



Hades

The Afterlife

by

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First chapter agent version for review.

'The grim sea rises' Salvador said. He glanced towards the great unknown that was the dark Aegean swirling waves and slashing them onto land. Down there below them in the sand the Lykan flag twisted so hard it tore. The riven fabric ripped against the air flowing on here from the east, a solitary spire on a lone stretch of shore sailing the unmatched strength that was Rome.

'I have never been afraid of anything in my entire life' he said as he braced himself to the blasts. The icy breath here was so cold it cut its way through tunics and shields onto skin and chilled. 'But' he raised his voice 'that darkness, my friends, over there' he pointed 'it torments me'. The cedar in the hills where we were were leaning to the onslaught of the wind, almost bending like bowing toward the empire. The high yellow grass flowed like oceans before our feet, and the bursts of fresh sea breeze shrilled around us. 'The winds' Marius admitted 'the Gods are with us', 'for what awaits us out there, the Anemoi know, and anger'.

A moments silence ensued, that is so much of a silence that could be and befall them in the storm, for the wind whined between their lines casting itself between body and body. Here it payed no heed to master or apprentice. No heed to creed, birthmark or allegiance, no distinction for moral or history. It just threw its way past onto the fields and I felt, somehow, that we were not alone, and I had to say. 'Our words here' I broke 'like us being here, it is a glimmer of history'.

We were forty men sent to the watch here to scout. Reports arriving in through the borders revealed an unusual movement of an unforeseen enemy coming unexpectedly our way. They'd seen black riders on horses with red eyes. So went the words anyway. Aggrandised, surely. But something in that mist laying itself like a blanket above the sea, was moving, was lurking and was getting closer as we approached the mid of night.

The weather worsened, the blows battered us so hard it was with effort one would stand straight. And talking, we resorted to mild shouting. 'What could possibly unearth so strong a will in the four winds' Marius thought aloud. And like that, a muted horn distinguished through the whining storm's mist. 'Did you hear that' he said and through the lines spread a tangible excitement. 'No' someone said. We stood in silence for what must have been a minute attempting to define another. 'Maybe it was just, your, pardon, our, imagination'. 'We have been holding out here for days, weeks really, the mere thought of something stirring in the shadows tingles our hearts with wonder'. 'With wonder?' Salvador said 'this adversary is covered by the elements, arousing a storm we have never encountered'. 'Say Zeus, I say, save us' he said. When somewhere in the mist a more pronounced sound emerged. A second horn followed by what must have been a third and then a faint fourth, they were certainly far from one another. Stunned we eyed deeply into the seas searching for answers late in the night. And then a fire suddenly lit somewhere further north, it was the bonfire of Point Crassus, closer to the sea. Why? What did they see? What did they know? When another ignited in the southern horizon. 'What is out there' Marius thrilled. And, I thought clearly this time, like a splinter of clarity shot through my mind I could see now. 'I think a thousand years are descending upon us' I resorted to say. 'Behold Persia' I whispered and ascending through seaborne smoke: little lights, everywhere.

For as far as we could see arriving onto our waters were vessels. We stood silently without words even forgetting the cold harshness of the strong wind cutting our cheeks and wetting our eyes. I caught myself mesmerised by the sheer immensity of what we had before us having frozen stiff, when I so moved my chainmail's links clinked and chilled me with that colourless cold that is the hallmark of frozen steel. It aligned and layered itself against my torso and I begged myself not to complain when something even more touching rallied my senses. 'Do you hear that?' someone rightly said. 'No, what?' Salvador said, 'no where?'. 'It is drums' I said. I mimicked their booming to spike these men into believing, into remembering, what they were. Wolves. The very most rugged of kind.

'We have orders to remain in Greece, but we can not take on that and live' Salvador consulted us. 'Live' Marius frowned 'what is this if it is not a worthy extent of living, to dive the hurricane'. 'And for what destiny do we sign our lives to this course' he responded. 'The eternal city is marble and laws, flowing lush water in fountains with women, out here are farmers disputing one another over pigs'. 'My blood is as red as yours brother, I was raised in the green valley and I have loved the Goddess' city but this is not Athens, this is insanity'.

Marius churned his gladius into the soil and lifted it to reflect the black dirt's stains. 'So when you die of old age in a temple afforded to you for a younger past...' 'We are not alone' I interrupted 'legions follow our tracks, whatever wills, we will not be alone'. 'And. Don't forgo we are the mightiest to have walked the Aegean' and the men excited behind me. 'We falter to no foe, we sign no treaties and we demand no terms'.

'Neither do they, I expect' I added, nodding down the hills to the shore and out into the sea where a thousand good ships were gathered getting closer; bit by bit, by bit. The drums had unsettled the men, who were, have to say, some of the most experienced the skirmish had ever involved. And the men overheard the heated discussion. 'Send onto me an ocean' one said 'and I shall be your mountain to break its' waves' the men hurried. 'Finally a day I have so awaited; I shall be where I am best, with my friends in the fields if I leave'. 'The Persians are riders of a burned earth'. 'The Gods do not adore them, they despise them, they do not follow them'. 'But they follow me, because I courageously defied death to live'. 'See I am Roman. And invincible.' The lines cheered. 'We are eternity' he followed; 'cry, cry thunders' and they roared 'to eternity!'

'They will make landfall in the early morning. Even with the garrison we cannot attempt to throw the first lines back into the sea' I slipped. 'We will rendezvous with the legion in the hills and stage our defence'. 'A fort, is a fort' I smiled tryingly. 'From there we will have to outlast them, awaiting Caesar'. Marius and Salvador both nodded, but between breaths Marius was sighing.

I hooded my cloak, rose on my horse and turned to the forest. 'Remember Marius' I said 'of events', 'have you read the works of Platon?' 'Do not chase your death'. 'We are all born for a time and place'. 'The eons of time are ruthless' he said and quoted;

Everything else has a beginning,
and an end;
this given bless wanders way
the pure cherry of blood withers gray
Great strengths forget as glory grim

He said it with that kind of razor sharp level he had evolved over the years of living literate in a world of illiterates. I laughed, and he glanced down the ocean. 'Do they know they are dying for nothing'. 'Pagans'. He got up on a pile of rocks as if he was to try address them 'I should convince them' he said 'little men with no brains doing exactly what their ruler has them do'. 'And their ruler is a small-minded man too' Salvador piked. 'Are you their ruler?' Marius wondered.

We saddled up the skirmish leaving the hills for the fort rallying what strengths we could along the way. The bonfires served an early warning to those living out here and the Roman guard. To think they had never been in use. A lighter century we were stationed along the shore as a lookout for incursions, strange maybe, since the Roman invasion no one had claimed anything between Thessaly and Athens. Ah, well, nor anywhere else here where Rome is the sole guarantor of peace and tranquility. While the lands beyond the boundary were lawless, treacherous and even evil. Here soared a sinister story where the opportune would stab his friends in the back for gains, here no one could be trusted except accounted to sell the blood of their countrymen for gold.

With wind in our backs we swept on horse across the green wide fields under starlight. Greece is truly beautiful like this, it is worth living for I thought. In the distance were the bonfires blazing alive like Helios had hurled flames across the countryside. So prominent, so stellar, I wonder... when the faint horns of the horde suddenly nestled their way in through my conscience. I simply couldn't tell whether they were real or nightmares anymore. Ah, it pained me then whether the legions would make it, and even if they did, were they suffice? I think so, but I did not know.

The round arma shield bounced on the back on the man in front of me, its' emblem is the pride of my life. We are the pack. An elite used for special assignments under command of the consul of the white city itself. This is where we were recruited and trained, in Athens garrison they made us taste the worth of soil and branded our hearts with iron. In the Lupine forest they taught us guerrilla tactics, to have an effect without being noticed, and to stage waylays; getting captives and stealing orders. In learning we stole their affection and they chose us solely for the purpose of guarding the frontier.

The terrain receded swiftly beneath us. Such a slender view we were, now a follow of eighty, cavalry, I figured any enemy to see us would instinctively be beset by shock and back off. From hooves hitting the road smoke rose into a grey cloud around us. And faster than any other band in the region we headed home. As much a home as we had known ever since we enlisted.

Fort Isabel lies on top of hill in a natural defensive formation, fortifying their gains was one of the Romans most successful strategies and had made them manage to win so much of the boundaries around the Mediterranean. This meant a spread of forts interlinked their borders. While we, we were right in the outskirts of the forest viewing the hills above the sea.

'Rome the conqueror' he said aloud. I nodded. 'Rome the victorious' he hailed and the gate went up. The mood was merry here, little did these legionnaires know only so far away was

the largest landing party we had ever seen. Maybe the largest the world had ever seen. While surely they suspected something, seeing us and the embers arising in the sky from fires. While nowhere nervous our band were never jittery about facing death in the eyes and revealed no signs, no suspicions, to anyone.

For a military installation the fort had an unusually attractive apple garden and it's master happened to be there trying to fend off a century of horses, their tired riders only seeking to leave them to get some rest. It was a fruitless endeavour and eventually he gave in to the idea of being the provider for the most esteemed of soldiers. While the horses rummaged in the garden I tried to seek out the fort's commander.

Beyond two guards in flowing dark red raiments, styled helms and massive steel shoulders I found him in his special commander housing. A somewhat lavish residence with large far-eastern urns in the corners, decorative banners with golden eagles hanging from the roof and trophies from hunting along the walls. Above a fireplace was the head of a large grey stag. The fires snapped and crackled above our conversation. Its' heat was ever present and reminded me now of the glowing bits of light I had seen in the sea. The commander was a real Roman officer, seriously stern but slightly slow. At times almost obese in his thoughts. It must've been long since his tours. He wouldn't walk with shadows under the pale moon night I figured. Ah well. 'What' he said 'are you sure?' 'On my life' I wagered. And he dispatched a courier immediately to send the news onward; to the next fort, and in the long run, to the white city.

'It is the Persians' I said steely, like I had encountered their civilisation before. Truth is I hadn't, no else here had either I thought, and no one knew really what to expect. I just know of what I've been told there were no others in this world that could amass an armada like them. 'And what do they want' he questioned me while at same allowing me to sit. He offered me a cup of black tea. An affable quencher from the east, surely, ironic, I thought. 'More land and slaves' I said and I felt a sudden fit of rage rush through me as if the reality of the situation had just gripped me. 'Truly the world could not be so cruel as to allow a barbaric society to tremble the light' I said. He scratched his head. 'No, it is, grievous' he said. 'And how many are they?' I put away my cup and took a deep breath, 'without immediate reinforcements we will only delay them, and they could easily seize all of Greece'. 'My' he jolted. 'And my men are all heroes awaiting the fight of their life'. 'Sadly they haven't seen anything like them'. 'Germanic tribes in nicer outfits they think'. 'No' I shook my head.

'And my men are speaking in terms of a divine battle'. 'A kind of show between good and evil: that there will be Gods amongst us'. 'It is prophecy'. 'I wouldn't count on it' I troubled 'and I find it extremely unsettling it has spread'. 'They are on our side' he injected. 'Yes the Gods are truly on our side' I corrected myself. He agreed. 'We shall make an offering immediately' he said and ordered a sacrifice of 50 bulls to Zeus. While he dispatched a few guards to head for the farms I said 'I don't believe they will settle our battles'.

Did I believe in the stories that were told. Yes, yes of course. I had seen the large lightning storms myself roll above my home in Thessaly. To our family the ties with the celestial was one of great respect and admiration. A reality of kinship where we paid our homage in prayers and often offering food at festivities, while I had over time grown fond of the idea

that no God would ever involve themselves in my life. I wasn't insignificant nor too small, but I was on the periphery of where history was made. And now, I was in the eye of storm. Hmm.

A pious man he took my dormant atheism with a bit of ill will. 'I suppose this kind of view has its place too' he tried to bridge our gaps. 'What I'm saying is we are doomed without the legions and while many here are zealous to perish in ardent glory I believe we should do everything in our power to save Greece, not firstly our names'. 'And that involves numbers'. 'Location'. 'Treatment facilities and food'. 'You sure sound like a general' he said. 'Are you sure you are not one?'. I withdrew, stepping back two steps. He paused to gauge my reaction and without receiving the one he expected he continued. 'The closest legion we have available is one day away'. 'And then two at two days march' he puzzled. 'That is, at most, what we have' I countered pronouncing the word at most with stress.

A large map lying on a table inside his residence enticed me to walk up. It was a colourful display of all the world. A drawing ranging from Africa to Asia, and in its midst, Rome, coloured with the same red I recognised from the banners. Small pieces of stones cut into figures lay strewn across the map and from the illustration alone, the artisan's eye of detail, I felt an ever more heartfelt connection with a capital I had never even been to. 'And those pieces' I pointed 'they are us?' 'Which of these symbols are we' I wondered. Resates got up from his chair. That was his name. The short form of Resatusin Maximilian Domitian. He dug in a cupboard for me and he snatched what seemed to be another figure. He sat a stone carved fox right on top of Greece with a slam. 'You are blessed with guile' he said and smiled. 'Rome will have great use of you'. 'If I survive' I interrupted. 'Yes' he added 'if we survive', 'of course'. 'Well' he smiled as if he just realised he was part of something much greater, and needn't worry too much. 'We survived the Thracians' he said 'and Ares himself knows them', 'and we wandered under stinging sun through the rocky Illyricum', he rolled his right sleeve and showed his arm where a large scar revealed 'and its savage ambushes'.

'You have seen much' I said, adjusting some of my perceptions of this man. 'I have been fortunate to survive and further my blessings' he replied. 'But now I am old' he said 'I don't have the same soldier in me'. He shook his head examining the blue visible veins in his hands. 'I need to address the men' he said abruptly while straightening his back 'What was your name again?' he corrected his black mantle to cover his shoulders. He suited himself for a more statesman-like look. 'What may I call you'. 'Lysander' I said 'if it matters'. 'Oh' he marked. 'One day you will do great deeds for us Lysander, I can sense it. I will pray for you, for us and for Rome. I leave you now' and he left me for the crowds waiting outside the residence.

It was only early morning not yet fully sunrise and the grey clouds covered the sky when Resates addressed the cohorts. It wasn't a very long speech. Instead it was useful and explicit. The enemy was brutish and in great amounts was told. We had to abandon the fort to rally with legions south of here. We would leave the settlement, as was, and march at noon. And we were to pack lightly to prepare for anything.

I found Marius and Salvador in the crowd further back. 'We are ready' I said 'We have everything', 'everything except rest' I thought. 'You never sleep anyway' Marius reasoned, 'I

stay on my guard' I argued. 'What is that we use to say?' he troubled. 'Oh yes, yes, you can rest when you're dead' Marius humored.

I first met Salvador and Marius in tryouts, we were inexperienced kids, now we lead the skirmish. The pike of the ninth legion. Salvador is long and slender with sharp lines. His forebears farmers from outside Thessalonica he volunteered to enlist in the legion in hopes of quickly becoming a citizen. He is mild and modest, almost simple, seeking one day to settle along the coast and raise a family. Marius is a hulk from Alexandria who worked summers aboard fishing boats traversing the islands in the white city's archipelago. He didn't miss hauling nets and carrying around rope on the rolling seas. He was destined for more as he said: 'I am a faint chance of kingship'. A real gladiator that loves the tension of bloodlust crowds and the clashing of hardened steel in the dust storms of the rumbling grounds. He will die one day. 'And we will see each other in the afterlife' he says, untouched, smiling.

Of the three captains in the century that leaves me. What is there to say I wonder. I am no good with words, nor the triangles the machine-makers work with. I thought only to make the world a better place with what I inherited from my family. I was taught that you get up in the morning before the first rooster crows, and you go to bed not before the last sheep have entered the barns. At seventeen I enlisted to see Rome. And in the academy I grew gaining friends and a community, and practicing more than any others we would chase laurels and sometimes girls. Sometimes they would chase us. We were unspoiled, sheltered in a shielded society. Raised inside for a world outside our borders that aches most painstakingly for change. We were the vanguards of a new hope.

The storm had calmed inland. There was no rain and hardly no wind: instead is a pressing quiet we share while the dark clouds still stir above the distant ocean. We left the fort, we're on our way again. We ride through forest and the vibrant red cloth of the horses armor waves backward to our hurry. The black conifer trees rise majestically towards the sky here where the air is fresh with greens. All these men I've come to know I thought. In formation we blast forward. Everything we've done. All we have seen. To think the oceanfront teems with death when all these times are so rife with life.

Leaving just before dawn we met the early morning sun in the woods. Its' rays were trickling between stems and illuminated in anxious lines the enveloping fog around us. 'These are the sights of legends' Marius shout as we flurried fast forward. In the shadow the cold cut my free skin into shiver and I longed between for the sporadic sunlight to caress with warmth. Leaving the grove the road happened on large fields spreading in all directions. It was a luscious feeling to leave the darkened mist for the open: the broad sunlit plains. Above us here were clear blue skies and only above the horizon the sun gazed in our eyes. In the distance in the east we could make out the cliffs dividing land and sea, somewhere yonder them was something unruly amassing. And it shall be its' end I thought. We're on our way away from the fort to Antigona. It is a stronghold to the south and they will need all the help they can get.

We stopped in a thicket where the roads converged into a crossing for the horses to drink. A small creek flowed by our side here, twisting and turning outwards the ocean. 'Salvador' I said 'we have come far, we're almost at', 'you know I wonder' I interrupted myself 'I wonder what Resates will be doing... he is leaving the fort and going south, it will take them longer

and they will leave villages by the ocean unguarded. I trust he makes arrangements for escorting the children and the women. And the sick'. 'Aye he will' Salvador said instinctively 'he is not the kind to run', 'to avoid his calling'. 'No he isn't' I followed slightly assured. 'So what is this Antigonā Marius intervened. 'Some kind of grand barracks?' 'Something like it' I said. 'It is home to Claudia. The eleventh'.

'The eleventh' Marius suddenly cheered 'outnumbered!' he rejoiced 'they stemmed the boneslayer tribes of Avia, in mountainous Pannonia'. 'Yes in the dawn of expansion, long ago, so they say' I said. 'A few eastern enemies will be easy for these legionnaires' he continued. 'Oh no' I shook my head 'This is different I think, these are seasoned warriors. And underestimating is the tool of a fool anyway' I rejoined. 'Maybe their strength lies in numbers here, but from what I remember, of what was said about them their forerunners are hefty ones, just like Avia riled by their blood hungry warlords into a violent ecstasy'. And I hushed for myself 'they are monsters craving slaughter'.

We set out again southbound crossing the small creek, at its deepest it reached up to the horses' knees and I for one would irrevocably reminisce the scene of ... 'the dice is thrown' Salvador amused and the men laughed heartily. 'Yes indeed' I agreed. This seemed so seemingly absurd to fit the occasion, a type of humour everyone could relate to, for everyone had been taught this story in school. The story of how the empire was forged was embellished deep into our minds for these highlights served a cohesive matter to join us in a common matrimony. A universal cause.

Antigonā rises high in midst of an enormous expanse of farmland. From every direction it is an unmissable site in the distance: a prime feat of Roman engineering built like a hexagon of basalt stone surrounded by a moat. Its six towers and spikes lining the walls and exterior pattern into a terrifying sight, for from the dark ledges alone overlooking the plains one would await, or expect, gargoyles to prey on their victims. It is a truly wicked master's design, one awakening folk tales. And approaching it we happen on others flowing through on the roads, mostly ordinary people, some having heard or having been told of evacuation. We said to some, who asked, that it is imminent. See some are curious, like us, and some are scared, most are alarmed. Men in hats with straws in their mouth, typical farmhands carrying their children on their shoulders, some well off traverse in horse-led carriages in finer clothes. They all have one thing in common, they are all on their way to the citadel. War strikes poor and rich much the same.

It has been a little more than half a day since we left our lookout above the sea. 'What do you think has happened?' I wondered. 'An entire morning, that leaves plenty of time for the Persians to make a landing' I reasoned. 'We haven't heard any news but I'm guessing, assuming rest, the frontrunners could make their way to the easternmost villages anytime now', 'and we will know their arrival when plumes of smoke rise in the distance' Salvador said. 'They will pillage and burn'. Here where the carriages skip and bump in the road is a palpable calm before the storm. 'Where are you from, son?' We check the crowds for witnesses in lack of better. 'Mares by the Sea' he chirped like a young bird. 'We saw the fires and then the boats, that's when we fled leaving everything behind'. And then they check us. 'Who are they?' he worried, his eyes were dilated like olives and his hands shook, something he tried to conceal, asking again 'who are they?' 'Do you know?'

'A shadow amidst these sunlit fields endangers all we've known' a soldier lyrically flowed. In lieu of theatre why can't you just say it the way it is I wondered. Because we don't really know? Because we don't want to sow fear? Another man slid his fingers across his throat saying death follows us in our tracks. Maybe it is best not to sow more fear I figured. And we instructed the men to remain silent to questions, to direct them to the officers in Antigoná. Whom, by the way, reaching its limits, would they stand with arms wide open? Waving welcome everyone? Or duly describe this menace as an unwanted guest in advocacy of another desire? A fort can never be full to its citizens I understood, wondering whether they would too. And now advancing in straight sight was this grand bastion itself. When I realised I don't know what time they have, they could easily lay a siege to starve a settlement like this. Antigoná's mighty walls would stand of little value in this long run.

'Talys', said a woman holding a child in either hand trying to keep up with the horse's pace. 'Soldiers woke us in the middle of the night', 'and in front of us, in the village centre they instructed us to get out, to make for the southern roads'. 'I grabbed Victor and Veá' 'and I am tired' 'we have walked all night and we do not know what awaits us in Antigoná'. That makes us two, I thought. This will be the end of everything or the beginning of something else. 'It will be okay' I calmed her, reaching down some of that bread we had been rationed. She thanked me kindly, and stuffed it in a bag she carried. She seemed somewhat comforted by our company. Who could be against us, I reasoned she thought.

There was sudden shouting. And the lines on the roads picked up pace. I knew it. 'I knew it' I said and Marius nodded, 'yes because we run like a dog with its tail between his legs'. 'No one is impressed. The Persians find us weak, and the Gods are difficult to our withdrawal'. 'At least we know where they are now' I said. In the distance Mares by the Sea burned. 'It is a fishing village' Salvador said 'it is of no importance' he whispered to himself. 'It is of all importance' he raised a slightly higher tone like he was weighing the two against each other. 'Well, which one is it?' he said a bit unnerved.

'It is a frontrunner group sent to instill fear'. 'Are we afraid? Is that why we are not there?' I questioned. 'No!', 'I do not think so' I answered myself, 'Mares is empty and our lives shan't be risked for fishing lines'. 'Let them raid I say'. 'They gain nothing and they tire'. 'And then there is Dalia, Tremas and Keles on the way' Marius said. 'Yes' I nodded. 'Will we leave them too?' 'As soon as someone comes shouting in the forest the great Roman wolves tremble' he pretended to shudder. 'By my heart, Romulus and Remus, we are over-particular and afraid'. 'We are not afraid' I said again. 'Then come with me brother to Dalia' Marius implored. He raised his gladius pointing in the distance toward the village. 'They will not expect us and we will send their captains into telling of our courageous deeds to reconsider burning our country and routing our people'.

'Where is Dalia anyway?' Salvador said. 'It is only east of here, beyond the rapid cliffs and the oxlands where the bulls graze. There on a hill lies Dalia'. 'I have been there' Marius said. 'It is a beautiful place'. 'Why have you been there?' I said. Marius paused for a thought. 'I ... I loved a woman from Dalia' he slunk. 'Great so she's there' one of the men interrupted 'she's there and we're here and that's why it's a good idea to be there'. 'This isn't war this is poetry'. 'I know people from Mares, Keles, Isabel and many other places' one of the older soldiers fabulated. 'Let's go there too, I love them'. 'She isn't in Dalia' Marius said, 'And I regret saying, I should've kept it for myself'. He swung his gladius once in the air from atop

the horse. 'It is defense on behalf of the innocent by way of confidence toward the assailant' he articulated. 'We shall pray, and we will call down the thunder on these invaders'.

Salvador shrugged and I wondered what to say. Some part of me agreed with Marius. And another part of me said we better make haste for Antigoná. Between our lines people were now almost fleeing. Children were running and with them mothers and fathers, grandmothers and grandfathers. Sights that etched themselves into my eyes, poor people I thought. Horse carriages swished us past filled to the brim rolling from side to side, back and forth along the road. The fires in the distance surely served an enormously demoralising view to many. The empire was really burning. To think. Of all things they'd expected to see, this wasn't one.

We didn't have a lot of time to consider our options. Seeing all these people I reasoned to have my answer. 'You know this road' I said 'it is a good road'. 'Without it these people and us would be mired in a field with mud stained all over our garments'. 'Which we wouldn't have'. 'This road sets us apart from the cruel nature of our instincts, that show themselves so eagerly amongst the leads beyond our borders'. 'See it is a Roman road'. 'The finest in the world'. 'We Romans are not creatures like those who oppose us and seek our destruction, we are a superior society and human civilisation rests on our shoulders; today, tonight, tomorrow and for the rest of our lives'. 'It is a responsibility we mantle', 'so let us join in sending a clear message to these fiendish invaders we are unrelenting, and to tell our own people: we are the watchmen of the future'.

So it was settled. The lines of men excited when we turned to the hills of Dalia. The road there was smaller and went through pastures. We could make it in time I thought. Their landing party wouldn't be very large and we could just foil their plans once and escape. They would send us to Rome for our bravery, or burn our bodies on a pyre for folly, it was one or the other. We knew we could take on a burning party and anything bigger we could just bolt. Dalia must surely be empty too. 'Right?' I irritated Salvador by asking repeatedly. 'In all likelihood it is' 'and' he paused 'if it isn't, well, we will come as heroes to their aid' he tryingly smiled. Not a fan of rash action this undertaking surely adventured some of his ethics. Marius shone like a beacon, this was what he dreamt. His eyes zealously fixed on the horizon like he had a pact with Phobos himself to unchain all fears. All he wanted was to stampede the horde with the standard raised: to bludgeon the darkness with his shield and shed light where there was none. All he wanted was to enter the fray and breath the air of ascending victorious.

We went against the stream of people for the first time and men and women cheered at us. 'Give them hell' a man shouted. In truth we didn't know what we were doing and we were already received as champions. We picked up the pace, the more they praised us the more sincere the objective appeared to be. The more real it varnished our minds: they fled from their homes. We were committed to engaging the enemy on our own. A follow of a little more than a hundred. And I slipped a soldier's motto to rally myself. 'The strength of the wolf' I thought aloud 'it is the pack'.

The oxlands when we arrived were full of brown and black bulls. We zigzagged between while some of them resorted into chasing us. We hadn't the time to linger, we were late, for the sky receiving us here was orange and sooty. 'Heavens' I said 'we are late'. Bits and pieces

of burnt wood flew in whirlwinds through the air. It burnt my eyes into repeatedly blinking. And I thought of what to do. 'Shall we pursue them anyway?' I posed. Salvador hummed something unintelligible I gathered to be a muted yes. Marius lowered his helm almost to cover his sight. 'We have come a long way to bail' he said 'it is the village that burns, not our poise: we are strong as ever, much stronger than a few grunts with torches' he said condescending. 'Remember Rome the victorious' he slipped. 'Alright' I said and unsheathed my sword to signal the strike. Marius yelled at the men: 'Wolves!' 'See! These are our homes under flames'. 'It has come to us to cast this terror back into the sea. So rise, rise to the moment! History stands still at this point in time as it is ascribed to the Gods to see us and send us our fates. We are in our right, and you need not worry. Were you suddenly in green forests, elate, for you are in the grove of the Giants. And you are immortal'.

We blasted away down the hill toward Dalia's fires where embers chiseled themselves into us, stinging our skin like a whip. 'Stay in the charge' Marius shouted. Small bits of burning flakes had stuck to the Lykan banner and it waved mystically above our front almost entirely delineated in little flames. 'Stay in the charge' Marius shouted again.

We flew through gardens that were set ablaze trying to follow the trails of the destruction to find them. We jumped hedgerows and verandas when we suddenly found them in the open village square. And even if it was just an instant, though we arrived at great speed, it pervaded in time so slowly we could see this enemy eye to eye. Clothed in full length black robes ordained in metals, with visors formed like demonic faces and shoulders with jagged spikes they turned to us in apparent surprise. And as we rode against them they quickly hurried to huddle together into formation: aligning swords, shields and burning spears into a diamond. Our horses raged when we spurred them to charge into them, and with great force we clashed through their lines sending them flying in all directions. Like waves of water on an image created in sand we smashed straight into them.

A horse to my side suddenly screamed in agony as it was speared, blood gushed as it fell hard into the gravel and its rider was cast off headlong. Shortly he was joined by a second, and a third. They rose quickly arming themselves with swords and shields to continue on foot. Glancing across the site I estimated a loss of at least ten horses that first strike, that means ten to an innumerable amount of invaders laying strewn in the ground. We rallied to ram them again, turning around. It was perplexing, no vexing, that this enemy did not so much as cringe or balk to our charge when we went again. The residual group of Persians soon decided to split up as to avoid the thrust of the second strike. Our ram was ineffectual, their adaptation faultless. We rode through nothing, only trampling the odd stray, crazed by panic.

After the second strike we got off our horses and engaged the remainders. With swords in hand at distance their appearance would at first suggest them arriving indomitable, that terrifying, but they were not at all undefeatable. They were just very good: I was immediately caught in a melee. Thrown about I was pushed sideways to tumble through the grey gravel when I rose fast and I stroke my gladius deep into ones shield. Twisted metal cried when he fell to the ground. The impact was that forceful and loud. His face was entirely covered in black velvet below the lines of a frightening plate mask. Who are you to have come so far to fall so fast I wondered. He jumped up, drew a dagger and swung for my throat only missing by the length of a hand. I kicked him down again. He dropped the

dagger and I must have knocked him out slamming his head with the shield because he was immovable. Dead even. Maybe.

And in a rush shouts from all around me arrived like as if I, in a whim of time, had been secluded from all other events in a duel. The party of Persians were leaderless by now, and some ran, and we let them, while some were ferociously fighting, taking on two, three sometimes four of us. Surely fuelled by incense. A smoke from the far east they inhaled before raiding, it made them angry. Mad. Madness: it is unbelievable how just a few could keep us at bay here. Their psyche was grander than they would frighten, even seeing their group diminish motivated them to greater rages and greater risks. We had defeated at least a hundred from the initial charges and what remained, were pockets. One in an especially ordained helm with black and white feathers thrashed his scimitars in the air in front of him holding out, surrounded. You poor man, for you are only a man, and your religion is poor, you are up against more than you can ever handle I thought. He countered a frontal swipe only to fall hard in the ground when a gladius was sunk in his back from behind. War is immensely ugly.

They had been twice our numbers, but we caught them just at the right time. We divided them, singled them out to take them out. And when the last Persian hit the ground the men yelled of Rome. 'The unassailable' I grabbed Salvador 'do you hear it, it is the cries of triumph', the dark red hue of blood mixed with soil stained his face, and he nodded slowly: 'indeed'. Marius came dragging his gladius and shield across the ground, he was exhausted. 'Many a times I worry will the Gods favour our deeds or ignore, today they cannot ignore' he said. The men yelled and the shouts pierced the sky flying all the way to the retreating. Cowards. Did they have a story to tell.

We raised ten men we had lost to be carried on horseback. They must be getting a real burial at Antigoná. We saddled up, heading back through burning buildings standing only as slim skeletons of what used to be lavish homes. They were now falling, crumbling to ashes. What would remain of Dalia was nothing. Nothing I thought. It gnawed on me whether Dalia was worth the lives of ten good men. After all what is a life worth? What is a really good life worth? Ah. We are only shadows of a fire sweeping along a stage, and we flail as the fire wilts. Perhaps one day we will find the origin and we will know. Rushing through Keles we found it still inhabited. Maybe for every man gone we saved a hundred here. Without courtesy we told them to pack up and leave immediately. I watched all the families gather outside the buildings making ready to go. All of this would soon be on fire I thought. When I realised we really have to get them all to safety. And I shouted 'Move out!' Now!

The wind picked up pace along the long stretch between Keles and the castle. Dark clouds churned above us sometimes exciting into rain rinsing our bloodied bodies. There was no longer any sun and we had around us worse weather, all the way from the sea to Antigoná and beyond. 'The winds are back' Marius noted. 'Yes' I said 'the sky is uneasy'. 'It is the clouds from the ocean' Salvador guessed 'they are moving inland' 'and who knows what they bring'.

We arrived at the great gate amidst lines of differing citizens and soldiers, the draw bridge was lowered above the water surrounding the castle and the people scuffled for room here. Atop the strong Arabian breed it was like wallowing in water, we simply pushed our way

through. Inside the walls Antigonā afforded the visitor a notable city of inns, markets, shops and housing. The keep dominated the view and stood tall in the middle of the city. We went sauntering around and noticed there wasn't much room in the public spaces for people had set up tents almost everywhere. 'After this lets hope we don't have to sleep in a tent' Marius lament. 'Let's hope we save Greece' I said 'Yes, of course' he followed 'of course'.

Outside the grand entrance to the keep stood a line of soldiers in white garbs interlinking with sharp shining halberds. One approached us signing us to stop. 'My allegiance to the white city' I said. 'Yes' he said slightly startled seeing us all bruised and battered. 'Where have you been?' he worried. 'Lest you missed, the seas are teeming with the army of Persia, we made for Dalia to save its citizens, and to tell the enemy we aren't going anywhere'. 'And what happened?' he posed. 'What happened is what you can see for yourself. It was only a raiding party and we scattered them and killed hundreds'. 'I see' he said. 'Mares and Dalia is burning and soon the other villages will share its fate'. 'The wooden forts will be crushed, Isabel is abandoned, and the enemy will surely siege Antigonā'. 'We dont know their intentions, we don't know their full strength but they didn't come all this way only to ruin a few fishing villages.' Salvador intervened. 'All of Greece is in peril' he said. 'And you are?' 'Salvador Patres' he answered, captain, Lykan skirmish of the ninth. 'You know we are Claudia' the guard said. 'Aye' Salvador raised to grab his hand. 'Good to meet you Salvador' and he shook his hand. 'We don't have much time' I said. 'No' the guard stepped aside. 'Leave your horses, we will allow you into the keep where Commander Verus waits for you'.

We unsaddled and walked through. Verus sat in a deep room on the other side of a long table filled with candles. The roof hung chandeliers and in the back of the room was the characteristic golden Eagle. The live candles waved as we walked by. 'We have only just found out the forts are abandoned'. 'And long lines of refugees are converging on our settlement'. 'On us' Verus coughed. 'Where are you from anyway?' When I thought he would be a little more informed.

'We are Lykan legionnaires' Marius said with slight spite 'and while you sit here in your castle we have engaged the enemy singlehandedly'. 'My brothers, have died'. 'Oh, so it was you, I heard, but Dalia is no more' he said 'I extend my condolences to your losses'. 'So you know' I said. 'I know' he nodded. 'You are from fort Isabel then, and you have had a long day?' 'What can you tell of this enemy?' 'That they are ruthless and unafraid' I said 'yet we only met a small raid, in numbers only twice our size, maybe, a little more'. 'They didn't stand a chance against us'. 'But we have seen their landing' I pictured in front of me. I could see the boats in my mind. 'They are several thousand' I gestured 'well equipped, with horses and who knows what they brought with them over the seas'. 'How many days do we have' Verus said 'at the speed they have been moving to Mares and now Dalia I say tomorrow maybe the day after, and they will be here knocking on your gates'. 'Yes' he grunted. 'And I thought spring would arrive with something else'. 'No one expected this' Salvador said. 'You are ranking officer' I said 'what do you want us to do?' 'I want ...' he took off his helm and scratched his head revealing fully his long black hair aged with lines of grey. 'The villages are evacuated or set on fire, the forts are emptying and much of the coastal is arriving to us'. 'Two legions are already on their way, so they say, anyway', 'and still we are spread thin' he coughed 'I want you to stay here for now'. 'Will you stay here and help the refugees; the sick, and the weak'. 'Persia knows in order for them to challenge Caesar they need to cease something fast before Rome reacts'. 'And even with the full might of the east, this is not an

easy undertaking for them'. 'And here in Antigonā, behind these walls, we can injure them to the extent that they will voluntarily move on. We should be safe, all who come here should be safe'. Oh, I thought for myself, don't be so sure.

That night lightning rolled above the plains of Antigonā. Rains whipped the roof of our building and winds whined along the hatches and the door. 'Who would move in this weather' Salvador said. We had been given our own house in the city, fresh food, melons, grapes and bread and soft beds to rest our wounds and our heavy minds. Another boom from the thunder resonated its way here so loud it shook the stone in the walls. 'What would it take for Persia to reconsider, to turn back?' Salvador wondered. 'Oh' I thought, a revelation, 'that their men fall ill, maybe to disease'. 'And how will they fall ill to disease?'. 'We pray to Demeter to poison their supplies' I suggested slightly airheadedly. 'Maybe we could leave toxins in the great granaries out by the coastal fields' I said slightly more serious. 'Whatever they brought from Asia they will need to rely on these stores' 'We could do that yes' Salvador suddenly woke. 'In fact it is a good idea, sometimes you have your moments Lysander'. 'What poisons do we have?' I riddled. 'Rat poison' I said instinctively like I had been here before. 'We need something with a fast incubation time'. 'If we can make them believe the Gods are against them ...' 'The. Gods. are. against. them.' Salvador interrupted. 'Yes probably' I agreed 'but they will not intervene in our wars anymore'. 'Not since' and I forgot or I didn't know since when Gods had last found themselves among humans. 'Not in generations, not since the hundreds at Thebes' Salvador said scholarly. 'and that is long'. 'Ah yes' I recalled. 'Well we do not have much time, we ought consult Verus immediately. And we went out in the night underneath rain slipping along walls to the Keep again for an audience.

Verus seemed preoccupied consulting with a soldier when we got back to his hall. Tonight maybe he wouldn't sleep at all. Well, who could in this weather. 'Verus', 'commander' 'I have a plan' I said. 'Cant you see I'm busy' he answered. 'It is important' I annoyed. 'Ah, well' he coughed. 'Centurion' he said 'allow us some privacy'. 'Seventh' Verus said, 'they have arrived only this past hour and they know nothing of why they are here'. 'Ok' I understood, terribly eager to share my own mind. 'The great granaries, goodness sake, they could be poisoned' I said, almost slipping on my own words. 'But it needs to be done now, in this very night'. Verus sat down by the long table. 'Poison ah, hmm'. 'Yees, see these crumbs' he said and he swiped the surface clean. 'Gone like that' he said with whim: 'it is a good idea'. 'No it is an excellent idea' he found. 'Guards!' he called out.

And so that night the rat pack left the keep with bags of poison for the great granaries. It would be a gamble whether the Persians would even use them, maybe they would burn them, but if they did, they would have had to bring even more food themselves and surely their spies knew of the great storages. And this would be a long campaign.

It was a difficult night to sleep, lightning discharged above the fields in all directions and branched out in brilliant white patterns. It was a beautiful display. 'I have not seen something like this since I was a boy' I said. 'Zeus' Marius spoke softly, like feeling every letter of the name. 'Maybe he is fighting' Salvador said, 'a war too in the heavens' he imagined. 'Invaders of Olympus like in the stories'. 'He could disintegrate the Persians if he wanted to' I levelled him down to Earth. 'Aye he could' he said. 'Why are the Gods so finicky

to side with the good' Marius wondered. 'We won with favor of the Gods today, Marius, have you already forgotten?' Salvador said.

Come morning the winds had brought clear skies and the early morning sun shone like a beam through the hatch-locked wooden windows. Beyond the door was a murmur of civil chatter. I opened it, and a throng of people appeared in my sight. Drowsy only just awake I rubbed my eyes to notice that just across the street were bakers distributing bread, and they had attracted a clumsy crowd; some were waving, some were shouting. We had happened on a real commerce district.

We found Verus and a few lightly armoured scouts above the eastern wall. Skirmishers I thought, good men, what would we be without them. I felt a sense of belonging and I could hardly contain a smile climbing up the ladder to where they were. 'Why you are sunny' Salvador said 'heh, yes' I flowed. 'Well, we can say one thing so far, they are predictable'. 'Tonight even in the storm they set Keles and Isabel on fire'. 'Thanks to our foresight we had no casualties, we had no men lost and they had nothing to plunder'. We intruded on the conversation, 'what news do you bring' I wondered. 'That they are strong but some ships seem to have receded in the night, they are not as many as they arrived'. 'And where are they headed' I surprised. 'Who?' the scout confused. 'The ships that left'. He turned to the others and shrugged 'I have absolutely no idea'. 'It could be a manoeuvre and it could be a withdrawal' Verus ruminated. One of the scouts appeared slightly jittery. 'I think you forgot to say of the shipwrecks'. 'Oh, sorry'. 'Who are you anyway' I wondered. 'That's right we haven't been introduced, I am Basilus, captain of the second scouts, the eleventh'. 'Great to meet you' I said, 'I am Lysander and these two are Marius and Salvador. 'So many acquaintances on one day' he puzzled. 'The shipwrecks' he continued. 'A line of burnt out ships line the bay, they are most likely hit by lightning last night'. 'What?!' I almost cheered. Salvador grabbed hold of me and squeezed my shoulders 'see' he said. 'Blazes' Marius followed.

The Gods hear prayers, or they simply don't side with marauding evil I thought. And what would this mean for the future? For us and for all these people. To believe that there is hope. That this bastion would not be our tomb. 'So how many still remain' I returned from my sudden reverie. 'Hmm' Basilus hesitated and seemed to count, then he sighed as if he lost track. 'About half maybe' he said 'they... they will not conquer the empire' he said. Why this is the greatest news we could get I figured. For goodness sake there was a chance for all of us.

When suddenly one of the scouts interrupted us. 'By everything worthy' he said. 'Look!', 'look there where the road meets the plains, and further away, upward'. The rest of the scouts and us stretched out long above the wall for a glimpse. 'Where?' 'There!' he pointed in the direction of the high ground. And there on a hill in the distance was a rider on a black horse, it seemed he waved a green flag. 'My you have the eyes of an eagle' Verus responded. The horse got up on his hind legs and landing he set off down the hill on the other side, we watched until we could not see him anymore and we stood stupefied, unknowing what to say.

'Seems these burnt ships didn't daunt all of them too much' Verus broke the downy depressing silence. 'We all believe in something', 'what do you believe waits behind those hills?' he wondered. 'Whatever it is' I said 'we better be ready for it'. 'Pray' one of Basilus

scouts said. 'We pray'. One man had seemingly depressed us all now. How one man can make all the difference I thought. The tower guard had noticed him, and out on the walls they had too. 'These are scare tactics' I said 'this could go on'. 'Then they will die of poisons' Marius raised. 'A slim chance, but maybe the bad food and the ships together will make them leave' I supposed.

The skewered lamb rolled above a fire and a chef strew spices above it with the tip of his fingers. We sat down for a lunch at a long table set up in the stables. One part of the keep served to hold a farm's spread of sheep and pigs. The animals ran back and forth between the pillars. There were a few of these hay-filled quarters makeshift in the city. This wouldn't last, even rationed, very long I estimated. It would provide for the garrison for a week or two at most. We were locked in by an enemy we didn't even know yet. And we weren't taking any chances.

The juicy crunchy taste of meat grilled down to the bone watered my taste buds. I was, no we were, almost drooling, longing for another serving. We didn't know what our stay would bring. We didn't even know what tomorrow, this evening or the next hour would bring. And everything from now on was crucial to anticipate and to plan. Without a contingency we would be dead. Of the men we could tell some were anxious, and some were eager to just get it over with, to decimate this enemy and meet them in cold blood. We were outnumbered, while for the legion this was a common occurrence: Rome had stood at worse odds some thought. And the thunderstorm and the whining winds had made them believe we were aided by the Gods themselves. Who can be against us if Mount Olympus is with us I heard one of them men say. 'Webly' I said 'stay strong, they favour our hunger'.

As night fell the stars shone, I walked with Basilus up and along the walls looking for sightings and sharing scout's stories. Along the roads little lights from torches lit the view of people still coming through. In a silence I gazed up to the constellations. How I wish I knew them more by name. A physicians' son, Basilus had joined the army in Syracuse and sailed from there to Greece. 'Why didn't you join the hospital to walk in your father's steps' I wondered. 'My blessing is my sight' he said 'I am not delicate with my hands'. 'Besides, my love wanted us to move to the white city, and I am all for her'. 'A real romantic' I allowed. 'Well, we have a child coming this fall and I would want to survive this' he said stern. 'Survive this' I repeated 'who wouldn't want to survive this'. 'Do you have someone waiting for you?' he asked me. Along the walls guards walked between us and we hailed Caesar. 'I don't I said, I am still searching' and I smiled 'but I know what it feels like to be loved'. 'We will survive this I said. 'You will be with her again'.

Come morning we gathered in one of the keeps' taverns enjoying a meal of eggs, pork and slices of newly harvested rucola salad. And bright yellow orange juice was poured to us. Squeezed directly by a machine in that very cooking area it was a precious delight, sour, but with a sweet aftertaste. 'Orange' I said holding the cup 'wow'.

Elsewhere Antigon was filling to the brim now as streets crowded with merchants, farmers, soldiers, scholars, horses and beggars. The countryside was still teeming with folks faring from far and wide for safety. The barracks now held three legions and their standards stood flapping to the mild breeze at the iron-gated entrance. Two guards on either side stood with

spears, immovable, in long flowing raiments and visors far below their eyes. The characteristic visage of the praetorian. The imperial guard.

I don't remember in this hectic environment where I was when the bells first started chiming. But I remember the streets somehow emptied as if people had all found their way into buildings, maybe cellars and to stables. The bells continued to chime that early day and I thought I knew why. A young lad, an announcer, came running through the streets 'assemble the army' he shouted. He ran somehow stumbling forward in sandals, shouting, again and again. I met up with Salvador in a tavern. 'Riddles in the dark are untying' he welcomed me 'shall we go' he said. 'Yes' I nodded and we made for a wall's ladder. It is a tiresome climb, maybe even more now, it is a tall wall. Well up there I saw why the bells chimed. I saw everything I had expected and I saw more. There in the distant hills was darkness: long lines of men with large pikes and flailing flags. In between them were horse riders and large bulky grey beasts I had only heard of in the academy, only scarcely seen in the gladiator grounds, but never like this. War elephants. Shudder. And furthest beyond those lines rose brown towers with landing bridges and there were towed trebuchets. 'And so it begins' I thought aloud. Salvador fondled his face with his hands, 'are we up for this?' he wondered. 'Yes' I said. 'We must'. 'This is what we've been waiting for'.

The walls were crowding now, with legionnaires, likely as interested as we were, likely even more unknowing than we had been. I knocked on a soldier's shield squeezing by on the ledge. He jumped up. 'On your feet friend' I said and he laughed slightly nervously. Making my way I glanced down in the yards, they were putting together the ballistae, and huge piles of long armoured arrows piled up where there had been carts of vegetables and fruits.

The Persians marched for what must have been three maybe four hours before they stopped. We could see their front much easier now but the entire eastern horizon filled with blurry lines upon lines of infantry. Those that had stopped had begun erecting tents and some where, it seemed, hammering away on catapults. Their intentions unmistakable. They were going to let us surrender, on our knees. In front of their long lines was a group of lightly armoured cavalry prancing back and forth. Sometimes they would attempt to charge the residual refugees arriving from the north only to turn around about a tenth of the way. Why.

Their reversals made this heart-wrenching sight a little more bearable standing there almost helplessly watching, waiting for developments. They really weren't that many and would likely meet a much stronger counter from us if they went for the fleeing. A much stronger counter I thought. That would be us.

The day would recede into night and leaves fell from the trees as they were chopped down in the gardens to make room for the ballistae. 'It is a catapult, a catapult that slings away this large iron arrow attached to a rope'. 'If we strike the landing towers we can pull them down to fall upon their own weight' an engineer said proudly. 'No Persians will make it over these walls' he said.

Several hours and a few night watches later it started. The impact shivered one's bones. It was night when a stone the size of a shed came flying at the keep hitting the eastern wall with a tremendous crash. Another one came just short and tumbled around on the ground into the water splashing it all the way up here. A third flew over and smashed right into the

merchant living quarters. 'What can we do against that' I asked Salvador. 'We can wait until they have no more stones' he said apropos. 'They will need to ram the east gate in order to get in', 'these boulders cannot alone open the keep for them'. And so we stood watch while the enemy hurled stone after stone on us. The flying stones weren't even visible through the pitch black night but could only be heard, swishing by at great speed until they smouldered into the keep. 'Good thing the' and he abruptly changed his mind: 'nooo!' Salvador extended an exhausting depression, 'by the mountain' he said. And I stood watch as the distance ignited and I followed the bright orange balls arcing all the way against us. 'Fire catapults' I said. And with a splash of flames one ball hit the blacksmith's gardens. Shortly after the sky rained pure fire on us. Down the inner yard came a mingle of a horse-drawn carriages pulling pools of water. They doused the flames with buckets. A fire ball rolled straight down the street into a carriage and extinguished in boiling vapour. Gone as quickly as it had arrived it left us only charcoal. 'How long can this go on' I wondered. Salvador stood silently, it was as if he really disbelieved our vulnerability and studied it. 'How long?' 'How long' he said 'its has been all night, we can expect next night, and the night after this and for as long as they...' he flustered 'they will need to ram our gates, or climb our walls to really hurt us' he said. 'Without getting inside the keep we will be safe'. 'Yes, touched, but safe still'.

Some of us had fallen asleep above the walls toward the morning that night. No fires would spread atop the stone and no boulders could obliterate the foundations. Drowsy from little rest I watched above the wall and I could tell in the immediate horizon the Persians had managed to put up what must have been hundreds of little beige tents between the trebuchets now standing there silently, it was as if these machines of death were also asleep. And I was awake when the gatemasters pulled down the draw bridges to the south and north to allow the refugees in, those that had spent the night outside the walls in terror could now breathe a little easier. They came in in numbers, strikingly thankful and tired. The gates were left open as there were still groups of people making for the keep from various villages, various countrysides, all except the east where Persia had set up a settlement. Their group of front line cavalry had grown tenfold by now and it happened that they made for the roads of the fleeing only to turn around, at most they had made it halfway before turning. 'The people must be in dread' I said 'what can we do?' 'We are needed here there is not much we can do'. 'Needed here why?' I posed to Salvador 'to protect the people' he said increasingly slow. 'Ok you are right' he said. 'If they engage the innocent someone has to disobey orders, ride out'. Ride out, that meant taking on them right on I reflected. 'Who is so brave' said a lookout overhearing our discussion. 'Am I?', 'are we?' he wondered. We have to be, I thought.

It was morning after another night of vicious catapulting. Following some counsel we, me and Marius, met the men in one of the barracks. It is a huge stone-building built in vaults supported by large pillars in the yard of the keep. This is where the men lived, where they ate and where they had practiced. They had all been instructed to remain here by us, by Verus, but it seems chance had us delivered a different detail. It was inevitable, given the long lines of refugees at some point they would be engaged lest we rode out to meet them. 'It will be this way' Marius resolved 'that if fate has us chosen we will be there, we will be keen, we will be the first to step between'. It comforted no one was really afraid and if they were they concealed it well. Many of the men still believed in divine intervention, see they had heard rumours of the thunderstruck boats and they told of the pyres they had seen atop

the wall, the fires where the Persians were burning the bodies of the sick that had likely died to the grain stored in the poisoned granaries.

And following that day came the unmistakable response in form of the most repulsive of acts. The Persians were catapulting their dead into our keep. And I thought it was only a matter of time now before they would exact their revenge. To many people seeing the dead's limbs and bodies lying around in the streets, atop the roofs and in the gutter spelled another meaning, the unfaithful were being punished by the heavens. A secret secluded among the high ranks and sometimes not even them, the rat pack had served its uses. People believed while disguised for wrong reasons, now to question, did the remaining Persians too?

'What will you do when all of this is over, this tour that is not a tour but a' I hesitated... 'a skirmish?' Marius questioned. 'A worldly trial?' I tried 'Ah yes, you mean so' he responded. 'An evaluation' he pronounced. 'What is life if not a judgement' I wondered. 'What we choose to do each day, life is choices that is the only... predicament for us. We are born and we die and in between this we make our lives'. 'I want a daughter' Marius surprised the conversation. 'Wow. You have never told' I staggered. 'I never told?' he said. 'Maybe I didn't'. 'A warrior princess?' I asked. Marius suddenly stood smiling looking down in the gravel. 'What?' I perplexed. 'You say the funniest things sometimes' he shrugged 'warrior princess, no, she could be whatever she wants to be'. 'Free'. 'I was a slave in Egypt you know, I, I detested Cleopatra'. 'The warrior queen' he said. 'Her rule marks the...'. 'Anyway, what is it you want?' he shook out of his incipient story. 'Lysander the meek, no it is Salvador the meek, Lysander the enlightened. You want to see, that is your temperament, to explore and to learn?'. 'Lysander the teacher' Marius said. 'What will you seek to know, what is it that you yearn to know'. I thought for a while. 'I want to know my enemy' I said. 'What gives speed to this foe'. 'What boasts so strong of an arrogance it believes it bests Rome' and I fondled the air between us with my hands, catching it between my fingers and holding it there for myself. 'To defy the very Gods' I said. 'Persia and their crocodile Gods' Marius humoured 'there is your answer, they are not very civilised'.

Salvador arrived late that night to our room in the keep. 'What kept you so long' I said. 'Are you waiting for the skies to open and hurl meteors at our enemy? You will grow old' 'Everything here makes you old' he returned. 'I met'. 'Oh! A woman' Marius awoke. 'Yes' he nodded. 'Good for you' I said wondering a 'where?' 'She works in the stables' Salvador said 'she took my horse the other day and vanished with my heart'. 'Also' he added. 'Also?' 'She Greek, she is Greek'. Marius grinned 'you trip on your words great friend, she has you in her grip'. 'Maybe' Salvador said. 'I have told her of you Marius, especially of you'. 'That is difficult to believe' Marius said. 'No you are many mysteries' Salvador thought. 'An intriguing acquaintance'. 'She wants to meet us all together, to see the two of you'. 'And you are eager to show us' Marius wondered. 'Not really' Salvador laughed 'it was only a whim of conversation'. 'I don't know anyone here, except her'. 'You know Verus' I said. 'Verus yes' Salvador agreed. 'Does this man ever sleep'. 'I dont know' I said. 'I dont know', I said again, but this was only redirecting the story we were suddenly so curious about. 'Tell us about your girl' I raised. Salvador sat down in his bed and unbuckled his tunic. 'She's from Corinth', 'and what is she doing so far up north?' I said. 'She trains horses and nothing of what you would expect from a young woman' he explained. 'Her specialty is shock cavalry. She teaches them to be, hmm, unwavering'. 'This is a difficult word, I do not see this description' I said. 'Cavalry?' Marius interrupted 'yes cavalry' I said. 'Unwavering' Salvador

thought aloud. 'They charge stickmen and learn never stopping. They fasten blindfolds on them to elevate their hearing, to detect and engage enemies only by noise'. 'But she is not a fighter. Her hands are slender, her eyes are bright like diamonds and her voice is smooth as silk'. 'She is not from here' Salvador continued 'and she so serenely reminisced of her home above the highland cliffs where waves come splashing in spring' he continued. 'The sea spray smells salt and seaweed there. And the twisting trees fragrance the coastal with conifer.' 'A humbling setting' I followed 'so what does she think, what does she know of you'. 'That I am a rider with the ninth'. 'She herself belongs to the eleventh' Salvador stated 'we didn't really talk all that much about this'. 'Antigona is on fire' he expressed 'we kissed only between helping the watch douse flames.' 'A fiery romance' I smiled. Then suddenly small bits of stone crumbled from the roof falling on the ground. Through the silence we could sense: hear and feel the boulders pounding the keep and its walls like earthquakes.

'Where is the honor in this?' a man yelled from the courtyard only immediate upon entering the city. He set his hands out toward a row of carts where there were white sheets wrapped around bodies. Seems they had carried the dead with them. 'Where is the dignity, in this?' he yelled. 'Where are they from' I asked Basilus whom too had gathered with some of his men in the yard. Watching nervously. 'Teras' he said 'the Persians attacked their convoy in the cover of night, only sparing some, surely to tell the story' 'And here they are with their families, dead' he pointed subtly. 'It is the first of its kind, so far, what could we do' he shrugged. 'How many more are still arriving?' I wondered. 'Many' Basilus said. 'We need to escort the next wave' I figured 'to show them we do not stand idly by while Romans die'. 'Your words: my allegiance' 'you have my men' he said 'and I will follow you, follow until the red sun sets on their deaths, and it is over'.

We buried the dead next to where our men lay, where the people had died from the onslaught of boulders and fires. It was a growing cemetery in the bowmen's shooting range. As for the Persians we burned them, like they had, on pyres, to prevent the spread of diseases. And soon we feared, we would have to burn our countrymen too.

We shared rations that day, rations of smoked boar and bits of fresh vegetables gathered from the southern gardens. It all washed down with water. This food didn't taste the same anymore, it was unpleasant, almost disgusting, to feast having seen the lines of dead. It could have been my family I thought wondering suddenly whether they were safe in Thesally. 'So they go for the refugee convoys now' Verus said, seating himself next to us along the dining table. 'Yes it seems so' I sighed 'they are growing desperate', 'maybe demoralised their shelling serves no uses and their men die to an invisible enemy'. 'They lose faith'. 'And brand it with blood' Marius intervened 'pagans' he said disparaging. 'I heard you are planning an encounter' Verus said. 'Yes' I said swiftly, suspecting he would be opposed since we hadn't had a discussion of it. 'Oh no certainly I agree' he said nodding. 'It is a calling, that is, what all say'. 'This will be a drawn out engagement if they do not give in to the plights of Gods'. 'They do not believe in our Gods' Marius said 'and theirs are all warmongers'. 'I see' Verus troubled. 'And telling of their size even with all legions in Greece and Macedon it will be difficult to send them back across the sea'. 'With Caesar's army this would be easier'. 'He is in Rome' Verus riddled. 'Maybe our news will reach the white city soon, and a ship will embark on a journey to spread our misfortune. 'Maybe they will pillage and burn'. 'Maybe they already are'. 'Enough of this jabber' Salvador annoyed. 'There are still villages unaccounted for and every day and night we receive new refugees'. 'On this Roman soil they

have no one else'. 'Our oath is with these people'. 'A soldier's tale' Verus said glamorously. 'Well, there are many other romances we would favor to dying by the swords of Xerxes warlords' Salvador said, 'I do this to live'. 'And in order for me to live someone has to be there, someone has to be us, where we are'.

We slept through another night of bombardment. I slept reasonably well given the circumstances. But the Persian trebuchet crews were nocturnal and the stones still flew across the keep. How many stones do they still have I wondered, I thought in my sleep when Salvador suddenly answered. They were soon out and would surely shift to another stage in the siege he said. And I awoke laying awake the rest of the night watching out our window, down on our walls and further out in the horizon where little lights mingled in processions. Their night watch. I watched them walk back and forth along the plains all the way out there, all the way out there where death awaited. And I hated them for all they stood for.

'She braids flowers into headbands for the women and the girls'. 'And she tells me with waning voice they will soon come and I comfort her into believing they will not'. 'They are not strong enough, are they, she says'. 'Do I tell her the truth or do I lie'. 'What do you think Salvador' I wondered. 'Is this girl good for you?' We stood watch as the men were out practicing with wooden swords and large bulky shields, shields about five times the weight of their real ones. 'Staying inside the keep you grow weak' one said joining us 'you resort into hiding, into hibernating', 'like a bear' he shouted 'are we bears?' he said and the group laughed.

'Their spirits are high' I deemed, 'they focus on our enemy, that is their passion, that is their calling'. 'When I will be free, long after this, I will raise children who will be spared the damaging life their father had to lead' Salvador said 'there is another world out there I have seen it'. 'It is the Roman peace' I said. 'And there is also its destruction and we know it by name, less than hours away from our haven'. 'You will have your cottage, your kingdom by the sea, and your wife will braid the hair of your children, but it is not today'.

This was the first night since the siege had started we could sleep without shelling. They are out of stones I figured, watching out the keep's room window as I had grown accustomed to doing these nights, I saw nothing except those faint lights. The unruly weather was gone. We hadn't had a cloud in the sky since the storm. Instead the plains covered in a fog one could barely see through the dark. What does it mean I worried. What does it have in store I riddled.

I was pulled out of my bed in my underwear with the sheets and everything. 'What?' I surprised half awake. 'What is going on here'. Before me were two large figures I had surely never seen before. They wore a heavy chainmail with circled links and a dark red uniform beneath it. These two men now threw Salvador and Marius out of their sleep onto the floor, even Marius I thought, who was almost as large as they were, down here on the floor. 'Basilus sends us to summon you in the yard immediately' one said. Basilus. What could it be I wondered. In the keep's yard stood a group of riders atop their horses, all in all they were maybe ten. And there was a familiar face. 'What is all this commotion?' I asked. 'We have no time to linger' Basilus ordered 'my scouts say Fallas arrives and the Persians are in their tracks'. 'Convene your men, some are already awake and making ready, they thought you were already up, Lysander, when you were sleeping' Basilus had a more sharp tone now

than the one he had had earlier. The fog here had laid itself like a blanket in the courtyard where visibility was not much further than a few feet, maybe an actus in all. Just long enough to plan an assault no one would see, no one would know. Not until it was too late that is.

We gathered by the northern gate having ceased our horses. All in all we were about two hundred. 'Men' I said 'you know why you are here. The people of Fallas are in need of us, they count on us in this time, rise to this reason and hold the line'. The cogs of the gate whined as the drawbridge was lowered. We rode out of Antigonon onto the fog-filled plains. 'Finally out again' Marius revelled. 'By blazes I cannot see far' he yelled. 'It is a worthy effort' he raised.

Antigonon receded quickly from view as we took the northern road. Fallas was much further away than any other village we had housed and it wasn't inconceivable the news hadn't spread its way until now. Or Fallas had been sacked and the survivors headed for safety. We knew nothing, riding out in the cold grey fog. When it wasn't long until we encountered the silhouettes, faint figures ambling around in the fog. Black forms moving in the distance. They appeared to be the closest thing to ghosts I had ever seen. We rode in their direction and as they got closer so too a convoy appeared, seemingly confused of its way. 'Fallas' I shouted 'we are friends'. 'By the mercy of the heavens' one shouted 'our prayers are heard'. In front of us was a group of farmers with their families atop ox-led carriages. 'We were attacked' one of them said with hollow eyes, like he had seen the end of his world and arrived back to tell. 'We do not know how many have made it thus far'. 'Go south' Salvador ordered 'and do not stop until you see the keep of Antigonon. There they will harbour you', 'hurry for we must continue' he said and viewed my way as to check my reaction. 'Aye' I said. Attacked I thought.

We rode past lines of wagons pulled by spotted bulls. The people were difficult to distinguish here for the fog was that intense, their faces blurred and their movements faded. Even for the strongest of hearts it was slightly harrowing to ride the northern road through this early dawn mist. We stopped at another convoy to raise their moods, and to gain some understanding of what had happened along this road. 'You wouldn't believe what we have seen' one elderly man said holding nervously on to the harness of a bull like it would defend him from danger. 'Demons in the mist' his voice stammered.

We left them as we had left the others, we advised them to continue, continue quickly along the road, for even though it didn't seem to lead anywhere now, not in this weather, it was really the road to the safety of Antigonon. When only a few moments after they receded out of view another feature arrived, arriving large as a horse it went through the mist only to disappear in the blink of an eye. Startled we stopped, seeing only more fog. But what we couldn't see; we could hear, for somewhere beasts breathed boisterously around us. Suddenly another black figure flew right past us into the west, something not bigger than a horse and its rider. 'Blasted black magic' someone said in line. 'Liches are controlling the ether'. 'No!' I said. 'This is not witchcraft, it's horsemen, Persian riders riding through the mist'. We continued up north along the road when just in front of us a rider sped through the fog from one side to the other. 'We're found' I said slowly 'they know we are here'. And right at that time, on both of our sides two figures flew right past us and continued seemingly their way up north, disappearing into the fog from whence they came.

'This ghostly scheme' Salvador said 'they are trying to tire us', 'little by little, wear us out', 'sow spooks in our minds'. 'Weapons at the ready' Marius yelled. And just as he finished his sentence immediately to the west of us appeared a large beast, it was coming out of the fog straight at us at high speed with its tusks lowered. It charged right into my side, it rammed my horse and continued its way through others along its path. Everyone seemingly thrown about by this massive creature. My horse and I had fallen on the cold stone of the hard road. I tried to stand when I realised my horse was mortally wounded, he was unable to get up, and me, I was almost knocked out. My senses didn't even react the way I wanted them to. My eyes couldn't see at all times for I had dirt maybe blood running from my forehead into my sight, and I couldn't hear, only the sporadic voice of Marius yelling through screaming. 'Hold the line' he yelled. I got up and watched as our lines were perforated by oncoming cavalry. They had lances with sharp ends and they speared into us, and we fell and sometimes someone fended and the Persian fell instead. In a charge one was coming my way. I unsheathed my gladius and rose it in the sky aiming it towards him. He tried to spear me when in the last moment I hit his lance downwards, he missed and striking the ground he fell, flying off his horse. When another horse rode right past me I was slammed with a blunt object straight in my back lunging me forward onto the ground again. 'Are we not stronger' I thought, 'are we not stronger?' I said aloud. I got up, even though I couldn't see clearly, and even though I only heard sometimes. Marius was shouting still and I saw Salvador atop his horse waning in and out of the mist. Good, I thought, someone has to lead in this chaos. Another elephant arrived from the west of me, trampling through our lines. It trumpeted loudly sounding unearthly riled and so vehemently angry. From its back two soldiers jumped off in front of me, they had two thick scimitars coming my way. They swung at me, and I raised my shield absorbing both. It was such a heavy impact I fell to the ground. All dizzy I thought in dread I couldn't see them anymore, and I cannot hear anything anymore in this roar. Why this seeming veil of war is suffocating me I thought. Then I saw them, they had me surrounded when I got up, and they edged closer, behind their grinning masks. What are you? I wondered. You don't know latin: you have no faith. You are Godless and you are below us. They were three of what I could see circling me, and I was one wild out of my senses. How was I even standing. When a sledgehammer hit me holding my shield, the strike was so powerful I lost my grip of it as it swung away with a jangle. I was left with my gladius alone and I parried quickly two of the Persians at the same time and turned around to fend the third. The two slashed my way when I received them and the metal cried intensely, steel to steel. They backed off to breathe, maybe deliberate on how I managed. And I, I wondered how long I could do this too. Then there came Salvador, he rode straight into one of my assailants while behind him I could see the elephant spearing Romans with its tusks throwing them around. Here I thought I was lost to an immutable stress when in an instant my reflexes parried another blow from the Persian in front of me. He had decided to take me down I think for he vied me even more aggressively having lost his companion. I fenced him back and forth, trying to get a high guard to finish him but he was so quick I had to defend myself all the time. I skipped a side when from behind the Persian behind me tried to slam me again with his hammer. He missed and flew right by me when I was suddenly trampled by a rider, and rammed I was thrown to the ground, lunged into the grass and I felt an excruciating pain emanating from my left shoulder. Where was I, I wondered in the moments after outright delirious. I was surrounded by roar and I could only see dirt flying amidst blood to horrifying screams. 'They will write songs about us' I heard Marius whisper. When I was suddenly rolled aside again when I discerned merciless shouting: I could define swords in the torsos of my countrymen, lances in the speared horses

and blood gushed when a sword slashed into someones stomach. When I looked further, there amidst the fog, rays, sunlight, I stared into the light and I suddenly felt consoled. It contoured a Roman horseman, then it vanished like it arrived. A horse ran over me again and I rolled uncontrollably down the battlefield. I tried to get up, but my muscles were so sore and I was terrified, I felt so spent, I was lifeless, and yet a welcome voice unworried me amidst all this terror. 'We will walk the golden meadows with the Trojans' Marius whispered. 'Stand brother' he urged, 'it is over', he reached for my hand. 'Where am' I wondered. 'We won' he said. 'Remember, Rome the victorious'.

And lying down I took his hand when darkness suddenly befell me. In an instant it was so cold and his firm grip had receded. I was seemingly alone. 'Where am I?' I wondered and said loudly when only a faint echo revolved its way and waned.

I felt sand in my hands and sand on my legs, my feet and my cheeks. I wrestled with my thoughts where this sand would arrive from atop the hill while brushing it off me. While touching my body I realised strangely it didn't hurt anywhere anymore, and I got up, confused of why. From there it struck me it seemed I was no longer there on the foggy plains of Antigonon I was ... somewhere ... else. It was quiet and it was dark but not black entirely, I think, see I could see: it was a lone strand. A desolate strand where waves rippled softly against the shoreline. They were so silent yet I heard them touch and leave. Looking around I saw jagged edges of mountain sticking out in a delicate pattern. I realised I must be in a cave of some sort. I examined my shoulders for wounds, no, none, in fact I found no blemishes anywhere on my skin. No injuries on my body. I unsheathed my gladius revealing no blood nor any stains at all. I sheathed my sword and thought for a while. How does this match, I was mortally wounded now I am ... spotless. A lonely strand, where, an epiphany warmed my being... the. dead. walk. I realised, of course, I ... am ... dead, and this water is the river. What is its name? Styx? I was in the Underworld. While curiously I wasn't afraid of the notion of being dead, it all felt the same, I was only startled and lonely wondering where everyone else was. So I shouted, at the top of my lungs, 'Hey?', 'Is there anyone else out there?' 'Marius?' But there was no answer, nothing, only my echo there again.

End agent version.