

Prologue

An army was dying. An empire was being brought to its knees.

The soldier was at the heart of it, always had been, and though he was ignorant of the scale of the tragedy in which he found himself, he had seen enough of his comrades fall to come to the inevitable conclusion.

‘We’re fucked.’ He smiled at the man beside him.

It was a hollow smile. The Empire meant nothing to him. Enlightenment? Romanization? Fancy words for corpulent politicians. His world was the section, the mates on his shoulders. His world was the few metres to his front, seen over his shield’s lip.

‘Here they come!’ A centurion called the warning as a wave of men burst from the concealment of the trees.

They were big men, a head taller than the Romans, and their charge from the raised banks only made them look more like giants. The soldier noticed that these were fresh troops, unbloodied, their eyes still sparkling with life, not yet acknowledging the truth that they could die on this track.

‘Brace!’ the centurion called, and the soldier overlapped his shield with his neighbour’s, putting the weight of his body behind his front leg. His limbs were weakened yet they obeyed. He felt the slip of the mud beneath his sandals, and ground them in deeper, every inch of push and shove a matter of life and death.

The soldier caught his neighbour’s eye. Three days ago, this comrade had been a young warrior. Now the stubble of his unguarded throat had grown white.

Eyes back to the front: the Germans were a few paces away, their faces screaming, cursing, twisted by both hatred and the scent of victory.

They clashed. It was shield on shield, grinding, creaking, splintering. It was metal into flesh, the resistance of bone, suction as the blade was drawn free. It was gnashing teeth, spitting faces, eyes dead with resignation or ablaze with defiance.

It was battle.

Time became meaningless for the soldier; he measured life in breaths, and so he had no idea how many gore-soaked minutes passed before the line of Roman soldiers finally broke, the Germans pouring into the breach, the fight descending into a melee of individual skirmishes.

Warrior after warrior came at him. Most were a blur – cut, parry, thrust, move on – but some details were etched into his mind: a Roman staring quizzically at the stump of his arm, hacked off by a German axe; a woman, a whore from the baggage train, holding spearmen at bay with wild swings of her own staff; a mule, thrashing in agony, eyes bulging from its skull in terror. Brushstrokes of battle on a canvas of war.

‘Rally, rally, rally! Form on me! Form on me!’ The soldier heard the harsh call for order and saw the broken line of soldiers fighting their way to his side. He did not know it, but the barking voice had been his own. Like the well-drilled strokes of his sword arm, the soldier’s tongue had acted on its own initiative.

The small knot of men stood firm as the tide of German warriors swirled around them. Other groups of soldiers closed ranks, shields overlapped, swords and javelins held in shaking hands. The circling carrion birds watched as this

stronghold of armoured men was besieged by a rolling sea of enemies.

A lull in the battle. Men still died, but the initial clash dissipated into a handful of skirmishes and the dispatching of wounded. Tortured cries for mothers rang out in every language of the Empire. The soldier knew battle, and he knew that this lull was an inhalation before further exertion. The fight was not over. The forest seemed to hold its own breath, waiting for the next move.

It came from the head of the track. Thunder. The thunder of hooves.

German cavalry charged forth, pouring into the narrow space between the trees, sweeping up Romans who had survived three days of horror only to die trampled beneath hooves or spitted on the end of cavalry spears.

The knots of men broke in the face of this force, discipline replaced by the animal instinct to flee. There might be safety in the trees. They might yet live . . .

Some men resisted this urge. Forced it down with clenched teeth. They were the backbone of a legion. 'Get back, you cunts! Get back!' the centurion called, only to be silenced as he disappeared beneath a trampling steed.

The soldier's group split apart. Only a half-dozen stood with him now. The survivors of his own section: men who had slept, ate and shat together so often they were almost of the same organism. Their solidarity now bought them respite, for the cavalry mounts swerved around the unyielding shields, leaving the die-hards to go in search of easier or more glorious prey.

And there was nothing more glorious than a legion's eagle. The silver totem was the soul of the legion. As the soldiers

died in the dirt, or fled for the trees, the eagle wavered, the standard-bearer forced by wounds to his knees. The bearskin cloak about his shoulders was thick with matted blood.

The soldier saw the man sag, a witness to the last stand of the infantry who fell in defence of the eagle. Only when the standard-bearer made no further move to fight did the soldier realise that the man had died with his hand on the sacred staff. The boot of an enemy cavalry trooper was enough to push his body to the dirt. The wild-maned warrior hefted the totem into the air, cheering himself hoarse, and his countrymen broke from their slaughter to revel in the capture of one of Rome's most sacrosanct possessions.

But the soldier was no longer watching the eagle.

He hadn't turned away from anguish. Another of the standard-bearer's charges passed through his vision. A charge that had slunk, unnoticed, into the deep green shadow of the forest.

It was a mule, and the soldier knew what the boxes on its sweat-shined flanks contained. The legion's pay chests. In this forest of ghosts, they offered the soldier a promise of being reborn.

He took it.

PART ONE

I

I'd seen worse places to die.

It was a shaded grove of oaks, monolithic and ancient, the expected chorus of birdsong conspicuous by its absence. Between the high branches stretched a blue to match the eyes of the people born into this land of sweeping forests and angry rivers: the Germans.

I had met the first of them far from here, and though the faces of those warriors had blurred with time, I recognized their guttural growling language and their imposing physical traits: the thick beards, thicker shoulders and muscular limbs. Compared to my own, now nothing but gristle and sinew, they appeared god-like.

About their own gods, I had known nothing until this morning. Now illuminated, I wished only to go back to blissful ignorance.

Because the German gods enjoyed sacrifice. Human sacrifice.

I had been spared the sight of the act, mercifully unconscious of what was happening so close to where I rested my head on a pillow of dirt and fern leaves. It was the smell that drew me, the smell of cooked meat, and my hunger had overcome my inclination for solitude. I had approached what I presumed to be a campfire, intending to beg or steal some food, depending on the appearance of those at the feast.

What I had found was a banquet for the gods only. I counted six bodies in six charred wicker baskets, suspended

above fires that were now nothing but ash. The bodies were roasted, shrunken, but the cross-slung leather belts on their hips told me that they were Roman soldiers. I knew because I had stood in the ranks myself. Six of their comrades were staked out to the floor, their feet touching to form a circle, bellies slit and entrails piled upon their chests.

Yes, I'd seen worse places to die, but this manner would take some beating, and the sight of slippery innards and torn muscles sent my vision reeling. I puked, but only a handful of half-digested berries fell pathetically on to the forest floor.

I looked again at the men on the dirt, seeing faces twisted by pain and indignity. How had I not heard their screams?

And how had I not heard the hoof beats?

They were nearly upon me. I looked towards the far end of the grove, seeing flashes between the trees of horses and armour.

Shit. Roman cavalry.

I turned and cursed. My line of retreat was cut off. I saw them coming through the trees now, a skirmish line of infantry soldiers. They hadn't seen me, eyes lowered and scanning the undergrowth ahead of them. They were the beaters, but their quarry was long gone, and so only I would be flushed on to the grateful spears of the cavalry.

I looked at the circle of bodies. I knew what I had to do, and yet I hesitated, even as I began to hear the Latin voices of the soldiers calling to one another.

'Stay in extended line! Put a javelin through that bush! Scan the treetops!'

No, they would not miss me. I had no choice.

I knelt beside one of the staked men. He was in his late forties, probably close to the end of his enlistment; his lips

were torn open where his own teeth had gnashed in agony. This close, I noticed the insects crawling over his exposed organs, and the deep mine of his emptied stomach.

I plunged my hand within, finding the liver. My knife was tiny, a couple of inches only, and blunt. Blunt because it had served me well. It did not fail me now, on this last task. The liver came free. I drove the knife inside the man and left it there, and then I slid into the undergrowth.

My hiding place was a thick tangle of thorns, and they suited my purpose. I pulled off what was left of my tunic, pushing it beneath roots and soil. I turned this way and that, feeling the barbs prick and tear at my skin. The first few drops of blood forming my mask, and as the blood ran freely, a memory came with it, and I pictured a sun-drenched port city. There I had heard from olive-skinned sailors of a man in the East, some revered leader, who had worn a crown of thorns when he died. I prayed that I would not perish at the hands of the Romans, as he had.

The barbs dug deeper.

I stilled when I saw the two men enter the grove. From living on the frontier of Rome's Empire I recognized the thick array of decorations and ornaments on the man's shield: he was a prefect, the third highest position in the legion, and the only one that could be reached by a man not born to the senatorial upper class. He must have served upwards of thirty years on Rome's front lines, for he was perhaps fifty years of age, and he'd even come to resemble a legionary's shield: solid, a little worn at the edges, with the slightest of bulges along the midline. Even the shield's iron boss was a reflection of the officer's bulbous nose.

But it was the man with him who held my attention. Though half the age of the Roman, the cavalry officer led the way, power and authority coming from him in waves. Only those born into nobility carried themselves with such assurance. Yet the man was tall, with blond hair to his shoulders. German nobility, then, from a client kingdom of the Empire.

I watched him as he studied the cages, and their occupants. I saw a smirk appear on his lips, though he did well to hide it from his companion. He pointed out the leather belts, coming to the same conclusion as I had done myself.

I willed myself to be still, patient, and listen. I opened my mouth, mastered my breathing, and blocked out the background noise of troops rustling in the undergrowth.

‘He’s a soldier, but he’s not one of mine.’ The veteran shrugged. ‘All my work parties are accounted for. Detachment from one of the forts on the Rhine, maybe?’

‘Only twelve of them?’ the tall German posed.

‘Maybe they’re the First Legion. Thick as pig shit, that lot. Sir,’ he added, before seeming to address the manner of the men’s deaths. ‘Six in the cages, six with their guts out.’

There was a question behind the statement, and the cavalry officer answered it. ‘I can’t tell you what significance that holds, I’m afraid. Maybe none.’ He shrugged. ‘What I can tell you, Caeonius – and you can take these words to the governor yourself – is that I shall put my best men and trackers on finding the savages who did this. Judging by the state of the bodies, and the warmth in the timber, I don’t think they can be more than a day ahead, if that.’

The prefect – Caeonius, the German had called him – nodded vigorously, partly in agreement, but more so in anticipation of retribution.

Following hundreds of years of conquest, all the world knew that the Romans had an unquenchable thirst for vengeance. I had no idea upon which province's soil I cowered, but I knew that the wrath of Rome would come to these forests with more certainty than the decay of autumn.

'I'll get the men to bury the bodies, sir.' The old soldier offered his junior a departing salute, but paused on his heel at the unexpected reply.

'Don't,' the cavalry officer stated simply.

I could see Caeonius politely rephrasing the words that he'd caught on his lips as the German knelt beside one of the torched cages. He motioned that the Roman do the same; joints clicked as the gruff veteran conceded.

'Here.' The nobleman gestured below the rim of the cage. 'There's a wedge of wood held in place by the frame. Once the frame moves, this rope here' – he pointed to an intertwined length of vine – 'will bring down deadfall on whoever moves it.'

'Deadfall, sir?' Caeonius asked as the cavalry Officer scanned the canopy above.

'There.' He pointed, without triumph. Above them, a heavy branch stood at an unnatural angle from the others. I'd spotted it myself, and if the German was also looking for such traps, then perhaps we did have something in common – a shared heritage of dirty warfare. 'From that height, you're dead if it comes down on top of you,' he added.

'Is nothing sacred?' the veteran grumbled, doubtless yearning for the days of shield on shield. Ironic that he stood on ground revered by those who were indigenous to these lands, though Romans were known for their destruction of cultures, not their embracing. 'Thank you, sir,' the prefect

eventually added, obviously meaning it. ‘I’ll have slaves move the bodies.’

They were at the staked soldiers now, a mere ten paces from my refuge. Behind me, I could hear the line of legionaries moving slowly, but coming closer. So close to the grove, they would not expect to find anyone, now, but how could they miss me?

It was time.

I stood.

‘You.’ I addressed the two officers, lifting a legionary’s short sword in my shaking hand. The shake came from nerves, but made me look like a man on the edge of sanity.

The two officers turned, the Roman reaching for his own sword, but the German waved him down with an open palm. The noble’s face was at first astonished, but the open mouth slowly twisted into a wry smile, as if he was the only man privy to the Empire’s greatest joke.

‘You,’ I repeated, my voice unsteady. It was the first time I’d had cause to use it in weeks.

I saw them looking at me, marvelling at my naked body. I had discarded my tunic, and the only thing covering my skin was a sheen of deep, red blood. I had bitten into the liver, gagging on the cold flesh, and used the organ as a leaking sponge to turn myself from decrepit beggar into a figure of nightmares.

‘You.’ I spoke a final time, pointing the sword at the German and blinking blood from my eyes. ‘Who are you?’ I faltered.

He raised his hands, slowly, palms open, and spoke in a voice that was both commanding and friendly. If he saw a ghost, rather than a man, he betrayed no sign of it. ‘I am

Arminius. I am commander of a cohort of Roman auxiliary soldiers, Cheruscan cavalry, to whom I am also their prince. I am German-born, but a citizen of Rome. Who, my friend, are you?

I let the sword drop to the dirt, the last of my feeble strength fleeing.

The act was over.

‘I don’t know.’