again and again, and the man's screams faded to nothing.

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The iron was cold.

He held the *galea* helmet in his hands, turning it over, letting the candlelight dance upon the traces and grooves and pockmarks. Rough fingers stroked the back of the helmet, feeling the cold metal, and a hand ran across the top, bent for months past. He had cleaned it, but even in the faint lickings of the candles, he could see faint runs of dried blood, seemingly engraved into the iron. He closed his eyes and set the helmet atop the stiff bed.

Twin candles offered flurries of light, crawling over the man's tired and weather-beaten face, over the thick muscles protruding from the *lorica squamata*, a shirt made with iron scales. His feet were bare, lain apart a rug of animal fur. On a chair at a crooked desk draped a woolen tunic and a linen vest.

Crunching outside. For a moment his hand fell to the *spatha* at his side, a 65cm long sword 6cm wide. He had carved his name into the handle, and it was warm from being against his hip. The crunching diminished; he relaxed, turned, sat on the bed, breathing sharply, telling himself to calm down. *He's on his way. Anytime now. Try to get some sleep.* Sleep? Hah! The thought made him smile. True commanders never slept. *It's too cold to sleep. You thought having the largest tent in the camp would be an advantage, but it's just frigid cold; all the papilio butterfly tents trap heat, and yours expels it.* He shivered, spine tingling. Even with three heavy blankets, even after twelve or thirteen hours of marching, he couldn't sleep. That's because he knew. *Why did you send him? You knew! Why did you pitch camp? You should've kept going!* In this

weather? *Your men would be dead. They need sleep. They need food. They need warmth.* No. *I need warmth.* He shivered again. *He's on his way.*

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Snow shifted like rolling sand dunes outside the ramparts; the drifts blasted this way and that in the etching wind, and the gales howled through the stakes on the ramparts. The sentries paced the outside of the camp, 30 feet apart from one another, past the legionary tents and the cavalry tents. The slave tents, the empty mess tents, a few tents for storage. Tents for the slaves. The four opening in the ramparts bore upon them – *porta praeoria*, *porta decumana*, *porta principalis sinistra*, *porta principalis dextra* – the Praetorian Gate, Tenth Gate, left principal gate and right principal gate, which faced southward. All were empty, revealing nothing but a windswept wasteland of snow and dazzling ice breaking the darkness of the night.

The sentries marched, bone-tired and in agony. Having marched thirteen hours before they pitched camp, and working on a low ration of food, their bodies and minds fought back. Eyelids dropped. Minds pitched closed. Thoughts drifted to home, to parties, to wine and celebrations. Thoughts of friends they'd left behind, loved ones left to care after the children. Thoughts that almost warmed the soul in the unbearably cold winter storm.

It was at the *porta principalis dextra* entrance that he was first seen. A cloud of snow growing larger, moving right for the camp. The sentry who spotted him called for some of the other sentries, and they waited at the gate. He rose like a specter from some distant land; the horse drenched in snow, eyes bloodshot, legs knocking, icicles dangling from the mane. The rider didn't fare much too better. The Roman soldiers helped him down.

He opened his mouth: "*Kaeso.*"

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The flap on the tent flew open; the commander leapt up, drawing the *spatha* from his side. The blade glittered like frost in the candlelight. He saw a Roman legionnaire, mocked up in a *galea* Montefortino helmet with a plume of red horsehair sticking out the back, dark and brooding in the cold. A maroon, cloaked, hooded *paenula* draped over him, hiding his arms and the *gladius* short sword hidden under the robes. *Caligulae* boots adorned his feet, encrusted with muddy grime.

Behind him the world was one of white rain and icy puddles; the snow fell in torrents, blinding the eyes of one from seeing ten feet in any direction. The Roman soldier stepped inside, throwing back the hood of the cloak; charcoal eyes with frost-bitten eyebrows melted in the candlelight, and suddenly the room felt so much colder. He let the tent flap fall, and his creaking jaw grinded: "He's returned."

The commander turned, took up the linen vest, threw it on, and pulled the woolen tunic over it. He sat down on the bed and pulled his own *caligulae* boots onto beaten feet. The Roman soldier stood erect, facing forward, stoic. The commander watched him, scrutinizing, and then stood up off the bed. He picked up his *parma equestris*, a round sword of Roman make: wood plated with iron, then painted with silver decors and bronze crossing spears. He pulled it close to him and said, "Is he hurt?"

"Winded," the soldier replied. "And cold. He is very cold."

"Where has he been led?"

"Outside. *Via principalis.*"

"*Ita me di juvent!* Get him in here!"

The Roman nodded and ducked out of the tent; a fierce cold blew in, snowflakes flinging about; the candles went out, caking the commander in darkness. "*Merda.*" Commotion outside. He fumbled about, lighting the candles once more with handheld flint, and just then the flap reeled inwards. He moved quickly around the table with the candles, blocking them from the biting cold. Three Roman sentries entered the tent, a man dressed in several thick woolen coatings at their bidding. Snow and ice clung to the fibers of his clothes and to his beard and face, making him one hundred years older.

"Leave us!" the commander ordered.

The Roman soldiers ducked out. One said, "I will be outside, sir," and disappeared.

The man stood firm. The two looked at each other, listening to the wind outside. The commander said, "Take a seat. On the bed. Here. You look so cold. Get under the blankets." The man nodded and slid into the bed. The commander pulled the thick sheets over him. "Can I get you something to drink?" The man shook his head, mumbled something. "Say again." The commander couldn't make it out. "One more—"

His voice choked as if stabbed with poison. "*There's no time.*"

The commander sat down on the bed. "Talk to me. Tell me."

"The Macedonians are pursuing us with an army of fifteen thousand, coming through the mountains from the north. They've hemmed us in. Unless we climb the mountains, we can't move. We've been ordered to assist Herennius, but a Macedonian force of two thousand some is blocking our path south. We are caught on either side, and both forces, they march by night!"

The commander rose, fearsome. His blood burned. "How far? March by night?"

"For their infantry, a day's march. They will be here by tomorrow evening." He coughed up blood.

"The bigger force? Please tell me no."

"The smaller."

The commander didn't move for an eternity. His bones cried, joints whimpered, when he finally spoke. "We only have six hundred men. Some of those are wounded, and others ill. Most are frost-bitten and complaining. We're low on food. We *need* to reach Herennius. He is expecting us in the assault. Ah. We can rest somewhat assured: the Macedonians know not our plans for assaulting Larissa, or they would be marching their armies right in Herennius' lap. But instead they pin us, six hundred odd cold, tired, starving Romans, against the mountains. Gaia — have we a choice?"

The scout's eyes burned as ice in his eyebrows melted. "No."

"*Merda*," he hissed under his breath.

"*Merda*," the scout agreed.

The commander ran his hands above the candle flames, feeling the warmth crackling against his flesh. The wind howled outside. Sentries paced the ramparts and palisades. The tents were quiet, coughing in the wind, soldiers sleeping. Slaves slept in separate tents, and doctors patrolled the medical tent, unknowing. The snow continued to fall, blowing drifts through the mountain valley, blinding the trees in ice laces, burying the earth in swirling snow.

The commander's eyes fell upon the *galea* helmet at the scout's feet. Empty eye holes spoke volumes.

He lifted up the lid to a chest in the corner, drew out the frigid cloth, folding it over and over in his arms. The rough fiber stuck to his skin and rubbed it raw. He opened the flap to the tent, stepping into the blizzard. The Roman soldier legionnaire sheltered his face from the wind with his semi-circular, 4-foot-tall and 2-feet wide *scutum* shield. He lowered it ashamedly when Kaeso stepped into the snarling winter.

"Captain," the Roman began to say, but he caught the pained, wretched face of the commander, and looking down, he saw what was in his hands. The soldier's heart froze, and all beating even in the tiring weather ceased. His throat knotted and his world spun for a few moments.

Kaeso said nothing, but lifted the purple tunic, and draped it over the front of his tent.

"Soldier," he said under his breath, "get some sleep. We go to war in the morning."

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The oblong rectangular shield felt much heavier than it had last night. His armor, too, steel and cold, weighted him down; he dropped to his knees, puffs of snow lifting with the impact. The winds bit and tore, and his face felt as if it were cracking, splitting apart. He rested the shield in the snow, let it lean against a rock worn and ruddy with time. Footprints led up to the small hill, from where he could gaze at the towering snow-capped mountains, over the spindly Macedonian trees, fraught with snow and ice. He could have seen all of this if it weren't for the blinding sheets of snow falling all around, whistling through the trees and roaring through the arctic mountain passes.

Kaeso removed the helmet, the metal burning cold. His own hands shook, and he closed his eyes, running a hand through the curved hair attached to the rim of the helmet. Snow scorched his ears, and the wind cried in his numbness. The helmet dropped to his knees, plunking in the snow; flakes drifted over the metal. He fell against the icy rock, staring up at a sky alive with thousands upon thousands of twirling snowflakes. A tear ran down his face, half-freezing. His entire body choked and shivered, run through with swords of ice, and his voice crackled:

*"Mars vigila...
Mars vigila...
Mars vigila...
Mars vigila..."*

His sighs died with the wind, and yet he called, refusing not. *Hear me! Hear me!*

"Grant me strength and victory. Grant us dominion! Pull us through and we shall make sacrifices. Strike fear into the enemy! Burden them with the losses of war, the bodies of their heroes! Rain your favor upon us! May your name be glorified. For we are but mortals, shadows and dust, mere whispers to be forgotten with the new rain – you live forever. Any victory is your victory; mere mortals cannot win now. We honor you in fighting. We honor you in standing your ground. Grant us strength... and honor."

He stared into the blinding sky, oblivious to the acrid cold.

Grant us strength, honor, victory. Mere mortals. Shadows and dust.

The rocky hilltop, laced with snow, descended a craggy face and dove into a tundra of ice and snow, a world of shadows and hidden truths. Amidst the trees, creaking and groaning in the wind, casting shadows of disposition and fear, five hundred and fifty-seven soldiers knelt in the snow, their shields before them, heads bowed. They all huddled together in a small clearing, shield-to-shield, muttering incantations of Latin tongue under their breaths. The heat from their own voices massaged them. Horses poked their noses in the snow, seeking food, finding but barren earth, parched with the winter of battle. The soldiers all removed their helmets, driven by desperation and torn courage, to cry out the name of the only one who could save them: Mars, the great god of war!

Kaeso pulled the helmet from the snow and set it on his head. The metal scorched his scalp and ears with sub-zero cackles. All his armor grunted in protest, grinding together, as he stood and grabbed the shield. He gave one last look to the skies and descended the hillside, joining the troops at the bottom. He moved in front of them, to his horse, and saddled it. The horse stepped back and forth. The other troops silently stood, grabbed their shields, put themselves in marching formation.

The fifty-three cavalry soldiers mounted their horses, looking their mighty general in the eye. Fifty other soldiers remained behind to watch over the wounded and to be posted around the abandoned camp. The ragtag army, mostly young men drafted into war by the governor's of their home provinces, had seen more blood spilt and heard enough screams of outrage and death to last two lifetimes. Now they held their shields close to them once more, driven by one masked fortune: survive this last one, and find warm beds and hot soup in Larissa, now besieged, soon to fall. That drove them forward; desire for life. A hunger for food and sleep pushed them into the jaws of battle.

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The scout appeared from between the trees; the horse gasped and panted, and its knees shook. Kaeso urged the man over, and the scout said, "Sir, approximately 2000 enemy soldiers await you four, five miles ahead." He paused to let that sink in; Kaeso's men only numbered in the late 500s. He continued, "Fourteen hundred Pikemen, three hundred cavalry, three hundred archers. Give or take. They are fresh, sir, and haven't seen battle – or if they have, they've already been in and out of recuperation. Their ranks are solid, they have no wounded. They are expectant."

"Expectant?" Kaeso growled. "No, then I think they have not seen nor felt battle."

"Sir, it would be in our best interests to flee."

Kaeso gazed to the right and left. His troops shivered. What had once been a wide stream bed had dried out, leaving a dusty plain covered with snow. The pain hovered between two forests to either side, and the forests splashed against ice-capped mountains thrusting into the swirling blizzard. "To retreat is to walk into an army of fifteen thousand. We have no choice." He lowered his head, felt the cold. "We must press on."

"Sir, we only have some odd three hundred veterans, your cavalry, and a pitiful 200 legionaries. We are cold. We are starving. We are tired. Miserable, sir. There is no strength in our bones."

"Do you think I am such a great man as to be an exception? I have given up my food to the wounded, and have given my noble clothes to those whose toes are frostbitten and falling off. I know the suffering these men have endured, for I, too, have endured it. I know how sick and hungry and exhausted they are. I am, too. I also know that the only way to food, to sleep, to warmth, is through this valley. We must press on. I choose the lesser of two evils: we can stay here and die of cold and starvation, to be scavenged by fifteen thousand Macedonian soldiers, or we can fight – either two thousand or fifteen thousand. This is not a good day. I was hoping to pass through this land and join Herennius at Larissa. Those hopes, I am afraid, were just sputters in the wind. Thank you for your work. But join me as we march forward. Blood will be spilled today. Macedonian blood shall sparkle on our swords."



Hundreds of spears vanished upwards into the biting winds coursing through the mountain pass. Icicles and frost clung to the heavy clothes of the soldiers, knuckles ghostly white as they clutched the hardwood spears. The metal spearheads dripped with fervent cold. Soldiers coughed, held their heads low, let their own breath warm their faces; leaning the heavy poles against their shoulders, the Pikemen knotted their hands and blew on them, fingertips tingling, numb from the arctic swells. The small round shields, colored dark and foreboding, the legendary colors of mighty Macedonia, did little to protect them against the blizzard's fury.

Beyond 1400 Pikemen locked in square formation, 300 archers knelt in the snow, wood-and-steel bows against them. The 200 Macedonian archers did not meet the eyes of the mercenary Cretan archers, better trained and more ferocious than those dragged from villages, towns and cities under Macedonian rule. Two 150-men cavalry units flanked the archers. The horses periodically lifted their legs from the snow, trying to shake the cold, and drowned their noses in the icy, scuffing for grass, finding none on the dry dirt of a once-vibrant river. The horsemen's hands felt frozen as they held the heavy spears in their hands, or set the end in the snow, letting the spear lean against the horse. The two thousand soldiers wore black and orange clothes, dirt-stained metal armor, and wore pear-shaped helmets.

The Macedonian general gazed past the towering spears, into the blizzard.

Between the trees on either side rose a single phantasm, galloping quickly, tossing up columns of dusty snow. The horsemen rode past the archers and to the front of one cavalry unit. He nodded at one of the men, and they spoke briefly. The archers inconspicuously watched, and a few Pikemen turned their heads to get a better eye. The horseman pulled away and returned into the trees, fading into the tundra, with one lone command: "Await the fire."

Muffled words ran between the troops. Soldiers cloaked in red armor, glinting breastplates and rectangular shields, rose from the wintry ash before them, far off. There was no room for rumors: here they were. Those who were about to die – Roman filth.

"*Confuto!*"

The command broke in the howling wind, and the marching ceased. The soldiers gathered into formation. Two urban cohorts, elite veterans, warriors of many battles, famous – even legendary – in their hometowns; flashbacks of prior clashes cut through them as they shivered in the cold. Between the front line urban cohorts, a unit of legionaries – no different from the urban cohorts, save for experience and skill and domed helmets instead of the jawed helmets aflame with a brilliant red mane, as the urban cohorts wore. Three more units of legionaries – short *gladius* sword, rectangular *scuta* shield, brazen body armor and a huddle of seven-foot-long *pilum* javelins held behind the shield – formed the second line, to reinforce the veterans and fellow legionaries if they were unable to pierce the line in the Macedonian ranks. Behind them, Kaeso

on his steed and fifty-three cavalry soldiers, fidgeting hands fingering the hilts of frost-bitten spears and short *gladius* swords.

The captain squinted his eyes, heart melting. Before them the Macedonian infantry reached 15 feet into the sky. All courage failed him, and he blundered to himself, "*Mars vigila, Mars vigila, Mars vigila...*" Beside him, an attendant muttered, "The gods do not favor us this day."

Kaeso swung around on his horse and shouted to the horsemen: "Today we ride! Beyond this wall is hot soup, buttery bread, soft beds and warm fires! Large beds, even larger for the beautiful Macedonian women we all shall meet, unparalleled in all of Rome! Ride with me! Let us cut through these peasantry with pitchforks and press on to fame! Our names shall be hailed all through Rome! *Vires quod veneratio!*"

The Praetorian cavalry echoed:

"Strength and honor!"

The Macedonian general roared to those closest to him, inspiring all measures of steadfast hope and strong-willed courage, "Take up spear and shield! Put on your helmets of bronze! Erase all fear from your heart! Do not forget – you are the sons of Hercules! You are great soldiers! Harden your hearts, and think of better days – I promise you, they shall come!"

Shouts and cries of the Roman entourage carried with the gale-force winds, squeezing between the tall spears, drifting over the archers and into the ears of the Macedonian general. He leaned forward in the saddle, felt each ragged breath of the stallion beneath, and he listened.

A companion growled, "Fear?"

Shaking his head, "No. Attempts at courage. Let us drown them in fear. Pikemen! Phalanx formation!"

The command stretched through the ranks. Each 200-man unit, forty men in a row, five rows deep, blended and shuffled in the snow. Spears clanked together. Biceps and triceps, leg muscles and fiery eyes, all tightened. The first two rows held their fifteen foot spears outward, horizontal to the ever-deepening snow. The second row held their spears over the first two rows' heads, pointing towards the Romans. At the rear of the units, the last row held their spears at a 70 degree angle. A wall of sharp iron, nearly impregnable. As the last spears fell into place, the commanding officers of the phalanx Pikemen gave out resonating cries.

The general's frost-bitten hands, already swollen purple and blue, tightened over the stallion's reigns. The archers betrayed kneeling for standing in the ankle-deep snow. The general cried, "Forward!" The entire Army, an organic, living creature, two thousand strong, took one step after another towards the Romans.

Kaeso kicked his horse forward, moving through the legionaries to the front. He saw it in their faces. He felt it in the deep caverns of his own soul. Even the veterans shook beneath their armor, holding their shields close to protect against the cold. The wind seemed to blow harder and harder, throwing up brilliant blinds of snow against the Macedonian Army as it moved, its phalanxes in the front, archers in the back, two units of horrific cavalry in the rear.

Kaeso raced up and down the lines, hollering: "Do not fear! Do not shrink back in terror! We are mortal; we cannot change that! But the One who precedes us into battle has not forsaken us! Mars smiles upon us, grand citizens of the House of Julii, legendary warriors of the might of Rome! He laughs in the enemy's face! See the wind blowing into their faces! Let us mock and them the brute power of Rome!" *Scuta* shields clashed at the soldiers' feet and javelins banged against the *scuta's* metal bracing. "Today those of us who are heroes shall be legends! Those whose names are unknown shall be celebrated in their hometowns!" Some men pumped their *gladius* swords into the air.

The captain screamed at the top of his lungs, "Let us show these cowards the bitter taste of Roman glory!"

Cheers erupted. Souls warmed.

vires quod veneratio

Macedonian boots flattened the snow. The phalanxes ran the length of the forbidden forest mountains, over the snow-drenched riverbed, and to the opposing, wooded mountain slope,

cutting off any attempt for the Romans to bypass the line and assault the rear. If the Romans were to pass, they would need to break the phalanx wall – an impossible feat.

The Macedonians watched as the first Roman line began to march towards them. The red shields and armor stood out in the blizzard. The two armies moved closer, the spears swaying back and forth. Eyes burnt like melted steel.

“Halt!” the Macedonian general hollered.

A resounding cry, and the phalanxes froze, shimmering.

“Archers!”

The Roman army continued to march.

The archers drew arrows from leather pouches; the arrows, over one foot long, were made with a concoction of wood and steel, with metal tips that, when fired with enough power, could pierce even steel breastplates. The archers fitted arrows into bows, pulled the bows taught, aimed into the blizzard. The wind was against them. The Cretans grinned – they lived for this.

The two Roman cohort units and one legionnaire unit continued to march. Five hundred meters.

The archers’ arms burned. Excitement, ecstasy, thrills mounted.

The emblems on the Roman shields were able to be seen in the heavy snow. Four hundred fifty meters.

The Macedonian general leaned forward on his horse. “Archers! Release!”

Three hundred arrows tore into the sky.

Because of the blinding snow, they did not see the arrows till they were right over their heads. Before they could react, screams of shuddering pain rippled through the ranks. Shields fell into the snow, bodies collapsed. Men tore at arrows in their chest and legs, the tips shove out the back of their flesh. Hands raised, slick with blood; snow melted under gushes of steaming body fluid, arteries and organs torn. Soldiers clutched at arrows in their throats. Panic spread through the ranks. Warriors writhed and whimpered in the snow, and in seconds lay quiet, their youthful and boyish innocence display – crystal as their snowy graves – in vacant eyes and crooked masks of agony.

In pacis, filius tego texi tectum suum abbas (in peace, sons bury their fathers)

In bellum, abbas tego texi tectum suum filius (in war, fathers bury their sons)

Amidst the mayhem and confusion, the commanding unit officers ran up and down the unit lines, shouting, “*Testudo! Testudo!*” The soldiers stepped over their fallen comrades and clustered together. The commanding officers continued to lash out the command, boots splashing in blood-laden snow.

A commander’s voice evolved into a shrill scream as the second volley fell upon them. Arrows laced through the soldiers and more fell, wounds burning in pain and freezing in the snow, all at the same time. The urban cohort commander pitched onto his knees, weakly pulling at two arrows in his chest; blood soaked under the pierced armor, warming him, and he fell onto his side, going limp, eyes rolling into the back of his head.

Another commanded coughed blood welling in his throat. A single arrow had driven through him, splintering his lung; knowing his End was on the horizon, feeling weak already, he continued to rasp, “*Testudo! Testudo!*” Blood trickled down his chin; he blacked out, fell against Roman legionaries. He felt warm, serene, unconcerned. The ocean touched his ears, and he smelt the salt, felt the silky hair of his little girls, heard their laughter – *Elysium*.

His bloody hands scraped against the wooden and steel shields of his men. They tried to pull him inside, but a third and fourth arrow pierced him with the third volley. Arrows landed in the snow between the soldiers, pranced off their shields, and a few soldiers grunted as arrow tips pierced the wooden shields, the steel tips, burning hot from driving through the wood, hovering centimeters before their wide eyes. No more men fell, as three testudos had been formed: the soldiers stood shoulder-to-shoulder, the front and side lines holding their shields to face the outside; the soldiers on the inside braced the lightweight shields above their heads. A fourth volley – arrows pranced off the ceiling of shields.

All movement ceased. No one could break through a wall of phalanxes in testudo. Not a single person knew what to do.

Wounded lay crying in the snow.

The Macedonian general winced and grinned at the same time. In testudo, the archers would be more than lucky to strike down anymore pitiful Romans. The only unprotected soldiers in testudo were those in the very rear, holding their shields above their heads – but no one could shoot an arrow out for it to fall backwards into an enemy. It was impossible. Yet he smiled, for now those poor Roman soldiers were just as clumsy and awkward as his own phalanxes. And no testudo could tear through his walls of spear. He'd gut them all.

He called out, "Phalanxes! Forward!"

The command echoed down the spiked wall. Snow crunched. The line moved forward step-by-step. The wind was bitter; yet the Macedonians' rage and hatred for all things Roman was even more so. First the Brutii invaded sacred Macedonian land, and then the Julii backed them up with reinforcements. The Romans plundered villages, besieged cities, enslaved – and at threat of revolt, violently exterminated – the inhabitants, all under that ungodly banner: *Roman glory!* The Romans were sophisticate savages, and the Macedonians loathed them all the more for it. The icy cold, brittle winds, the frozen snow was hot as fire compared to their everlasting contempt and fury towards the Roman Way and all who claimed it.

The general saw the fumbling testudos and snarled to his comrade, "We run them down this day!"

He shouted to the archers, "Use fire!"

To the advancing Pikemen: "Drench your spears with the blood of Rome!"

The beautiful chorus ran through the ranks: "The blood of Rome!"

Selected infantry ran up and down the Cretan archers' line. Each infantryman carried a ragged piece of timber, the crests wrapped in tar-soaked cloth, aflame, specters in the ashen storm. The Cretans relished the warmth as they dunked the tips of their arrows in tar and put them to flame. They raised the arrows, the flame flickering over ice-riddled faces, facial hair eaten with lice and frost. Together they fitted their bows and pointed them into the sky. Upon the general's command, they released. A flood of one hundred flaming arrows shot into the winds.

Those at the front of the testudos felt the color drain from their faces. Upon the sight of the wall of spears moving forward, strength melted with the snow. The wind blew hard, and turned, and carried an updraft of snow against the testudos. At the same time, the snowflake-wrought heavens shimmered as if lightning were splicing through the wintry storm clouds. The arrows aflame fell upon the shields or plunked into the snow, the burning tar melting all hope. Soldiers gasped – "*Pro Iuppiter!*" – as burning embers fell between locked shields.

That was when the ground began to shake.

Not even the thunder gods of Elysium could turn their heads to the awful blood-curdling cries and ferocious war hollers as hundreds of coal-black stallions stormed into the narrow mountain pass behind the bulk of the Roman Army. Thick clouds of ashen snow lifted from the earth, gray sentinels; ice clung to the manes, fire curled from the nose, eyes as dark as Moria pierced the sheets of snow, falling with no retreat. Hundreds of horses poured into the pass, kicking snow and galloping between the trees at either side of the dry riverbed. The soldiers upon them gazed with the eyes of hawks, and wore braided wings upon their helmets – they flew like eagles down the pass, the horses carrying them faster and faster, weaving between the great trees.

The Roman Army, upon hearing the vigilante cries, turned their heads; eyes befell the great white cloud drenching trees and bare sun: ripples of fear and shock rang out. The Macedonian phalanxes, propelled by the enemy's drain of courage, paced quicker, the great spears swaying with each footfall. Now the Romans found themselves between a rock and a hard place, with no way out: Phalanxes, archers, cavalry to the south, nearly three hundred cavalry storming upon them from the north.

Driven by the sight of the flaming arrows, the Companion Cavalry loomed upon the loose net of Roman cavalry and infantry.

The Roman Praetorian cavalry, lit with deeds of valor and flamed hope, clutched their spears, the tips reflecting off the snow.

The Macedonians continued to march their phalanxes forward; the Cretan archers reloaded flaming arrows and the Macedonian regulars launched two hundred arrows towards the three remaining legionary units and the fifty-four cavalry soldiers.

The Macedonian general with two units of Greek Cavalry galloped around the archers and prepared to brush through their own phalanxes and assault the testudo.

The Companion cavalry – only a quarter mile away – closed off any retreat, and stoic snow-capped mountains to the left and right forbade escape.

They had no way out; no choice.

The testudos broke apart as the soldiers saw the arrows flying over their heads and into the stunned remnants of Roman military. The shields clattered and clanged as the soldiers stepped out of formation, in a confusing whirlwind. The remaining commanding officer screamed, "Charge!" The soldiers spun at his voice and followed him, running through the snow towards the marching phalanxes. The spears spread before them, but they ignored all fear; they came to a halt ten meters in front of the nearest spears. The commander called, "Fire at will!" Both the legionaries and urban cohorts drew the javelins, aimed, and fired. The javelins flew through the air and into the Macedonian soldiers. Some were blocked by the towering spears, but more than a few cut through the ranks.

Macedonian soldiers dropped their spears and fell to the ground, impaled. Blood sprayed over their armor and splashed in the snow.

The Romans reloaded, aimed, fired. The sound of cutting air and fervent cries. Macedonian soldiers toppled against one another. The spears were knocked back and forth by wavering bodies. Brief shouts amongst the lines and the Pikemen tried to reestablish themselves. This gave the Roman soldiers time to reload, and by the time the nearest phalanx started to run, another barrage of javelins pierced a handful of youthful soldiers. They fell against their comrades and the spears were knocked to and fro.

The Roman officer hollered, "Charge!"

Legionaries and urban cohorts gripped their *scutas* in one hand and drew the short *gladius* swords in the other. Ferocious war cries carried out and they charged the phalanx. The broken spear formation allowed them to move between the spears; each soldier thrust the gladius into the enemy, searing armor and flesh. Blood sprayed into the air and the Macedonians screeched. They dropped their spears to the ground and grabbed for their swords. The Romans blocked their blows and stabbed back. Macedonians clutched wounds and staggered, in a daze, only to be trampled under the Roman boot. Instilled by hatred, the Romans swung their swords in every direction, in a turmoil bout of blood and gore. The earth burnt red as lava, and bodies scattered the earth. Roman soldiers fell, too, crying out to Mars and for their mothers back home. They writhed in the dirt, losing life in a foreign land, for a cause they cared nothing about, realizing how shallow Roman *glory* really was.

The surrounding phalanxes hooked around to engage the Roman soldiers breaking the line.

Roman soldiers fell into the snow as the arrows fell. The horses shrieked and nearly stampeded. The cavalrymen kept them at bay, turning this way and that, only to see the Companion cavalry racing down their throats. Kaeso's heart fluttered. The Roman legionnaire units had blended together in the fiasco, the commanding officers shouting but not being heard. Chaos erupted as they realized they were completely hemmed in, fish in a barrel. The Companion cavalry were nearly upon them.

Kaeso roared, "*Vox rabidus quod amitto canis bellum!*"

The Roman cavalry charged across the field, lowering their spears to meet the oncoming 300 horsemen.

The Roman infantry, lost in the confusion, split up, half running towards the phalanxes and another half after the Roman cavalry.

A few Roman soldiers escaped the phalanxes and charged after the archers. The archers drew arrows, fitted them, and fired. A handful of Roman soldiers released their swords and pitched to the earth. Those not snatched raised their swords and leapt upon the archers, stabbing fiercely.

Blood covered the snow and the archers fell under the Roman forces; archers fell to the ground, waving their hands, crying for mercy, but the Romans stabbed them in the throat, face and chest.

The Macedonian archers scattered; the Cretan fired fiery arrows into the Romans.

Roman soldiers fell into the snow, flames burning the wounds. They gasped for breath and clawed at the ice. Macedonian archers, too, were struck, and grabbing at their backs, staggered about, in a daze, before falling. The Cretans reloaded, and the Romans charged them, stabbing their gladius and blocking with the shields. The Cretans were well-trained, and tossing away the bow, drew swords and counter-attacked. Shields were broken, Roman swords scattered. Romans tried to fend off the Cretans but they beat them into the ground.

The Romans were completely overcome by the mercenaries, and the last Roman fell into the snow, pleading with bloody palms, but felt the sword stabbing through him with burning pain. He saw stars, felt lightheaded, and puked blood. He rolled over and the sword drove through his back, piercing his spine. He lay paralyzed, but feeling, and watched the struggling phalanxes and the wearying Roman infantry, feeling the blood drain from his body. His eyelids slowly slid shut.

Horses shrieked as the spears were driven through their chests. Horses flopped over, spilling their riders. The Romans drove through the Companion cavalry, impaling soldiers and horses upon the long spears. The Macedonian cavalry, as well, ran through the Roman line, unseating dozens of Roman soldiers. The soldiers fell to the ground, many knocked unconscious, others killed by the impact of the spear. More crawled amidst the snow as horses galloped back and forth, hearing the shouts and cries of bloodshed in their ears. Some unseated because their horses fell got back up, drew their swords, and cut at the legs, thighs and chests of passing Macedonians, or cut the legs out from the horses so the horses would pitch forward, breaking their necks, and the riders would be tossed; as the riders lay on the ground, the Romans would slice open their face and throat.

Kaeso wheeled his horse around, slashing and stabbing at the Macedonians who drew near. Fury was written all over his face, and his muscles burned with a power not of this world. Not even the wailing winds could dissipate his blood-lust. He completely changed as he felt the warm blood of his enemies splash over his own arms, legs, chest and face. He tasted the sour blood of the Macedonian riders and felt the satisfaction of the kill. Riders ran up and he cut them from their saddles, all the while shouting, "Rome! Rome! Rome!"

A Macedonian rode up behind him and slashed his sword. Kaeso gave a shout and twisted to the side as the sword's blade cut through the cloth at the base of his back, splitting skin tissue. Pain rocketed through the Roman captain and he toppled from his horse, landing in the snow. He saw white for only a few moments, heard the thousands of hoofs around him. He saw horses all around and felt for his sword. He found it, and stumbling about saw a Macedonian soldier groaning for help. He drove the sword into the man's throat, twisting it. Blood gurgled like a fountain.

He tottered back, completely in a daze. Blood covered the back of his tunic. The air felt warm.

A soldier was shouting, "Captain! Captain!" but was silenced as he was trampled under a horse.

Kaeso turned around. The trampling Macedonian raced for him. Kaeso side-stepped and swung out his sword, slicing it along the horse's throat. Blood sprayed all over the snow and the horse staggered forward. The Macedonian fell to the earth, rolling in the snow; he tried to stand but Kaeso stabbed him over and over until blood cleaned the snow out to the ruddy earth of the riverbed. He continued to savagely stab the broken body, the Macedonian barely clinging to life; Kaeso's clothes burnt crimson.

The reinforcing phalanxes maneuvered around the Romans already entwined with the original phalanxes, and marched towards the fresh legionaries swarming across the valley. The Romans froze to a halt, drawing their javelins, shouting amongst themselves. The Macedonians continued to march.

The earth broke apart and Greek cavalry roared in from either side, spears pointing outwards. The phalanxes froze solid and the Romans were turned about, hurling their javelins at the cavalry thundering upon them. A few horses and soldiers fell, but the Romans were knocked against each other as nearly three hundred spears tore through a bulk of one hundred men. Romans fell

into the snow, impaled and gasping for breath, spewing blood. The horses trampled them and any Romans remaining, either trying to fight or running, were caught under the blade of the sword or the hoofs of the horses.

The phalanxes turned around from the bloody field and charged the Romans pressing against the other phalanxes.

Almost one hundred legionaries jumped into the fray of running horses, hurling javelins and stabbing horses and soldiers with spears. Screams of men and animal alike lit up the air and blood stained clothes and manes. Macedonians hacked at the Romans with their own swords; Romans dropped their weapons and spun about, dark and bloody lines drawn over their flesh. Dismounted Macedonians launched themselves against the charging Romans, breaking into them with swords. Roman soldiers fell, awash in their own blood, crying for help and love and mothers in distant lands. A Roman screamed for the gods as he lay on the ground, legs crushed by trampling horses, bowels opened by a sword; he held his own organs in his hands and blood melted the snow beneath him.

Kaeso stumbled over him and stabbed a Macedonian horse. The horse fell atop the rider, pinning him. The rider cursed Kaeso as the Roman stabbed his gladius into the man's face, crushing bone. Kaeso jumped over the horse and slashed a wounded soldier, dropping him next to the ones whose guts were spilt all over the soil.

Horses and bodies littered the clearing. Snow melted under the blood. Men and animal alike cried out in pain and agony. Kaeso heard thundering behind him and turned as three Macedonian cavalry bore upon him. He rose his sword and shrieked, "Rome!" as he was trampled into the ground beneath their blood-soaked hooves.

The Roman soldiers engaged with the phalanxes were fueled by passion, not strength. All strength had abandoned them long ago. Their swords were dripping with blood, the frost melted with the friction of the slashing and stabbing. The frightened Macedonians fought back; the shields were ruttled with bends and grooves from the enemy's assaults. The Romans blocked, cut down, moved forward, blocked, cut down, moved forward. They stank of death, and breathed it in. It was as much a part of life as a heartbeat and pulse.

The Macedonian phalanx reinforcements swung around and ran forward from behind the Romans. Romans cried out as spears burst through them, erupting from their stomachs. Shields dropped and then the Macedonians attacked with slashing swords. Shoulders and arms gushed blood and chests and abdomen's dangled organs and stripped flesh. Roman soldiers lost consciousness and toppled into the snow. The remaining Romans were caught between the wall of spears and the hacking ferocity of the Pikemen before them. Slowly their numbers faded, and their dead ran awash the snow.

A Roman urban cohort, helmet long abandoned, drilled his sword through the shoulder of an enemy, drew it out, stabbed again, the enemy crumpling. Before he could raise his sword again he toppled forward, a spear impaling his back. The spear yanked out and he grabbed at a Macedonian soldier, whimpering and sobbing. The Macedonian kicked him in the face, knocked him over, and drove his own spear into the Roman's bare scalp.

Horses galloped around any of the remaining Roman soldiers, the riders hacking at them with swords, trying to get the horses to trample them underfoot. Seeing it was hopeless, scattered Romans ran for the mountains. The Companion cavalry screamed out horrendous war cries and followed, knocking them down and trampling them, or swinging out with their swords upon passing and leaving the Romans crawling in the grass, backs drenched in blood and split flesh. A Roman's body was crushed under the hooves of a Macedonian horse, and he lay in the earth, body crushed, organs splitting, lungs flattened. He felt his eyes bulge, saw the world hovering, tasted blood in his throat, and then heard the birds singing, smelt the falling leaves of autumn, and then... *nothing*.

The Macedonian general pulled the reign on his horse, galloping over the bodies of wicked Romans and fallen comrades. The snow had become as red as satin crimson, and the sweet smell of snow had been replaced with the all-too-familiar stench of death and decay. Macedonian

soldiers picked themselves up, crawling over the earth, thankful it was over. Others staggered, covered with blood, barely holding on to swords or spears, glazed eyes flickering over their friends and enemies. Most had never seen war before. They had expected something... romantic.

The Macedonian general pulled his horse to a stop and jumped down. His own hands were dirty with blood.

A horse pulled alongside him. "Sir," the rider said, "we've cut off any routing Romans."

The general nodded, breathing hard. He looked with compassion on his men. "We've done well. Our country will be proud. The invaders have been pushed back." He said it all but didn't really care. He saw a soldier huddled over a corpse, crying softly. Was it all worth it? He loved Macedonia to death. Alexander the Great was his hero. How would Alexander have done? A great victory has been won. *Tell yourself that, general. Tell yourself that.*

"Sir?" the man asked.

The general suddenly felt cold, hated, alone. "What?"

"The survivors, sir. The enemy who have not died. With them, what shall we do?"

The general knew the right answer. *Kill them all.* "Bring them to me."

••

Horse blood, dry and cracking, clung to his limp brown-and-orange tunic. The once-gleaming steel breastplate was splashed and speckled with blood, and one of the white feather spouts on his pear-shaped helmet bent to the side. His lungs wheezed with each gasp, and a bloodied sword dangled from a limp hand.

Wandering eyes flashed back and forth, morbidly brilliant; he swaggered amongst the blood-drenched snow, twisted bodies, fallen horses. Snapped spears, broken swords, arrows embedded in flesh or snow. Torn flesh, gutted boys, vacant eyes and hollow screams frozen in time. The blood hardened in the cold. Young men locked in death's icy snare. Some had crawled towards the forests, sides opened and guts spilling, only to grow weak and collapse, with no resolution save to turn blue, purple, bloated in the snow.

There would be celebrating throughout Macedon, but for now, in this valley of the dead, all that was heard – was weeping.



ROMANORUM VIA

THE ROMAN WAY

SOMEWHERE IN THESSALIA, EXACT LOCATION UNKNOWN

Pain. That was all he knew. The most unbearable pain, running in rivers up and down his spine, coursing into his arms and hands, up his neck like lightning, and his head pounded as if a spiked mace were being jabbed inside and twirled around. He closed his eyes and balled his hands, tried to forget it, tried to drift off, but the pain pulsed with each breath. For a moment he stopped breathing, desiring just a moment without pain, only to let out an articulate choke which only sent thunderheads stabbing through every part of his body. The silence roared. The cold bit. He saw spots, an unfamiliar face – dark eyes, dark hair, dark skin – and then he knew nothing.

••

“Do you want some water?”

Light. The voice thundered. He wondered if he were being spoken to by a god. He shut his eyes. Too bright. Only made the agony worse. “No.” His throat cracked and split when he spoke. He coughed and tasted blood on a swollen tongue.

“I know you feel much pain, even as you are not mortally injured. If I put hope in *your* gods, I would say they have favored you.” The voice was deep and yet sweet. Maybe only sweet because he so desired companionship. “You are not alone. Fourteen others are held prisoner. My physicians treat their wounds even now.”

Prisoners. He sarcastically mumbled, “Physicians? There is no enjoyment in taking the lives of the defenseless.”

“Not at all,” the voice replied. “Do you forget it is your people who watch the weak and helpless die at the hands of mercenaries and wild animals, in the dusty stadiums, to the storm of applause?”

“It is not your place to criticize the justice of Rome.”

The stranger snapped, “Since when is it your place to invade my homeland?”

“I am simply a soldier.”

“Aren’t we all?”

“I follow orders.”

“No. You are not a soldier. Not now. You are a prisoner. And does your following orders include inhumanely executed acts of senseless violence? You Romans destroy our crops, burn our homes, rape our women, enslave or exterminate our men. I have seen the great pits of fire, and smelt the burning flesh. I’ve heard you send your prisoners to the games, and publicly crucify anyone who protests Roman authority. Your chant is ‘strength and honor’ – how much strength does it take to break the neck of an infant; where is honor in the screams of ravaged women?”

“Do you plan on dragging us to your cities, only to execute us? Sweet revenge.”

“No. No. I am a soldier, not a savage. I hate your Rome. I hate your ways. Do not doubt that. My heart lies in the pulse of Macedonia. I shall kill many more Romans before I fall. Yet it is in battle that I respect you. I respect you because you fight with unparalleled intensity. You fight like gods – and fall the same.”

“We fight like gods?” He coughed again, and spoke despite the pain. “Do the gods bleed? Do they cry? Do gods sob for their mothers as they hold their own organs in their hands?”

"Your voice shakes, but not in fear. You are angry."

Silence. He opened his eyes and stared at the man despite the brilliant light from half-melted candles.

The man said, "Do you imagine I speak with you now only to put your neck under the axe blade?"

The tent flap opened. Silencing wind blew in, and the candles flickered out. The visitor stood, issued orders in a foreign tongue, and slipped out. The prisoner thought he had spoken Greek. The prisoner did not know Greek. The tent flap blew back and forth in the winter wind, but the newcomers sealed it shut by placing a small wooden chair before it. They spread a cloth over a table and opened it wide, holding up crude bone- and bronze-instruments, inspecting them in the candlelight as the candles were lit one-by-one.

One of them said, "Roll over, Roman."

••

The visitor returned. The prisoner barely woke, could hardly speak. The operation had been very painful, and he had rested countless hours. Now the visitor pulled up a chair, lit some candles, and hovered over the prisoner. The prisoner felt the warmth from the small flames dancing over his cheeks. It felt good.

The visitor said nonchalantly, "I imagine you are at a loss as to why I have decided to speak with you, over the other prisoners, if at all."

"Could I have that water now?"

"Don't you wish to know why I speak with you?"

"My throat is dry."

He shook his head. "The physicians. I apologize. They have you under special treatment, but do not act like it. None of them like you." He stood and walked to the side of the tent, prepared a wooden goblet with water, and helped the prisoner drink. Outside, the rustling of feet in the wind, scattered Greek voices, the clanking of metal-against-metal.

The prisoner drank, and asked, "How are my companions?"

"Your men are being attended to."

"They are not my men... Shall they live?"

"It cannot be foreseen. Some are gravely wounded. Yet hold faith: our field physicians are very skilled."

"So were ours. They are all dead. Can you get my companions some water, too?"

"It is not customary to give water to prisoners."

"Special treatment."

"Only for you."

"Only for me."

"Don't you wish to know why?"

"My heart breaks for my companions. Give them water, and I will ask, *Why?*"

The visitor stood and left the tent. He barked out orders and entered. He sat back down. "It is done. Now you will learn why I have not slain you and your men. It is customary to walk through the aftermath of battle and execute any surviving enemies."

"They are not my men. I am not a man of authority."

"I saw you fighting my Pikemen. Not you as in 'Romans,' but you as in: you. Your sword gleamed with fire, and your eyes burned with passion. Your shield was knocked and bloodied; you blocked and struck as if Hercules had abandoned Macedonia and joined the Roman's god, Mars."

"This is why you treat me well? I am a fighter?"

"No. For I am a better fighter than you. Most of my men are better fighters than you."

"Not fighting."

"Yet even if it were, would it not be worthy?"

"Six hundred Romans fell. How is that possible, if they fought with each an arm held by Mars and Hercules?"

"Yes, but you-"

"I fell, too. I am not a god. I am a man. Mortal. My wounds lay testament." He grunted. Still they hurt.

"Then you see it is not your skill – or talent? – that begs my respect."

"Then what? Why do you beg me to ask, then refuse to answer me? If my destiny lies in the tip of a Macedonian spear, I embrace it. I am sick of it all. Sick of the memories that never leave. Sick of hearing, in the cool wintry silence, the groans of the wounded and the screams of the damned. Macedonian hatred in the name of Roman atrocities is my salvation. *Vires quod veneratio*. What is strength? What is honor. I wish to know, *what is peace?*"

"Strength? Honor? Glory? Do you believe that is why I've spared you?"

"How can I know? You answer questions with questions."

"I spare you because I have seen something I've seen in no other Roman. Not 'strength,' not 'honor,' not 'glory.' These are all ideals. Roman strength is brutality. Roman honor is murder. Roman glory is the rape of nations and enslavement of freedom. Yet in you, I see none of these. I see *clementia*."

"Mercy."

"On the battlefield, one of my men's spear broke in a Roman charge. He tried to draw his sword, but the frost, it sticks to the blades: he could not draw it from the sheath. You rushed upon him. He raised his hands and fell to his knees, crying out, pleading, *Mercy! Mercy! Mercy!* All around you, your fellow Romans slaughtered those who were defenseless because the phalanx was smashed. You raised your sword, but upon looking into his eyes, you turned and struck another, slaying him – but leaving the unarmed soldier alone. I saw this from horseback, and all fury fled from my bones. Roman strength, honor, glory, I'd seen it – but this bore my own strength, honor and glory. The heavens stood still. Mars and Hercules, locked in hand-to-hand combat amidst the heavenly storehouses of snow, froze and released, if only for a moment. *Clementia*."

A seeping silence. The prisoner: "It is not 'mercy' to spare the life of a boy with blood on his hands, blood not foreign, but home. Had I struck the boy, you would have found me fallen on my own sword."

"You are not a merciless Roman, and are therefore the first worthy Roman I have met. You are not a murderer."

"You are not going to execute me?"

"No. You shall live."

"And my companions?"

"*Qui ostendo misericordia vadum exsisto ostendo misericordia.*"

Those who show mercy shall be shown mercy.

"You spare my life in mercy."

"No – I spare your life, because first you spared."

••

The visitor returned the next morning. The prisoner felt much better, and even smiled as the one who could take his life with just a word entered the tent. The visitor smiled at the breadcrumbs over the sheets. He said, "Can I get you anything?"

"No, but thank you. I have been fed well. Bread and soup."

"I was sure they gave you and your men double rations."

Fattening us up for the kill. He didn't think so. It didn't feel that way. "It was very good."

The visitor walked around the bed, and sat down in the chair. Forever he said nothing, then, "Roman soldier: what is your name?"

"Manias," he said. "I am – or was – a legionnaire."

"Manias. A strong Roman name... Are you married?"

"No. I've been enlisted since I was eighteen. Three years served in the Roman Army."

"That makes you–"

"Twenty-one."

"A good age. A warrior's age. How many battles have you fought?"

"Three too many."

"Three? I have fought eight too many, in the mountains, the valleys, in the fields and towns, over the rivers. More blood has been spilt at my command than I could fathom. The last many nights I have tossed and turned in my sleep, seeing those hollow eyes of dead soldiers, all of them looking at me, pleading, *Why? Why? Why?* I cannot sleep well after battles. Nor anytime, ever since the Pripet Marshes."

"I do not think you are a bad man."

"And you are right. I am *not* a bad man. I do not thirst for this bloodshed. I am not harbinger of blood-lust. I have a beautiful wife, and as I lay alone at night, I can feel the warmth of her olive skin, taste the sweetness of her wine. Her breath is lavender, and it smells like waking up amidst a garden of flowers, with the sun on your face and the birds singing. Oh, and her eyes!" He was smiling now, eyes glazing over. "They sparkle as freshly-fallen snow. In my dreams, I hold her against me, wrap my arms and legs around her, and she groans against me, as she did on our wedding night. This is every night, Manias – every night she is with me, and I wonder if I shall ever see her again, ever kiss her soft cheek, or stroke her silky hair, feel the warmth of her saccharine embrace. It frightens me, Manias. I tell myself I am fighting for her, spilling blood to preserve her freedom, and at times that thought calms me. But as I see the enemy marching towards me, I put on a mask of unfettered courage. Inside I am a boiling storm of fear and bottled emotions. Sadness. Depression. Shall I ever hold her again? When I kick the sides of the horse, lay my spear horizontal, and charge into the enemy, the emotion pops out of the battle, and rage settles over me. When my spear pierces and swords become thick with blood, Macedonia in all its power and glory is forgotten – and I see only her before me."

He continued to stare at the wall. His head bowed, and he stared at the dirt ground.

Manias: "Why do you tell me this?"

He slowly looked up, peering into his eyes. "You ache, Manias. You remember her, too, don't you?"

"She does not know I love her–"

"It is strange how men can be so brave in battle but so shy in bed."

"It is not like that. I have not slept with her. Nor have I kissed her, or tenderly held her. I have never looked upon her with this ache. I know her only as a friend, and no such thoughts of love came across me when I saw her. But once I left my hometown, and marched into Macedonia, singing war chants and battle cries, it is her I thought of. Surrounded by men, I wanted her. Cold and freezing, I wanted her. Starving and weak, I wanted her. Covered with blood and panting in the stench of death, I wanted her. Gazing upon the bloody fields after a battle, I wanted her to hold me as I cried. I did not love her until I left her, and for three years I've seen her everywhere. People's faces. The rain. Songs of the birds. Even in the lightning." He laughed, but it came out as a cough. "Always in my dreams."

The man said, "You and I have a lot alike, except you've no children. I have a little boy. Dark hair, dark eyes, dark skin. He would be a fierce warrior, were he not all of four feet tall! I thank the gods that he dreams not of war, but of peace. He wants to take over his uncle's winepress. With night's approach and evening's dawn, my wife and I would walk hand-in-hand through the grape orchards, our little one always running ahead of us, skipping through the rows of grapevines. He would pick grapes and eat them. Even when they were sour, he pretended he liked them."

"He sounds like my brother – he is you, too. Eleven now, eight when I was cast into the town watch. He wants to be like me. An 'honorable Roman soldier.'" It came out with a poignant mark of distaste.

"Well," the man said. "We cannot help him now."

"Yes..." His eyes fell out of time, and in a moment he returned. "He would listen to my grandfather's stories of war. My grandfather served in small campaigns against the Gauls of inferus Europe. At school, my brother was entranced by stories such as those of Alexander the Great."

"The Macedonian general who swept past Babylon!"

"Did you ever dream of becoming the next Alexander?"

His tone went cold. "Any such dreams were dashed in blood and weeping."

"My brother dreams of glory on the field of war."

"As did I. As did *you*. But we know there is no glory to be found in war."

"I would sacrifice myself to the gods just so my brother would never know what we do. I pray his soul be kept pure."

"You are a good brother."

"I hope his dreams change – or they remain dreams and dreams only."

"Men grow tired of sleep, women, wine and dancing sooner than they grow tired of war."

Manias' eyes fell. The man stood and headed for the tent exit.

Manias looked up. "I still have not your name. Or is it forbidden?"

He paused at the flap, and turned over his shoulder. "It is forbidden." As he left, he said, "Alypius."

"Alypius. A strong Macedonian name."

"Sleep well. Worry not."

Manias found himself alone once again. The pain slowly returned.

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It was yet a few more days until Manias could walk. He hobbled with a walking stick and exited the camp alongside Alypius. The snowstorm had ended, and the sun burned brightly, the snow on the ground, in the trees, stashed about the scattered tents and supplies and horses reflecting like a million glass paintings. Macedonian soldiers, armed with spears and swords, bows and arrows, were everywhere. They wove a path through the camp, going slowly, especially along the perimeter. Manias noted how everyone stopped what they were doing and knelt down before Alypius as he passed. He then realized Alypius was the Macedonian general. Manias and the general ate with his companions. A few of the prisoners had died due to problems in surgery, and they mourned the losses together. The companions despised the enemy general, but on seeing Manias speaking openly with him, they joined in as well. That day all of them spent four and a half hours together, talking about home, life, the gods, sharing jokes and laughing together. Even in the cold, the sun warmed their tunics, and servants draped them with blankets. They ate supper together, said good-byes, and departed. Alypius returned Manias to the tent, and guards guarded the tent as night fell over the sleepy, snowy valley.

Alypius stood outside the tent as a horse rushed up the narrow street woven between thrown-about tents. The Greek cavalry rider hopped off the horse and said to Alypius, "Sir, fifteen thousand Macedonians are descending into the valley." He beamed with excitement. "News of your victory has reached their ears, and there will be much drinking and celebrating tomorrow night!"

Alypius did not smile. He thanked the man for the news and told him to scout out the area to watch for any Roman troops. He did not want a celebration party being trashed. As the scout departed, Alypius covered his face and walked through the darkness, in deep distress.

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"What is it?"

"You are leaving. Get dressed. Come with me." He left the tent.

Manias quickly dressed and stepped out of the tent, his boots smashing in the snow. The wind was calm and the snow sparkled, a sea of ruby diamonds. Macedonian soldiers gave him strange looks, hesitant stares, but nothing of the original hatred he had seen in their eyes. Now he read something of... disgust? He searched about the tent for the general, and saw him speaking with several armed spearmen, whose spears were nowhere to be found. He trotted over; the general dismissed the Pikemen and turned to face him.

"You will be departing. As you requested, your men will be joining you."

"They are not my men," he said once more. "I am no commander."

The general ignored him, speaking quickly. "You will be traveling with one of the field diplomats. He will take you and your men to the city of Larissa." Pain swept behind his eyes. "It has fallen into Roman hands."

"I am sorry."

"Truly? I doubt that. But it is of no consequence here. A small attaché of Pikemen will be accompanying you for protection. My trust and degree of honor for you will be much broken if my Pikemen and diplomat do not return. You are the only Roman I have ever liked."

"I swear no harm will come to them."

The general nodded. "Quickly. Time is running out."

"Why now? Why the haste?"

"Fifteen thousand Macedonians are marching towards us."

"How does that-" He understood. The fifteen thousand soldiers would not understand.

The general confirmed his fears. "They would not hesitate to kill you. Their general is higher ranking than I, and he hates Romans unlike any of these men here. He would kill every Roman citizen, man or woman, boy or girl, if he had the chance. So you must be off."

He sighed, the cold wind stinging in his throat. "Why have you saved me?"

"You are the only Roman I have ever liked."

"Yes. I know. But you've never told me why."

"You showed mercy."

"That's not it. I see it in your eyes."

The general smiled. "It is in your eyes, that I see myself."

Manias cast his eyes before the snow.

The general looked out over the pristine mountains. "You do not want to be here. You do not enjoy the kill. You kill because you are ordered. You have been enslaved by Roman politics. Macedonian militia once enslaved me, but I protested through obedience. I rose to the position I am now, and as I lay in bed at night, I wonder if it isn't a curse. A curse that I am to wander this world a killer, hated by my enemies. Even if my name were chanted in the streets, even if I were to become a legend to be immortalized in a crystal statue, to be set before the throne of Porrolisum, what would it profit my soul? My own deeds of valor and honor haunt me, and I always wake in a sweat, praying it isn't true. I have watched you sleep. I have seen you twist and turn and sweat and cry, locked in dreams of turmoil. Manias, you have taught me that the enemy is not one made up of savage beasts, but of men who have families, children, dreams and hopes. Men who want to lead simple lives with simple jobs."

Manias said, "You have taught me the same."

The general smiled, and touched him on the shoulder. "Friendship has no boundaries. Remember me."

"By my blood, Alypius, I swear never to take a Macedonian life again. May the gods strike me if I do."

The general's eyes watered, stinging in the sunlight. "Go with peace. May your gods protect you."

"And yours."

Manias shuffled past the general and to the armed Pikemen. They seized his arms. They did not like him as the general did. Manias prayed the general would not be treated any differently now that he'd befriended one of the enemy. The Pikemen took him through the camp; he caught the eyes of many Macedonian soldiers, and in the deepest he saw a reflection of his own. Heart melting, tears built up as he realized he had not killed men. He had killed young boy. Innocent boys. They, too, wanted to go home. This was not a war of justice vs. evil, it was not a war of sophistication vs. savagery. It was a war of boys against boys. It was a war the soldiers did not wish to fight.

The diplomat awaited in a wagon pulled by two horses draped in frost, eyes glazed over with flakes of snow. Their noses dripped the ashen paste. The wagon was large, and eight other prisoners sat inside. Six of the other prisoners had died from complications of the surgeries, or from the wounds themselves. Manias crawled in with them and sat down, curling his legs against his chest. About ten Pikemen followed with their spears, and he watched the icy lace on the trees as the wagon rocked back and forth into the mountains.

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The wagon rocked over the last embankment and slid down a path covered with ice. The trees were bare and dripped with icicles, beautiful. The wind whistled through the trees. Ice tinkled like

sonnets in the breeze. Larissa came into view, a brilliant city surrounded by a massive stone wall. Some of the buildings within were smoking, and several piles of bodies were being burned outside the city walls. Manias turned his head, refusing to look, but the odors of the burning flesh whipped over them. The horses snorted. The Macedonians' hearts flared in hatred. Graves had been dug in the snow, and bodies were being lain inside, dressed in full Roman battle-dress, swords and javelins and all.

Roman soldiers wearing heavy clothes and only carrying their short swords, supervising the burning of the Macedonian bodies, saw the wagon coming down and called for the authorities. A Roman leader, surrounded by an entourage of armed bodyguards, approached the wagon, horseback. The wagon driver, being the diplomat, pulled the wagon to a stop as the Roman cavalry approached.

The horses' breath fogged before them as the Romans encircled the train. The leader glared at the Macedonians, and let out a thick command. Four of the soldiers dismounted, approached to ten feet, and hollered, "Lay down your weapons!"

The Macedonians looked amongst themselves, and cast their spears into the snow.

Herennius said, "What is your business, coming under banner of truce?"

The diplomat waved to the prisoner. "Thirteen Roman prisoners to be delivered unto you."

Herennius squinted. They *looked* Roman. He shouted to his men, "Search them!"

The Macedonian guards were forced to the side as the prisoners were ripped from the wagon. Manias fell into the snow, manhandled by the Roman guards. His clothes were ripped off of him and he froze naked, feet aching in the snow, numb. No weapons were found. His clothes were handed to him with curt apologies; he said nothing and dressed. He had expected no less.

Herennius: "What are the conditions of their surrender?"

The diplomat quoted the Macedonian general with eloquence: "Allow us to safely return home."

Herennius nodded. "And why shall we not kill you now?"

The diplomat was quick: "If you wish to be besieged yourselves, I would not recommend it. If we do not return to our respective armies, a counter-attack and siege will be lain against the city. Your Roman forces are thin, as you wait reinforcements. It would not be wise to kill us."

Herennius smiled. "As you wish. Permission granted."

The Pikemen shoved the prisoners into the fray of Roman guards. Manias bumped against a horse.

Herennius leaned forward. "Now leave. I do not wish to look at you any longer."

The diplomat didn't reply. The Pikemen gathered into the back of the wagon and the wagon turned, wheels leaving ruts in the snow, and the horses plodded it back into the forest, where it vanished in the snowy fog.

Herennius ordered, "Take these men to headquarters! Get them food and a hot bed. We celebrate tonight!"

Manias should've smiled. He did not. It was all too evident in the captain's eyes.

He sat behind a Roman cavalryman and rode towards the towering city gates. Many of the walls were battered and bruised. Herennius said, "Prepare a small band of cavalry. I want those Macedonians taken out. They have seen the city. They may be spies."

Manias turned in his saddle. "No! I will not allow it!"

Herennius snapped: "Who are you to speak this way with me?"

"I have given my word that no Macedonians shall be touched."

"Whose command rides with you?"

"The command of the gods," he snarled. "They have spared me. I am favored. Do not anger them."

"The gods mock the Macedonians!"

"We are more savage than they! The gods mock upon us! Nearly six hundred of my companions were slaughtered before my own eyes. In ten minutes, an entire Army wasted. Do not tell me the gods smile upon us. We are cold and alone and in a foreign country. We sleep with Macedonian women because we long for our own. We are homesick and tired. The Macedonians treated the survivors, patched our wounds, gave us beds and food and drink. They did more than our own Roman physicians would've done. Please. Now show them some respect. Let them return to their army. They, too, just want to survive so they can return home."

Herennius said nothing. He shook his head, and cut off the order. Roman cavalrymen swore.

Manias closed his eyes. He could be branded a traitor.

Herennius said, "Young soldier, this time your wish is granted. Let us forget this incident."

Relief flooded over him. His muscles relaxed. He felt so tired.

The gates of Larissa towered above him. He heard crying, and remembered the general's words: *they enslaved the inhabitants – or exterminated them*. His eyes beheld the truth. Rome's majesty faded, and he buried his head in the horse's mane, refusing to look. Wailing shook through the city, a tsunami of grief.

THE SACKED MACEDONIAN CITY OF LARISSA

A woman, dressed only in a dirty tunic, fell before the foot of the cross, hands shaking against the pierced feet of her husband. Two children looked up at the man on the cross, tears welling in their eyes; one held a small infant who shrieked. All down the street between the Greek buildings, hundreds of crosses had been erected, and men and women hung from the wooden beams, wrists and feet pierced with nails. Blood drained onto the street. Some still lived. At the foot of every cross or so, with living victims dangling above the jaws of destitution, friends and family cowered down and begged to their gods for revenge, speaking in Greek so the Roman soldiers marching up and down the street couldn't understand.

Manias closed his eyes, but the images did not depart. He kept seeing fingers curling around shattered wrists; hearing the cries of the children and women; the wailing floating over the city. As the Roman cavalry strode down the street, those on the sides looked over their shoulders, eyes blazoned with sulfuric anger, the wrath bottled up and brewing.

Manias looked into the eyes of a haggard woman, and she looked away, eyes bloodshot and cheeks puffy. He remembered Alypius, and now he felt compassion. Alypius had said, "Roman glory is brutality." This was not glory.

The woman stood at the foot of the cross and kissed the feet of a young man.

Her husband? Father?

Son?

Manias whispered under his breath, "What did they do to deserve this?"

The Roman he was riding with heard, and replied, "They did not offer their services to Rome."

"And why should they?"

"Do they not know they've been conquered?"

"For refusing bread and bed, you crucify them?"

"Order needs to be instilled."

Manias looked back at the woman they'd passed. The tension in the city was flaring. Hatred flowing like wine. Romans marched in rogues up and down the streets, the alleyways, amongst the worshippers mourning at the temple. They took up guard in Larissa's square. They executed the governor and made headquarters in his bedroom. The force of the furious war horses, the swords and spears, the flashing red armor, kept order. Not the crucifixions. Not the punishment. Manias felt sick.

The entourage dipped into an alleyway and came out at the town square. It was completely void of peasants, but filled to the brim with Romans. Tents scattered over the stone, on the governor's villa steps, horses tethered to statues, some torn down in the Romans' daring rampage beyond the city walls. A crater smoked in one of the buildings, where an Onager had thrown in burning debris from the skies.

Herennius was greeted with fists pounding on the chests. The soldiers saluted Manias in this way, too. Manias refused to meet their eyes.

The horses came to a rest at the foot of the villa's stairs. Herennius dismounted: "Join us, friends."

Manias and the other prisoners stepped down, and as the horses were led away, they scaled the steps, past massive Greek columns holding up a red tiled roof, and entered the labyrinth of stone and epic murals. Manias looked behind him to see the mourning city, caught in reddish smoke, and the hazy snow-covered hills stretching to the mountains and the sea.

Their footsteps echoed in the great hall, and they were met with many more cordial greetings. Eventually they walked down a corridor and entered a barracks. There were several beds. At the foot of the beds were giant basins. A Macedonian woman quickly stood, shaking. Herennius

snapped at her in Greek, and she hurried away. Manias stepped out of her path and she barreled past, refusing eye contact. Herennius walked between the beds to several windows cut into the stone. They were covered with heavy canvases, and yet light still bled through, casting the room dim.

Herennius said, "These shall be your quarters. You will not sleep outside. I have no doubts you experienced much harsher conditions in the presence of savages."

Manias said nothing. Neither did the other prisoners.

Herennius continued, "Please make yourselves comfortable. I will return to you soon."

He left the room and quietly shut the door.

Manias walked over to one of the windows, lifted it up. Below was a courtyard draped in snow. A small fountain was caked in broken ice. The breeze was cold. The door opened; he let the canvas down and turned to see the Greek woman rushing in. She made several trips, pouring steaming hot water into the basins. Many minutes later, all of the prisoners were bathing in the hot water, relaxing, closing their eyes. One fell asleep and began to snore. Brief laughter. Then the door opened and Herennius entered. He saw them, smiled, and said, "Enjoy yourselves! Tonight is a night of feasting! You shall join me and many other great Romans for a night of feasting when evening falls! We honor our fallen comrades once again!"

Manias thanked him for the invitation. Herennius refused the acceptance and dipped out.

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Manias had never seen most of the officers before. They sat in a round room covered with murals of epic Greek battles. Manias looked over the murals as he and his companions were given seats of honor. He thought one of the heroic fighters in the paintings might have been Alexander, but he wasn't sure. Alexander was more than legend around Macedonia – he was a god. The room was lit with hundreds of candles set about the round walls, casting the shadows of the table and its occupants against the paintings. Macedonian servants delivered choice meats, wines, vegetables of all sorts, even some fruit. Small talk floated around the table. Stories of great deeds done on the field. Couplets of how the savage Macedonians had fallen under Roman glory *brutality*.

A Roman officer tried to strike conversation, but Manias kept warding him off, wondering if he'd get the hint: he didn't want to talk. He sat at the table and thought of home, the sweet smell of his mother's cooking, her tender smile, the way she would always make him clean up after a day sweating in his father's shop. He remembered running through the woods with his brother, playing legionnaires with friends, crying, "Strength and honor!" and playfully swinging sticks at each other. He smiled. Such days. Why did they always have to end?

Herennius stood at the far end of the table. "Fellow Romans! Lend me your ear!"

The talking stopped.

Herennius gripped a goblet of red wine and spoke with wide gestures. Wine splashed out of the cup, all over his hands. "Fellow Romans! We gather here today to honor those great men who fell under the Macedonian's futile attempts to beat back fate! We honor those who caught the enemy's spit! We honor those who sacrificed themselves for Rome! Strength and honor!"

The battle-cry ruffled throughout the room, echoing off the round walls.

Manias didn't return it.

Herennius laughed. "The Macedonians thought they could beat Rome! They thought we were mere toys! What do they think now! Those who tried to defend their precious city lie dashed upon its earth-works! Those who rebelled Roman justice now groan in the streets, tasting the bitter honey of their own defiance against Mars!"

Herennius looked down at his plate. He hadn't eaten much, and he wanted to throw up.

"And today is not just for those who have fallen, but for those who have returned!" He pointed to the rescued prisoners setting at the seat of honor. "Stand! Be recognized! These are survivors of the epic battle where our outnumbered forces did not turn tail, but brought the wrath of the gods upon the Macedonians, knowing all the while defeat was inevitable, but thirsting for Macedonian blood! Stand!"

The prisoners stood. Manias followed, but almost collapsed. Nausea and dizziness ate through him.

"Tell us," Herennius said, "what kind of men these Macedonians are."

Manias' eyes burned. All eyes fell upon him. He choked: "Savages."

Herennius' eyes gleamed. "You are brave men, indeed! Heroes! And you are being well rewarded! This time tomorrow, you shall be setting sail for Tarentum, the port city of Apulia province! You are going to Rome to be recognized before the Senate of the People of Rome!"

Cheers exploded, thundering amidst the room. The guests of honor grinned ear-to-ear. All except Manias. His eyes fluttered. The cheering was profanely loud, a booming pain sweeping through him. He looked up at the domed walls, and the sword of Alexander and his own beady eyes glared right back at him.

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He would have preferred to awake to the sound of the birds. But instead he awoke to grunting and crying. Pleading. His eyes slid open and he rose upon his elbows. The sound came from the window. The others about the room were sound asleep, snoring loudly, wrapped in blankets and pillows. Manias squeezed out of his sheets and crawled up next to a window, pulling back the speckled canvas.

The courtyard below was packed with Roman soldiers, standing around the perimeter, shields interlocked to create a wall. In the middle of the courtyard, amid the few strewn and naked trees, the frozen fountain and dilapidated snow, two Roman officers dragged in a Macedonian peasant. Manias leaned out the window as the peasant was thrown to the ground. He was picked up by two Roman soldiers, and with rope they bound him to the fountain, his back exposed. Romans gave out littered cheers as the man's tunic was ripped away, revealing undergarments and bare skin. Tears strolled down the man's face. He begged in Greek tongue, crying out. The Roman soldiers scattered back to their position in the wall, and the two officers overlooked the prisoner. One of the officers drew a whip with nine tails, lacerated with pieces of broken pottery and rocks. He stood behind the man, growled something unintelligible, and with a surge of power, hurled the whip downwards.

The sharp pottery and stones in the leather cords stuck into the man's flesh. The man cried out in a sickening gasp as the whip was jerked backwards; ribbons of flesh peeled from the body, revealing slashed muscle and yellow bone. The Macedonian buckled against the fountain, blood spurting into the snow, running down his thigh and legs. The Roman officer hit him again, tearing slices out of his back; then again, chunks being ripped from his hindquarters. The Macedonian's auburn eyes glazed, and he grew weaker against the fountain. The Roman officer hit him, bits of stone coursing around the man's head and sticking into his forehead; the chord was given a rip, and the man's head snapped back, bare bone exposed as flesh was seared as if he had been scalped. His head knocked against the frozen fountain and blood streamed down his face. He cried out. Blood had sprayed the officer in the face; he blinked his eyes, smeared the blood with his hand, and started laughing. The Romans joined in.

"Verito Macedonian sus super." The Roman officer ordered.

Roman soldiers freed their shields and raced forward; grabbing at the man's shaking hands, they ripped him onto his side and propelled him into the snow. The Romans' hands were bloodied, and blood continued to splurge all over the snow. The man's head rocked back and forth, feeble cries of forgiveness and mercy coming forth. The Romans dropped back into place and the officer raised the whip, and struck again. Bloody lines crisscrossed the man's chest as streamers of hairy flesh were torn.

Manias grabbed his tunic and raced out of the room, down stone stairs, and out into the courtyard. He barreled past Roman soldiers and his bare feet froze in the snow. The wind was rough, surging into the courtyard, the cold cutting through the thin fabric and invading his soul. He staggered up to the Macedonian and stepped over him, blocking the officer, who had raised the whip. The officer ordered for the guest to be taken away immediately and processed by Herennius for inferring with Roman justice.

As Romans rushed forward, Manias snapped, "In the name of Rome, if you touch me, you shall all be dishonorably disbanded, cursed by Mars himself!"

The Roman soldiers froze. Such a curse was a death sentence upon the field of war.

The officer demanded the soldiers forward, and they slowly crept towards the fountain.

The Macedonian coughed up his own blood.

Manias snarled to the officer, "Leave this man alone! If any more harm befalls him, your head on a silver platter!"

"Stand down!" the officer commanded his men, and he raised the whip.

Manias did not flinch. "Strike. Prove to these men how you are a coward, not a warrior, striking an unarmed man."

The officer's eyes flared. "Move or I shall strike you! In the name of Rome!"

"What right do you have to declare in the name of Rome!"

"You are a mere peasant! How is it your right? Move or I strike, *in the name of Rome!*"

"I am one of few survivors of the Macedonian onslaught! I fought like a true Roman! I have the right!"

Then the officer recognized who it was, and instantly released the whip. It plunked into the snow. He had seen this newcomer last night at the feast. A celebrated hero. A man of honor. The officer did not cheer up, but instead grew even more sullen: "You shall be reprimanded for interfering for the justice of Rome."

"We shall see. I will be watching you. If this man is not treated for his wounds, you shall die by the Roman blade. I swear it upon Mars."

The officer stared at Manias, and turned his head. "Rufius! Maximus! Take the Macedonian to his home."

"Leave him with supplies to treat his wounds," Manias said.

The officer nodded. "It will be done."

Without saying another word, Manias walked past the two Roman soldiers approaching, barreled his way through the locked wall of shields, and ascended back to his bedchamber. The prisoner grunted as he was picked up and carried through the streets, past the hanging crosses of corpses, and returned to his family. A victim of Roman justice.

••

Having heard of how Manias had stood up against a Roman officer, Herennius ordered Manias to a small dinner in a house down the street from the villa. Manias washed and quickly dressed. Down the marble steps, several Romans waited with a horse. He thanked them, mounted, and followed a pair of cavalry soldiers through the loose network of tents and stables piled up in the courtyard. The sky dripped with snow, gray clouds hiding the sun's most beautiful rays. Many of the crosses had been taken down to prevent disease, but all around the courtyard were poles with sharp ends; upon the sharp ends, the rotting heads of Macedonian soldiers lay for all of Larissa to see. Romans patrolled the streets all day and all night. Houses were raided if there was any suspected rebel activity.

The house was made of stone, and there was a winding stairway to the entrance. The cavalymen remained behind, but prodded Manias to follow the spiral staircase. He did, and came to a door. He knocked twice. It opened, and a Roman soldier in plain clothes let him inside.

Candles burned all about the room. A fire burned in a hearth, the room locked in a homely glow. Manias was thankful for how warm it was. Herennius sat in a wooden chair, and rose when Manias entered. He greeted him with a firm handshake and had him sit down in another chair facing the fire. The Roman soldiers took position around at the doors. Manias listened to the crackling fire, enjoying the warmth.

Herennius broke the silence. "I've gotten word you halted a thief's punishment today."

Manias said, "Thief? What did he steal?"

"That is not—"

"What did he steal?"

Herennius shifted. "He is alleged to have stolen some very expensive—"

"Alleged? You mean there's no proof?"

"Manias. These are very hard times, for the people — and for us! How can we keep order if the people don't respect us? How can they respect us if they do not fear us? I know that he might be innocent. I know it might be unjust — at least, if all the facts were gathered. But right now, one loose slip of the tongue, one letting of an accused error slide, and we could be attacked in the shadows! This city could cave in around us, and we would be trapped — at the hands of the

Macedonian mob. The pleasure of one man being taken from him is a small price to pay for order, wouldn't you agree?"

"And the crucifixions? Were those a small price to pay, too?"

"Manias—"

"Captain. Tell me. How many men and women did you crucify on these very streets?"

His eyes narrowed. "It is irrelevant."

"No. It is very relevant. How many senseless acts of cruelty are needed to subdue a nation? And how many senseless acts have been repeated, over and over, in this city alone? I went down *one street* and saw at least two hundred crosses. Did you execute one member of each family, Herennius? Is that how you do it? Break friendships, break families — how can they possibly rebel?"

"This city belongs to Rome—"

"What is Rome, Herennius? Rome is not unlike Macedonia—"

"It is completely different!"

"How, Herennius? Tell me how? Different name? Different people? Different dress?"

"Rome is a light shining in the darkness."

"But *how*, Herennius? Is this light bathed in murder and rape and sacrilege?"

Herennius turned his head, looked into the flames.

Manias leaned forward. "I think I now know why Mars abandoned us on the field several weeks ago."

The captain's head turned around, and he leapt from the seat. "Silence! Do not curse the gods!"

"I have not. I have cursed ourselves."

"You have cursed Rome!"

"Have I?" Manias growled.

Herennius prepared to strike; Manias' muscles clenched. Herennius took a breath. "Please leave."

Manias did not protest. He got to his feet, turned a cold shoulder, and went out through the door.

The captain swore. "*Vappa!*"

••

Manias descended the round stairwell and walked onto the street. A fine snow fell, flakes resting in the horses' manes. The cavalymen looked at him, as if wondering, *That was quick. What went on in there?* Rage stenciled Manias' face. He pulled himself on to the horse and said, "We return to the villa." His stomach growled. He had been prepared for a wonderful feast. Now he knew he wouldn't be able to eat until morning — if Herennius did not have him executed by then.

The horses trotted down the street. Manias felt the cold wind against his face. Snowflakes burned as they blew onto his skin.

There was a thunking sound, and a horse neighed. Manias turned his head just in time to see several sixteen, seventeen, eighteen-year-old kids running out of a dark alley, throwing stones at the Romans. Manias knocked a stone out of the way with his hand. Some skin scraped off. The two cavalymen with him cursed and jumped off their horses, drawing their swords. The youth threw more rocks, yelling Greek profanity. Manias rolled his eyes and likewise rolled off the horse. A rock hit the horse and it bolted down the street. The two Romans rushed towards the alley.

Manias stepped in front of them, drawing his own sword, and pointed it at them: "Do not."

The soldiers came to a halt, bewildered. The youth, holding rocks, did not throw. Manias was pinned between them. He stepped to the side, and casting glaring eyes at both, said, "Let us not spill more blood. Enough has been spilt to wash the city clean twice. Let us forget this incident. Romans, sheath your swords. Boys, please return home, and stay out of trouble. Try to get out of the city with your family and friends. Please. These are not charitable times."

The Romans obeyed, but the kids did not move.

Manias told them, "I will not report you. I cannot even see your faces in the alley's shadow. Now go home. Sleep at home with your family. Mourn your losses, as will I this night."

The boys dropped their rocks, turned, and skittered down the alley, vanishing.

The snow fell.

The soldiers grunted. "We are under orders to eliminate any—"

"Resistance. These are just boys gallivanting for glory and honor. They do not understand."

"That is irrelevant. We are *under orders* to—"

Manias walked up to them, putting his face in theirs. "What is wrong with you? Do you not have a brain? Do you not have a heart, a soul? Can you not think for yourself? Look around you! Look at what is being done in the name of Rome! Innocent people killed and beaten and maimed! Peoples' possessions taken for no reason other than Roman greed! This is not a bright light shining in the darkness. It is darkness itself."

••

Herennius had not returned to visit Manias. Manias walked about the villa, exploring the rooms, admiring the great murals. It pained him one morning to discover that the murals were being painted over – hired Romans from some foreign province placed ladders against the walls and began to paint. Manias noted they were very skilled, but it hardened his heart to see the wonderful, exotic Alexander the Great disappear under a Roman banner and several charging Roman soldiers. He returned several days in a row, and the painters painted all day and night, working in shifts, between which they ate and slept. In a week or two the mural was complete: the fall of Larissa. The Romans were painted as fierce warriors with golden eyes, the heroic men that made up folklore; the Macedonians were painted as savages, dressed in war paint and blood, charging with axes and broken spears. Several frames over, the image shifted: the Romans celebrating over a strewn assortment of dead Macedonians; Manias noted that no Romans had fallen.

He looked, but did not see, for the past clouded his vision. The noise of chatter about the room faded, and all he heard was crying, moaning, the clashing of metal-on-metal, the sickening sucking noise of flesh being shredded, torn, pierced. He saw his friends falling all around him, bloodied and beaten, knocked this way and that. He saw men pulling arrows from their chest, shrieking as they drowned in their own blood. He saw the fear on the Romans' faces; he saw the fear in the Macedonians. He heard the gut-tearing sound of arrows splicing through the air, then the roar of the soldiers as arrows scattered through the ranks. He remembered Alypius, eyes tearing as he spoke of his wife, his son, the grapevines and winepress.

••

Manias was awoken one morning by a friend, a fellow rescued prisoner. The man's eyes glowed, and his smile radiated the most undone hope. Manias didn't need to be told. He quickly got dressed without bathing, kissed the Macedonian maid on the cheek, and ran through the corridor. In the great hall, Herennius and several soldiers awaited. Herennius said nothing, but beckoned them to follow. They descended the marble stairway, mounted horses waiting at city square. Herennius told them the news: they were en route to a harbor many miles to the west. Manias smiled as Larissa fell behind them, and the cold of the winter returned. Forty Roman cavalrymen walked with them, and together they etched their way into the rolling mountain foothills still etched with sparkling snow.



THE ROAD THE HERO WALKS

JOURNEYING HOME

Manias rocked back and forth on the back of the horse. The cold ate through his thin tunic, and he closed his eyes, wanting so much to drift asleep. Now he would have appreciated a nice wagon, where he lie out, or lean against the railing, and just fall asleep, waking on a trireme destined for home. No. His eyes were slit, and he muttered under his breath. And the cold! It chewed at every fiber in his soul, massaging the bones with grisly teeth. He ached for a warm fire. He ached for that Macedonian tent, where he was more comfortable and more at peace than he was riding through the mountains, destined – he praised the gods – for home.

He half fell asleep, and saw her before him. Those engulfing eyes, the beautiful curled red hair, the soft skin that burned to be touched. He ached more for her than he did for warmth itself. How nice was her touch? How nice were her lips? He did not know. He hadn't seen her since his own up and go, and now he burned with intense passion, a flare of trickling, youthful hope. He was going home. He would see her again. He would talk to her. She would fall over at the tales of his great heroism and valor, and he would catch her in his arms. She would look up at him, smile, and he would hold her close, for eternity, until all-

Ripples of shock ran through the ranks. Manias opened his eyes, looked about.

They were marching through a narrow canyon laden with snow-covered rocks. To either side was a hill cloaked in misty trees. Dark figures appeared between the trees, standing tall and proud. The Roman horses refused to move, clamping their feet in the snow. The Romans cursed the horses, cursed themselves. Some horses turned in circles. Manias gazed up at the tree-line, filled with hatred. Hatred because he was so close to her, and now this. Hatred because this wasn't what he deserved. He wouldn't go out like this.

The Roman commander whirled about on his horse. "Forward, Romans! Charge down the pass! The harbor is but a handful of miles away!"

The horses didn't obey. They stood fixated, staring at the stoic figures in the tree line.

The commander cursed. "Move! Move, heathen creatures!"

Manias patted his horse's mane and looked up at the unmoving sentinels.

A Roman growled, "Why don't they move? Are they just watching us?"

Someone said, "Let us turn around! They will attack if we move any further!"

Manias clutched at the horse. The figures in the trees did not move. Snowflakes touched his cheeks.

The commander spat, "Roman soldiers! Spur your horses! On to the harbor! Strength and honor!"

He didn't understand: the horses were petrified. *Of what?*

Finally a horse neighed and bolted down the pass, the Roman barely holding on. The horses all around Manias followed suit, and suddenly he was being tugged down the valley, snow from the horses in front of him blasting up in foggy drafts, slashing him like talons. Over the roar of the stampede, the hurried cries of the soldiers in the forest went up, and suddenly they, too, rushed down the hillsides, upon stallions of their own: jet-black stallions, harbingers of death; the soldiers

wore black and orange, and twin feathers adorned their helmets. They let out a cry, lowering their spears as they charged towards the Romans.

The commander shrieked, "Romans! Arm yourselves!" He drew his sword.

Manias' hand dropped to his side and he drew the *gladius*. Frost scorched the edges. The hilt was so cold.

The Macedonian Companion cavalry were nearly upon them, followed by a cloud of acrid snow.

Roman horses continued punching snow, diving through the narrow pass.

The Companion Cavalry swept across the Roman flanks. Roman soldiers raised their swords only to be pierced by the Macedonian's spears. Soldiers let out screams as the pikes stabbed through them, dismounting them from their horses. Blood sprayed into the air and bodies were flung from horses. The Companion cavalry drove their spears into horses as well, felling the mythical beasts, sending Roman soldiers rolling in the snow. Before the befallen Romans could stand, they were trampled under furious Macedonian hooves. Empty horses rode alongside the Romans, and corpses – human and animal alike – littered the pass, turning the snow blood red.

Casting away broken spears, the Macedonians drew sickening-looking swords, and kicked their horses in the side even harder. Steam blasted from the horses' nostrils as the chase commenced. The Roman horses led the way, twisting through the mountains, the riders shoving their heels into the horse's sides. The Macedonians caught one or two, falling the Romans with their swords. A Roman leapt from his horse, knocking a Macedonian off the saddle; the two rolled around in the snow until the Roman was atop the warrior; the Roman removed his helmet and bashed in the man's face until his helmet was smeared with blood.

The commander thrust his sword into the air. "Onward, Romans! Reinforcements await us!"

Manias was near the middle of the pack. The Macedonians were closing on him. A fellow rescued prisoner bound for home let out a gurgled shriek as a sword was thrust through his side; he collapsed off the horse and lay writhing in the snow, moaning and spitting blood. Manias cursed the gods under his breath and kicked his horse harder and faster. The horse screamed and kept running. The path ascended upwards, suddenly blasting over a hill. Down below, a harbor lay sprawled against a diamond sea, docks with triremes and cargo ships sticking out into the water.

"Homeward!" the commander howled, and the horses raced for the Roman-occupied town.

The enemy shouted to each other in unintelligible Greek and kept chasing. Manias glanced behind his shoulder, and his jaw fell open. A Macedonian was upon him, swinging his sword down. Manias leaned to the far opposite side, swinging his own blade upwards. The two clashed together; the impact nearly knocked Manias from his horse. The enemy struck at the horse, drawing blood. Manias lashed out with his sword, blocking a strike, and then drove the tip of his sword into the enemy's arm. The enemy howled and broke away, gripping his arm.

The harbor was so close. The sound of trumpet blasts floated over the snow. Roman soldiers aligned the ramparts.

The Roman commander yelled, "Rome!" He suddenly spun the horse around and drove into the enemy. Swords flashed back and forth. Overcome with rage, the Roman hacked his sword and blood sprayed all over him. Many Macedonians fell off their horses. The other Romans were nearly upon the city; Manias glanced back to see the Roman commander slide off his horse, blood spurting in an arch from his throat. The horse ran into the woods.

The Romans passed under an archway, into the hands of awaiting Romans. Manias jumped off the horse. Blood dripped from the tip of his sword.

A Roman hissed, "Shut the gate! Shut the gate!" Roman soldiers obeyed.

The companion cavalry charged towards the slowly-closing gate, intent on slaughtering the invaders. Romans upon the walls loaded bows with arrows, aimed, and fired in unison. A sheet of arrows fell upon the straggling cavalry; horses cried out; men fell into the snow. The horses were scattered, trampling their own. Surviving Macedonians hollered, "Retreat!" but the frenzied horses would not obey. The Romans calmly reloaded, aimed, and unleashed. The arrows sparkled in the sky before falling amidst the Macedonian ranks. More soldiers splashed into the snow, arrows sticking out of their flesh, and the remaining were able to flee back into the mountains. As they vanished into the forest, the gate opened and a fresh unit of Roman cavalry stormed the field, running past the fallen corpses and pursuing the broken Macedonian ranks.

Manias wiped cold sweat from his brow.

A medic ran up. "Sir. There is blood on your armor. Are you injured?"

"It is horse's blood," Manias said. "I am fine."

The medic looked at the sword. "The gods have favored you – you've slain the enemy."

"I have slain no one," he said. He kept his promise.

••

None in his family had ever been sailors. Now he knew why. Or remembered, at least. He had been this sick only once – journeying to Macedonia. Now he hung over the railing, eyes bulging, stomach reeling. Not even the ground was stable here. The waves smashed against the hull of the trireme; below, about one hundred forty Roman sailors pushed oars back and forth, and the wind caught in the sails. The boat made good time, and the wind helped the sickness, if only a little. White-knuckled, he clasped his fingers around the wooden railing, leaned over, and let spit dribble from his mouth, wondering, *How much longer?*

Sailors milled about behind him, every once in a while pointing and laughing. Manias ignored them. His friends tried to play a game involving stone checkers, but their grief led them down darker roads. Titus had left them, torn down by the cavalry that had assaulted them yesterday afternoon. His body had been gathered from the field, and slept downstairs, awaiting arrival in Tarentum. Rufus would be sent home with Titus' body, as they both lived in the same town and had known each other since childhood. From Tarentum, Manias was bound on the road north through Apulia and Umbria, into Venetia, and then to his home. He simply hoped they were still there. He hadn't gotten any letters; this happened, he was told, because of a naval skirmish between Rome and Macedonian. A storage vessel with letters to troops in Macedonian had sank in *Superum Mere* – the same sea they traveled now.

Dark clouds scattered over the horizon. Manias felt sicker. No land to either side – storms sank ships.

He shivered.

Lightning illuminated the clouds, and the thunder traveled over the waves. The wooden beams of the trireme creaked. He gripped the railing even tighter.

A sailor behind him said, "No need to worry. The storm is traveling in the other direction. Travels with the wind."

"Oh," Manias said, as though he hadn't a clue that clouds traveled with the wind.

The sailor leaned against the railing beside him. "So you are going home?"

"Yes."

"For good?"

"I don't know. They never say. Probably not."

"It's rare, getting leave. Especially when your home is so far from the front lines."

"It is a reward."

"For good fighting?" the sailor asked.

"No, not really. A reward for surviving. Six hundred of my friends fell from the Macedonians' sword."

The sailor cursed under his breath. "The Macedonian savages. I do not worry. Rome will conquer. Rome always will. Rome is the light."

"You suppose Rome will remain forever?"

"Rome is the light. Of course Rome will remain forever! Rome will stretch the face of the earth."

Manias swallowed. "Maybe you are right. Maybe Rome will never vanish."

"I don't see how it can. We are so powerful. Armies tremble before us. We are legendary."

Manias said nothing. He just closed his eyes. Bile crept up his throat. *Here we go...*

Someone shouted from the other side of the trireme. More shouts. The rowing stopped. The sailor beside him swore and ducked away, running to the opposite railing. Manias opened his eyes, looked out at the diamond-ridden sea, and turned. He walked to the other railing, peeking over the sailors' heads. Far out across the sea, a pillar of fire rose into the sky.

Manias squinted to see, but could not. "What is it?" he demanded.

"A sinking ship! It is burning!"

"One of ours?"

"Who can tell from here?"

Manias felt the oars shift rowing. The trireme began to turn. "We are going over there?"

"Yes. We will look for survivors."

"What if it is not ours?"

"Then we will not help the survivors."

"This is stupid! There might be an enemy vessel over there!"

"We shall see soon enough," the sailor grinned.

The last of the burning wreckage had sank into the depths by the time the trireme brought its nose before the fray. Debris littered the water, mostly planks of wood and torn sails, ripping and tugging with the tide. Everyone crowded at the railing. There were no bodies. Manias asked where all the survivors were.

"We were too late," someone said.

"The enemy took them?" Manias countered.

"No. The water. Their armor drowned them."

Manias shivered. Drowning. How horrible a way to die.

••

The trireme docked in Tarentum. The moment Manias stepped down onto the docks, a flood of emotions hit him. Tears welled in his eyes. This was his home, and he could sense it. The stocky architecture of Macedonia was no more: here there were buildings with marble pillars, elegant statues, flower gardens and baths. Children played in the streets, dressed in brown tunics. Men talked sports and politics. Women window shopped. The air smelt of salt and of Rome – a peculiar smell unbeknownst except to those who missed it for far too long. He and his several companions walked down the boardwalk, carrying their weapons and shields, wearing their armor. It was much warmer here, and snow did not cover everything. Manias held the *scuta* shield close and opened his other arm in a brilliant welcome. He stepped into the city and was overcome by it all. He was finally home. He and his friends bought several drinks and passed them around. They spent the night in a military barracks, very nice compared to the field tents in Macedonia, and for once he did not chatter his teeth and need seven blankets to stay warm; his feet did not turn into blocks of ice overnight. And in the morning, the birds sang, the children ran through the streets, the women laughed and the men flirted. This land was truly Roman. He loved it deeply. He forgot his worries, drank some more wine, said farewell to his friends, and started on his journey north.

••

The trip took about two weeks. He walked all day, hitched rides when he could, and slept in a few inns here and there. Being dressed in his armor and carrying his shield and weapons, he could find food and board by spinning wild tales of heroic deeds, valor and victory. These words were foreign to him, and yet he feigned them well. He would leave out all the real aspects of war: the blood, the crying, the death, the screaming, the fear. These he knew all too well. He had felt them in his own soul. At night, he dreamt not of his stories, but of those battles again and again. He dreamt of Alypius. He dreamt of the ambush in the mountain pass. He dreamt of dying. And when he woke, he would slip out before dawn and be on his way, stomaching enough courage to speak again of war at the next town down the road. Then the day came when he walked down the road and saw that familiar stone building where he had his first kiss.

A SMALL TOWN SOUTHWEST OF PATAVIUM, VENETIA PROVINCE, ROME

Bare trees shattered the sun's rays as he crept between the bushes, up to the side of the building. He touched the cool brick, thousands of memories rushing through him. Laughing with his friends, playing pranks, fishing along the creek, traveling to the ocean and swimming off the rocky beaches. He felt the cool wind against him and walked around the side of the building. A dirt road wound between several scattered buildings. People moved here and there across the street. He knew these were mostly just shops, a tavern, some stables and a trading post. The

homes were scattered throughout the countryside. This was a rural town with rural people. This was "Home."

Shield fastened to his left arm, sword sheathed and his helmet catching the warmth, he strode down the street. The last time he'd walked his path, he'd been only eighteen years old. He had been horseback, and had gotten farewell waves and stares as he rode with the Roman cavalymen on a journey to Patavium. The familiar smells seemed more intense than ever. His armor suddenly felt heavy as the emotions surged like a broken dam. He set down his shield and sat upon a stone porch. He leaned against a crudely-shaped pillar, drew a heavy breath, and looked up at the clear blue sky.

People passing on the street greeted him, cordially, not knowing who he was. Just a passing soldier. He recognized some of them. This being a small town, he had been fortunate to befriend most of the people, especially during festivals and celebrations. Had he removed his helmet, perhaps they would've recognized him, but he did not. He wanted to keep it a secret. He wasn't expected home for another many, many years. Army careers could last up to twenty years. Deep down, he knew, perhaps, he wasn't expected at home anytime. He remembered his mother's crying. Had she accepted his fate? When he left, war was breaking out on all fronts: Spain, Macedonia, Britannia and Germania. Reports of Roman victories – and defeats – had ridden into town with the traders (although who knew how accurate the stories were; everyone was willing to buy something as the traders spoke of heroic battles and glorious victories).

Manias' stomach rattled. He lay his shield upon the pillar and entered the shop. Tables were in the middle of the room, and racks lined the sides. Food, clothing, jewelry, toys, anything a hungry Roman could imagine was at his or her disposal. The owner gave Manias a wan look, keen to not having Roman soldiers walking through the doors. The owner leaned against one of the tables and watched with curiosity as Manias picked up a handful of juicy grapes.

The owner did not recognize him, even when Manias approached and held out his hand: "How much?"

The owner scratched his nose. "I am a trader, not a merchant."

"What would you like?"

"I would like you out of my store." His son had been taken by the Romans as well.

Manias smirked. "Old man, you offend me. What have I done to so taint my reputation?"

The owner swallowed. "It is not good business–"

"Even Romans can trade! I have a *gladius*. Would you like one of those?"

"No. Please, no." He completely took it the wrong way. "Please, just take the olives and go."

"*Heu*, Sextus! It has been many years since I've stolen olives from your store. Do you still hold it against me?"

Sextus' eyes crossed. "Who are you?"

Manias removed the helmet. Immediately, Sextus understood, and nearly fell over. He clasped his arms around the soldier and embraced him like a son. His eyes beamed and he fidgeted all over, a shaky old man. He finally released Manias and, short of breath, choked, "Boy, boy, boy! You have changed! You are not a boy anymore! Your boyish features have shrunk into the face of a warrior!" He embraced him again. "By what token have you departed your fellow soldiers? I see it is not dishonorable discharge: you carry your armor and shield even now!"

Manias grinned. "Call it honorable discharge, Sextus. I have been allowed to return home for duties performed."

"Duties performed! Hah! My own soul cannot believe it! A hero in our midst! You must tell me, tell me it all! The traders spin us fancy tales, but I do not trust them: they have never set foot outside Rome! But you, Manias, *you*, you have seen the whites of the enemy's eyes and have not shrunk back in fear! Please sit down and tell me all!"

Manias shook his head, still smiling. "I must decline. My family awaits."

"Do not make them wait long, Manias!"

"They do not know I've come. Do they still live at my home?"

"Yes, yes! Your father tills the land! Your mother weaves for profit, and your brother... he spends his days messing around and playing jokes with his friends. A spitting image of yourself all those years ago!" He slapped the soldier on the shoulder. The metal clanked. He laughed. "Boy, take those olives! Take some more! Eat up! There shall be feasting tonight, I assure you!"

"Not tonight, Sextus. Not tonight. Tonight I spend at home. Yet that feasting shall come. Tomorrow I will come into town and 'spin tales' on your front porch!"

The old man grinned between crooked teeth. "Praise the gods, Manias! Praise the gods!"

••

Having replaced his helmet, his identity was not broken. He was viewed with mystery. He caught himself spying the roads for her, but she did not warm his heart. Not today. The road twisted and turned through the woods. He walked slowly. The sun was setting fast, but he did not fear. He had spent many nights shivering in the snow, recovering from wounds. Now he was free, alive, home! He did not care if night squeezed about him. This land's night was his unwavering delight.

The stars began to poke through chopped clouds when the road took a bend and he saw it. He realized how long it had been. The gate was still crooked, though patched in places. The crops were dry and barren. Smoke curled from the stone hut. As he neared the homestead, he saw another building constructed on the land behind the house. Vines crawled up its sides. He pushed open the gate and walked down the stone path. The door was shut, but light bled through the cracks. The windows were covered with canvas, offering brief flickers of light. Manias set the shield and sword down next to the front door, took a deep breath. He pushed his ear against the door. Huddled conversation within. He stood on the deck, transfixed, trying to grip it.

A month ago he had stood facing the Macedonian phalanxes, riddled with fear, heart beating like thunder.

Now he stood on the hearth of his own home.

A month ago he had been freezing, miserable, starving.

Now the armor was snugly warm, hope ignited, and the sweet taste of olives stuck to his tongue.

Home.

The night wrapped about the homestead. The wind whistled between the gates.

Home.

He remembered playing war games with his brother. Helping Father plow the fields. Mother yelling at him for not helping to clean around the house. He had thought life was so hard back then. Now he was ready to work the land, to live a simple life of love and music, of festivals and celebrations: a life of family and friends. He thought of her, but it faded. Not now.

He knocked on the door.

The conversation halted within, a few words were passed, and sliding furniture.

Manias grabbed his shield and ducked around the side of the house, crouching beside broken pottery.

The door opened. A female's voice: "*Who is it, Cnaeus?*" His heart burned: Mother!

"*No one is here. Are you sure it knocked?*" He wanted to leap out: Father.

"*We all heard it,*" Mother said.

A boy's voice: "*I bet you it is Maximus playing jokes.*" His brother!

"*They should not be disturbing us as we eat,*" Mother said.

Father said something and the door shut. They resumed eating.

Manias moved back to the front of the house, lay his shield upon the hearth, knocked, and ran back.

His mother cursed and his father flung open the door. He ran out onto the porch, almost tripping over the shield. He readied to kick it into the dry crops but the light from the house flooded over the engraved black bats on red paint, the metal boss, and the deep lines and punctures cut through the woven wood. He knelt down and picked it up. The handle was warm even in the cold. His heart started beating faster. *No*, he told himself. *No. No.* His soul did not listen to logic. Energy flooded through him. He peered into the darkness, the woodlands. The stars cast barely any light.

The woman moved behind him. "What is it?"

He stepped to the side. Her shadow fell over the shield. A hand slapped her mouth. "A shield."

Come home with this shield – or upon it.

"Is it ours?"

The father turned it over in the light. "It was my father's. It is ours."

"He is here." Her voice was coated with excitement. "By the gods, he is here!"

"Who is here?" the boy asked. "Is that a shield?"

Manias ran around the corner, armor clattering as he raced into the light. The sight of him sent the family into screams. He embraced his mother, gripping her tight. His back burned from the anxiety – the wound searing – but he did not care. He smelt her curled hair, felt her breathing, and started to cry. He could not help it. Real warriors, he was told, weren't meant to cry – that was fine by him. He did not want to be a warrior any longer. He wanted to remain here. He moved away from his sobbing mother, and took the hand of his father, whose own eyes were tearing. They looked deep into each other's eyes, and finally the father ripped his son towards him, throwing aside the shield and smashing him in the back. A treatise of love. Manias hugged back. His father pushed him away, grinned ear-to-ear, said, "*Eho dum!* My son returns – not upon the shield!"

Manias looked his brother in the eye. He had grown so much taller. His ashen blonde hair was combed behind his ears, and his wide blue eyes gaped like the oceans. Manias ruffled one hand through his brother's hair, then grabbed him off the ground, held him tight against his chest, and spun in circles. The boy laughed, holding his brother tight. He set him down and said, "I never thought it possible, Servius, buy by the gods, I am fooled: I missed you."

Mother wiped tears from her eyes and continued to cry.

••

No one went to bed until late. Mom turned the soup-and-bread meal into a celebration, bringing out hidden foods from the pantry. Mushrooms, melons, grapes and plums dripped from their mouths. Almonds scattered the table, and more olives were brought out. *Mulsum*, a honeyed wine, was splashed around, and they sank their teeth into oysters and flounder, salted with spices from the beds of Ostia. Their stomachs promised to rupture. They sagged backwards as they walked. That night they ate like kings. No one worried about gaining weight, no one worried about tomorrow's meals, no one worried about skimming on rations the next few days. Tonight they feasted, they told stories, they caught up. More hugs and kisses than Manias had seen in three years were delivered in three minutes. The night drank its shadows over the small homestead, but the windows burnt with candlelight – even to the break of dawn. No fieldwork or weaving or playing with friends for the day – sleep, such a strong and peaceful sleep as could not be fathomed, settled upon them all. The birds sang, the earth warmed, and Macedonia, war, bloodshed and violence was forgotten.

Except in his dreams.

Those he would never escape.

••

As he had promised, Manias took roost on Sextus' steps and told the stories of the 'awful Macedonians,' the heathen warriors of Macedon. He told of their evil sacrifices, their bitter strife. He told of how Larissa had fallen to Rome under the spell of the god of Mars. He told of the harrowing ambush and the Macedonians slaughtered by archers' arrows. For hours this continued. More and more people gathered. Most of his friends had departed from Patavium, and then to placement throughout the Roman republic and onto the fringe of the foreign enemies – the House of Julii ordered everyone sixteen to twenty to register, and soldiers patrolled the towns making sure everyone obeyed.

But the Roman Army was not drafting girls. And so he saw her.

She walked down the street, and the moment his eyes caught her glory – glory even beating back the most precious and ancient glories of Rome – he stammered over his words. He bit his tongue and continued, all the while watching as she walked towards the crowd, aroused by all the commotion. Chocolate eyes melted into the soft tank skin of her face, so tender and beautiful that she seemed to be painted by the gods – painted and stepped out of the canvas. Her tunic draped to her ankles, but he could imagine bronze legs, smooth as silk. He saw the muscles in her arms, trickling with sweat, and even that was lovely. She walked with an elegant grace unknown to most of mankind. His soul ached, his muscles burned; he felt dizzy, on the verge of suffocating.

Then she looked into his eyes.

He pardoned himself and broke through the crowds. He wore his armor, at Sextus' request. She stood transfixed, barely recognizing him. He threw his helmet into the dirt and trotted across the street. She reached out, and they embraced. Hers was friendly, but he held her so close, so tightly, that he felt every breath. Her hair brushed his face. He so wanted to kiss her neck. She pulled away, and he brought up her hand, kissing it tenderly. The crowd behind them was dispersing. She smiled at him, and he released her hand.

"You look different," she said warmly. "You're not the boy I knew."

"And you are not the woman."

She laughed. "I have not changed much."

"You look beautiful." He regretted it. Dumb fool.

She laughed. "Some things never change, Manias. Come on! Let's walk. Are you on leave?"

They started walking down the street, side by side. He felt like he was paradise. A month ago he and a Macedonian 'barbarian heathen' spoke of home, spoke of girls they loved. He had mentioned her, never imagining he would see her again – certainly not so soon! But now she heard her footsteps, her charming laugh, felt the warmth of Roman sun on his face, and praised the gods. He told her he was not on leave. He had been rewarded a return home.

"Will you be returning to the Army?"

"I hope not. I do not really like the Army. I imagine I am not much of a warrior."

"Why do you say that? Hah! You must be! You've been rewarded this pleasure of walking with me!"

"A pleasure worth all the denarii the Army pays."

"That isn't a lot."

"No, but after sixteen, seventeen years, it can add up."

"So what did you do to get such a reward?"

Survived. All he'd done is survived. "Strong patriotism."

"Patriotism is a virtue of the vicious. You must be vicious."

"Once when we were marching, a few friends stole some farm animals from a Macedonian town. They were going to kill it and eat it. Hot food was something we weren't accustomed to. I convinced them not to do it. I couldn't stand the thought of killing those innocent animals. No, I am not a vicious person. I was made fun of for being too soft, actually."

"A soft person does not get a reward return home."

He had viciously survived. "Has anything exciting happened since I've been gone?"

"Exciting? Nothing exciting happens here. Farming. A few festivals. Gossip and rumor. We could make nice conversation if there was something worth speaking of. As it is, there's not much chance of that."

"I haven't seen Lucius or Decimus or Gaius. Where have they all gone?"

"I was going to ask if you'd seen them. They were borne away by Roman soldiers."

"I feel as if I am the only young man here!"

"You are." Good news for him. "The Romans ride through and draft. It is by order of Silvanus."

"He must be desperate. He is waging war on four fronts! Spain, Britannia, Germania, Macedonia."

"And now Britannia and Germania have become allies. None of Rome saw that coming."

"Are you serious? Britannia and Germania? Sworn enemies of Eurasia?"

"When Rome stepped up its attacks on Germania, the two nations allied and now they fight together. It is hurting the Roman advance. Words of many bloody battles – sometimes more defeats than victories – ride up with the traders. Since we've heard the same story more than once from different traders, we can say with certainty they aren't fabricated for weak advertisement."

He caught several hellos from men and women on the street.

They sat down beside a market and spoke for several hours. He did not grow tired, and prayed she did not. As dinner neared, his stomach whined, and he said he had to go. As he stood, he asked, "What are you doing tomorrow? Please say nothing."

"There is a party at Collina's."

"A party?"

"Not for you. It is only for women."

He smiled. "I never like those parties anyway."

"Some boys do."

"Those boys, I will never understand."

"Good-bye for now."

"So I won't see you tomorrow?"

"Oh, who knows?" she asked. "Maybe I'll look you up."

He said good-bye and walked for home, basking in the falling sun, so free. His heart and soul were liberated. Out of sight, he knelt down on the ground, scooped dirt in his hands, and smelt it with all his being. The scent of the Roman soil ran through him, and setting it down, he wiped his hands clean and continued home.

••

Manias had nothing to do the next day. His father went back to work plowing, mother weaving. Manias helped out in the field, proving more effective than his own father. Lots had changed. The Roman officer had made him fit enough to power-march twenty miles in a day. Such lousy work amongst the fields was nothing more than child's play. He offered to help, but his father told him how much Servius wanted to spend time with him. Manias nodded and found Servius. Servius wanted to play a game, and rushed into the woods. Manias grabbed some olives and downed them quickly. He hadn't eaten olives forever, and had probably gained a pound off them already. Servius returned with several sticks, tossed them to the ground, grabbed two, kept one and handed the other to his brother.

"Do you remember how to play?" Servius asked.

Manias nodded. "Troy, right? We're playing Troy?"

"Did you fight in any battles, Manias?"

"Many battles."

"Okay. Let's fight one of your battles."

His stomach knotted. "Why don't we just stick to Troy? All my battles were chicken-scratch compared to Troy. Troy is better."

"*Everyone* plays Troy. Do you want to be the barbarians or should I?"

"They aren't barbarians..."

His brother paused. "Not barbarians?"

"Never mind. I will be the Macedonians. You can be the Romans."

"Okay!" He stepped back several feet. "What is it that the Roman leaders say when they go into battle?"

"A lot of things. Lots of swearing."

"No. A chant or something. 'For Rome!' or something like that."

"I've heard that one, but the captain of my army, Captain Kaeso, always said, 'Strength and Honor!'"

"His name is Kaeso? Did he get to return home, too?"

Elysium. "Yes. He got to go home."

Servius hollered, "Strength and honor!" His voice sapped through the trees and he raised his stick and charged. Manias blocked and struck, going slow enough for his brother to block him. Manias played dumb and let Servius slice him in the side. He let out a shout as if it really hurt and fell to his knees, and- The world became dark and fuzzy, the sounds drowned out. He heard screaming, crying, shouting. He saw his friends falling all around him, blood seeping out of their torn flesh, sprinkling the armor. He saw the Romans throwing themselves against the enemy, heard the slashing of flesh and the shredding of the spears. He felt vibrant pain bursting through his back, saw the shadows dance around him; the pain screamed, and he rolled onto his back. A Macedonian, sword dripping with blood, raised the sword to pierce him in the face; the Macedonian was flung to the side as a Roman soldier barreled into him with his shield. He saw the Roman engaging another Macedonian amidst a fury of spears and swords and collapsing comrades, and then he heard crying, yelling, and the vision faded, and he saw the treetops, felt the wind on his face. Mother was crying. Father was yelling at Servius. Servius was wailing, "I didn't do anything! I didn't do anything!"

Mother saw his eyes open and yanked him to her chest. The pain in his back began to fade. He felt faint.

Father picked him up. "Manias. Manias. Manias, I'm sorry. I told him not to play that game with you."

"It's okay--"

"My brother returned. He suffered the same."

"Am I crazy, Father?"

"No. You are not crazy. You are heartbroken." Innocence shattered with blood and steel.

"Do not blame Servius. As long as he enjoyed himself, all is well."

Servius fidgeted. "Let's play Troy next time, okay?"

"Troy." Manias weakly smiled. "Troy tomorrow, Servius. Troy tomorrow."

••

He had never actually seen them in the city of Rome, but he knew the baths there were much more extensive. The small town had gotten a baths put in a year after he had gone to Patavium. It was a simple building, with three rooms and an outside pool. Inside the building was the *Frigidarium*, or cold room, which contained a cold plunge bath. Another room was the *Tepidarium*, or the warm room. There was the *Apodyterium* and the *Caldarium* – the hot room. Outside was the *Natatio* – outside swimming pool. He had bathed in them more than once in Patavium, and enjoyed them now. He had forgotten such luxuries. Steam curled around him, sweat popped over his brow, and his chest felt heavy and yet elated at the same time. The owner of the baths scurried back and forth with refreshments and food.

He told them, "In the city of Rome, there are no owners running around – slaves do all the dirty work."

Manias told him he'd seen slaves in the baths in Patavium, and the owner asked what the baths were like there. "Wonderful. Much bigger than this. And yet I find the quality here much more soothing. It is so rout in Patavium."

"A wish of mine is to travel to Rome and visit the baths there. The science of the baths amazes me."

"I have never been to Rome," Manias said. "But I hear the baths are outstanding."

"As big as a small town!" the owner exclaimed. Someone shouted for drinks and he scurried off.

The girl he was with moaned, "Were the baths in Patavium as wonderful as this?"

He shook his head. "The baths? Much better. The experience. I find it now so... wanting."

"Did you see many places on your travels?"

"We traveled from Patavium to somewhere in Macedonia. Linked up with a Brutii Army, and then we were chopped off of that branch and sent north towards Bylazora. It is supposed to be a very wonderful city. The Macedonian Babylon, I hear. We never actually saw it. A Macedonian Army cut us off in the mountains. We pretty much fled. They were much too large for us to handle. But on our way down we had a clash with a rogue of Macedonian mercenaries. Mostly spearmen, some Greek hoplites, slingers and such. Our cavalry rode them to pieces, and we finished off the work." It sounded so simple, and yet the whole ordeal, lasting at least an hour, had wore him to the point of fatigue. He had slain enough Macedonia to wash his clothes in blood.

"So you are a hero?"

"Hero? Some might say. But no more than the other thousands upon thousands of Roman soldiers spread across the world. I just did what I had to do." He was preaching it up. She was buying it. He hoped. Prayed, even. The gods got him this far, why should they abandon him?

"After that battle you returned home?"

"No. I wish. Hah. No, we regrouped and camped in the province Macedonia of Macedonia. It is confusing, I know. Captain Kaeso had one bear of a time writing legionary reports. Eventually we met up with a mixed task force of Brutii and Julii. There were about sixty thousand of us Roman soldiers, and we besieged the Macedonian city of Thessalonica. Two seasons in, we stormed it at night." Women ravaged. Children murdered. Corpses nailed to burning crosses. "We swept through pretty fast. A siege is a horrible thing. Those inside suffer, whether they be soldiers or not." Parents so famished they ate their own children. "Some kids were no more than skin and

bone. Disease everywhere for lack of water. The only water they got was stagnant water from the rains, and it carried disease."

"Water carrying disease?"

"I was told water can carry diseases."

"Diseases are a curse of the gods, don't you know? The Macedonians were cursed."

"Yeah. Yeah, I guess they were." Then why did we get slaughtered?

She leaned against him in the bath. "I'm glad you're back. I haven't had any guy to really talk to. You're the talk of the town! No one can believe you're back. You *are* a hero."

"Heroism is an ideal. But if me being a hero makes you like me anymore, then I'll take a wreath of gold."

She laughed and squeezed his arm. "You're cuter than when you left."

••

Father approached him that night, sitting at the edge of his bed. "I am sorry about what happened today. Your brother should not have tried to—"

"It is my fault, Father. I was flirting with the past. I should not do that."

"Do not feel guilty. Do not feel like a coward. If war were so natural, why must men be trained to kill?"

"I do not feel guilty. I feel tired. Are the crops done?"

"I really can't do much but aerate them. They'll be fine. Do you want anything to eat? Olives?"

"Hah. For once, no."

Father stood and began to leave the room.

Manias began to crawl under the covers. His armor, shield, spear and helmet lay against a chair by the wall. The window let in a cool breeze. He had found himself getting hot lately, so used to the Macedonian winter. "Father?" He turned. "How old is Servius, again?"

"Eleven."

"He looks eight years old. His face does."

"I know. He still looks young."

"He is blessed. He will age well."

"Goodnight, Manias."

••

Manias locked his sword, shield, helmet and armor in a wooden chest, set it against the wall and covered it with a quilted blanket. He looked at it with satisfaction, once again dressed in a tunic and belt, sandals about the house and leather shoes outdoors. Eager to abandon the life of the Army, he convinced his father to grant him some inheritance – his father had actually offered it first! Manias took the inheritance, a small plot of land, and for several days, with the help of men about the township, constructed a small cabin with a thatched roof – a one-room deal, with a fireplace in the center, a small bed, two windows, a stove and some sparse furniture. Sextus gave him a plow, and he broke ground outside his cabin one wintry day. The spring was coming, and it would be harvest soon. He would lean against the plow, smile, and thank the gods, any who happened to be tuning in: he had what he dreamed. A simple life. But there was one thing missing, something he ached for every night as he lay in bed, something that consumed his thoughts as he roasted his dinner upon the glowing embers of the fire. He couldn't wait forever. A man of twenty-one, a hero, he figured he had what it took, and he set off.

••

The unforgettable aroma wrenched Manias from his sleep. He found his arms and legs shaking, but could not remember the dream. A nightmare. That's all he knew. Servius and Father were already in the kitchen, sitting beside the table. He tightened his belt around his tunic and sat at the table. Mother threw pumpkin bread, a bowl of wine for dipping bread, wooden cups of water on the table. The bread was steaming. She topped the bread with sprinkled cheese and raisins, and some olives just for me.

She informed me, "I went into town today, Manias."
 "I was going to go in today."
 "Don't bother."
 "Why don't you tell me why?"
 "You already have plans."
 "Do I? I thought me going away was a sign of adulthood."
 "I didn't make these plans."
 "No?"
 "Go to the grove when you're done eating."

••

Whispering sighs of the brook ran about the sides of the grove, weaving between dry cat-tail stalks and bare faces of windswept trees. The grass grew in stony patches, some greener than others, all smelling of suckled honey and fog. Mist wrapped its icy coat around the trees, a curling carpet frosting the copse. The grove sat upon a low hill; between the skeletal trees, one could make out the rolling winter forests, wisps of smoke rising from scattered homesteads.

She sat upon a rock beside the brook, contemplating its quiet waters. Dawn's songbirds wove tales of romance, alighting her soul, beating the heart. She twirled nimble fingers and imbibed the wicked sensation, one she had not felt for so long, except inside her dreams; her muscles tightened, she crossed her legs and groaned. Bottled emotion swirled within, and she felt nauseous. Sweet nausea.

He pranced upon the grove and entered the clearing, silent. He had learned to walk without sound while training Patavium, and polished the practice in the fields of Macedonia. Now he crept towards her, staunch as he would be if he were stalking barbarians; her back was turned towards him, shoulders slouched: she peered into the babbling brook. He knelt down behind her, ran a hand through her curled hair held in a wavy bun; she whirled around, knowing the touch so well. Now he drew his finger over her cheek; her eyes burned and mouth gaped, watering. She gasped and a spittle of drool ran down the side of her mouth. Already on his knees, he pulled her head towards him. She sat upon the rock, head bowed to his. He choked for breath, wrapped his arms around her rough tunic, and pulled her down. He lay in the grass, and felt her weight upon him, a beautiful weight he embraced with every ounce of energy, an embrace even braver than his movements upon the battlefield.

Her wonderful chest vibrated, nimble arms and legs shook, pelvis stiffened and pressed against him, breasts enlarged. Her eyes batted as grunts escaped her open mouth. With one hand he gripped her tunic, and with the other pulled her head to his, and their tongues danced in a rhythmic sonnet, masterpiece so bold. His own muscles tensed, and as she rocked back and forth upon him, he thought he saw stars. Pleasure took over and he felt the clothes trapping him, a prison. Sweat dripped down his face even in the cold wind breaking between the trees, and their mouths fell away. She breathed into his neck as he kissed her face, cheeks, hair, and then she smothered her face in his hair as he sucked on her neck; her hands pressed against the sides of his face, arms gracing his neck. His eyes burned like fire, and hers rivaled the greatest volcanoes at Pompey. She whispered sweet nothings in his ear as she moved up and down upon him; he kissed her arms: every grappling his lips touched was a different wine, a new taste – euphoria sprinkled every nerve within him.

She pulled up for a moment, undid the braids, allowing her hair to fall around her face as rain falls among the stars. She grinned and moaned as he ran his hands through her hair, feeling each silky strand. He pulled her belt off her tunic, and she rose up, the very goddess of light. She twisted her nimble body, sliding the tunic off, and letting it fall upon the cold stones. He drank her body and tried to swallow it whole, but could not: legs like those of the African gazelle, succulent hips begging to be kissed, a stomach smoother than the water of the Pontus Fuxinus², swollen melon breasts quaking with every agonizing breath. He pulled her down and his hands groped at the soft of her back, amidst the risings and fallings of her bones; her warmth pressed in on him and he found it hard to breathe. He kissed her shoulder, fondled her breasts, kissed them. She

² present day Black Sea

pulled back, as if in retaliation, but kept his quivering arms at bay: her bronze arms tore at the belt of his own tunic, and slipped it out from under him. She fell atop of him, stroking his arms, rocking and groaning. They did not kiss; their eyes closed, forbidden by the mesmerizing pleasure; he lay upon the earth, felt her breath against him, her body scraping and rubbing against his, and let her dance.

Locked in passionate embrace, they lay naked beside the brook.

The goddess of light
and the god of war.

••

Sunlight poured through the trees, warming his shoulders. He stood behind her, lavishing the cool breeze and the warmth of her body. His arms wrapped around her. She leaned her head on his chest, stroked his arms, and he fastened the belt of her tunic around her waist. He wrapped his arms around her front and pulled her close, kissed her hair.

She turned, kissing him. "I have to go."

"Go? Why? Let's just stay here. By the stream."

"I am expected to fix dinner for my family."

"Let them fix it themselves," he said. They kissed again. "Don't leave. I just want to hold you."

"And I you."

He stared into her bottomless chocolate eyes. "You are so beautiful."

She laughed and rubbed against his rough tunic. She could feel his heart beating.

"When did you know?" she asked him, leaning back, hair draping around her, eyes intent.

"When I left."

"I knew when you left," she said. "I dreamt of you every night."

"It is strange how things work out."

"It is *wonderful* how things work out."

He rubbed her shoulders and kissed her passionately on the lips, tasting the inside of her mouth. "Stay with me. Please."

"I have to go. I don't want to arouse suspicion."

"Who would know? Please."

"You sound like a whining infant," she mused. "Not the great soldier you are."

"I would throw in my hero title just for one more kiss."

She kissed him. "Don't test your fate," she said, and she skipped out of the grove, raising her arms.

Elysium.

••

The weeks turned into months. It was not long until the bare trees sprouted green sprouts. All the villagers held their breaths. Then the flowers burst out of the earth, sprinkled the trees, and sent curling aromas wafting through the entire province. Trees burst apart with a flurry of leaves, and the brown grass strengthened with the newfound spring rains. Manias worked the land, preparing for the spring harvest, a tiresome job that took up much of his time. Between working, eating and sleeping, there was no problem finding time for her. She was always coming into his house, and would often spend the night. A few frowned upon this, but no one really cared. Little boys would huddle outside the cabin and hear them at night, their groans and moans, stifled laughter. They would snicker and race into the woods as Manias burst from the door, half-clothed, yelling and howling for them to beat it. They were terrified of him – but they respected him as if he were the thunder god himself. She always wanted to have children, but he wanted to wait. Wait for what? Marriage, he said. Let's do it honorably. She said, When? Their families gathered and stabbed at a date in late spring. She jumped up and down, rolling over in giggles and excitement. Marriage! She embraced the one she loved, and they locked themselves inside his cabin, not coming out till way past dawn. And he didn't feel embarrassed to whisper in her ear, "I love you." She would cuddle against him to the sound of his voice: "You are mine."

••

Those in the town turned their heads as the dozen horses trotted down the street and entered their midst. The Julii cavalymen dismounted, their bright red armor blinding in the sun, shields clattering against them. Swords hung on their right hip, and helmets with red horsehair flowing like a mane rustled in the soft winter breeze.

The lead soldier walked amidst the peasants and announced, "I am looking for a Publius. I was informed I could find him here." He gazed into their eyes. "Does anyone know if he is here?"

A young man pushed out of the crowd. He was merely five feet, four inches tall, squat and yet lean. He spoke to them. "You cannot have him. There has been a mistake."

The leader squinted. "Is there something I have not been told?"

"A mistake in your paperwork. Servius Publius is but eight years old. He has many years before the draft."

"We are not looking for a Servius Publius. We are searching for Manias Publius, of the House of Julii, Legionary. He was sent here on leave for several weeks. We are searching for him now. Can you tell me where I can find him?"

The man's face paled, and he bit his lip. "He stands before you."

The leader smiled. "It is an honor to meet you, Publius! We have all heard great things."

He didn't respond with the same humble courtesy. "Why do you search me out amongst my home?"

"You have been called by our glorious leader, Silvanus."

"I thought I was free. I thought I was allowed to remain here, with family. And friends."

She was coming across the street. She froze for a moment and stared as Publius and the cavalryman spoke.

"Your return was but a leave. It was a *reward*. You have not been discharged."

"Please. Let me stay. Return to your superior. Tell him you could not find me. I beg of you."

The leader scowled. "Is this not the man of legend? The one who slew so many Macedonians and fought to the death, only to be captured and released? Is this not the man of whom legends are made? Speak! Where is your strength? Where is your honor?"

"I just wish to remain here. I am happier here. I am not a warrior."

"You are a Roman soldier. You are an honorable man. Do not taint such honor with this foolishness."

"I must regret that I will not willingly go with you."

"Even to Rome to be recognized by Silvanus himself?"

"With all my heart... No."

The leader sighed, glanced at his men behind him. "You are a soldier of the Roman Army. You are to serve a career of sixteen years – the standard. I am sorry to report that you must be taken by force. If you refuse to cooperate, you will be considered a deserter and will be executed by Roman Army standards. Is this what you wish?"

He cursed the gods. "No."

"Then gather your sword and shield."

Manias closed his eyes. *Elysium* vanished before him. He wanted to get sick. "How long?"

"We will depart at nightfall. Say goodbye to those you love."

"We are headed for Rome?"

"You will be recognized by Silvanus himself, the great leader."

Merciless barbarian in Roman clothing. "After I am given the honor of Silvanus' presence... shall I be allowed to return home?"

"The Roman Army is stretched thin across the world. You shall be reassigned."

He took a deep breath.

"I urge you, Manias. I urge you, not as a superior, but a fellow Roman soldier: do not refuse to show up. I take no pleasure in killing Romans."

"I am Roman," he said. "I am a man of honor. I will be here at nightfall."

••

"You can't just high-tail it out of here."

He grabbed the trunk from under the bed, slid it over the floor. As he propped open the lid, he told her, "I have no choice." Reaching inside, he drew it out. It had been so long. Memories flashed through his arms, up his spine, lodging like mace in his head. He shook them out. The legionary helmet, domed and yet pitted from abuse, felt so cold in his hands.

"No choice?" she said, standing over him. "Don't go! Run into the woods. The grove. Remember the grove?"

The best time of my life. "They're soldiers." He stood, set the helmet on the bed, and walked to a closet. Pulling aside a flap of animal hide, he drew out the four-foot-tall, two-and-a-half feet wide curved rectangular shield, took the sword in its sheath, and set them upon the bed next to the helmet. "They'll find me. And kill me. A deserter." He returned to the closet, taking the bundle of red clothes and armor off the floor.

As he set it upon the bed, she leaned against the wall, felt the breeze from an open window, nice and warm. "So this is it, then?" Crimson sapphire eyes glared at him. "It's over."

Manias turned from the bed, looked at her. "It's not over. I will return. I promise."

"Return?" she cried. "Upon a shield!"

"I will come walking."

She ran hands through her hair. "You can't make promises like that."

He stepped towards her, took her hands in his, and did not turn his gaze from her eyes. "I'm a hero, remember? I will leverage myself to duty in Rome or something, far out of harm's reach."

"Manias," she whimpered. Tears burned in bloodshot eyes. "A request like that will not be honored. Silvanus is fighting on three continents. Everyone is going to the front. Patavium has been all but run dry of troops. The Roman soldiers are stretched so thin they can't breathe for lack of air."

He kissed her hands. "Don't worry. A hero's words are greater than a pen's stroke."

"Silvanus is a tyrant! All he knows is bloodshed and violence... all in the name of power, and in the name of Rome."

He didn't know what to say, so he turned to the bed and picked up the sword. It felt heavy.

She stepped forward, standing right behind him. "You told us you were here for good. You said you were discharged." She wrapped her arms around his waist, her lips centimeters from his neck. He could feel her warmth breath. The ache refused to leave.

"I thought I was," he said stoic.

She removed her arms. "You come here, you seduce me, and-"

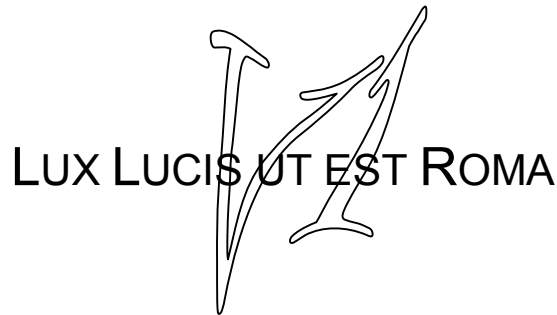
He dropped the sword onto the bed, turned. His eyebrows creased and he spat, "*You seduced me! You called me to the grove! Do you think I am excited about this? Did you see joy in my face this afternoon when the cavalry rode in? Finally I've found what I always wanted.*" His arms waved back and forth as he rattled on in the small cabin nestled in the woods. "A simple life. A beautiful girl to share it with. I was given a plot of land, a small cottage... and I found you." His harsh words had vanished, and now he took her hands in his. He felt them shaking, cold and clammy with unbiased anxiety. "I don't want this to end. I want to stay here, in my homeland, with you." His hands flashed to her shoulders, and he pulled her against him, and their mouths touched. The kiss was passionate but cold. He felt the clock dripping and removed his soul from hers. "But it doesn't look like it is going to work out that way – not now. Later. I swear by the gods, later! I will return, cast down my sword and shield, and we will live together. We will work the land. We'll get drunk and make babies – lots of babies."

She was almost crying. Her shrill voice cut his heart down the seam. She pressed against him, burying her face in his chest. Nimble yet quivering fingers gripped his shoulder. "I want to make babies now."

He kissed her hair, it smelt of jasmine, and he spoke in a low whisper: "We will have to wait. As unbearable it will be for you, it will be even more-so for me. You will be in my thoughts everywhere I go, and I shall *not* return upon my shield. We're going to make babies. We're going to have a family. It will happen. We will live in paradise. *Elysium*. We just have to wait."

She cried into his chest, groping at him. She tilted her hair back. Tears slid down her face. His own throat knotted, and he grasped her, almost choking her, he held on as if a storm were to sweep her away. Her lips shook as she whimpered, and she coughed between jagged sobs. No words were spoken. He just held her tight, felt a tear slide down his own face, and looked out the window, at the spring grass rising like dough in the hearth, the trees casting silvery shadows,

laced with limbs of gossamer and gold. The soft breeze blew through and he felt it massage his face. She heaved against him, dampening his shirt with tears.



THE LIGHT THAT IS ROME

THE MAJESTIC CITY ROME, PROVINCE LATIUM

He had seen it only in his dreams. His eyes widened as the cavalry trotted under the massive arch, the great entrance to the magnificent city hailed as the light of the world. The arch rose high above him, and he felt engulfed, swallowed, and he was drowned in a cacophony of laughter, dancing, working, chatting, selling – the everyday life of Rome. He could have closed his eyes and been in Patavium or Arretium – but upon opening, he could tell this was someplace altogether different. Patavium was a township compared to this place – an ingenious work of Roman architecture – a work of art all by itself!

Down the main street, wrapped in a mist of archaic mystery, the coliseum rose, a labyrinth of curved stone, great archways, glorious pillars, all lined with dozens upon dozens of shops and platforms for public speaking and plays. Manias felt himself unable to speak. The coliseum rose hundreds of feet into the sky, a rotunda that the champion gods would step away from. He could hear the roar of spectators, cheering and booing, and between the great arcs riding around the oval curve of the structure, there seemed to be a swarm of movement, 45,000 Romans pumping with adrenaline, watching re-enactments of battles on the dusty sands below – with real blood and real death-cries.

On another side of the city, exposed bare ground crawled with contractors taking measurements, talking amongst themselves, preparing to build an awe-inspiring temple to the god. This bare plot of land, over hundreds of years, would rise up into the Pantheon, finally to be completed in A.D. 125. Across the city lay the forum, as large as a small town, crowded with shops and traders, kids playing between the pillars. Animals were sold for sacrifices and food, and jewelry was adored by the women and girls. A theatre sat at the rim of the city, lacerated with dozens of stony spires reaching into the sky, a semi-circle of seats surrounding the stone stage: men danced back and forth with wooden swords, and the crowd loved it.

As the horses walked through the crowded wide city streets, Manias marveled at the hundreds of statues erected between buildings, *on* buildings, in courtyards and municipal parks. Statues of warriors, gods, great men and women of the past. Manias even saw a statue of Alexander the Great, slowly falling apart due to time. Fountains and small gardens dotted the streets, the edges of towering buildings, and even adorned the rooftops and balconies. He couldn't help think that this was the Roman equivalent of the hanging gardens in Babylon!

No matter how far they rode, the coliseum never seemed to grow. It hovered in the distance. Manias wondered how big it really was. Then they were moving in its shadow, and it seemed to rise above him, a mountain. The cheers of the spectators blurred out even the noise of the horse's hooves, and he heard the clash of swords and spears and the galloping of horses within the arena. Cages against the side of the building were either empty or held slaves and prisoners damned to the games – most sullen and quiet, knowing this was the last day of their life. Manias caught their gaze, and they glared at him with intense hate – Roman soldiers, what *filth*.

She would love this, he thought as they passed the baths. The baths were, without exaggeration, the size of their town – no, twice the size! The entrances were adorned with pillars and arches of marble and mosaic. No roof shielded the baths: dozens of still-water baths ran

upon the marble, and fountains in wondrous patterns drenched those going to and fro. Children played in the water spouts. It made the baths in the town look like the back of a horse's hoof.

The sight of the baths returned his memory to her, a memory painful, but one he did not wish to forget. And he saw her face, so beautiful, and the ache returned. It was forgotten for the moment, however, as they passed several guards in full armor and weaponry, their *scuta* shields held before them. They let the cavalry pass and he entered the Roman military base. Soldiers practiced everywhere he looked; there was a giant courtyard, engraved with marble statues, and several buildings. He got off the horse and followed the captain up marble steps, between shadowy pillars, and into the main building. He looked back at the great city and sighed. He realized it then, with full and vibrant intensity: he would not be going home again anytime soon.

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He had never experienced a real, royal Roman dinner party. He was told to dress "ornately," but what that meant, he hadn't a clue. A slave came to his room within the military camp, and gave him several colorful tunics, a Senate ring. Manias was frustrated when the slave returned with a basin of steaming-hot water; Manias had to undress, wash, and dress again. He paced about the room, nervous, cracking his knuckles, until the slave reappeared and begged him to follow.

The room reminded him of that painful dinner in Larissa, Macedonia. The walls were round and painted with the great Roman figures that had led many battles, conquered many provinces, and brought the light of Rome throughout much of the world. Yet Manias felt more than self-conscious, as this time there was no room for informalities. Senators joined him at a long table, and over fifty men sat down.

Hors d'oeuvres of salads, radishes, mushrooms, eggs, oysters and sardines were delivered about the table by black slaves. The Senators talked politics about much of the Roman kingdom: dry, stale, boring. Manias felt like he was wasting his life. He picked at his salad and boiled egg, thinking only of her. He would trade in this royal meal for just one bite with her. *Serve me bread and water. Just let me have her again.*

A standing ovation erupted as a lanky figure entered the room. The slaves all bowed, and the newcomer raised a hand outward towards all the men. He wore a fine gold tunic and a wreath of olive leaves upon his blonde hair. He spoke with eloquence. He greeted each Senator by name, and reaching Manias, asked him to stand. Manias did so, and took the hand of the tyrant.

Silvanus' eyes sparkled and his skin blushed with olive oil. He greeted the hero with a kiss on both cheeks, shook his hand vibrantly, and facing the men seated about the long table, announced, "Behold, a true Roman soldier! An inspiration for our men all across the Republic!" Nods and claps greeted his words. He told Manias, "It is my honor to have you dine with us. I requested it. I have yet to meet such a distinguished soldier. A mere legionary, proved of his worth even beyond the infamous Captain Kaeso. You shall be richly rewarded."

Manias felt cotton-mouthed. "Thank you," he said, even though this was the man who had stripped him of all he loved.

"Please, sit down, Publius. Make yourself comfortable. If you feel offended, tell me the offender, and I shall take his head!" Muffled laughter.

Manias kept his mouth shut. *You would.*

The servants poured glasses of wine minced with honey, and as the Senators, Silvanus and Manias drank, they served the main course, *prima mensa*. The food came in steady droves, and mounds were piled onto the plates. Eel and tunny, goose and ostrich, and an entire sucking pig. Manias, who had never eaten most of the meat placed about the table, devoured it hungrily.

As the meal was about to end, Silvanus stood and spoke above the din: "Let us now honor those who have taken the glory of the House of Julii – and all of Rome! – to the barbarians of Hispania, Germania, Britannia and Macedonia!" Everyone stopped eating, stopped talking, and several slaves offered sacrifices of wheat, salt and wine at an altar at the far end of the room. Manias closed his eyes and offered up a prayer: *Relieve me.*

The sacrifice finished, Silvanus said, "Now, let us enjoy ourselves, and detach from the bitter world of politics and war!"

Slaves brought several bowls of honey to be spread on freshly-baked bread, an assortment of cakes, and basins of exotic fruits. The Senators and Manias marveled over yellow slivers that,

when peeled, tasted like no other fruit in the Kingdom. Silvanus proudly revealed, "These are brought from far-off lands! They cannot be grown here, and I myself have never tasted any till yesterday night. These are the last of them. They are precious. Enjoy them. Publius? Have you gotten one?"

Manias stripped the peel and looked at the yellow fruit. "Yes."

"How is it?"

He took a bite. Flavor exploded in his mouth. He grinned. "There is nothing like it."

Silvanus slapped his knees. "Senators?"

They gave a *hoorah* of enjoyment.

"The fruit is called *banana*. But I know that is not what you all are really hungry for! Pat your stomachs and let us continue to the most charming aspect of our evening together!"

As he sat down, Manias tossed the peel onto his plate, and was startled as giant doors flung open and acrobats did cart-wheels into the room. The Senators turned in their seats and applauded. Slaves served wine and they all got drunk, laughing and cocky, aroused as naked dancing girls, some only thirteen or fourteen, danced around the table, stroking the Senators, Manias and Silvanus. Manias brushed them away, as politely as he could, feeling corruption gnawing him away. The girls were beautiful. His muscles squeezed and his eyes fluttered. He forced it down, thought of her, her, *her*. Musicians crowded at one end of the room, playing a symphony on an assortment of horns, small bronze cymbals and tambourine-like drums. Musicians plucked at stringed instruments such as the whistle flute and double reed pipe. Even a water organ was brought in for the entertainment.

The wine took its lavish toll and Manias felt dizzy. The music floated into his ears. The girls danced around him, laughing and singing and touching. Touching him where it felt good. He only became aware of the touching. The naked girls. His mouth opened and he groaned. They surrounded him. The Senators laughed and touched at the girls, but they tramped away before their greedy hands reached the skinny, soft, tan targets. Silvanus had girls kissing and rubbing him. Manias, the guest of honor, was treated especially well, and this was all he knew: not the food, not the acrobats, not the dancers, not even the euphoria of three-too-many wines. The girls.

••

He awoke, head splitting, mouth parched, lips black and blue. He stumbled for a small room where a basin of water sat beside a polished strip of metal. He looked at his reflection in the metal, his windswept hair and stubby beard and the bloodshot eyes. He tried to see if the sides of his head were pulsating, but couldn't make it out. He hung over a hole in the floor for seemingly hours, but only bile dripped from his mouth. Wrapping himself in a robe, he felt the cool of spring as he walked onto a balcony dressed in ferns and blooming flowers of burgundy, cherry, ginger and gold. The warm sun felt good and he leaned against a pillar, looking over the city spread before him, a maze of streets and avenues, four-story buildings, shops and homes. The coliseum rose quiet in the distance, void except for slaves cleaning up from yesterday's games. The city of the future Pantheon was abandoned. The streets crawled with people, though, going to and from work. He felt blessed in an odd way to be standing in the balcony, in the breeze, above the city. A slight elation overcame him, but as soon as he remembered her, he crept back inside, shutting the wild city of Rome from the back of his mind.

He bathed, and after he was dressed, he put on his sandals. The door opened and a slave said, "Did you enjoy your sleep last night?"

"Yes." He couldn't remember.

The slave smiled. "The Senators are jealous of you, sir?"

"Jealous?"

"Last night, sir."

"Oh," Manias said. The guest of honor. The girls clawing all over him. "Yes. It is not that big a deal."

"I am not one to judge," the slave said. "The sun is almost above the city. Have you forgotten?"

"Forgotten?"

"The chariot races, sir. You told me to remind you."

He cursed himself. "Thank you!" He bolted out the door and down the corridor, vanishing down a spiral staircase.

••

The *Circus Maximus* was crammed with over 250,000 spectators filling the oval stands surrounding the cylindrical track. Manias found the box seat above the citizens and leaned upon the railing, watching the chariot wheels spitting dust, the war-horses propelling themselves forward with bursts through the nostrils. Many of the stables churned with horses, and the starting boxes were empty. *Spina*, decorative sculptures on the sides of the track, were being tilted up and down to let spectators know how many laps had been completed. Twelve chariots overwhelmed themselves in a mad seven-lap dash about the track. The chariots were painted four different colors, in four different three-chariot teams: Red, White, Blue and Green. The riders stood in the bed of the chariots, screaming at the horses, yelling harassments at one another. The chariots wobbled and tilted about the wide turns. The horses stampeded around the track.

A voice behind him: "The chariots are light vehicles. They have to be. It's for the sport."

Manias turned. "The sport?"

"This chariot races are not much different than the coliseum. People do not come here to watch horses running around the track."

"The stands are full."

Below them, a woman stood and shrieked, "I entreat you, O Demon, whoever you are, and demand of you from this hour, from this very moment, you crucify the horses of the Green and White teams! And that you kill the drivers Clarus and Felix and crush them. Do not leave any breath in them!"

The man said, "The coliseum is adored because of the violence."

"There is no violence here."

"See that chariot there?" He pointed. "Do you see how it wobbles on the left wheel? This is what the fans are here for." Manias followed his finger.

The twelve chariots were rounding a bend. The wheel on a Blue chariot wobbled back and forth, and as it rode around the wide turn, the sprockets broke and the wheel twisted and shredded itself from the bed. The horses shrieked; the bed tilted, the edge smashing into the dirt, sending a crowd of dust into the driver; the driver, blinded, eyes stinging, released the reigns, and toppled from the crooked bed. He flipped over the back of the chariot and landed on the track, screaming as horses and chariot wheels trampled him to death. The chariots continued the race, the one chariot coming to a stop as the horses tried to shake themselves free. A cloud of dust settled, revealing the crumpled and bloodied body of the unfortunate driver.

The man said, "Sometimes they can even get caught in the reigns and be dragged to their deaths."

Manias stared coolly at the trampled driver, disturbed.

The man took a sip of wine from a marble goblet. "You wished to speak with me?"

"Yes. Not here, though."

"Not here?"

"Let's take a walk. Leave the mob for just a moment."

The man set his goblet down. "I would be honored. Quite intrigued, as well. A hero with a request."

••

The *Campus* was an old drilling ground for the Roman armies that had been raised before Silvanus' tyranny. The grounds that had once served for training of the sword and javelin now became wrestling and boxing fields. Marching grounds became the site of contests in foot racing and long jumping. The archery range now found itself used by those who took up archery as a hobby or sport; contests were not uncommon, and were often led by former soldiers experienced in the art of archery. Sweaty men and teens ran about the grounds on lunch breaks or after school and work. They would often run to the Tiber River and jump in for a swim, or go to the baths to freshen up.

Manias and the Senator walked the grounds, saying nothing except small talk, speaking of the wars in distant lands, the feudal disputes in the Senate, the bitterness of Brutii and Scipii rising against Julii. The Senator said, "Julii is in a hole. Silvanus has gone against Senatorial orders and attacked Germania and Hispania. The *Senatus Populusque Romanus* – or the S.P.Q.R., the Senate and the People of the Roman Republic – had authorized the invasion of the barbarian lands of Macedonia and Britannia. Silvanus is hungry for power. He is a war-monger. He is stretching the legions so far that now he must draft soldiers, and he has been drafting for many years now. The wars do not fare well, either. The Brutii and Scipii are up in arms. Hatred is billowing between the families." He shook his head. "Last night's dinner was a ploy to get us all riled up with Julii. Silvanus may be the cool and suave and sophisticated Roman on the outside, but he has his own power struggles, his own fears. There is talk of discharging him."

"I thought a Roman House leader could not be discharged. Leadership runs in the blood."

The Senator ignored him, changed the topic. "You had but one request?"

Manias' soul tumbled in a cacophony of mockery. He watched several youths wrestling each other, sweating and grunting, and he reminisced on the days when he was eighteen again. "After I am recognized... allow me to return home."

The Senator licked his lips. "Publius, you know that cannot be done. You know all too well how it works around here. If we let every hero return home, Rome would be brought to its knees. We *need* experienced soldiers. It keeps our armies going. You cannot expect freshly-trained recruits to be the backbone of entire legions!"

"Please, Senator: consider extenuating circumstances. Having returned home, I was under the impression I had been honorably discharged. I set my sword and shield away, and took up the scythe and wicker-basket. My father granted me a plot of land, and I fell in love with a beautiful girl. Two months apart from the Army, what else was I to believe? I set to work preparing for the spring harvest, and I was – and still am – endowed to marry come the first spring rains. My dream throughout life has not changed. I do not thirst for glory and honor on the field of battle. My only desire is a simple life, a simple love – peace. I had this, had what I'd always wanted, what I thought I'd never see, and it was taken from me as the flowers burst into bloom. Roman soldiers bore me here, to Rome – unannounced and unexpected."

Several youth ran past them, panting hard, drenched in sweat. The return of spring was met with more sports than any other season. The Senator stroked his tunic. "Publius, Publius. You are not the only soldier suffering heartbreak."

"Had I know I was on leave and not discharged, I would not have been so foolish as to settle down and fall in love."

"We cannot help falling in love."

"I would have kept my passion secret – for her sake, not mine."

"Would you?" the Senator asked. A long, awkward pause. Youths shuffled past and clambered over the bank and into the Tiber. They walked along its rocky bank, eyes glazing the emerald water churning with wrestling youths with sun burnt faces. "I am truly sorry for the misunderstanding. Yet you know how stretched Julii is at this moment. We need all the good warriors we can muster. Silvanus is walking a tightrope. He may be a fool, but he is a ruthless fool. He will never allow you to leave. He cares little for 'extenuating circumstances' – his chief concern is wars; namely, winning them."

Manias' resolution intensified. "Then might I propose another request, this one being shot down? Station me in the lands of Rome. I wish not to go to Hispania, or Germania or Britannia, with no doubt I would hate to return to Macedonia, you understand?" The Senator nodded. "Rome is beautiful. Grant me this: station me in Patavium."

The Senator shook his head now. "It would be a disgrace to Roman glory to send one of its recognized heroes to a town watch in an unimportant city."

"I will bear the disgrace! I implore you, Senator – no, I *beg* you: speak with Silvanus. Plead my case."

A scowl transfixed the Senator's lips. "I am a Senator of Julii. I cannot, for all my honor, make such a request."

"It will be *my* honor tainted, not your own. Increase your honor: honor the wishes of a Roman hero."

"Your wishes are a blatant stain on Roman's own honor."

They walked in silence. Manias knew no ground could be made. *Politics*. “Then what shall happen to me?”

“It is to be decided tomorrow in the Senate.” A flock of birds alighted and flew over them. Manias watched their shadows sprinkle at his feet. The Senator spoke: “Let me give you one piece of advice: Silvanus will grant you one request. It is the way we honor heroes. Most request a girl for the bed, though I doubt that will come from your mouth. We both know Silvanus – if your request is not worthy of Rome, you could very well be sentenced to the Games. Tomorrow, Publius, be careful what you ask for.”

••

A slave took him to what might have very well been his destiny with a rising and falling of the sun. The stands were packed, crowded, dripping with sweat and oily perspiration. Manias choked for air. They climbed higher on the stairwell. The slave looked at their tickets, trying to make them out.³ Manias finally snatched them away, read the greased Latin, and said, “We’re on the wrong side. How did this happen?” The slave mournfully apologized. “I don’t care.” They found their seats just as an announcer, dressed in purple fashion robes, a circlet of dove leaves and a broad smile, stepped out on a flowery box overlooking the dust and grime of the Coliseum.

His voice echoed due to the architecture of the legendary structure: “Today we shall witness the famous battle of general Cassius and his son, the Battle of Carrhe!”⁴ Cheers erupted. Manias clapped as well. The announcer boomed, “We find Crassus and his son outnumbered on the field of battle, surrounded by Parthian cavalry. Cassius’ son dies in a cavalry charge against the Parthians, and dies a noble Roman death!” Honorable praise. The announcer waited for it to die down. “The Parthians taunted Cassius with his own son’s head. Then the Parthian cavalry charged the Roman soldiers! Let us see it with our own eyes today! I give you, the great battle of Carrhe!” Stinging cheers burned like sulfur in Manias’ ears.

The slave leaned towards him and said, “The Games, they’re inspired by barbarian practices of sacrifices at funerals. To honor someone who died, the servants or soldiers of his tribe will fight to the death against one another, and all are buried together. Though this is more of an *excuse* for the Games, rather than a reason.”

Within the stadium, giant grated doors opened and men dressed in scanty armor, carrying spiked maces and swords, wearing dented and spliced helmets laden with horns and spikes entered, spanning out. The crowd celebrated. The soldiers carried *scuta* shields, etched black and engraved with haunting mosaics. They peered up into the stands, eyes gaping with frozen horror. The announcer told the citizens in the stands, “Behold the Roman Army!”

Manias grunted. “They will lose. Why choose Carrhe?”

“Carrhe is popular amongst the citizens now. Why not? Who cares if it is politically correct, as long as the Mob likes it? Don’t you see, sir, that the Games are politics. Roman leaders boost their popularity by hosting games, and the city reaps money off condemned slaves.”

The gladiators congregated in the middle of the stadium. The announcer paraded the Parthians, and opposite doors opened and several horses streaming in purple cloth and knotted armor began circling the arena, kicking up a ring of dust, taunting their fellow gladiators with swords and spears and battle-axes. The Roman actors pressed themselves into the middle of the arena, sticking together, amassing and frantic.

The slave said, “More and more, people are wanting something different: exotic animals, exotic people. New attractions, like ostrich races or dwarves vs. gladiator women.”

“Gladiator women?”

“And dwarves. Really small people. It is quite amazing.”

“I’ve seen them before,” Manias said.

The ‘Parthians’ encircled the grouped ‘Romans,’ harassing them with catcalls.

³ Yes, you had to buy a ticket with your seat number to watch a game in the Coliseum! A historian once remarked, “Ancient Rome is our modern day New York City.” If we were to see Rome as it were, instead of just as a few heaps of crumbling stone, we would discover a city that would even rival the hanging gardens of Babylon!

⁴ Timeline error: the battle of Carrhe took place in A.D., not B.C. Oh well. I really like Carrhe

The slave: "The Romans should thin out."

"No. They'll be easy pickings for the Parthians... Who are these gladiators?"

"Slaves, I think. They can also be prisoners of war, or *damnati* – men or women sentenced to the arena. There are Samnite gladiators and Thracian gladiators – romanticized versions of Rome's barbarian enemies. Then there are Retarius and Minnillo gladiators, stylized fishermen and fish-men fighting against each other. Sometimes they even blindfold the gladiators, using helmets with no eyeholes. A pretty game of, 'He's-behind-you!' Bestiarii are popular – elaborate arena hunts, men fighting lions or tigers or, even once I saw, a pair of elephants! Sometimes some water is even put into the stadium, some fake boats and thrown in, and there is nautical battles. Is it not ironic how these gladiators are held as scum, but treated as heroes?"

Much like war, Manias thought. *Vicious violence-lovers are hailed as honorable.*

The Parthians below surged into the Romans. Blades hacked and stabbed. Screams drifted. Blood steamed in the sand. Manias turned his eyes.

"Not amused?" the slave asked.

"I find it hard to take pleasure in another man's death."

"These are condemned men!"

"And does that make them any different from soldiers? Do they, then, not feel?"

"You are a killjoy."

"Romans prize virtue, honor, strength. These makes a true Roman – this is not Rome!"

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The great chamber's triangular roof was held together with pillars carved of precious stone, inlaid with jewels, and designed with ornate mosaics and montages. A narrow path led straight to a podium; on either side of the podium were the countless benches now filled with Romans in flowing white tunics, trimmed beards and goatees, elegant signet rings and enough flare to knock a sword from its sheath. Fake smiles and care-free – or care-full? – nods and, "How is your family?" scattered about the room.

Silvanus sat beside the podium with three others. He stroked his beard and appeared anxious, eyes flitting about, wary, searching for the blade of the politicians. He wore colorful robes and a red ring. Beside him were two others in robes and wearing rings; one wore a jade ring, the leader of the Brutii – Numerius – and tossing stinging looks Silvanus' way. The other man wore an azure ring – Decimus, leader of the House of Scipii. Standing behind the podium, an elderly giant, the anointed leader of the S.P.Q.R. – Titus Falcus.

The entire Senate room grew silent, and Silvanus and Numerius of the Brutii stood. They greeted each other with weak chest thumps, and then stood beside Falcus. The Senate clasped their hands tightly together, leaned forward, bathing in the intensity, and the two had at it.

Brutii: "We asked for your assistance in Macedonia. We did not ask for you to claim our lands!"

Julii: "What lands have we stolen from you?"

Brutii: "Larissa was to fall to *us*. We have been given the task of transitioning Macedonian into a protectorate. When we asked for your help, we asked for you to back us up. *We* were called to take Macedonia. It was to be a province of Rome under the leadership of Brutii! Brutii demands you pull out of Larissa as soon as our troops reach the city!"

Julii: "Macedonian bands from Larissa were harassing our troops. What were we supposed to do, sit back and take their assaults? Do you think I am going to allow the glory of Julii to—"

Brutii: "Rome is glory! Brutii is not glory – and neither is Julii."

Julii: "Then why do you thirst for it so? Why do you demand Larissa, if not for glory?"

Brutii: "Why do you take lands that are not in your jurisdiction, if not for glory?"

No answer.

Brutii: "Hand over Larissa."

Julii: "Larissa has been under Julii care for the past many months. We cannot withdrawal now."

The debate continued. No grounds were made. Empty threats, hollow promises, vague concerns. Typical politics. Falcus split it up as an hour passed, and then Scipii's Decimus stood, and took the side of Falcus and Brutii. The three of them, a backwash frenzy, charged into Julii with brutal intensity.

S.P.Q.R.: "Your campaigns in Hispania and Germania are being pulled into question again."

Julii: "What is there to question? We wish only to pursue the glory of Rome. The barbarians are in need of a savior – Rome is that savior!"

S.P.Q.R.: "That is for the Senate to decide."

Julii: "Was it not the Senate that ordered my armies into the battlefields of Germania and Britannia?"

S.P.Q.R.: "Your armies? Your men belong to the Republic of Rome – not you or your House."

Julii: "How can you expect such a campaign against Britannia to go smoothly without skirmishes on Germanian soil? The Senate asked me to invade Britannia. I did. Then Britannia's diplomats jumped all over Germania, and now they are in an alliance. Does the Senate wish me to avoid the Germanian's blade when assaulting the Britons?"

The Senate: "Why did Germania ally with Britannia? Was it not because your soldiers started burning Germanian villages?"

Julii: "Rome's soldiers."

S.P.Q.R.: "Your tactics are brutal. Did you know massacre the population of Larissa under the Roman flag?"

Julii: "If it were so, these are just rumors to my ears."

Scipii: "Word of rape and murder and pillage – all in the name of Rome – have been reported in Hispania, Macedonia, Britannia and Germania – all lands in which the armies under your arm – and your arm alone – exist?"

Julii had no answer.

S.P.Q.R.: "The Senate humbly asks for you to withdrawal your troops from Hispania and Germania."

Julii: "It is impractical."

S.P.Q.R.: "By this time next year, we shall be in a cease-fire with those nations and offering peace agreements of denarii and trade."

Julii: "How then do you wish me to go ahead with the invasion of Britannia?"

S.P.Q.R.: "It is to end. If you cannot control your own lusts, then you are not fit to command the armies of Rome."

Anger broiled behind Julii's eyes. "One year."

Falcus nodded. "One year."

"It shall be a bloody year."

Falcus ignored him. "Obey, or you shall be reprimanded, and lose seats in the Senate."

Those of Julii sitting upon the stone benches shuffled anxiously. They caught the eyes of other Roman members. Pity. Pity that they had to serve under such a wicked tyrant.

Silvanus nodded. "It shall be done."

Many minutes passed. Brutii and Scipii sat down. Julii did not: "Today we honor a wonderful Roman. A man of virtue, strength, and especially, honor." He waved towards the towering door at the end of the cavernous room. "He is a soldier of the House of Julii, a warrior unparalleled, a legionnaire of legend. I give you, Manias Publius."

From the shadows of the arching door, a man appeared. Shining armor and clean war garments clothed him, and he braced a splendid, sharp *scuta* shield against his left arm, and his right arm dropped to the hilt of his sword. The domed helmet reflected light from the graceful windows at the top of the Senate chambers. He walked down the aisle, stoic-faced, rigid. The Senators rose in heavy applause. The sound of the clapping bounced off the sturdy walls and the marble pillars. He heard the roaring in his ears, and stepped up to the podium.

Julii leaned forward, kissed him on both cheeks, smiled warmly. "Rome welcomes you. Turn and be recognized!"

He turned, methodically. The Senators still stood, and clapped even louder. This continued for nearly a minute until Julii begged them all to sit down.

He said, "This man before you slaughtered hundreds of barbarians in Macedonia! He cut through a swathe of barbarians and was one of only a handful of survivors! His fellow survivors told of heroic deeds of valor and strength. He screamed, '*Rome! Rome!*' as he charged the field. His sword burnt like crimson and his eyes glowed as if Mars had possessed him. We honor this man today! We honor him with recognition! And with a gift."

He walked around the hero and steely looked into his eyes. "Make a request, and it shall be honored."

Manias said, "My request is to better serve Rome."

The leaders of the Houses smiled. The political jaunt saturated his words. In saying this, he put himself in harm's way: after a furious debate on Julii vs. Rome, those words burnt like fire in Julii's ears. If Julii sent him to Britannia or Germania, it would be a blatant offense against Scipii, Brutii, the Senate, and S.P.Q.R. The same if he were sent to Macedonia or Hispania.

Silvanus looked deep into his eyes. He could not punish this hero – for if he did, what would be the charge? He had requested to better serve Rome – an execution would cite a rise-in-arms through Brutii and Scipii and much of Julii as well!

Now Julii smiled. "Your request shall be granted! As of now the dispatch has been sent across all the lands of Rome! A new legion is to be formed! Legio XII! The twelfth legion! Manias Publius, you are being given the honor of training, leading, and commanding the 2nd Century of the 3rd Urban Cohort! Do you accept this most precious honor? Do you accept the granting of your own wish? Do you accept the task to serve Rome?"

Desperation sank like a rock in the seat, tied to his heart, pulling it ever down. A curse. A prophecy:

"Yes."



THE 12TH LEGION

MILITARY DIVISION, THE GREAT CITY ROME, PROVINCE LATIUM

Wooden stakes surrounded a marble statue of a Roman soldier holding his sword and shield. Men in turquoise tunics jumped back and forth in the dust, hitting at each other with wooden swords, parrying and striking, faces laden with an odd mix of excitement and competition. Manias stood at the statue, watching the soldiers with the play toys, and was brought out of jumbled thoughts as two men walked up. He turned around and thumped his chest before them, a sign of *strength and honor*.

Manias immediately noticed they were older, and was not surprised. These men had been borne out of the urban cohort. Manias had gone from grungy legionnaire to the commander of an urban cohort – unheard of, except for in the case of honoring a hero. He could tell bitter distrust wrapped over the minds of these men, but he did not make a case about it. He introduced himself as Manias Publius of Venetia Province, partaker of the campaigns in Macedonia.

One of the men said, “And I am Quintus Farus of Massilia Province. Partaker of the campaigns against Gaul. I was one of the mere beggar infantry when we stormed the gates of Lugdunum. I was raised always in the threat of Gallic raids. They would sweep down from the mountains, raping our women, killing our men, stealing our children. The walls of the fort were our only honeycomb of protection. My best friend died in a Gallic raid – he and his sister were out in the fields; they hadn’t heard the warnings of the scouts. His body was found, mutilated, but hers never has been.” His eyes grew shadowy in hate. “Ever since my only wish has been to conquer the rest of the Gauls. Most of their land is in our possession, but their armies never sleep. Before I die, I shall send the soldiers of Gaul to the pit of Hades.”

Manias nodded. “I am thankful to be serving with such a passionate man.”

The other man looked at those training in the dust. “Do you not remember those days? So youthful, so innocent... I thirst for them again.” He looked at Manias. “Tiberius Meridius. I was born and raised in the heart of Rome. The city of Capua, south of Rome. My father served in the early campaigns against the Gauls. Quintus here served under him. My father provided me only the best of training, and I rose through the ranks, over six years, to where I am now.”

Manias said, “I am honored to be serving with you men.”

A horn sounded from the pillars of the Roman camp’s headquarters. A summons to the courtyard.

“We are on the other side of the wall now,” Quintus said. “We shall make warriors of children.”

The three centurion commanders of the 3rd urban cohort abandoned the statue.

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Aristotle once commented, “All youth are immature, lazy, and only want to party.” Manias saw himself in their eyes as he walked before the haggard ranks. The courtyard was filled to the brim with nearly six thousand boys and men. The sun was high, the breeze was cool, and their tunics tugged back and forth. Manias paced before the new members of Legio XII, 3rd urban cohort, 2nd century. Most of these recruits were just mere kids – sixteen, seventeen, eighteen years old, from scattered provinces around Rome. Most had never seen the city of Rome until earlier this week, where they had been branded and divided, sent to their tents and centuries, forced to get to know

their new companions – their new brothers – even before actual training began. Now the time for training had come. Manias hadn't seen any of those under him, and now he peered into their eyes, saw wells of youthful innocence. His heart ached. Mere boys. Just boys. Farmers and girl-chasers. They had turned in the dice of an old life and vowed to take up the sword and shield for a new one.

Manias walked before them, and his own voice thundered: "I am not your friend. I am not your father. I will not weep when you fail, I will not gently chastise you. Your skills reflect my ability to lead. If your skills are not perfect, then I am not perfect! *You shall be perfect!* A Roman soldier lives and dies by his sword. If you cannot use your sword, you cannot live. I look at you and I see myself – for I stood in the courtyard of Patavium many years ago, shaking and nervous but smiling and ready on the outside. I will not be fooled – you are frightened. You are frightened because you don't know if you can make it. You can! Thousands have gone before you." He glared into their eyes. "It is my job to train you with the sword, and lead you forward with the sword. Orders have come down: we are to march for Germania in five months! In five months you shall be put to the test – but not as boys, but as men. Your childhood is gone. Now is the time to work hard, fight hard, and bring Roman glory and honor to the field."

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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 of Rome, and paraded for up to and around twenty miles a day, through the fields and country back-roads, 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.

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 is 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 (for obvious reasons), 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: replaces wheat with barely. 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 fighting. 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 Macedonians, 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 *auxiliaria* 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.

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Five months came and went. August of that year, the commanders of the centurions, the cohort commanders and all ranks above were called into the domed dining hall Manias had feasted at many months before. Candles sprinkled light about the room, and the slaves served dishes of pork and fish, green vegetables and fruit. Wine splashed in the cups. Everyone ate hungrily, caring not for the tightness of their belt. This, they knew, without being told, would be the last *real* meal in a long, long time.

General Alexander Spurius – child of a Macedonian father and a Roman mother – stood up at the end of the table with his drink. Wine dripped over the edges as he groveled to the assembled soldiers, “Let us drink heavy and eat the same! Silvanus’ orders have come down the line! This morning I received word *Legio XII* is to set out for Germania tomorrow afternoon!”

Cheers shook the table. Manias gripped his goblet and chugged wine down. A pleasant burn.

Tiberius shook him from his sleep. “You were having a nightmare again.”

Manias wiped beads of sweat from his forehead. “Thank you for waking me.”

“Do you fear the war?”

“No. I fear never seeing her again.”

“You are an honorable Roman, Manias.”

“That’s right. An ‘honorable Roman.’ So pleased.”

Tiberius bit his lip. “If you will not fight for Rome–”

“I will fight for Rome. Not for Silvanus. *Not for Silvanus.*”

“You are a heretic. Do not let your words be heard. Silvanus will take your head.”

“Is that the worst that could happen?”

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Here they stood once more. Five months ago, to the day, they had found themselves in the courtyard for the first time. Then it had been different. They had been unruly and disheveled; Aristotle’s observances had been keen. Boys whose most ambiguous desire was a night of partying love-making had stood here on this sacred ground, and here they stood again. They had been rebellious; now they were disciplined. They had been lazy; now they were hard-working. They didn’t think; now they were trained *not* to think. They had stood about, loose and anxious; now they stood in perfect rows, shoulder-to-shoulder, stock-faced, expressions set. Then they had worn dusty and grimy tunics; now each wore crimson battle dress, heavy armor, a sword, a clutch of javelins, a bronze helmet and carried blood-red shields stamped with the emblem of Julii. In five long, grueling months they’d evolved from nervous school-kids to trained killers. Such was the way of the Roman soldier.

General Spurius rode his horse before the 6000 assembled foot soldiers and the 600-odd cavalry. He rode before the guards at the gigantic arch gateway. The steel gate was closed, and he rode before it, and raising his sword, he kicked his horse; the horse reared back on its hind legs, pawing at the air, and he hollered, “Strength and honor!”

The cry floated through the ranks.

The horse trotted before the gate. He snapped the orders. The guards began to raise the gate. One hundred fifty cavalry joined the general, and as the gate opened the main avenue of the city gaped before the Legion. Thousands – even millions – of citizens crowded the sides of the street, beating their chests, hollering blessings. The road weaved between several statues, past the coliseum, and out into the rolling fields surrounding the city. The cavalry marched first, and was submerged in buckets upon buckets of red flowers thrown onto the departing Army in honor of the god of war. *Legio XII* of the House of Julii abandoned the military division of the city and marched in perfect unison towards the massive front gates of Rome.

Manias looked up at the arch as he led his 200-man century underneath. The crowd’s cheers thundered; he could imagine Mars clapping. Flowers blew all around him, bathing the air in a tingling scent of lavender and rose. The smell burnt through him and the lavender reminded him of her. As the soldiers marched he closed his eyes, and listening to the rhythmic pounding of the march, imagined seeing her smile, seeing her beautiful eyes once again. He smiled under the helmet, and all noise drifted off; he was being honored by millions of people and yet he would throw it all away just to touch her face, to kiss her lips, just once more.

The soldiers chanted as they marched out of the city. The chant echoed through the statues and monuments, the buildings and pillars, through the Roman forum and even into the coliseum. Gladiators fighting paused and listened to the warriors’ cry:

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)

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Six thousand six hundred honorable Romans drew peasants out of their huts, farmers from their barns and fields. Little children ran along the sides of the road, dancing as the Roman soldiers filed past. The city spread out like a canvas behind them, but the noise of the crowds, the roar of the blacksmith, the tinkering of the inner city didn’t haunt like a festering sore. Now it was the songs of the birds. The feel of the wheat against one’s palm. The gentle wind moving across your face. A taste of *Elysium*. Manias smiled. A taste of *home*. He was not born for the city. He could

never live in Rome. Return home. Survive and return home. He did not fight for the glory of Rome. He fought for no ideal. He fought for her. He fought for himself. He fought for them. She was no ideal; he was no ideal. She waited. Did ideals wait up, tossing and turning in bed for years upon years? He saw the little children and remembered the Macedonian general, his own son who wanted to become a winery worker. How was he doing? He hoped well. A smile touched his face. He wished well to the barbarian and ruthless enemy.

The Roman Army, it seemed, never stopped marching. Can you imagine going at unheard of speeds (marching a mile in fifteen minutes) while carrying a total of seventy pounds of equipment with you?

The Roman Army often marched in a box formation. The strongest legion would march in the center; the strongest of its strongest soldiers marched at the head of the center line. These legions were called *Agmen*. The strongest legion was the Vanguard, going by the name *Primum agmen*. Surrounding the strongest legions were the *Novissimum Agmen*. These were the weaker soldiers, acting as padding in case of a surprise attack or ambush.

This marching mode set a pace forcing legions to travel up to twenty miles a day. Ahead of the marching legion were *Expeditus*, or fast-moving group scouts: lightly-armed soldiers that could move quicker. Cavalry scouts were often sent ahead to seek out possible camping sites and to make sure the path and the area surrounding the marching path were clear of enemy forces.

Every night, after sometimes more than five hours of marching, the Romans would halt and erect a camp. Because every Roman force used the same scheme, this meant every soldier always knew where to find everything. This also meant that when a soldier would enter the camp of another legion, perhaps in delivering a message, he would always know where to go. The legion's standards always had their place reserved at the center of the camp; they even had their own tent!⁵

Camps were usually built in strategic locations, and when stopping for long periods of time, often built forts. A camp or fort was rectangular and surrounded by a broad ditch. When the army built a camp, the soldiers would throw up an earthen rampart with the earth from the ditch. Upon that ditch, soldiers would build a stockade of wooden poles. When a fort was built, instead of an earthen wall, the Romans built a heavy wall of stones, complete with watchtowers. Four gates were the entrances to the camp: from gate to gate, two main streets crossed the camp or fort; the *Via Principalis* (Mainstreet) and the *Via Praetorium* (the Street along the praetorium). The gates on the left and right side of the fort or camp were called after the *Via Principalis*, with the extension of *dextra* (right) and *sinistra* (left). The praetorium (headquarters) was in the center of the camp, along with the tents or houses of the leadership, as well as an isolation hospital. The

⁵ One of the most striking visual aspects of the Roman army were the standards, tall poles topped with various insignia and symbols, including many types of animals. During the Empire, the image of the emperor was also added to many standards.

The standards were not just for show; they served important practical functions as well. Each century, cohort, and legion had its own standard; during battle and other activities, these were held by officers called standard-bearers (general term *signifer*) who were marked out from other soldiers by the animal-head skins they wore on their heads.

The standards helped to keep the units together, since the soldiers could see them above the action. Standards also helped to preserve the cohesiveness and pride of each unit, as they represented a concrete symbol of that unit's achievements. They were also used in various religious rituals designed to promote unity.

The most important standard in each legion was the legionary eagle, made of a precious metal (usually silver) and symbol of the power of Rome and the honor of the legion. To lose the legionary eagle in battle was a terrible disgrace, and leaders like Augustus who succeeded in recovering captured legionary eagles capitalized on the propaganda value of the event. The eagle standard was carried by a special standard bearer (*aquilifer*) who wore a lion-skin headdress.

sheds or tents of the *contubernia* were placed around the center of the camp. Every camp even had its own small *carcer* – prison, located near the *Porta Principalis Sinistra*.

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Roman boys who desired to serve in the Roman Army as *legionarius* – legionaries – became a *tiro*, or a soldier in training. The usual age for a boy joining the Roman Army was seventeen to eighteen years old, though there are records of boys as being young as thirteen and fourteen joining the Roman Army. After training he would join a maniple, one of three belonging to a cohort. After 22 years of service in the Roman Army, the boy could be released as a *veteranus*, a veteran soldier. By that time he would be around 45 years old.

A Roman soldier always dressed the same. A tunic served as underwear; over the tunic was an hauberk. The Romans wore sandals with iron spikes on the side so he wouldn't find himself 'slithering' on the march. On his head rest a bronze helmet, and those of higher status in the Army would often adorn their helmets with plumes and horsehair crests. The average Roman soldier carried three weapons: the sword, the dagger, and the javelin. There were specialized Roman soldiers – archers did not carry a sword, just a dagger, and their bow and arrow; *triarii*, experienced veteran soldiers, would most often carry spears into battle. All the Roman soldiers carried *scuta* shields. The cavalry did not have the rectangular shields like the infantry – the cavalry's shields had six sides instead of four. The shields held big metal knobs on their fronts; the knobs connected with the handles on the insides of the curved shields; the metal knobs – or bosses – could be used to punch the enemy in close combat.

A Roman soldier was expected – and trained – to march up to twenty miles a day, and each carried a stake for the palisade of the camp, a rucksack with provisions for about three days, pans and his weapons. While marching for five hours a day, a mile every fifteen minutes, he was also trained to carry nearly fifty pounds of equipment! This was usually carried on the shoulder as a pack mounted on a wooden cross frame. Also, for every eight soldiers there was one mule in the baggage train to carry extra equipment. The contents of the fifty pounds of equipment included rations, a canteen of water, cooking equipment, a selection of tools, a cloak for bad weather, sleeping equipment, and spare clothing (especially for the cold winter months). With his armor and pack, a Roman soldier had to bear about seventy pounds on the march. Cooking equipment consisted of a bronze pot with a loop handle, a smaller pot with a straight handle, and a grill. Oil lamps may also have been carried.

A Roman soldier's life was repetition. Every 15 days the soldiers would receive their rations: a ½ bushel of *frumenti* grain. Using the grain, they could prepare bread, porridge, wheat and barely. If meat were available, the Romans shoved it down hungrily; meat was most often purchased from traveling merchants. The soldiers were encouraged to eat cheese, olive oil, and honey whenever they could. The pay was low – 45 dollars a year (though it was counted in denarii). While it wasn't a lot, soldiers received the 'spoils of war:' gifts of land and valuables.

The marching never seemed to end. Every day it grew colder and colder as the heart of Rome fell farther and farther behind them. The foothills of Rome grew rougher and deeper, the earth sliced apart by ravines and dark forests with no end. The mountains shot up like sentinels in the mist. Fog greeted them every morning, only to vanish with a whisper with the rising sun. Leaves turned colors – the green faded to gold, jasmine, orange and chocolate, only to fall with a cough of the wind. Winds carrying icy breath descended from snow-lashed mountains, and the grass at their feet curled, withered, yellowed.

The last of the distinctly Roman towns disappeared behind them, fortified by a heavy wooden palisade. They marched deep into the forest, across rivers and streams, in valleys, always in the shadow of the mountains. No one said it, but all knew it. These were Roman lands but they were teeming with Gauls. More than once a handful of soldiers had seen figures in the trees; the figures disappeared after they rubbed their eyes, but no one called the spotters crazy.

Quintus kept his blade dutifully sharp and trained his eye on the tree line. He always told Manias, "They're in there, watching us. I can feel it. I can taste it. Smell it." Even when the trees were empty except for birds and deer, he would adamantly pledge, "They are hunting us even now. God-awful barbarians."

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One day as Fall neared a close, scouts hurried back to Spurius: "A storm is forming to the west!" They never reported weather unless it were bad. "Sometimes up to five feet of snow has fallen. It will reach us by tomorrow morning." Spurius, trusting his scouts with his life – foolish or wise, some would debate – reached a conclusion: "Let us construct a fort. Find me a good location and we shall fortify it tonight. No doubt the Gauls will try to attack us in the snow."

The legion reached a small town, just a jumble of scattered huts. The lands was covered with rectangular plots of wheat and barley, interspersed with dark forest. The conquered Gallic villagers watched with bitter strife as the army marched down their main rode, leaving the crops wallowing in billowing dust clouds. The parents kept their children close, and the children did not refuse: they were told stories of the savage Romans, of their rape and murder and child-stealing. The Roman soldiers tried to avoid the gaze of the peasants as they marched between fields and forest.

Dark storm clouds gathered on the horizon as Roman soldiers got to work. A fort was constructed on a field of wheat. Soldiers were sent into the forest to cut down trees for the palisade, and other soldiers constructed the tents, handed the equipment, and dug the ditch and constructed the rampart. The sun was falling quickly. Fearing the snow storm would be on them earlier than the scouts had reported, Spurius sent out several cohorts to a nearby field to gather food to be kept inside the camp. By the time they were ordered to return to the completed fort, the stars were burning like jewels, and 2/3 of the designated wheat field had been leveled. The owners of the field, an older man with two children, a widow, felt tears slide down his cheek as his food and work was stolen out from under his nose.

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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. Spurius 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. Manias, Quintus and Tiberius were called to the general's tent, along with several other leading Romans; the 1st, 2nd and 3rd urban cohorts 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 Spurius would keep no record, said nothing. Manias 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.

Manias 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. Manias pulled the tunic under his armor tighter, goose-bumps rattling up and down his arms. The cold, it brought memories: Macedonia. Lying in the tent, feeling the brittle warmth of the candle-light, General Alypius. Blazon snow etched like fog on painted glass.

A superior officer spat, "Commanders! Walk the lines!"

The three of them nodded and spread out. Manias 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 nipier. 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. Manias 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. Manias 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.

Manias 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 officer hollered, "To arms! To arms!" A trumpet call floated over the soldiers.

Romans grabbed swords and javelins. Manias ran for his weapons, blending in with the other soldiers. He guessed there were one thousand eight hundred Romans, and more and more Gauls emptied from the brooding haunts of the woodlands.

Manias 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, sparkling with the emblem of Julii, and faced them towards the enemy.

Manias grabbed a shield and held it against him, blocking off the cold. The Gauls were halfway across the field.

Tiberius glanced over at Manias, 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. Manias 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 pulsated, 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.

"Urban cohort!" Manias hollered. "Aim your javelins!"

The Gauls' eyes burnt with crimson rage.

The Gauls were nearly upon them – fifteen meters.

"In the name of Rome!" Manias screamed, "Fire!"

Hundreds of javelins arched from the Roman lines, dropping into the Gauls. Gauls were thrown backwards, dropped to the ground, screaming and writhing. 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!" Manias roared. The first three lines drew their swords; the others pulled out their javelins and threw them over the heads of their comrades, raining into the enemy. Still more came from the woods.

Energy coursed through Manias' 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.

The Gallic lines smashed into the Romans and hell unleashed.

Spurius 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 trumpets!" Trumpets cried out over the encampment.

Manias' 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 Manias drove the bottom of the shield into his feet. The man fell and the Roman beside Manias stabbed him with his sword. Manias 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.

Her wonderful chest vibrated, nimble arms and legs shook, pelvis stiffened and pressed against him, breasts enlarged. Her eyes batted as grunts escaped her open mouth. With one hand he gripped her tunic, and with the other pulled her head to his, and their tongues danced in a rhythmic sonnet, masterpiece so bold.

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 trench 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.

His own muscles tensed, and as she rocked back and forth upon him, he thought he saw stars. Pleasure took over and he felt the clothes trapping him, a prison. Sweat dripped down his face even in the cold wind breaking between the trees, and their mouths fell away.

Manias glanced over and saw the Gauls spreading between the ranks. These boys had never seen real combat before, and some fought well – and others died just as well. Manias 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 Manias drove the sword down into the bare-chested man's gullet. He ripped the shield from the man's throat and blood sprayed 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 charge of the Gallic barbarians.

She breathed into his neck as he kissed her face, cheeks, hair, and then she smothered her face in his hair as he sucked on her neck; her hands pressed against the sides of his face, arms gracing his neck. His eyes burned like fire, and hers rivaled the greatest volcanoes at Pompey. She whispered sweet nothings in his ear as she moved up and down upon him; he kissed her arms: every grappling his lips touched was a different wine, a new taste – euphoria sprinkled every nerve within him.

Blood smeared Manias' 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 Manias shrieked as a sword pierced his throat; blood sprayed all over Manias, and Manias 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 Manias in a desperate plea for life, and yet Manias gave him no comfort: he turned his head and struck again. The waves never ended.

She pulled up for a moment, undid the braids, allowing her hair to fall around her face as rain falls among the stars. She grinned and moaned as he ran his hands through her hair, feeling each silky strand. He pulled her belt off her tunic, and she rose up, the very goddess of light. She twisted her nimble body, sliding the tunic off, and letting it fall upon the cold stones.

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. The Roman cohorts overstepped the fallen and pushed the Gauls back towards the tree line.

He drank her body and tried to swallow it whole, but could not: legs like those of the African gazelle, succulent hips begging to be kissed, a stomach smoother than the water of the Pontus Fuxinus⁶, swollen melon breasts quaking with every agonizing breath. He pulled her down and his hands groped at the soft of her back, amidst the risings and fallings of her bones; her warmth pressed in on him and he found it hard to breathe.

Manias 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 Manias, 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. Manias 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 Manias' maniacal brain calculated. He screamed, "Follow me! Follow me!"

He kissed her shoulder, fondled her breasts, kissed them. She pulled back, as if in retaliation, but kept his quivering arms at bay: her bronze arms tore at the belt of his own tunic, and slipped it out from under him. She fell atop of him, stroking his arms, rocking and groaning.

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, and raised their shields. And 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.

They did not kiss; their eyes closed, forbidden by the mesmerizing pleasure; he lay upon the earth, felt her breath against him, her body scraping and rubbing against his, and let her dance. Locked in passionate embrace, they lay naked beside the brook.

Hope fluttered back into Manias as the cavalry rushed past, chasing the Gauls into the trees. Spurius' 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. Manias brutally ignored the searing pain of his arm and led the circling 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.

Manias ordered, "Drop your weapons!" He spoke Latin. They would understand that.

⁶ present day Black Sea

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 Manias muttered, "Sir, you have found your glory."

*The goddess of light
and the god of war.*

The cavalry sent up clouds of snow, the hooves trampled bodies, broke swords, spears and shields, and rushed between the trees. Cries ran through the fleeing Gauls as they rushed for the river, stumbling through dry thickets and brambles. Thorns and branches drew deep welts and bloody lines on their bare bodies, their 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 by the heavy charge of the Roman 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 icy waters, throwing off their weapons, and swimming. Some made it; for others, the cold took charge, and they drowned 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.

A lieutenant said to the commander, "Sir, there is a bridge just up the river! We can ride the rest down."

The commander 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.

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 raped the children, enslaved the men, and killed 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 beset the fallen Gauls trampled down in the snow, lying twisted and broken, shattered lives, a ruined land.

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Manias had cleaned off his armor, shield and sword in the river, washing the blood from the cracks and creases. Someone had told him to wash his face, too; he had not noticed a spurt of blood running up his cheek and into his hair, despite the bronze helmet. He was not in urgent need of medical care, and yet by that night he was told he'd be fine. They wrapped his wound and ordered someone else to carry his shield for him the next few days – a rare honor, but Manias was being branded (once more) a hero: he had been the one to lead the counter-charge and capture forty Gallic prisoners in the making.

Now Manias had been beckoned to Spurius' tent in the fort. The winds began to howl and a blazon white snow fell in sheets. He held his head low to keep off the stinging snow, the charming cold, and entered the camp; the darkness shredded in the glow of candles, and Spurius, removed of his battle-dress, wearing only a tunic, sat at a desk. He stood and greeted Manias warmly, the scene all too familiar: Kaeso in Macedonia. Shivers traveled up Manias' spine.

"My deepest sentiments, Commander Manias. How is your arm?"

He gripped the swollen cast. "It will be fine."

The general said, "Sit down. I implore you."

He sat down, and the general sat next to him on the bed. "Your reputation proceeds you once again."

"I was only doing my job, General. I am a soldier of Rome."

"A soldier of Rome," Spurius said, breathing deeply. "And a true Roman you are. I have not seen the likes of you ever since I was given the rank *general*. It goes without show for me to say how deeply honored I am to be sitting across from you. Have no doubt – there shall be a Game or two in your honor."

"If it were in my honor, they would cancel the games. General."

Spurius shifted uneasily on the bed. "No one can deny it now."

He cocked his head to the side, whispers of candle-light sprinkling his brow. "Deny what?"

"Your charisma," Spurius said, suddenly standing. "You inspire allegiance and devotion. You charged the Gauls – and your men followed! Your men respect you. Your men, they fight for you – like I've never seen before."

Manias cut him off quickly: "My men fight for Rome. I am not a god. These boys dream of glory and honor."

"And you do not? If not," he asked quietly, "then why did you charge?"

"Because only in charging could we hold them off. Do you think I want to die? Our lines were breaking. It was not a foolish act of rage or boyish ramping for fame; it was a tactical counter-measure."

The wind shook the eaves of the tent. Spurius mentally pulled at his hair and paced about the tent. "Why are you so hard on yourself, Manias? What burdens you?"

His eyes flashed burgundy. "What burdens me? You wish to know what burdens me?" A sly smirk crossed his face. "Silvanus is the burden. He is a tyrant. The cruelest Roman in the Republic, marking his victories with theft, rape and murder. Rome, Spurius, Rome is beautiful – but the House of Julii is corrupt, and Silvanus' reputation rubs with the Republic's reputation – and turns Rome into a harvester of the cruelest people ever seen. Silvanus and his subordinates have poisoned the minds of the masses with soft lies and gentle seductions: the Germanians, the Gauls, the Britons and Spaniards and Macedonians – everyone is convinced they are barbarians who drink the blood of their own kin. But I have seen them. They are no different than Romans – except civilized, even in battle. Here is my little secret, Spurius: I befriended a Macedonian *general*. Do you know what fills his thoughts? Not the blood of Rome, not mutilation of women and children, not the rape of mankind. He dreams of his beautiful wife, and his wonderful son. He dreams of home. So tell me, Silvanus: how different are they? How barbarian are they now?"

His eyes burned with a frozen flame making Silvanus' skin tingle and crawl. The candlelight seemed to fade, to dim, and for a moment Silvanus caught it in Manias' eyes: a romantic hatred. A deep and insatiable pause carved chasms as vast as the farthest reaches of the Roman strongholds.

Spurius stared into Manias' overcast eyes. "With one word, I can have you put to death, all because of the words that you've spoken."

He didn't flinch. "But you will not. I know this, because I see it in your eyes. You know I speak the truth. You, General, agree."

Another inexhaustible breath. "Commander Manias, you have shown you are quite capable of leading the soldiers of Rome. Your skills belong in rank with the finest Roman has to offer. For this, you and your cohort will be placed on the front lines in the Germania campaign."

Manias wanly grinned. "Is this your way of putting me to the sword?"

"No – it is my way of ensuring we win the next battle. You are dismissed."

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Four days the fort lay in the silence, watchman manning the walls, the Roman soldiers bearing out the cold. No more attacks from the Gallic warriors met Legio XII – for now – and once the storm lifted, the soldiers set out, gathering their belongs, and trudging through the snow. Spurius ordered the fort burnt to the ground, and the soldiers watched as the inferno raged, melting the snow and scorching the fields. The villagers huddled in their homes and watched the thousands of Romans marching up the road, vanishing into the woodlands, in a trek west.

By the time the march commenced, Manias insisted on carrying his own shield, and led the way for the urban cohort. He had been informally ranked higher than Tiberius and Quintus because of his prominent display of military genius. Now his face crinkled in the blasting cold and he wondered how long until they would reach the Roman task force.

Several days passed, and finally they stumbled across Roman scouts on horseback. Spurius conversed with them, and they marched for another hour or two. They walked along the ridge of a hill, and looking down to the valley below, saw a magnificent fort dotted with thousands upon thousands of lights. The smell of cooked meat wafted up through the snow-laced trees, and the soldiers' stomachs rumbled, crying out for a plate of hot food. They descended the hill and entered the encampment. They were shown to their quarters and Spurius immediately left them, taking himself and a few attendees with him to the task force General's quarters. Now General Spurius would be known as Captain Spurius – to make recognition of power easier to understand.

General Aurelius demanded of Spurius, "Where have you been? You are nearly a week late!"

Spurius quickly apologized. "We were set back by the winter storm. We were caught in Gallic country, and captured forty Gallic warriors. They were sent back to Rome."

"So you engaged?"

"We were ambushed. One of our soldiers led the counter-attack. Commander Manias, of the 3rd urban cohort. We were also delayed, may I add, General, by tending to the wounded and burying the dead."

"I am sorry to hear of your losses. My only prayer is that the gods will not forget those men – and I praise you for keeping Roman glory intact."

"Rome, General."

"Nevertheless, we are behind schedule. I wish to give your men more time to rest, but it cannot be done. We must sack Trier before the worst of the winter hits. The winter is horrible. If we do not take the Germanian city of Trier before it comes, we will be forced to turn and march back to Rome. Silvanus will be in a state of insanity. So we march tomorrow, carving a path to Trier, inspiring fear in the hearts of all who dare to oppose Rome! So tell your men to sleep while they can. Before the cock crows tomorrow morning, this entire fort shall be burned to the ground and the glory of Rome stretching towards the setting sun!"



THE EVE OF BATTLE

SOMEWHERE IN NORTHERN LUGDINENSIS PROVINCE,
SOUTH OF GERMANIA SUPERIOR BORDER

Spurius had not even seen so many Roman soldiers outside Rome. Nearly thirteen thousand, two hundred infantry soldiers knelt beside tents, warmed food, huddled over fires. Twelve hundred cavalry soldiers tended their steeds and rolled dice in make-shift stables. Not to mention over a thousand men, women and children camped outside the fort – scoundrels, slave traders, sweethearts and children of the soldiers following the baggage trains. That was before *Legio XII* showed up. When Spurius' men had erected their quarters, the Roman numbers jumped to nearly twenty thousand infantry and nearly two thousand cavalry. The darkness of the thick Germanian woods felt like a bottle about ready to pop, and from the distant mountains reaching into Noricum and Cisalpine Gaul provinces, the camp was a lake of fire from candles and lanterns, shimmering beside tents or marching along the perimeter walls.

General Spurius became known as *Captain* Spurius, since he now reported to General Aurelius, who commanded the task force. Manias, Tiberius, Quintus and the other commanders were not allowed to go to sleep, but aided Spurius and the other commanders in getting the cohorts to their assigned areas. Manias and Quintus helped carry wounded to the hospital ward, where citizens of Rome tended to their wounds with expert care. Manias and Quintus stepped outside of the hospital tent and stood stock still in the snow, gazing at the thousands of tents.

"I've never seen a camp this large," Quintus said slowly. "I have traveled into Gaul many times."

"Have you ever traveled into Germania, Quintus?"

Quintus shook his head. "No." A pause. Soldiers filed past, garbed in equipment. "Have you?"

Manias knelt down, grabbed some snow, felt it burning his palm. "Have you ever felt this cold?"

Quintus laughed. "No. No, I have not."

"You have not been to Macedonia." He shot Quintus a wry look.

A horse trotted towards them. The messenger boy shivered in the cold. "Commander Manias? Commander Quintus?"

"What is it?" Quintus demanded.

"You are being requested in the *Praetorium*."

Quintus and Manias exchanged glances and said, "Thank you," and hurried off into the snow.

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Aurelius stood at the back of the tent, the candlelight glinting off his armor. He wore it proud and stately, and every move he made, every breath he took threw off the potent truth: he was a proud Roman, and dying for Rome was his destiny, and one he saw fit to execute – whether it be here or there, now or later. He had no quarrels with dying tomorrow. He pondered whether any of the commanders or captains did as he had them all sit down. He did not do a head count: he knew from logistics there were approximately one hundred five commanders, three from each cohort, and three captains – Captain Maximus, Captain Spurius, Captain Antony. They all sat down in chairs Gallic slaves had assembled; each chair had a candle with it, offering meager warmth to those sitting down. The cold stung like blinding ash.

"This evening," Aurelius began, his voice crawling through the entire tent, "Captain Spurius and his troops joined us here. All of us were proud to know that Roman glory took the field in an ambush by Gallic barbarians." He grinned at this, beaming, and pointed towards General Spurius. "Please! Stand and be acknowledged, Captain!"

Spurius sat in the front with Maximus and Antony. His face reddened and he stood. "Excuse me, General, but I must say that I did not participate in the battle. Our men were gathering food when they were ambushed. The real heroes, sir, are commanders Tiberius, Quintus and Manias of our 3rd urban cohort." He faced the three commanders, and swiftly locked eyes with the Manias. "It is Commander Manias who led the counter-charge. I must plead that he be the one to arise and be recognized."

Manias felt the cold fire in Spurius' glare, but refused to close his eyes. He stood and acknowledgement greeted him. He did not tear his eyes from Spurius, but sat down. A few commanders noticed the... hatred in his glare, but said nothing.

Aurelius said, "I only wish we could stand here and talk about Rome and victory and the spread of Roman glory. But alas, we cannot. For to do so would take weeks upon weeks, and all of us would rise to our feet!" Laughter. "Tomorrow we march towards Trier. We have been commanded to sack the city. The order has come down from Silvanus himself. We are the spearhead in his invasion of interior Germania. Trier shall be the staging point for the eventual overtaking of all of Germania, and, too, the conclusion of our Briton invasion! From Trier we will march to the Briton city of Samarobriua, and we shall sail to the isle of Briton and seize Londinium!" His voice broke with excitement; his limbs pulsed with adrenaline. "Tonight we stand, full of power and might, and nothing shall stop us! The very earth we stand upon shall be scorched this time tomorrow, and we will be approaching Trier, our haunting chants filling the Germanian forests."

Cheers aroused. The commanders laughed and joked and knee-slapped, excited.

Aurelius paced back and forth. "But such Roman glory will not come without bloodshed. Scouts have reported that a mixed, ragtag army – if army is the right word – of barbarian Britons and Germanians have been assembled south of Trier, and are marching towards us even now! They will not surprise us; we will surround and annihilate *them*!" His face glowed in a sulfur bath. "A battle plan has been drawn out. It will be explained to you shortly. I want you to know that the barbarians suffer no chance against us – we will ride them through: it will be like cutting water with a sword! Our path to Trier shall be unhindered once the barbarians are slaughtered. Trier shall be raising the flag of S.P.Q.R. this time next year, and our names will be etched into the history books – forever!"

Aurelius outlined the battle plan.

Spurius would position his legion directly ahead of the barbarian army. His three urban cohorts would form the first line (in which Manias, Tiberius and Quintus would lead the 3rd urban cohort – the cohort directly to the right of the line). The legionaries would form the second line. Behind them, the hastati cohorts would flank, with the archers in loose formation, ready to open fire per Spurius' command. Behind them, Spurius and his bodyguard cavalry and a 150-horse cavalry unit would be prepared to attack any enemy cavalry if needed, or to run down any fleeing soldiers. His other 150-man cavalry unit would be placed on the outskirts for a special move. General Aurelius would remain with Spurius' XII legion to command general moves.

Maximus would position his legion to the right of the enemy, ready to swoop down from the hills. His soldiers would be hiding in the trees, ready to assault come the command. His first line would be made up of four cohorts – hastati flanking, legionaries in the middle. Behind them were javelin-throwing skirmishers, the velites, with cavalry on the right flank. Urban cohorts comprised the third line. Maximus' bodyguards stood behind them.

Antony's legion would be positioned to the left of the enemy force, ready to attack in communion with Maximus' charge. Antony's first line would be made up of four legionary cohorts; the second line three triarii, and the third line would be one triarii and two urban cohorts. His cavalry flanked the formation.

Each legion sacrificed a unit of cavalry, giving a force of eight hundred cavalry to ride down the enemy's rear once all the legions became involved in the fighting. The cavalry would be ordered to thunder over a hill and cut through the barbarian infantry straggling in the rear. Aurelius was sure this would create enough confusion and chaos, enough to instill barbaric fear, that the enemy would find themselves flustered, panicky, mortified, and running.

He did not listen when the Roman commanders of the cavalry to ride the enemy's rear protested: "You're ordering us to attack enemy infantry? Are you out of your mind? They will tear us off our horses!"

Aurelius shook his head. "You are forgetting, Appius, that these are not Greeks. They are not Macedonians. They are not Spaniards. They are *barbarians*. *Savages*. Farmers with pitchforks! They will be trampled under the horses' hooves. The sound of their stampede will be enough to invade their hearts with potent fear. You have nothing to be afraid of."

Appius growled, "Have you ever seen cavalry storm infantry? It can go very wrong, very quick!"

"Do you think I do not know how to lead? I have fought many battles in many countries. I know how to fight. And I know *who* we're fighting."

"These are not barbarians," someone said, "in the strictest sense of the word. They are not just farmers with pitchforks. The Germanians are blood-thirsty warriors. So are the Britons. They live in lust for blood. They are extremely patriotic, and not afraid to protect their homeland and their families. If you think you can just scare them off with a couple horses running down a hill, you've got your head up a wrong alley."

Aurelius did not flinch. "The Germanians and Britons pledge allegiance to warlords, not Germania, not Britannia. When they see death flash before their eyes, they shall turn tail and run like the cowardice, whipped dogs they are."

Manias turned and headed for the entrance. Spurius watched him go, but did not follow. Quintus caught sight of him leaving and followed.

Manias stood outside, listening to the roar and chatter from the tent. He stood behind a smaller tent to avoid the lashing wind, and sat down in the snow. Quintus came through the *Praetorium* entrance, glanced about, saw Manias, and sat down next to him. He said nothing, and neither did the other – they just looked out over the rising plumes of white smoke from scattered fires in the fort. Soldiers walked on the avenues, most retiring for the night, some giving wan glances at the *Praetorium* entrance and the two commanders sitting defiantly outside.

Quintus breathed into his hands and rubbed them. "Do you wish to find a fire?"

Manias said, "I am fine, thank you."

He shrugged. "We are going to be on the front lines tomorrow. You realize that."

"I sat in for the briefing. Of course I realize it."

"Do you think our men will be able to fight?"

"The men will fight."

Quintus nodded. After a pause, "Would you consider me a dishonorable Roman if I confided I was frightened?" When Manias did not know how to respond, Quintus started laughing. Manias smirked. Quintus said, "To be honest, I am terrified. I don't even know why I am laughing." Manias grinned, watching Roman soldiers walk past. Quintus said, "Are you frightened, Manias?"

Manias knew he was seeking consolation. A partner in his fears. "No." He stood, brushing snow off his armor. "If you are frightened, perhaps you should eat. But I am going to bed."

••

Quintus made his way through the fort towards their tent. Manias had disappeared in the darkness. Quintus watched soldiers huddled over fires, breaking open their packages, eating the food they were saving for victory. Quintus asked why they were eating their stores. One replied, "Why not? We cannot eat it tomorrow, for we shall be lying in a bloody field of snow!" Hoarse laughter. Quintus said nothing and walked towards the tent.

The talk of the soldiers massaged his ears: "Will we ever be remembered? Or are we but shadows and dust, brief flickers in time, signifying nothing?"

Quintus entered the tent. Manias was taking off his armor. He looked up, didn't acknowledge.

Quintus sat down on his bed, looked at his bags, picked one up, rummaged threw, drew it out. He unwrapped the package and nibbled a piece of cinnamon bread.

Manias eyed him: "Victory, or did you forget?"

"The other soldiers are eating their food," he said.

"It happened in Macedonia," Manias said. "Afraid the next day they'd be dead, most of the soldiers ate theirs. I ate mine. And guess what happened? I lived." He shook his head. "A twisted world we live in. I will not eat mine. I cannot. No, I cannot eat – nor can I die."

"You dream of immortality."

"Not immortality, Quintus. You cannot touch immortality. I dream of her. She is waiting for me."

Laughter outside the tent. Quintus stroked his bread in the dim candlelight. "What is it like to be in love?"

Manias stopped taking off his armor, just stared into the void. "No words can describe it. Back home in Venetia, I have a small cottage, a tiny plot of land. It is deep in the woodlands, untouched, the mountains a beautiful backdrop. It is before me all the time. *She* is before me all the time. Quintus, I do not fight for glory, or honor. I do not fight for fame and fortune. I fight not even for Rome. I am a simple man. I fight to survive, that I may return home, and see her again."

Quintus leaned back in his cot. "She sounds lovely."

"Her dove eyes are veiled by her hair as it flows and shimmers, like a flock of goats in the distance streaming down a hillside in the sunshine. Her smile, so generous, so full, so *alive* – so expressive, strong, clean. Her lips are jewel red, her mouth elegant and inviting, her veiled cheeks soft and radiant. The smooth, lithe lines of her neck command notice – all heads turn in awe and admiration! Her breasts are like fawns, twins of a gazelle, grazing among the first spring flowers. The curves of her body are sweet, fragrant, soft and spiced – her very flesh cries out, *Come*, and I come. I stay with her until dawn breathes its light and night slips away. She is beautiful, head-to-toe, beyond compare, absolutely flawless. She is more pleasing than a fine, rare wine, and her fragrance more exotic than Africa and Asia. She is paradise – an entire orchard of succulent fruits – ripe apricots and peaches, oranges and pears, nut trees and cinnamon, and all scented woods; mint and lavender and all aromatic herbs do not come close to the honey taste of her skin. She is a garden fountain, sparkling and splashing.⁷"

Quintus: "I wish I might experience such love."

Manias ripped off the last of his armor and threw it to the ground. "War hardens men's heart against love."

"Then what of your love?"

"I am not a man of war. I do not enjoy the cut of the sword. I hate war with a dark passion, deeper than death's distaste."

••

The guard held his shield close to his body and braced his face against the biting snow. Every snowflake thrown up by the slicing winds ate through his skin like a thousand needles. Slit eyes pierced the darkness, following the contours of the snow as it rode up into the shadowy woodlands. Every minute seemed like an hour. He crunched his feet in the snow, trying to get blood circulating again. Behind him, guards patrolled down below. The entire fort was drenched in sleep. Only a wan glow came from the *Praetorium*, where a huddle of guards stood watch, some sitting down. The guard upon the ramparts wished he were down there; upon the ridge of the fort, the wind blasted as if from a trumpet, and if it weren't for them freezing over with tiny icicles, his eyes would slide shut and he'd fall asleep there on the watch. To pass the time he entertained memories of home: laughter with his friends, running through the fields. As a little boy he would always watch the fresh Roman soldiers marching out of Segesta, bound for Gaul, and he was filled with notions of glory and grandeur. He thought it was all fame and fighting – never backbreaking marching, never freezing your feet off in the snow. Never this. He grimaced now. Never this.

Snow crunched under his feet and he marched along the wall, staring at the tree line. His thoughts filled all room for consciousness, so he barely noticed the faint freckles of moment at the feet of the trees. His thoughts broke apart and he concentrated, wondering if it weren't just his imagination, and he focused. *Animals*? No. The movements were organized, scattered through the base of the trees. Then some of the movement spread towards the fort, darting through the snow. Humans.

He grabbed at the bugle about his neck and raised it to his throat. He drew a deep breath.

The sound of hollow, rushing air washed over him, and he turned and flinched as hundreds of round stones fell from the sky. He let the bugle fall back around his neck, and kneeling in the

⁷ Taken from *Song of Songs*, chapter 5, *the Message Bible*

snow, pulled the shield over his body. He clenched his eyes shut and muscles tensed – there was a loud *clang* and the shield bumped into him. He could hear the stones landing all over the ramparts and down into the fringes of the fort. The volley clear, he threw off the shield, stood, drew up the bugle, and lit the night apart with hurried horn blasts. The humans that had approached the fort now scattered; he trumpeted again, and a commander raced upon the ramparts.

“What is it?” he demanded, shouting.

“People! Running into the trees! Throwing stones!”

The commander looked down at the ground, and his face contorted. “Savages.” He took his own horn and gave out a frantic shout. Soldiers scrambled from the tents, grabbing at their gear, and they climbed upon the ramparts. Soldiers drew up buckets of tar and flint. The guard kicked one of the stones away, surprised at how light it was.

The archers hurriedly drew up along the wall, dipped arrows in tar, lit them with the flint. The commander shouted, “Fire!” The archers released. The sound of slicing air rippled across the fort and several dozen burning arrows crisscrossed in the sky, landing amongst the trees. The flames danced over the trees, melted snow, and illuminated the fleeting enemy. The last of them vanished into the forest before another volley could be set.

The guard leaned upon the ramparts. It had only been a few minutes since it all began. Sweat dripped down his face.

The commander said, “Archers! Keep your bows and arrows close. Return to quarters.”

The archers began moving away, muttering, grumbling.

The guard approached the commander. “Should we alert the General, Commander?”

He shook his head. “No. Let him sleep. He has a big day tomorrow.”

“Sir, the enemy-“

“Skirmishers. Harassment. Happens all the time. Think nothing of it. I do not think they will return.”

“And why is that?”

“Thankfully, ammunition is in short supply.” He turned and walked away. “Get this cleaned up.”

The guard looked down, and his jaw dropped like a hammer. No stones at all. Heads dunked in lime, covered with snow and frozen blood, with wide eyes and slack jaws, had been thrown over the ramparts. He gagged and covered his mouth. Now he noticed the putrid smell. His eyes rose and looked over the tree line, now vacant, except for a few smoldering arrows. He hated these people. These barbarians. Savages.

••

Spurius, Maximus, Antony and Aurelius gathered within the tent and said nothing. The pig grunted and groaned, sniffing at the dirt, scuffing about. The priest entered, not meeting eyes with the soldiers. In his hand was a knife, sharpened only the night before. An altar rose within the tent, towering above their heads; the priest knelt, grabbed the pig’s scruff neck hair, and pulled it towards him. The pig’s eyes glazed with wonder at the priest’s beautiful costume; the same eyes went wide with pain and horror as the priest slashed the pig’s throat. The pig tried to squeal, but all that came out was a rasping gurgle. Blood sprayed all over the altar, drenched the priest’s clothes, and speckled the armor of the Roman leaders. The pig weakened and fell over. As it continued to kick, the priest drew up the bloodied knife and stabbed deep into the gut, tearing viciously; the legs kicked a few more times as he tossed the knife to the side, reached inside the steaming stomach, and drew out dripping innards. Blood ran down his arms, and the pig groaned, eyes floating. The priest stood, running the intestines through his hands, and his eyes were brutally wild. He dropped the intestines and looked to the leaders. A grave smile crossed stolen lips, and the leaders knew. They exited the tent, and Aurelius hung a purple flag over his tent entrance. The House of Julii readied to march.



VOX QUOD VENERATIO

STRENGTH & HONOR

SOMEWHERE SOUTH OF TRIER, GERMANIA SUPERIOR PROVINCE

Men standing stock-still in rows, expressions set, eyes to the front, some betraying their tension with pale, bloodless faces. A soft winter breeze rustled the horsehair crests upon their helmets, sunlight glinted off the dull metal armor. On the left arm, each legionary held his rectangular, curved shield – thick as a man's palm, with curved, straight sides, 4 feet high and 2½ feet wide, made from two layers of wood covered with canvas and calfskin, the metal boss in the center fixed to the handle on the reverse. In their right hands, two javelins; on the right hip hung the sword.

20,000 Roman infantry. 2000 Roman cavalry. Not a word to be spoken. The valley spread out before *Legio XII*, a clandestine void of sparkling snow. On either side of the valley were steep, tree-lined ridges. Beyond the ridges, *Legio VII* and *Legio IV* awaited the command to charge, Maximus to the right and Antony to the left. Aurelius, traveling with *Legio XII*, sat upon his horse amidst the bodyguard cavalry of Captain Spurius. Spurius' approximately 6500 soldiers stood within their rows – the first line of urban cohorts facing the wide valley of freshly-fallen snow, the second line of legionaries ready to reinforce the urban cohort if they got winded, and then finally, hastati on the flanks with archers ready to fire once the enemy came into range. Maximus and Antony were completely hidden; the Briton and Germanian combined forces came into view over a crooked hill, spilling like wine from a popped cork, opening into the valley. All of *Legio XII* sucked in a deep breath. The numbers of the enemy coming over the hills and spilling like acid into the valley were indescribable: more soldiers than snowflakes over all Germania, a black plague descending like the night itself. The Roman soldiers' heads fell apart with fettered fear, but they held it in. They did not look at each other, but simply faced the enemy. Spurius felt the wind against his face and winced. Manias' heart pounded. He had lied to Quintus; indeed, he was terrified.

The enemy assembled upon the plain, facing the Roman legion: British and Germanian tribesmen, cavalry and infantry, fully armed and waiting in war paint – exposed upper bodies and grim faces daubed in wild, tattoo-like patterns with blue-green woad, a plant dye. Their faces were not those of the Romans, clean-cut and shaven, but frothed with shaggy hair and maggot-rich beards. Their disheveled ranks were peppered with cutting swords, axes, spears, round steel, iron or bronze shields. The Germanians, many more messy and unshaven than the Britons, pulled hair from their eyes and held axes, swords, spears and shields. These soldiers – these barbarians and savages, enemies of the Roman Republic – did not hide their hate: war cries, taunting, cajoling, begging for the blood of all things Roman spread over the valley and into the surrounding forests.

Manias bit his lip. Their numbers, their sheer numbers. He couldn't count it. There was no organization, no units. Only a mass of soldiers ready to prance upon the Romans. For a brief flicker in time, Manias feared the Romans would be overwhelmed. Only the sound of hooves sharpened his knowledge of Roman power, and Spurius and several of his bodyguards galloped

between the ranks, spewing snow, and rode before the legion. Spurius glared at each and every Roman soldier, thousands of them, and he spoke.

"Do not fear the barbarians marching upon the threshold! They will be easily crushed! Last night I had a dream. I saw thousands of Romans celebrating, throwing swords and javelins and shields into the air, and standing against a lake of blood; and in the lake sank a burning ship, and upon the ship were the flags of Britannia and Germania, broken and tattering! The gods have favored us! Put your trust in Mars, and he shall bring the enemy to their knees – and cut their heads from their necks!"

The Roman soldiers beat their shields and shouted. Manias closed his eyes.

The chariots were a harrowing sight to behold. The horses shone as bronze, eyes of ice piercing. The chariot wheels, laced in metal and wood, wobbled and slipped through the snow. Slicing double-bladed swords had been fastened to the wheel hubs; as they turned, they reflected orchard sun. Amidst the chariots, bare-chested men wearing burgundy scowls and eyes of wrought-terror yelled out chants and catcalls, thumping crude swords in ebony fists. Scattered spears reached for the sky choked black. The train of chariots engulfed by thousands of blue- and black-clad warriors, stretching deep into the innermost reaches of the forbidden archaic forests.

Manias craned his eyes upwards, into the bright turquoise sky. He had never seen a sky so beautiful, not since his childhood – no, not since he had been with her. Every day, rainy, foggy, muggy, no matter, was beautiful beyond compare. Every moment in her soft embrace spoke volumes of a world he had yet to forget. She was the epiphany of life itself, and now his throat, his eyes, his very skin crawled for her pious touch. That beautiful sky, he scowled, mocked: mocked him because once he was beloved of the gods, and then cursed. That sky, so vast and bottomless, just patiently waiting, without a care in the world, for blood to be spilt – that sky, ominous and oppressing. Such beauty, such death.

The chariot wheels rolled slowly, then faster, and faster. They pulled from the thick swarms of barbarians and began crossing the snow, the scythe blades on the side spinning, slicing air. The drivers of the horses winced against the snarling cold lashing them with three-pronged spears, and the soldiers upon the chariot platforms gripped their scythed swords tight with one hand, holding on to a post in the middle with the other. Two hundred chariots spilt from the Briton and Germanian lines, gathering speed across the white plain, fire washing over the hearts and eyes of the enemy. The Roman formation grew larger and larger. Snow rose in dust clouds. The scythe blades screamed. Adrenaline gushed through the soldiers' veins.

Manias trailed his eyes from the opal sky to the chariots sprinting for them. He shouted, "Hold the lines!" He could feel the impertinent fear racing through the ranks as the chariots bore upon them. "Hold the lines!" He drew his javelin. "Javelins!" The other Romans did the same, methodically, betraying all instinct to run: *Rome, for Rome!*

The chariots were nearly upon them. The horses' muscles pulsated, dripping with venom, and their breath came in ragged puffs of fog melting in the frozen air. The riders lashed the reins harder and harder, and the horses continued to go faster and faster. The soldiers in the chariots flashed their scythes back and forth and gave menacing war cries. A wall of spinning wheels, slicing scythes, and scolding horses drew upon the Roman lines, shivering in the cold, dressed in their shields and swords and stock-still faces.

Manias said, "On my command, throw your javelins at the horses! Aim ahead of them! Remember Rome!" Hypocrite. He did not care. The chariots bore upon them. The very ground shook, the snowflakes at their feet dancing back and forth. Their shields knocked together, and their bones vibrated as if it were an earthquake.

Manias waited for the very last second, the crucial moment: then he screamed the command, raised his javelin, and hollered, "The horses!" The javelins cut through the air like an airborne plague; the chariot drivers looked up in stock shock, not knowing of such Roman tactics. The

horses did not react until each was impaled with dozens of javelins, bodies run through and cut and impaled. Blood gushed into the snow and streamlined their marvelous hides, and they stumbled and fell into the snow, twisting over the broken javelins. The front of the chariots burst into the back of the horses' bodies, flipping into the air, wheels spinning in the air. The soldiers shouted as they were hurled into the air; some fell in the snow, landing hard, one or two pierced by their own swords; others fell into the Roman ranks, where they were quickly executed. Manias screamed, "Charge!" and thrust his men forward. They raced through the snow, danced over the broken horses, and launched upon the scattered and fallen Briton soldiers. The Britons fell under the sword, crying out, but meeting only the cold, frost-licked steel of swords. Britons scrambled to their feet, abandoned their swords, tried to run back across the field now engraved with hundreds of ruts in the snow. But the Roman soldiers grabbed them, wheeled them around, and thrust their swords into their stomachs; the Britons' eyes rolled, waxed, and they fell against the Roman soldiers, sliding to the ground, blood marking their grave. The Romans celebrated, cheering amidst fallen bodies and crumpled, shattered chariots.

The Briton and Germanian barbarians saw the last of the chariots flip and break apart, and then they saw the Roman counter-charge, swiftly overtaking the stranded charioteers. They watched in gruesome agony as the last Briton was thrown to the ground by rough Roman hands, then smashed in the face with the curved bottom of a Roman shield. Anger billowed through them, and not even the gods could restrain them: with a howl of fury, with a thirst of bloodshed, for their countries and families, wives and children and friends and everything held sacred, they charged across the field.

Manias screamed, "Form the lines! Form the lines!" As the barbarians raced towards them. He sprinted along the lines of his Century, yelling, "The lines, form the lines!" He shouted at Tiberius and Quintus; Quintus was covered in blood from having slain a Briton charioteer. Manias hollered, "Push the cohorts back into position! Give the archers more room to fire! Soldiers! Romans! Form the lines and move backwards! Back into our original positions!" His voice was sore from the frantic yelling. He sent snow up with his boots as he ran back and forth. "The lines!" A volley of arrows flew over his head, reaching for the fringes of the advancing enemy.

Thousands of arrows spliced through the air, dangled as if frozen in ice, and then fell upon the charging savages. Peasantry with pitchforks were thrown to the ground, torn open by sliver arrows. Soldiers screamed and cried out as limbs and gullets and stomachs were pierced and bloodied; they fell to the ground, choking and gasping, drowning in their own blood. Another volley fell, but the charge did not waver; some stumbled over the bodies, but yet they raised their swords and spears and axes and ran helter-skelter for the Roman urban cohorts.

Manias jumped into position, raised his shield, and placed it against him. He grabbed a javelin. The enemy bore upon them. "Steady! Steady!" More arrows cut down the enemy, and then Manias screamed, "Fire!" Javelins arched, blended with more arrows, and together they fell, slashing down the entire front line of the charging enemy. Soldiers groped at javelins stuck in them, spit blood, thrown this way and that and tossed like salmon in the sea. Manias drew his sword and hollered, "Charge!" The urban cohorts shimmered with movement and then surged forward, leaping over the tundra, swords gleaming in the bright sunlight. The enemy stumbled over their dead and did not forsake the cause.

Aurelius shouted the order, and trumpeters trumpeted. The sound wafted over the surrounding hills, and suddenly the sky lit up with thousands of burning arrows, coming from either ridge of the narrow valley. Scrambling Germanians and Britons looked up into the sky to see a wall of fire falling upon them; shouts and shrieks of fear ran threw them, and they faltered. The burning arrows fell into the ranks, catching men on fire and shredding skin. Burning bodies fell into the snow, which melted under scalding flesh. The three cohorts of Roman infantry were nearly upon the enemy.

Manias' heart pounded against his ribs; barren energy coursed through him like a winter wind; he raised his sword against the enemy. A cry escaped his lips. He saw her, if for just a moment, her beautiful hair, tender smile, the kiss of something – someone – exquisitely sweet. Her eyes fell before him, and her body shook against his, and he threw himself upon the enemy, the sword screeching as it cut through flesh. He stabbed a soldier in the face, blocked an axe with his shield, hammered the face of a soldier in with the boss, and ducked to avoid a sword, only to drive his own up into the enemy's gut. The enemy spewed hot blood all over his face, and Manias threw him into the snow, piercing him with the sword. "Rome!" Tiberius hollered, leaping upon the barbarians.

Manias spun around, slashing the throat of an enemy, letting the blood spray all over his shield. Manias cut the legs out from under a Briton soldier. He twisted around and raised the sword, and almost brought it down upon Tiberius, whom almost cut Manias down. The two exchanged wry smiles, turned, and working together, drilled their swords into the stomachs of two oncoming Germanians.

She opens the door and lets him enter. She smiles up at his wonderful face, and she strokes a calloused beard. Children laugh outside. Despite the cold of the winter, she can feel warmth flowing through him. Alone, abandoned, she draws him close, and he sits beside her on the bed. She gazes into his bottomless eyes and feels nothing except exhilaration. He will never know. He will never know. He runs a hand through her hair, and she closes her eyes, feels his gentle touch, and peace swells over her; he pulls her close, and their lips connect, and she tastes a different wine, a rare wine.

Quintus screams as an axe falls against his bronze helmet, splitting the steel. He falls forward, blood running down his face. The world bleeds red, everything slows. Romans versus barbarians, hacking and cutting of swords, the thrusting of spears. The world shimmers into a dull red as blood drips into his eyes. He coughs up blood and pitches forward in the snow. Manias sees him fall, and fights harder, hurling his gladius into the barbarian ranks. The barbarians stream across the valley, blades of frozen forged steel catching the sunlight. Burning arrows careen from the heavens. Manias stabs an enemy and looks to the hills; they are barren except for the smoldering arrows. The cohorts grew weaker and weaker; a trumpet sounded, and the legionaries of *Legio XII* began to march, drawing their javelins.

A boy of fourteen fell under Manias' sword, collapsing into the snow. Blood gurgled like a fountain from his chest, and Manias stepped over him, blocking the blow of an axe. He cut down the axeman, and raised his shield just in time to snap the head of a spear. The spear lodged in his shield, and he ripped his shield backwards, tearing the spear from the enemy's hands. The enemy looked at him with solemn fear and Manias showed nothing but hatred as he cut him down then and there.

He tries to take off her clothes, but she at first refuses. She cannot. It is not her will. But he does not care. He takes the clothes off of her and pulls her close. He falls on top of her and kisses more heavily. She wants to leave, but doesn't know where she would go. He has left her, left her with the house and the farm and no hands to work the land. He had left her. He didn't love her. He didn't love her. No one loved her. She opened her mouth and let him go. Let him go...

The trumpets blasted. The hills opened up, and thousands of Roman soldiers swarmed towards the massed barbarian infantry. Legionaries, urban cohorts, triarii⁸ and hastati⁹ all giving out shouts, loosing formation, and swarming down the hillsides to either side of the barbarians. The

⁸ Triarii were tough, experienced spearmen who were the senior element – even the backbone – of the early Roman legion. Wielding nasty spears, *scuta* shields, and helmets with twin feathers, these soldiers breathed fire upon the enemy as their spears pierced savage flesh.

⁹ Hastati were often the newest recruits of the Roman legion, best used to wear out the enemy before a charge was made. They carried the regular Roman infantry outfit: armor, shield, sword and javelins.

urban cohort, growing tired, retreats, allowing the legionaries to replace them. The legionaries overcome winded barbarians, and the Romans from the hillsides slam into the sides of the barbarian ragtag army, driving through them like a nail through wood.

Manias screamed, "Fall back! Fall back!" as the Roman legionaries rushed through them, taking over. Manias ran back towards Spurius and Aurelius. The urban cohort, almost halved, followed after him as the legionaries took their place. Over the din of weapons and cries and death, Manias heard the sound of a charge and looked back to see Roman soldiers charging down the hillsides and pushing through the barbarian army. He came to a stop before a unit of hastati, and peered into their eyes. They eyed him with a mix of wonder and fear: blood stained his entire outfit, steaming off his sword and shield, and each breath racked him in indescribable pain. He just looked at them, turned, and in a craggy voice, cried out, "Urban cohort!" Tiberius ran up to him, winded: "Have you seen Quintus?" Manias told him the news, and Tiberius swore under his breath, cursing the barbarians. He looked at Manias, at the fleeting Romans, and ran back towards the front. He looked back to see if Manias would follow, but Manias refused. Instead he leaned against his shield, closed his eyes, and tried to breathe steady.

She lets him take over her. She closes her eyes and lets him work. His face flashes before her conscience, but she pushes it away, wants nothing of it. He didn't love her. He didn't love her. A faint whisper, breaking a meager silence: "I love you. I love you." She manages, "I love you, too," and holds back the tears. "I love you, I love you, I love you..."

The hastati of *Legio XII* marched past the broken urban cohorts and charged into the fray. Meanwhile the Roman soldiers nearly hemmed in the barbarians, showing no mercy, cutting down all who came before them. Most were better for dying than for fighting. Shouts and cries wafted over the barbarian army, and hundreds began to retreat, escaping through a small outlet Aurelius himself had designed. As he watched them follow the bait, Aurelius smiled and said, "Order the cavalry."

The earth broke apart and almost a thousand cavalry appeared over the sides of the hill, running down towards the fleeing barbarians. More cavalry came up at the rear, spreading out, charging head-to-head to the running barbarians. Many barbarians threw down their weapons to surrender, but the Romans slashed them down with their swords, trampled them under the hooves. The cavalry from the rear and sides splashed together, carving a scythe through the barbarians. Blood covered the snow and the horse's flanks. Horses shrieked as they were pierced by enemy weapons, and cavalrymen fell, only to stand and fight hand-to-hand. The fleeing barbarians, weary, tired, and disillusioned, did not put up much of a fight. The barbarians in the middle of the hoard threw down their weapons, but under Silvanus' orders, the Romans took no prisoners.

She gasped in pleasure as he ravaged her, again and again. The winter cold evaporated as sweat dribbled down her face. She forgot him, forgot everything, and only knew this, this one solitary thing, and overcame, she groaned and moaned and did not, for once, wonder where he was.

He leaned upon his shield, and vomited bile all over the snow. His legs knocked together and his stomach went sour. He closed his eyes and heard it, and cursed the very day he was born. The barbarians, weaponless, being slaughtered by Roman soldiers, chants of *Roman glory, strength and honor*. He puked again. Tiberius, sword bloodied, appeared through the ranks, announcing, "All the routing barbarians have been destroyed. This day will always be remembered!" Manias cocked his head to the side, and his eyes fluttered: "How can I forget?" Tiberius saw the hatred in his eyes, and just turned away. The sun shone bright and high, but the cold did not leave. Manias took his sword, his shield, and his armor, and marched past Spurius and Aurelius, who were celebrating, and vanished into the trees.



SACRIFICUM

SACRIFICE

A family held close together, sobbing as flames engulfed their home and their fields went up in smoke. Sobbing as their cattle were pulled out of the barn and slaughtered, skinned for the meat and left in a pile of bloody bones to be scavenged by vultures. Their eyes glowed with contempt, volatile hate: the soldiers did not meet their eyes but continued to march for the sunset.

The man's mouth was slack, flies buzzing within a swollen tongue. The children cried beside their father's body as the sound of their mother's sobs and screams came from within the house as she was ravaged again and again.

Roman soldiers threw bodies into the street, to be seen by all, bloated and rotting. Rain came and mingled with the blood, and all the town's drinking water was tinted red. The Roman soldiers only laughed and continued on their way.

Children rounded up, thrown inside a small temple to an unknown god, and the doors were shut and locked. Men and women cried out. A man rushed forward, only to be slain by a Roman soldier's gladius. The Roman soldier hovered over the man's fresh corpse and shouted out the order. Legionaries with torches splashed tar all over the building and lit it aflame. The children screamed as they were burned alive.

Weeks had passed since the battle. Silvanus ordered a scorched-earth policy: every town on the road to Trier was to be ravaged, burned, with appropriate demonstrations to distill any thought of resistance. All resistance that would not catch the hint was to be eliminated, brutally, without thought. Manias watched all of this and thought of home, all the while a silent fire burning within. Then the day came when they were four weeks from Trier, and gathering together the children of a town. Manias' cohort – or what was left of it – was passing, and Manias, driven mad, abandoned the cohort, sprinting towards the triarii preparing to pierce the throats of the little Germanian boys and girls.

He threw himself upon the triarii, yelling: "What is this? Is there not enough blood already? Let them be!"

The commander squinted. "Who are you?"

"Commander Manias, *Legio XII*."

"Commander Manias, this is not your jurisdiction. We are here under orders."

"Must you never think through an order? They are just children. They cannot rebel."

"But their parents can." He pointed to several men and women sobbing behind a guard of triarii.

Manias snarled, "So by killing their children, you kill any thoughts of rebellion? Does this make sense to you?"

"It will instill fear-"

"Show them mercy. Compassion. Show them what Rome really is."

"We are obeying the orders of Rome."

"No! You are obeying Silvanus, a murderer! This is not Rome!"

The triarii stared at him, mouths agape. No true Roman ever muttered such things. Spurius rode up on horseback. "What is going on here?"

Manias faced the Captain. "Captain. Please. Order these men to let the children go."

"I cannot. I am under authority. I pass down authority. We are all under authority."

"The authority is thousands of miles away. Please. Think through this. Let the children live."

"Are you speaking against Rome?"

"Captain Spurius, I love Rome. With all my heart, I do. But this is not Rome! This is Silvanus and Silvanus only! Silvanus is not Rome! He should not even be called a true Roman!"

Spurius' eyes hardened. "Blasphemy! You should be executed for this."

Hatred took over. "I would rather die than live one more day under Silvanus."

Spurius looked over to the triarii and groaned. "Commander Manias. Hand me your sword."

Manias pulled it out and handed it over. "What will you do, Captain? Execute me?"

Spurius held Manias' sword. "You have been relieved of your command."

Manias threw his shield to the ground, along with twin javelins. He pulled off his armor and threw it at the horse's feet. "Have that as well, *Captain*."

Spurius looked over at the triarii, then to Manias. "I respect you, Manias. That is why I am being lenient."

"Then you shall not execute me?"

"I am a man of Rome, and I am under Silvanus. Any resistance – *any* – is to be eliminated."

Manias waved to the crying children. "So I guess that means you'll kill us both, then, is that it?"

Spurius yelled, "Triarii! Release the children!"

Manias cocked an eye. "Perhaps you have a heart after all, Captain."

"Not much of one. Commander Numerius, in the name of Rome, eliminate this soldier."

Manias faced Numerius. Numerius pointed the shaft of his spear towards him. Manias loosed his arms at his side. To Spurius, he said, "I die believing you are a good man, Captain. Make sure nothing happens to those children."

Spurius ignored him, but his words rang forever. "Commander Numerius!"

The triarii captain winced and thrust the spear forward.

A shockwave of pain came over Manias and he stumbled backwards into a tree. Numerius pulled the spear out, drawing out bleeding entrails. Manias slid to the ground. Numerius' figure wisped back and forth, suspended in a fog, and Spurius' shouting orders sounded vacant, detached. The last thing Manias saw before blackness enveloped him was the triarii abandoning the town and marching for the road; the parents grabbing their children and running to their homes; Spurius dropping Manias' sword into the dirt, and kicking his steed, prancing into the distance. Manias' faltering eyes looked heavenward, at a cloudy noon sky, and suddenly all was warm, clear, happy and safe – and he vanished, forever forgotten.

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Groans blended with the sighing wind as he tossed and turned in the bed, twisting the sheets around his form like some decrepit Egyptian corpse. Sweat dripped down his face, bleeding from every pore and recess on his countenance, staining the sheets as he struggled for breath in the chilly night air. The silence roared, singing death cries and battle hymns: screaming and yelling, clash of metal and blood being spilt. Men crying for their mothers, grown men sobbing like babies. Arms and legs. He looked down and saw the sheets were lacerated with blood, and ember eyes stared from the shadowy corners of the room.

The large front door burst open, the lock shattering. The doors slammed against the stone walls with a defiant crash; the man leaned forward in blood, huddled in the blankets, and saw the horse at the door rear up on its thick back legs, the front legs kicking. Its feet and sides were sprinkled with blood like freshly-fallen Iberian snow. The horse gave a shriek of war, and the rider, clothed in darkness, stared at the woken figure with golden, burning eyes. He rose the spear in his hands. The horse's front legs connected with the wood floor, and the horse galloped to the bedside. The man in the sheets tried to scramble away, but the spear came down, stabbing icicles of pain into his side. He screamed and felt blood gurgle from the wound. The spear lifted, the iron point dabbed in blood, and fell again, in his leg, piercing bed sheets and flesh. The sheets spread red

with color as the spear came down and down, again and again, and the man's screams faded to nothing.

In the year 216 B.C., Oppius Silvanus was assassinated in his sleeping chamber. The Senate secretly rejoiced, and made sure the heir understood what had to be done. Silvanus' son, a noble Roman, ordered the Roman forces in Hispania, Germania, Britannia and Macedonia to retract, and by summer of 214 B.C., the territories were handed over to the original owners, with the Roman captains bowing before the natives and pleading for forgiveness for many years of theft, rape and murder. Those who had willingly executed the actions of Silvanus were condemned to die in the games as *damnati*. Spurius was spared by Commander Numerius' statements before the Senate in the year 212 B.C., of how Spurius had released several children despite Silvanus' orders, and how it was a Commander Manias who brought about the decision. Manias, whom Spurius admitted to ordering the execution of, was honored by a month without gladiatorial games, with parades and celebrations all throughout Rome – it was a beautiful idea that there was once a Roman who would stand up to even the mightiest and cruelest Rome had to offer.

hellatorius victorialis (warlike; victory)
erastus necessitas (lovers; death)
honararius despondeo (honour; despair)
spiritus obdormio (life; death)
patriota gladiator (country; fighter)
afflictio ommento (pain; waiting)
divinitus salutaris (heaven; salvation)
furtivus libertas (furtive love; freedom)