

After fleeing a disastrous foray into Germania, a band of legion survivors happens upon an enigmatic hermit who imparts a unique gift. Now, decades later, one of the gifted few threatens to unleash a power great enough to dominate the world. Can Adrian and his band of misfits stop their brother before it's too late? A stunning tale of epic adventure spanning the breadth of history.

## **Echoes of Rome**

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# ECHOES OF ROME

Live by the sword,  
die by the sword.  
Repeat.

CHRISTOPHER BANKS

*Agent Farish leaned back in her chair and produced a packet of gum from her pocket. "Juicy Fruit?" She said offering Mieren a piece.*

*"Mieren flashed a smile and nodded. "Sure. That's kind of you."*

*Farish chortled once then tossed a piece to her assailant. "Well, my dear," She said again, emphasizing the salutation. "...as for your question, I'm afraid I can't divulge exactly how, but I can tell you it is getting easier."*

*Mieren popped the gum into her mouth then pocketed the wrapper. "Oh, I think you can tell me, if you want Mr. Glasses here to ever have children."*

*"I already have two children." The man said nervously back to Mieren.*

*"Really?" Mieren seemed generally surprised. "Can't believe you're old enough to have ever even seen a woman naked let alone actually breed with one."*

*"I'm nineteen, probably older than you!" the man shot back.*

*"Mitchell, please." Agent Farish calmed the boy. She turned back to Mieren after giving the boy time to relax. "As for my backup, I guess I'll have to make do with the few snipers I have trained on you right now."*

*Mieren's smile faded only slightly. "You're bluffing."*

*"Am I?" the suited woman asked. Several tense moments passed in silence as the three looked at one another.*

*"Where?" Mieren asked.*



# *Echoes of Rome*

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First Edition

# *Echoes of Rome*

**By: Christopher J N Banks**





*Love you guys,  
but this first one, this first one,  
is for me.*



## Chapter 1:



### A Beginning is a Very Delicate Time

Adrian circled the room slowly looking at all the preparations. The hall he had ordered was large enough to hold two-hundred people and was decorated with white streamers from ceiling to floor. The streamers, there must have been several hundred of them, cluttered up the entire room, obscuring vision throughout. A pair of men in blue overalls was finishing hanging a large banner that read simply, '2008' above the door. One of the men was so fat Adrian wondered how the ladder's meager supports held his weight while the other was skinny with a forgettable face.

The fat man wrinkled his nose and called over to his skinny counterpart. "Straight on your side?"

The skinny man, who was sweating an ocean of perspiration into his overalls nodded "yes" and began climbing down his ladder. The skinny one seemed scared of Adrian and kept his distance, though Adrian could think of nothing he had done that would frighten the man so. The fat man adjusted his side of the banner a little before climbing clumsily down as well.

"Well, there you go Mr. Adrian. That ought to do it."

Adrian gave him a half-hearted smile and nodded his approval.

"Looks like its going to be one hell of a party." He said, nodding to a table at the far end laden with food and well stocked with alcohol. "Though I'm not sure how anyone is going to dance what with all these streamers hanging all over hell."

Adrian ignored the comment and took his overcoat off of a nearby chair, folding it over his arm. "With luck there will be no dancing this evening, too much work."

The fat man chuckled and folded his ladder down. "You're telling me. Last time I danced I was a few pounds lighter!" he gripped his belly with both hands and gave it a shake. "Hope all your guests feel that way."

"They do." Adrian assured him. He walked over to the man and produced an envelope from his coat. "This should cover the costs with a little something extra for you and your help." The fat man took the envelope and flipped through a stack of twenties.

"Pleasure doing business with you Mr. Adrian. Any time you need my services in the future, you just give me a call. No project is too big. I don't mind having to call in help to get the job done." He pointed over to the skinny fellow who had folded down his own ladder and was now pretending to busy himself so as not to meet Adrian's gaze.

Very odd Adrian thought. He shook the fat man's hand and turned to walk over to the bar. "I will do that. Good day."

The fat man picked up his ladder and bobbed a last thank you to Adrian's back. "Come on, let's leave Mr. Adrian before his guests arrive. What did you say your name was? Hank?" The fat man's voice trailed off as the two exited the solid oak double doors, the skinny fellow quickly outpacing the fat one. As they closed the doors a large breeze whipped through the hall sending the streamers fluttering violently. Adrian made his way over to the table and opened a bottle of Warsteiner. He sat and noted how the streamers resembled a thousand arrows screaming angrily through the sky. He took a large swig of the beer and waited for the arrows to come to the ground before glancing at the clock. 9:00, still early. It would be a good night. It always was when he and his friends got together.

Thinking of his friends always made him think of her. Suddenly self-conscious even after all these years he crossed over to a large mirror on the wall and gave himself a good look over. His face couldn't have been more than thirty years of age, but had a weathered look, like it had seen too many blistering winters and scorching

summers. His hair was short and cropped, a little longer than a military cut and a pair of piercing green eyes stared back at him. All in all, he thought he still looked good.

The door opened suddenly, sending the streamers on their delightful little dance once more. In the mirror's reflection Adrian saw a tall brunette walk in. He turned with a smile. "Mieren!"

The girl smiled a playful grin and shut the door behind her. "Adrian. Don't worry, you look fine." Her voice was light and flirtatious. Adrian crossed the room, dodging around the spiteful streamers and embraced Mieren in a deep bear hug. She stood a few inches taller than him, but his large, muscled frame easily picked her up and twirled her around in a circle. She let out a light laugh and kicked her legs up.

"It's good to see you, too, Adrian." He put her down and gave her a polite peck on the cheek.

"Let me take your coat." He said, sliding off her gray overcoat and tossing it on a nearby table.

"You look well." She said laughing. Adrian turned and stopped dead. She was wearing a light blue dress that accentuated her shapely figure and full breasts. "You, OK?" She asked teasing.

"You could always do that to me." Adrian said.

She smiled and crossed the few feet between them. "I know." She said mockingly and kissed him deeply. The kiss lasted a few seconds and lacked little passion. They parted hesitantly, with Mieren taking a few, staggering steps backward. "And you could always do that to me." She said, supporting herself against a chair.

"Good." He said slyly. "Come on, I'll buy you a drink." The two crossed to the food table, Adrian picking up his beer on the way.

"Again with the streamers, huh?"

"Better safe than sorry, right?" Adrian responded. "You still drinking Bali Hai?"

"If you're still making them, I am." She said, pulling a chair over next to the bar area. "Oh, but double the gin, it helps."

Adrian nodded an amused affirmative and complied. "So, what's new with you?" he asked, mixing the ingredients with skill and ease.

"Not much. I'm living in Toledo now."

Adrian scrunched up his face. "Toledo? Gods, why?"

Mieren shrugged, "Never lived there before. Thought, what the heck."

"Married?"

She nodded. "Yup, six years now. Four girls."

"Four in six years? What you trying to break a record or something?" Adrian asked with a small laugh.

"Just trying to make the best use of the time I have with him. His name is Richard. He's a good man, you'd like him." Adrian handed her the drink and pulled a chair of his own over next to hers.

"I'm sure I would. How's the financial situation?" He asked, gulping the last of his Warsteiner.

She lowered her head. After a few seconds she raised her eyes and a tiny smile started at the corners of her mouth. "About that..."

Adrian stopped her before she finished. "It's all right it's to be expected, especially with four kids! I imagine the others will need some money as well." She picked her head up and laughed a long, boisterous laugh.

"You always were a good sport, Adrian! Remember that time in Japan when you- "She cut off as the doors flew open and a pair of men wearing grey trench coats entered the room laughing. Mieren's eyes lit up when she saw their faces. "Ciro! Alam!" She cried.

The two men slammed the doors closed behind them and turned with a whirl. "Mieren!" They yelled back in near unison.

She put down her drink and rushed over to the two, fluttering through the dancing streamers. The men embraced her together laughing. She hugged each one separately as Adrian jogged over to join the trio. They all took turns embracing each other and shaking hands at the wrist vigorously.

"Did you too come together?" Mieren asked when they all finally had finished their hellos.

The taller man, a skinny framed man with charcoal-black skin smiled an impossibly white smile. "Yea, old Giro here and I have been living like kings for a few years now!"

The shorter man, a tad on the portly side who had long curly hair and looked albino next to his richly black companion slapped Alam on the back and took off his own coat in one movement. "Like kings? I thought we've been slumming it this entire time!"

The group laughed and Alam placed his coat on the table next to the others. "Wait till you hear what *Ciro* did in *Marseilles* this past winter."

*Ciro* bellowed out a sharp laugh and waved his tall friend off. "There's plenty of time for that, where's the drinks?"

An hour and several dozen drinks later the four friends sat around one of the large, circular tables. Discarded drinks and half-eaten plates cluttered the table's surface. At the far end of the room a large grandfather clock struck 10:00, interrupting the group's festivities.

*Adrian* finished another can of beer and smiled. "Well, should we start?"

"We're not waiting for *Pal*? *Ciro* said, his smile dimming.

"He knows the rules, damn it." *Alam* replied. "He's always late."

"Maybe he forgot the date?" *Mieren* offered.

"Maybe he forgot the year!" *Alam* chuckled back. The group snickered at the joke, *Mieren* catching herself from spilling her drink.

"OK, OK, then. Let's start." *Adrian* said once the laughter had died down. "Let's start with where everyone is living. I'm still here in *Chicago*, though I've had to move more than once thanks to our friend in the *FBI*."

*Mieren* to his left said, "*Toledo*." The rest of the group groaned then giggled at her misfortune. "What! It's not that bad!"

*Ciro* went next saying, "Until recently *France*, *Marseilles*. But, I won't be going back there any time soon!"

*Alam* nodded an amused agreement. "No, you won't. I was in *London* before joining *Ciro* in *France*."

"Everywhere and no where, for me." A light, baritone voice said from next to *Alam*. The group jumped with a start. Sitting in the previously unoccupied chair next to *Alam* was a short, stumpy young man of maybe seventeen years

Alam nearly left his seat in surprise. "Gods Pal, don't do that!" The young newcomer smiled a sly smile and roared in amusement.

"Still up to your old tricks, huh Palmiro?" Adrian laughed, reaching over and clasping the man's wrist. Palmiro returned the embrace and the two shared a knowing nod and smile with one another. Mieren came around and hugged Palmiro from behind as Alam and Ciro gave light punches to his arm.

"Good to see you, my friend." Alam and Ciro voiced together.

Adrian let go of Palmiro's wrist and stood up. "OK, OK, now that everyone's here we can begin proper." The rest of the group took their seats as Adrian began. "It's good to see all my friends again in one place. Ten years is far too long to go without seeing your smiles."

"Hear, hear!" Many of the group cried back.

"This is the 199<sup>th</sup> reunion of the group and I assume all is well."

"Number 200 is going to be a riot!" Palmiro yelled back. Another chorus of "hear, hear's!" erupted and Adrian joined them.

"Yes, yes." He replied. "But that is in another ten years, for now, we have business to discuss. Mieren is six years into a marriage, Ciro, I assume you're attached?"

Ciro through up his hands. "Of course." The others mimicked him, agreeing his married status was a thing of certainty.

"Anyone else?" Adrian asked? Alam and Palmiro shook their heads, no. "Well, good, that's not too bad. Funds?"

"The family needs a full share." Mieren said.

Ciro nodded his approval. "Same here."

Palmiro shook his head. "Sorry, guys. I am in debt at least two." The group sighed almost as one. "I'm sorry! I had a run of bad luck at the tables a few years back. Guys have been chasing me ever since. But, if we can't make it with the score, maybe I'll just let them catch me."

"A run of bad luck, what a surprise!" Alam laughed. "I'm fine. I've enough saved up for a few years. No worries on my part."

"Good for you." Adrian said. "I am light, but could survive if need be. But, since we need some anyway, I'll throw out a request as well. Everyone agree?" The others nodded their approval. "Good, that's



taken care of. Well, since we'll be seeing each other a good deal over the next few weeks, let's skip all the other formalities and have a good time. We'll meet at the Conrad Chicago tomorrow to plan and discuss. Room 009." The group raised glasses and toasted one another to another round of, "Hear, hear!"

The five friends drank and feasted well into the night. Laughter flowed as readily as the drinks and each passed far beyond the point of inebriation. In the corner the clock struck 2:00 just as Alam and Palmiro entered another round of drinking games. Mieren and Adrian politely ignored their friend's game and sat with Ciro close by, talking.

"So, what's his name again?" Adrian asked Mieren.

"Richard. Richard Fieren." She replied.

"Oh, no." Adrian said sadly.

"What?" Mieren asked?"

"You're Mieren Fieren?" Adrian asked? "Please tell me you were kinder to the kids?"

Ciro laughed and Mieren put her hand up in defense. "The kids have beautiful names! Yes, that's right, I'm Mieren Fieren and happy to be!" She said, though a hint of shame crept over her visage.

Ciro took her hand in his. "Now don't you listen to him, Mieren. It's a fine name. I'm sure you two are very happy."

"We are." She said. "Very." She trailed off and her look became very distant.

"You're not thinking of staying, are you?" Adrian asked. Across the room Palmiro roared in victory as he landed a large coin in a glass fifty paces away.

"Maybe just this once, another year or two..."

Ciro sat up, concerned and took her other hand. "You know that's impossible my dear. We need some guidelines, some standards."

Mieren sighed and nodded. "I know, I know. It's just..."

Ciro smiled to her. "You're not alone. This happens to us all."

Adrian leaned back in his chair and put his feet on the table. "You can stay with me as long as you like. I don't mind."

"I bet you don't!" *Ciro* said laughing. "*Mieren* probably wouldn't mind either."

She grinned at her friends and shook her head. "No, no. I know what needs to be done. It's just always hard, you know?" Her friends gave her sympathetic looks, knowing her pain.

Across the hall *Pal* and *Alam* had lapsed into a fierce debate. "I'm just saying," *Pal* began. "I think the technology exists, we should look into it."

"They can't actually fuse adamantine to your bones, *Pal*." *Alam* responded. "Does adamantine even exist?"

"Of course it exists or how else did they know about it?"

"It's a comic book, *Pal*!"

"All I'm saying is..." *Pal* trailed off and looked up at the door.

"What" *Alam*, asked.

A split second later the door flew open once again. The gusting wind caused the door to slam angrily against the wall. Standing in the doorway was a blond haired man in a suede leather jacket and a red scarf. He scanned the room in the blink of an eye before settling his gaze on the five friends. The man stepped into the room and sidestepped the door as it rebounded harshly and closed.

Across the room *Adrian*, *Mieren*, and *Ciro* sat up in their chairs. *Palmiro* and *Alam* stopped their game and hard looks came over their faces. Although it would have taken an expert to detect it, each person in the room slowly moved one of their arms to their sides. Silence enveloped the room.

The new man walked slowly forward, dodging the still dancing streamers as he progressed. As he passed the table with the coats, he skillfully removed his scarf and jacket, placing them on the table without missing a step. *Adrian* stood and walked steadily over to meet the new man. The two stopped and met a few paces from one another.

"Didn't wait for me this year, 'eh *Adrian*." The new man said.

"Didn't think you'd come, *Rome*." *Adrian* responded. "Thought '48 was the last time we'd see you."

"Don't be silly. We're family." *Rome* answered.

"You're no kin to me!" *Ciro* called out from across the room. "I say we put a few blades between your eyes just for showing up."

"I agree." *Pal* added.

The man turned his gaze on *Ciro*. *Ciro* met his eyes with an icy stare. "*Ciro*. Still breeding with wenches?" *Ciro* took a step forward, but *Mieren* placed a hand on his arm stopping him. "And *Mieren*, realized how ridiculous it all is yet?" *Mieren* ignored the comment entirely.

"I take it the skinny, nervous fellow earlier was yours?" *Adrian* asked.

*Rome* raised an eyebrow. "Skinny fellow? No, I expect that one belonged to Agent *Farish*. She's still looking for you all, you know?"

*Adrian* chided himself internally for not putting the pieces together. Of course it was the FBI, he should have recognized that. "Bold to come here when they are probably watching the place."

*Rome* gave a small chuckle. "Bold? I'm sure I can buy myself out of any mess they stir up. What about you? They are most likely surrounding the place as we speak. It would be different in my world."

"Your world is a dream, *Rome*. The Empire died many years ago." *Adrian* replied.

"A dream? No, not a dream." *Rome* told him evenly. "Besides, things have changed now."

*Adrian* ignored his comment. "Will you fight?"

"Do I ever?" *Rome* replied.

"Then don't get in the way." *Adrian* whispered back to him. "We've company!" he yelled forcefully to his friends as he headed for the front door.

*Palmiro* joined him at the door and the two pushed a large table up against the entrance. As they did, the other three produced weapons from their shirts or pants. *Mieren* took out several throwing knives, *Alam* a gladius, and *Ciro* a Browning 9mm hand gun.

"Still bringing a sword to a gun fight, huh *Alam*?" *Ciro* chided.

"Still relying on those crude weapons, *Ciro*? The tall, black man shot back, smiling sarcastically.

“Still arguing over whose is bigger? Mieren joked before running over to examine a small vent on the far wall. She knew it wouldn’t do any good. When Adrian found a place for their reunions, he made sure there was only one way in or out.

Adrian and Palmiro piled another table against the door as Rome casually took a seat near the middle of the room. He crossed his legs and lit up a cigarette. “I always get a chuckle out of this.” He mocked.

Palmiro put a third table against the door while Adrian rushed over and removed the electrical cover over the lights. A second later a yell came from beyond the door. “FBI, open up!” Followed by a crash against the door. Adrian pulled a gladius of his own from his side and carefully slid it into the exposed outlet, shorting the lights out. The room plunged into darkness and all noise stopped except for the rhythmic pounding on the front door.

Nearby Adrian and Mieren crouched next to one another behind a table. “Just like old times.” She whispered to him in the black.

“Never a dull moment.” He replied as his eyes adjusted to the lack of light.

The tables in front of the doors gave slightly to the outside force sending in a crack of moonlight. In the sliver of light Adrian could see Ciro and Palmiro barricaded behind an upturned table, guns gleaming. He couldn’t see Alam, but he knew he was near. The man was as invisible as the wind itself. Finally, still sitting comfortably in a chair in the middle of the room was Rome, a smug smile on his face and a trail of smoke crawling up from his cigarette. A few more crashes on the door and the tables gave way. A man in black SWAT gear entered the meager opening, the light on the end of his MP5 submachine gun illuminating a small section of the room. He crawled over the table and then cleared the obstruction for his friends. Seven more filtered in. One tried the light switch, to no avail. Flashlights scanned the room, finally falling on Rome.

“Freeze!” A chorus of yells went up from the newcomers. “Hands up!” Another yelled. Two of the SWAT members moved over and put their sights on Rome. In the open doorway Adrian could see several

police vehicles outside. Mieren's eyebrows lifted up and down quickly in amusement. Adrian smiled and braced himself.

Suddenly all hell broke loose. First, the door slammed shut. Two shots rang out from Ciro and Palmiro's direction and two of the SWAT members went down, yelling in pain. In the distraction Mieren let loose two of her blades. The knives flew with precision, slicing just above the surface of one of the SWAT member's eyes before lodging in the far wall. Blood instantly began to seep into the man's eyes, blinding him. Adrian tumbled out of his hiding and struck the hilt of his sword against the base of another man's neck. The officer crumbled a split second before his nearest partner did, Alam appearing and landing a similar solid blow. The remaining officer sprayed Ciro and Palmiro's location with bullets before turning toward Adrian. He was too late. Adrian sliced a thin cut against the man's arm, causing him to lower his MP5. The officer tried to draw his handgun with his other arm, but quickly found his shirt pinned to his holster by Alam's blade. Adrian smiled at the man. "Sorry, son." He told him before knocking him out cold with the hilt of his sword.

The two men holding their guns on Rome turned and faced Alam and Adrian. "Freeze!" They yelled. Alam and Adrian looked at each other and shrugged. "I said get down on the ground, now!" One of them yelled.

"You actually never said that." Adrian told them. "Besides." He pointed his finger to their left. They turned and saw Ciro and Palmiro holding guns on them.

"Put the guns down now boys, no sense anyone getting killed here." Ciro calmly told the officers. The men complied and quick pistol whips to the officer's heads sent the men into unconsciousness. From across the room the two wounded officers screamed into their earpieces.

"Backup! We need backup in here immediately!" The two officers, each wounded in each leg, yelled for help in the darkness. The group gave them a wide berth on their way to the door.

Adrian peeked outside and saw four police cars, each with an officer or two attached. He turned toward Palmiro. "How's Hermes doing these days?"

Palmiro smiled back. "He sends his regards. Diversion?" Adrian nodded back. Palmiro put away his gun and took in a deep breath, exhaling it slowly. He closed his eyes and lowered his head.

A few seconds later, outside, several police smoke grenades went off. The wind gusted violently, carrying the smoke quickly into the air. Cries and coughing from the police went up as Adrian tossed open the door. He rushed out, the others close behind him. The five darted down an alleyway just as shots rang out after them. More yells from behind foretold of a vigorous pursuit.

"Let's get going, people!" Pal called to his friends in front.

Halfway down the alleyway a chain fence barred the way. The group never slowed as they approached. Adrian and Alam used opposite walls to jump from wall to fence to wall, scaling to the other side easily. Ciro and Palmiro jumped halfway up the wall in one leap, contorting their bodies up and over the top before landing gracefully on their feet on the other side. Finally, Mieren squeezed and slipped her tiny frame between the chained shut doors, though she was forced to leave her high-heeled shoes behind. The group reached the end of the alley and stopped.

"Anyone get hit?" Adrian asked. The group all responded in the negative as police sirens roared around them. "Conrad Chicago, room 009. One o'clock and keep a low profile." The last bit he directed toward Pal.

"What?" he responded. "I always keep a low profile."

"Yea!" Alam exclaimed.

"See you all for lunch!" Ciro replied in agreement.

The five nodded again and quickly clasped hands. A second later they were gone. Adrian and Mieren headed to the left, Ciro and Alam to the right, and Palmiro straight ahead.

A few minutes later a group of police entered the room where the exchange had taken place. The SWAT members slowly regained consciousness as another officer restored the lights. Sitting in the

center of the room Rome was tapping away calmly on his Blackberry. Once the room was secure, a red headed woman in a black suit entered and took stock of the situation. She scanned the room looking at the downed officers before heading over to Rome.

"Rome Flance, now how did I know you'd be here?" The woman said.

Without looking up from his Blackberry, Rome responded. "Agent Farish. Good to see you again, Julia. I'm sorry you didn't bring enough men this time either."

"I'll have to take you in for questioning." Agent Farish said angrily.

Rome finished his typing and looked up. "Of course, and I'll be out within the hour. I've just notified my layers and they will meet us at the station. Shall we go?" Rome stood, collected his scarf and jacket, and exited, escorted by another officer.

Agent Farish looked around the room in dismay. The SWAT agents were being helped outside. None had received any life threatening injuries, just enough to incapacitate them, just like all the other times. Whoever these people were, they were good at what they did. Next time she promised herself she'd bring one-hundred men. That ought to do it. Agent Farish chewed on her lower lip in annoyance. This Rome Flance fellow was the key to figuring this whole thing out. She'd get to the bottom of it all right. And when she did, there'd be hell to pay.

Adrian and Mieren walked quickly down a side street a dozen blocks away from the scene of the fight. Police sirens could still be heard whirling in the distance and the cool wind caused the two to walk arm in arm for warmth. Adrian stopped in front of a broken down apartment building, decrepit shutters banging against a window on the upper floor.

"This is where you're taking me? Wow, you really know how to show a girl a good time, don't you." She muttered sarcastically. He looked from side to side before opening the door and stepping inside.

“Didn’t trust that we weren’t tailed. Too much wind to hear anything, and frankly you and the booze throw me off my game a little bit. Don’t worry this place is cleaner than it looks. Fifth floor.” The two headed for an old, wooden flight of steps and climbed up them to the fifth floor. Adrian led them to room E9 and opened a series of deadbolts.

Inside was a sparse, single room loft. A single bed rested against the wall next to an over-flowing bookshelf. The lone window was bricked up. “You think we might have been followed?” Mieren asked, going over to the refrigerator and pulling out a bottle of water.

“It’s a possibility. This Agent Farish is good. She’s been looking for us ever since the Albuquerque incident a few years ago.”

“Albuquerque? She’s been looking for us for ten years?”

Adrian nodded his head and took a seat on the edge of the bed. “She’s persistent. I dare say even a little obsessed.”

She opened the water and took a deep draught. “Wait, is this the same FBI agent that Pal sent an autographed picture to?”

“One and the same.”

“No wonder she’s obsessed. She’s been tracking you?” Mieren put down her bottle and joined him on the edge of the bed.

“Last four years or so. I keep her off my trail pretty easily, but lately she’s been getting closer somehow. I thought Rome might be helping her, but that doesn’t make any sense.”

“So why not leave town? I know you can’t have that much love for this town.”

Adrian shrugged. “Most of my assets here are liquid so I can move around easily enough. But, this way she stays after me and leaves all of you alone.”

Mieren nodded and stood. She placed her hands on her hips before touring the small room. “No Television, no computer, this is some safe-house.” She stalked seductively toward Adrian. “Whatever shall we do to pass the time?” She asked, glancing to the bed.

“There are always books.” He replied with a sly smile. Mieren laughed and sat down lightly on his lap draping her arms around his neck.



"Books? You know how I feel about books."

"Aye, I do." He chuckled. A second later their lips met in a deep and passionate kiss. It grew in intensity until hands began unbuttoning here, unbuckling there. Adrian stood and flipped Mieren onto her back, ripping open her dress in the process. She winced at the sound, but smiled eagerly, pulling him down onto her. He cupped a perfect breast nestled in a black, silk bra with his left hand as she let out a tiny moan of approval then drew his lips to hers. Slowly, Adrian stopped himself, lifted his head up and looked into Mieren's eyes. There was a wanting there, he had seen it before, countless times. He imagined the same look reflected in his eyes. "Should we be waiting to do this?"

She looked back at him breathing heavily. "No." She said with not a hint of reservation. But Adrian was already gone, a distant look in his eyes. "Adrian, you know-" she started, cut off when he placed his hand over her mouth.

"Crap." In a flash he was off her and to the door. "Behind the frig, there is a passage, it leads to the back alley. Go, now." Years of experience took over and she rolled to her feet. She grabbed her coat and rushed over to the refrigerator flipping the garment over her shoulders as she moved. The refrigerator slid easily at her touch, rolling to the side. She flipped the handle and a well oiled compartment snapped open. She darted inside and turned to close it.

The door blasted in sending Adrian tumbling across the room. He rolled with the force, landing in a crouch next to his coat from which he pulled out his gladius. Five police officers busted in, weapons drawn. "Get on the floor, now!" The lead one yelled.

Adrian winked to Mieren and charged the officers. The first officer fired a shot. To his surprise, Adrian stepped lightly to the side and used his sword to deflect the bullet away. The next officer fired with the same result. Adrian was a step from the first man when the rest opened fire on him. Bullets ripped through his torso, staggering him. Adrian was strong, he knew he was, but six bullets to the chest were too much, even for him. He collapsed to his knees and exhaled with a small chuckle. The officers parted and Agent Farish walked in with a

concerned look on her face. Adrian slumped to his butt, still on his knees. His eyes fluttered shut and his slowing heart beat pounded in his ears. As he lost consciousness he distantly heard the police arguing over what had just happened.

“Jesus, did you see that? He came right at me!”

“I’m sorry Agent Farish, I know you wanted him alive but he was crazy!” Farish looked down at the man she had been tracking for so long. She suddenly felt like the bad guy.

“Call an ambulance; get this man to the hospital.” She yelled over her shoulder to the nearest officer.

“Already enroot, Sir.” Another called back.

“Damn.” Farish muttered under her breath. A large amount of blood was pooling under Adrian’s body. In the commotion, no one saw the panel on the wall click closed.

## Chapter 2:



### We Came. We Saw. We Kicked its Ass

Adrian trudged along the dirt path with heavy footfalls. He was hot, tired, and ready for a rest. Around him 20,000 other Romans fared about the same. It was early September and the men had been marching more or less everyday for over a month. The inside of his metal chest plate was slick with sweat and his back ached from the weight of his shield. "Look alive, there." Yelled a centurion to a young man up ahead who had fallen out of rank for a breather. "If you wanted an easy life you should have joined the senate!" Adrian smiled at the slight as a few others around him chuckled at the recruit's misfortune.

Adrian had come late to the military. He was nearly twenty-five when he quit his life as an apprentice to a weapon smith over allegations of embezzlement. The allegations were fabricated of course, but he had little recourse and was forced to resign in shame. His family name tainted, he joined the 19<sup>th</sup> Legion in hopes of restoring some of that honor on the battlefield. Since that time he had seen limited duty, mostly building projects or quelling small rebellions in Gaul. Eventually, almost as a matter of formality, he was given the title of *Contubernium*. The pay was slightly better and all he really had to do was make sure the seven other men, well, boys really, didn't get themselves killed somehow.

Now the 17<sup>th</sup>, 18<sup>th</sup>, and 19<sup>th</sup> Legions had been charged with establishing a new province East of Gaul, Germania. They marched east for a few weeks and scattered the tiny settlements they found on the way. The Germans were suppose to be giants, fierce warriors with

little regard for tactics, but big enough to take a half a dozen arrows before finally falling. Adrian wasn't so sure. So far the few Germans he had seen were large by Roman standards, but they appeared to be simple farmers or herders, easily cowed by the might of the greatest force the world had ever known, the Roman Legion. "Rest!" The call came from further up the line. It was repeated down the ranks and men plopped to the ground in exhaustion, eager for the break. From a few paces ahead of him, his *Optio*, Rome, came over and sat with him. Rome was the second in command of his eighty man *centuria*. The *centuria* acted as a smaller unit within the 19<sup>th</sup> and could act in concert with other *centuria* or independently.

"Don't tell me your tired already, Adrian?" The man smirked as he removed his red cloak before sitting down. Adrian laughed inside. Rome was a likeable fellow for an officer, but he came from money and had never suffered a hungry winter. Even now his shield and the bulk of his armor were being carried in a supply train several hundred yards behind them. He most likely took turns with the other officers to steal quick naps in the wagons as well. Of course he wasn't tired.

"No, sir. Just enjoying this German soil while I have the chance." He kidded.

Rome laughed and dug his hands in the rich, black soil. "It will make good farmland someday."

"Looks to me like it already is someone's good farmland." Adrian noted, nodding to a group of farmers gathered a mile off, watching as the force passed.

"I said good farmland, Adrian. That means bringing the light of the Eternal City to these uncivilized barbarians and turning their family farm into a thriving agricultural colony." Rome threw his handful of dirt toward the farmers idly. "These barbarians will never become civilized without us."

"The Greeks said the same thing about us a thousand years ago." Adrian offered.

Rome laughed again. "That's why I like you Adrian, you're educated. You remember where you come from and why we need to

do what we do." Adrian wasn't so sure he agreed with Rome's observations, but he kept his mouth closed.

"How much more of this nature hike do we have left?"

"Not much, I suspect." Rome answered. "We're heading into the forest up there. Apparently there has been another small rebellion to the north-west." Adrian looked up and saw a dense wood a few miles up the path.

"Into the woods? Is there enough room to maneuver?" Adrian asked surprised.

"Well enough, well enough. Besides, old Varus has never steered us wrong so far." The Varus he referred to was Publius Quinctilius Varus, the commander of the 20,000 man force. He, like Rome, was a career officer and came from royal stock, most officers did. "How are the recruits doing?"

Adrian shrugged his head. "They'll manage, though a few of them might be a bit too green to be of much use when we finally see some action."

"That shouldn't be too concerning. We've enough men here to crush all the hordes of Germania combined." Rome smiled. "If a few of the new guys wet themselves before the fight they'll have their shame to deal with when it's over. Maybe that will make them men and ready for a fight that matters."

Adrian nodded his approval. It made sense. Besides, it made no difference how ready a soldier thought he was, until he saw raw combat up close, until he tasted blood in his mouth and took a life, no one ever knew for sure. It had been like that for him years ago and he suspected would be like that for all soldiers until the end of time. "Looks like our play in the dirt is over." Adrian said as troops ahead of him began standing again, often requiring tongue lashing from nearby officers.

"Good, I was getting bored anyway." Rome said, moving outside the ranks to take his place to the left of the column. "Get your boys ready."

Adrian turned and saw most of his men were slow to get up, the lone exception being a tall, black man who stood nearby, at the ready.

"Come on you bastards, if it doesn't kill you it only makes you stronger." The group grumbled to one another and slowly stood again. "You," Adrian called to the African. "Come here." The African came a few steps over and fell into step beside Adrian as the Legions moved on. "It's Alamani, isn't it?"

"Alamini, sir." The man responded in a rich voice.

"Alamini, yes, and I'm Adrian, not, sir, got it?"

Alamini smiled back to him.

"What made you decide the Legions were right for you? Don't see too many Africans in the ranks."

Alamini grinned again, an infectious grin this one had. "Special circumstances, Adrian." Adrian gave him a questioning look. "I was up in Alexandria on trade when I ran across a group of men attacking a woman. I stopped the attack and brought the young woman home. Her father, thinking I had harmed the woman, had me locked up."

"Doesn't make sense that you would assault a woman and then bring her home now does it, Alamini." Adrian interrupted.

"No, it doesn't." Alamini responded. "And please, call me Alam. I guess eventually her father figured that out and he had me released. To compensate me he told me he could pull a few strings and get me a tour in the Legions."

"This is a reward these days?" Adrian asked.

"It is when I gain my citizenship afterwards." Alam smiled. Adrian nodded his understanding. "I thought I would be joining the 24<sup>th</sup>, in Egypt. Six months later and I am 2000 miles away from home, going to fight a people I have never met."

"Don't let it bother you, Alam. It's easier to kill strangers." He slapped Alam on the shoulder and smiled to the young man.

Alam returned the grin and motioned toward the forest. "These woods, they look very old."

"I imagine so." Adrian responded. "So?"

"Back home very old things have a way about them, a certain magic. We should be careful."

Adrian chuckled at his superstition. "I've been from one side of this Empire to another and never have I seen any evidence there is any

magic left in this world. No elves, sprites, or trolls. Just men, men and their dark hearted designs.”

Alam turned his head and gave him a half-hearted grin. “Magic exists, even if we rarely see it. As for the dark heart of men, it is up to men with good hearts to combat them. I think you are such a man. You have a way about you.”

“I’d like to think so. What about you. Which are you?”

“Me?” Alam asked. “I’m not sure I’ve found my heart yet. Maybe one day I will.”

Adrian let the comments pass and turned his attention back to the march. He didn’t fully understand what the man was talking about, but he rarely understood anyone from Africa. Ahead the miles stretched out before him and the forest looked dark and foreboding. It was going to be another long day.

Two hours later the force entered a thick, dark forest. Adrian was glad to have to sit for over an hour as the spread out force was squeezed into a small forest trail. The legion, accustomed to traveling six a breast was now forced to walk side by side. This had the unfortunate consequence of extending the troop line three times the norm. The officers crunched in with the troops, putting Rome directly in front of Adrian. As they entered the forest, storm clouds gathered in the west and the wind began blowing harder through the trees.

“Looks like we’ll be having some foul weather, sir,” Adrian called up to Rome. Rome tried to catch spies of the sky whenever the forest cleared enough, but the canopy was too thick.

“A little water never hurt anyone, Adrian. Besides, you troops could all stand for a good bath.” They walked in silence for another half hour before the first drops of rain hit them. It didn’t take long before the wind began whipping the small drops into stinging razors.

“Back home, I would rejoice in such a bounty, but now I think I would rather be indoors somewhere.” Alam half shouted above the wind.

Rome turned and looked at the new man. “You’re paid to fight, not think, soldier.”

Adrian waved off the comment to Alam. "At least the forest is absorbing most of it. I'd hate to be out in the open in this."

"Do you think the rest of the force is in the forest by now?" Alam asked.

"You're the tall one, you tell me."

Alam turned his skinny frame and glanced back. As far as he could see, soldiers shuffled behind him in twos, shielding themselves from the rain. "I cannot see the end." He shouted.

Adrian nodded. "The line must extend over ten miles now, we are vulnerable."

Rome turned at his words. "Vulnerable, hardly. One legionnaire is worth ten barbarians. Even if they attacked us here they would have to throw their entire force against one point to even make a dent. Besides, I have it from good sources that the barbarian force is several days away still."

Adrian looked to his left into the woods. He didn't like it. The brush was too dense to see anything more than twenty feet away and this blasted wind made archers all but useless. No, this was the perfect place and time for an ambush.

As if on cue, Adrian spotted a pair of eyes staring out from the forest. At first he thought he imagined them, but then saw another pair, and another. "Ambush!" He yelled, ripping his large tower shield from his back and drawing his gladius. A second later a hail of stones erupted from the tree line toward him. He took a step forward and threw his shield up in front of Rome. A dozen rocks impacted the shield with loud, "thunks." Up and down the line others were not fairsing so well. Stones came roaring in, mostly bouncing harmlessly off of strong Roman armor, but a few finding foreheads or shattering kneecaps.

"Form up!" Rome yelled out. In the wind the order couldn't have traveled more than twenty feet. Another hail of rocks came flying in, finding a few more marks. The stones were followed by a new howl to join the wind, this one with a distinct German accent. Large, fearsome looking men in furs rushed out of the brush waving axes, swords, pikes, even had sharpened farm instruments.



Adrian grabbed Alam and tossed him next to Rome. He ordered the rest of his small group back to back, lined up next to each other. "Wait until they hit your shield and then thrust with your sword. Keep thrusting until they stop moving!" Adrian took a position on the other side of Rome and raised his shield, awaiting the impact. It came with a jarring shock as a 250 pound man crashed into him. His legs were pushed back a few feet, but held fast, his low center of gravity saving him. From around the shield he thrust his sword into the barbarian's side, always amazed at how easily it slid into human flesh. The man howled louder and slammed a large axe into Adrian's shield. Adrian's arm shook from the blow, but he managed to slam the shield into the man's face and knock him back. A quick swipe from his sword cut the man's throat. In one swift movement he moved to stand over the fallen man and swiped the tendon of the barbarian's leg who was sparring with Rome. The man clutched his leg, leaving him open to a thrust into his chest from Rome's sword.

Up and down the line barbarians clashed into disorganized Roman lines with different degrees of success. Alam managed to suffer only a minor cut on his forearm before dispatching his foe, but the three Romans next to him were down on the ground. Adrian and Rome rushed to the left, stabbing and kicking barbarians as best they could. "Look out!" Alam bellowed a warning as a second wave, this one from the opposite side of the forest rushed out on them. The strength of the Roman Legion lay in their coordination and support of one another. Spread out as they were and in these cramped quarters, that strength was largely nullified. Adrian pushed Rome out of the way of an axe swing, catching a spear in the side for his effort. His armor turned most of the thrust aside, though the puncture wound still burned fiercely. Alam stepped in and cut the spear in half before elbowing the barbarian in the face and slashing a line in his gut. Adrian parried the axe swing aimed for Alam's head and kicked the man in the groin then bashed his shield into the German's face. Alam and Adrian nodded their thanks to one another before helping Rome up.

They looked up and down the line, everywhere barbarians rushed into the fray, overwhelming the ill-situated Roman defense. "This is no

raid, sir! There are thousands of them!" Adrian shouted above the wind and battle. Up ahead the three watched as the Legion's Standard Bearer was cut down. The Standard was the most heavily guarded position, if it had fallen; there was little hope for the rest of the Legion.

"We fight our way out, and then we'll find survivors and circle up to the other legions." Rome yelled as he pulled a second gladius from the hands of a dead legionnaire. The three, almost completely isolated in the middle of the fray, rushed into the forest. Immediately, they were met with six charging barbarians who seemed surprised to find them there. Alam stopped, unsure what to do, but Adrian and Rome fell on the first two, cutting them down while they were still surprised. The remaining four, enraged by seeing their kinsmen fall, sprang into action, swinging swords and axes in a wild fury. Adrian and Rome did their best to parry the two, but were slowly being driven back. In response, Alam charged in from the side, skewering one of the men attacking Rome in the side. The other jabbed Rome with his sword, nicking his ribs. The odds thus improved, Rome attacked with both swords. With a deft twist of his wrist he sent the man's axe spinning through the air before finishing him with a double stab to the chest.

Meanwhile, Adrian was being hit from both sides. He managed to disarm one of the men, but then made the mistake of counting the man out of the fight. As he turned his full attention on the other German, his friend came up from behind and locked him in a vicious bear hug, knocking the breath out of him. His arms pinned, the other man smashed his nose in with the butt of his axe. His head rang and he found himself wondering why the man hadn't simply cut his throat. The man reached back to strike again, but Adrian kicked him viciously in the crotch, sending the man doubling over. Another kick to his face sent the man to the ground. Adrian dropped his sword and shield and tried to reach behind him to the man who was quickly pushing all the air out of his lungs. His hands grasped the man's sides, but slid off, unable to establish any type of hold. The German shook him, causing his head to swim as he struggled to remain conscious. Finally, his energy spent his arms went limp and he slipped into darkness.

Adrian awoke to Rome slapping his face. Alam stood nearby, watching for trouble. They were in a small, isolated thicket, the sounds of battle raging all around them.

"What? Where?" He began.

"Easy, easy. The big one was too much for you, eh?" Rome asked without humor. "Can you stand?"

Adrian sat up, wincing at the pain in his chest. "I think so."

"Good, we need to get out of here. The bastards are everywhere." Rome whispered. He helped Adrian up and handed him his sword and shield. Adrian was still weak from the attack, but he shook his head clear and gritted his teeth in determination. Alam bobbed his head up and down quickly, pleased to see him still alive. "Come on, follow me, and stay quiet." Rome whispered.

The three turned and headed north, paralleling the fight. Along the way they found several other survivors and quickly recruited them into their band. They were well east of the main fighting now and without a substantial trail to follow, the going was slow. Eventually, their numbers grew to fifty, though most were recruits who were on their first tour. They had just found another pair of men, huddled against the side of a hill when Rome called Adrian up to his side. "Not a lot of experience back there." He said.

"Not a lot." Adrian agreed.

"Have you heard anything lately? All I can hear is this damn storm." As if to emphasize his point a bright flash of lightning followed quickly by a crash of thunder followed his words.

Adrian nodded his head, no. "The battle trailed off about an hour ago. It seems even Jupiter himself aids our enemies."

Rome ground his teeth at the thought and turned his attention to the west. "We've a substantial force, even if they are mostly boys and farmers. They've had their training. I want you to organize them as best as possible. We're going to try to meet up with the rest of the army."

Adrian knew Rome's request had been coming, he just didn't envy it. "I'll do what I can." Rome clasped him on the arm and then turned west and began picking his way through the dense forest. Adrian let a

few others pass until Alam caught up with him. He fell in line behind him. "Do you know any of the men?"

Alam shook his head, no.

"I need you to help me find two men who can hold their own in a fight and don't mind giving orders." Alam gave him a questioning look. "Congratulations. You've just got a field promotion!" He patted Alam's shoulder heartedly and dropped back amongst the men.

Forty minutes later the group shuffled down a muddy game trail. The storm had intensified causing the visibility to drop to near zero. Adrian and Rome plotted along in front with Alam and two of the men they had picked next to him. The two other make-shift commanders Alam and him had found were actually not too bad. One was a veteran with several years under his belt, though he had been idle for the past ten tending to his family. The other was a young wanderer who was good with a sword and who had joined the legions "just for the experience," he said. Rome stopped abruptly as the trail fell off suddenly at a cliff. The rain and darkness obscured the landscape, but it looked as if the forest opened up to a wide clearing. Thousands of shadows milled around down in the valley, swaying from side to side like dark grains of wheat in the wind. Suddenly, a brilliant flash of sustained lightning ripped across the shy illuminating the field below. Adrian placed a hand on Rome's back to steady him from the shock. Below them and in the distance, perhaps three thousand Roman troops were huddled in a defensive circle, shields outward. Completely surrounding them must have been 10,000 Germans, firing slings from 300 paces away. The clearing around the Romans was littered with the dead, Roman and barbarian alike. It was clear the barbarians had tried several waves of attacks, but had sustained heavy losses.

"Gods, that can't be all that remains?" Alam said with a shaky voice. Adrian let go of Rome and took a step back, leaving him in silence.

"It is." Adrian said. "See the standards in the center. Varus and his command are there. He pointed to the four large standards bearing the legions' eagles. Evidently, someone had taken the time to retrieve the

19<sup>th</sup>'s as well, for it floated there next to the other three. Shaky muttering came from the group of men behind, the fear in their voices evident.

"We should go to them." Rome said lowly to Adrian. Adrian looked at him skeptically. Surely the man didn't mean to lead them down into that, it was certain death. Honor was honor, but nothing could be served by sacrificing themselves before they even reached their force. So what did he really mean by that statement? Adrian thought about Rome himself, his place in society. Of course, he was saying what he was expected to say, not what he wanted to say. Adrian thought about his next sentence carefully.

"We can't do any good down there. We'd be killed before we made it through the barbarian lines and you would have led all these men to their deaths." Adrian finished and stood in silence while Rome looked down on the field, illuminated again by another streak of lightning.

"How could this happen?" Rome whispered. Adrian didn't answer. The question wasn't for him anyway. The group watched their comrades in the lightning flashes for a long time. No one spoke, no one moved or coughed. The only sound was the storm, raging around them like a crashing leviathan. Rome took one final look down on his doomed comrades. "Let's go." He said in a steady voice.

"Gods protect you, boys." Adrian muttered to his fellows below.

The group turned as one and headed away from the battle, marching down muddy paths and through thick thickets. A half hour went by before Rome called for a stop. He gestured Adrian over. "Set up camp over by that rock outcropping." He said pointing to a series of small rocks jutting out of the forest floor. "No fires tonight, tell the men to keep close." Adrian nodded and set about moving the men over to the rocks.

The rock formation was actually bigger than it looked. From the east side they were able to cut off most of the wind and an overhang would keep five crammed men dry enough. Adrian showed the men with shields how to combine them with their packs to use them as shelters for their heads and upper bodies. Their legs would stay wet, but at least their upper bodies would remain dry. Those that had lost

their shield, a sin to a seasoned veteran, suffered worse than the others, but they got by. Adrian called Alam over to the overhang. "Set a watch up on the perimeter, four men to a watch, an hour each. Then get Ciro and, and the other one."

"Palmiro." Alam helped.

"Yes, Palmiro. Then get Ciro and Palmiro and get some sleep under the rocks."

Alam looked apprehensive. Adrian thought perhaps the task was too complicated for him to understand. "Is something wrong?" He followed Alam's gaze over to the rocks where Rome was setting up a place for himself.

"It doesn't feel right to have such a luxury when all the rest suffer so." He stated plainly. Adrian sized up Alam once again. He liked this man. He was from a humble upbringing, but had a keen mind and fine sense of morals.

"I understand. But you are in a position of leadership now. The men will look to you for guidance and orders. They expect their leaders to live above them, not with them." Alam didn't look convinced. "I know how you feel. Trust me. I've been around soldiers all my life. They need this much more than they need an hour or so of dry sleep." Alam slowly nodded his head before moving off to do his duty. Adrian saw the camp was setting up nicely so rejoined Rome under the rock.

"How goes it?" Rome asked in an official tone.

"Everything is set. They'll be wet, but they'll be alive." Adrian responded. "What is our next move?"

Rome unpacked his green, wool blanket and set it around his shoulders. "I've been thinking. Varus and his commanders will know the situation is hopeless. They'll most likely try to break out late tonight, under the cover of darkness."

"You mean to meet up with them?" Adrian asked.

Rome nodded. "Seems like our best chance at surviving this mess."

"Which way do we go?"

Rome kicked off his boots and socks, laying them carefully next to the rock to dry a bit. "It looked like the brunt of the barbarian force

was arrayed on the western end of the valley. They most likely had a second ambush set up there to catch the force as they regrouped. The south and north were very steep."

"They'll head east then?" Adrian asked.

Rome nodded. "There is a large river a half a days march east. I saw it on a campaign map before we left. It runs north and south. If we can get there, the force will follow the river either up or downstream. We just have to guess which way they'll go."

"Well what's in that area?" Adrian had seen a map only once many years ago and was fascinated that the Empire had a map of a barbarian area.

"Not much. 750 kilometers south the Alps rise up into the sky. If we can get there, there are plenty of small Roman towns a ways to the west. North 150 kilometers is the great sea. We could then follow the coast west into Gaul. Maybe find a shipping town or try to flag down a passing vessel. Either way, it will be a long march. Not everyone will make it."

"Especially with the supply wagons lost." Adrian agreed. "We'll have to raid villages for food and hope we can get by the barbarian force."

Rome nodded his agreement. "We will. First things first though." Rome pulled his cloak up and bundled it against the rock, resting his head against it. "We get to that river. We leave at dawn. Make sure the men are ready."

Adrian rummaged in his pack and pulled out an old apple. He bit into it and found it still bitter. A few minutes later his three "lieutenants" stumbled up to the rock and collapsed on the ground. "How'd it go?" he asked no one in particular. The young one answered in an oddly deep voice.

"Men are terribly miserable. They don't seem to enjoy the gift of rain the Gods have given us like a farmer would."

Adrian looked over at the boy. The lad had lost his shield in the fight, but sported two extra backpacks, courtesy of some dead countrymen. The boy noticed Adrian staring at him and looked uncomfortable. "...Sir." He added uncertainly.

Adrian smiled at the boy's nervousness. "Call me Adrian. No sense standing on formality when we're trying to survive. You're Palmiro, correct?"

"Yes, Sir... Erm', Adrian." He smiled a wide grin. "But call me Pal, everyone does." The boy hoisted himself up with the energy of youth and shuffled over, offering his hand to Adrian. The two clasped wrists, Adrian with a wondering look in his eyes, Pal with another enormous grin. He was far too happy to be in this situation, Adrian thought. Pal shuffled back to his spot and sat down with a sigh. "And this ugly bastard is *Ciro*."

*Ciro*, who Adrian thought must be descendent from a long line of albinos started to get up. Adrian waved him back down, much to the man's relief. *Ciro* was about his age, maybe a few years elder, and sported a mop of dark, curly hair on his head. "Please to meet you, Adrian. Don't mind Pal here, he's an agent of *Hermes*, he is. As long as he's moving from place to place, he seems to be happy." Pal's grin grew wider, encompassing most of his face.

"*Hermes*? He's a good man, but I don't play the lyre!" Pal joked. The group enjoyed a small laugh as they made the best preparations they could in the cramped quarters. Adrian looked over the three again. This was the best of Rome, he thought. A wandering boy, an established citizen with a gut, and a foreigner, all working together and fighting for the glory of Rome. If these barbarians could see this, if the rest of the world could be made to see this, he was sure the clans of the world would line up to join the light of Rome. Who wouldn't want to become part of such a wondrous brotherhood?

Adrian finally got comfortable enough to rest his head against the rock and closed his eyes. "Any of you married?" He asked to the darkness.

"I was once." Alam's voice came from next to him. A few seconds of hard silence went by before *Ciro*'s light voice drifted out.

"*Hades* watch after her soul." He said.

Alam responded back. "*Pluto*, *Hades*, back home she is known as *Asase*, *Gauna*, or *Were*. It is all the same. She is at rest." Adrian began drifting off to sleep just as *Ciro* whispered out again.



"Myself, I have been married fifteen years to my wonderful bride."

"Fifteen years?" Pal asked incredulously. "You've been in the same place with the same woman for fifteen years?"

"I don't expect a young Hermian like yourself to understand love, Pal. I love her as much today as I did the day we were joined. Though I must confess, I've had too much wine and gotten into the wrong woman's bed on more than one occasion!"

Adrian laughed at the joke, Alam and Pal joining him. "Perhaps there's a little of Hermes' blood in you as well then." Pal joked back.

Rome stirred and raised his voice. "If you all don't let me sleep I'll send you out to replace the patrols. That should please our beloved God of travel."

The four stifled laughter and fell into silence. "Besides," Rome continued, "Right now would probably be a good time to find a god that can help us, like Mars or Ayres." He was right, they all knew it. Sleep came fast to the exhausted troops. They drifted off murmuring prayers to the gods of war and battle, while in the same breath asking Hermes for a quick and safe trip home.

Morning brought a much needed relief to the storm. Adrian was up before the rest, gently rousing soldiers. He joked to them he was happy to see they hadn't drowned in their sleep and made sure each had something to eat. The watch had been quiet all night, the storm keeping both man and animal away. He was about to head back to the rock to rouse Ciro, Pal, and Alam when he spotted Rome exiting the overhang, strapping on his breastplate. Adrian headed over to him.

"Well, what has this morning brought us, Adrian?" Rome called far louder than necessary while he cracked his neck.

"What ever it brings us, let's hope Zeus continues to slumber so we can have a little more of Apollo's warmth before the night sets in." Adrian said, pulling another apple from his pouch and tossing it to Rome.

Rome caught it deftly with one hand while producing a knife in his other. He peeled off a slice and popped it in his mouth. "Tonight? Let's try to survive the day first!" he joked, giving Adrian a wink. Behind

him his three lieutenants were rising, awakened by Rome's boisterous voice. Adrian was certain that was Rome's intention.

"Men should be ready in twenty minutes, Sir." Adrian said formally. Rome nodded his understanding than headed off into the woods to relieve himself. "Make it ten. I want to get to the river before the legions do if possible."

Adrian watched the man go with a sigh. He lightly kicked a man near him still in the throws of sleep. The man awoke with a start and sat upright, throwing his makeshift tent off him in the process. "Ten minutes, son." He told the young man. The man grunted his understanding and rubbed his eyes forcefully. The soldiers already looked tired and they hadn't even started their march yet. Whatever today brought, it was going to be a long day.

Three hours later the force was making steady progress east. Alam volunteered to scout with another man, a hunter from Spain. The pair found a trail through the woods where they could walk two abreast. This cut down on the length of the group and allowed Adrian to move easier from the front to the rear to make sure the stragglers kept up. Not that he had much to worry about. Pal had taken the liberty of rear guard and had a nasty word for anyone not keeping up or carrying their own weight. The boy seemed to relish the role. Adrian figured it was the first authority role he had ever had.

If each man wasn't carrying fifty pounds of gear and half waterlogged from the night before, the trip could almost be described as pleasant. The sun beat down lightly through the trees and the path was easy, slopping gently down at a small angle. At about midday they started hearing the first sounds of running water and Adrian spotted the river through the trees ahead of them. He hurried to catch up with Rome as they came to the river bank.

"Well, we've made the river without incident. That's something." Adrian said flashing a small smile.

"It's a start." Rome agreed. The river offered no relief from the trees though, as the forest ran up to the river bank on both sides. "We'll rest here for a small while. Tell the men to refill waterskins and drink their fill." Adrian passed the word on to his three lieutenants

and the group spread out, finding spots to sit and rest. When guards were posted to their rear, Adrian went and joined Ciro, Pal, and Alam resting near the river.

"What do you think, Adrian?" Pal asked. Adrian gave him a questioning look. "How do you think the trees jumped the river?"

"What do you mean?" he asked.

"Well, it's obvious the trees grew to the river here, but than how did they start growing over there three hundred feet?" Adrian scratched his head. He had never really considered how trees got to the other side of river banks. "Ciro thinks they spread under the river, through their roots. Alam here seems to think the wind carried the seeds to the other side."

"And you, what do you think?" Adrian asked, not really having an answer.

Pal sat and thought for a few seconds. "I think it was the birds." Birds fluttered around in the trees as he spoke.

"The birds?" Ciro asked in a mocking tone. "Why the birds?"

"Sure," Pal responded. "The birds eat the seeds, carry them over the river and accidentally drop some. They grow into trees." Pal nodded his head, seeming very satisfied with his answer.

"How do you know the trees didn't start on that side and had to make it to this side?" Adrian asked thoughtfully.

"Well," Pal said. "We started on this side so I'm sure the trees did too!"

"Spoken like a true poet." Ciro chided.

Rome walked over and joined them, jumping up to sit in the small crook of a tree. "You're all wrong. The trees didn't get from one side or the other. The trees are like Rome herself, they have always been there and will always be there. Eternal."

Ciro and Alam looked intimidated and began pulling blades of grass up from the ground. Pal on the other hand, didn't look so convinced. "Eternal? What happens if I go cut one down? It's not eternal then." He stated.

"You think that one man can change a forest by cutting down but a single tree? Can one man change Rome?" Rome argued. Pal seemed stumped.

Adrian smiled. Rome was becoming clearer to him now. The man had one perspective and clung to it as if to life itself.

"Julius Caesar was one man and he changed Rome forever. Varus is one man and he changed the fate of three legions by bringing us into this forest." Adrian answered.

"You dare to question Varus' commands?" Rome asked, anger brewing dangerously below the surface.

Adrian tossed up his hands defensively. "No, no. I was simply showing that one man can make a difference. One man can change the world."

"Caesar was a great man, but he had armies, money, and the entire of the Roman Empire to help him, he did not act purely alone. And Varus was advised by his priests and advisors, he also did not act alone."

Adrian slowly looked around to the men scattered around him. He had gone too far and said too much. Rome's conscience and morals were aligned too far away from his own. He should appease him for the good of the group. "And what of all these men? You have changed the world for each one of them. Without you most likely we would all be lying dead. Either on the battlefield were we fought or later, hunted down by barbarians. To each one of these men they have a life; they have a world to continue in, because of you." Rome pondered Adrian's words carefully, pulling some leaves off of a low hanging branch.

"Maybe." Rome muttered. He jumped out of the tree and walked downstream tearing apart and tossing to the ground the leaves in his hands.

"Why do you do that?" Alam asked from next to him. Adrian raised an eyebrow. "Why do you give him all the credit? You have done just as much for us as he has, maybe more."

Adrian dug a tiny pebble out of the ground next to him and flicked it at Alam. "He's an officer, Alam. Keeping his head in the clouds is my job." Alam smiled and let out a bark of a laugh.

An hour later the group stood ready to move again. Rome had them arrange themselves in rough columns of ten. He stood in his tree crook and addressed his men. "Men, the rest of our force will be meeting us near here shortly. However, it is not known if they are north of us or south. As such, we will have to split into two groups. I will take one group of thirty men and head north and Adrian will take the remaining group and head south. If one group finds evidence of the legion's passing, they will send a runner in the opposite direction to catch the others." Adrian noted Rome was doing his best to look regal. "Be vigilant. Look for large amounts of tracks in the ground and for snapped branches. We will find our brethren. We will meet up with our leaders and march back home. Once we have resupplied back home and gathered proper reinforcements, we will return here and show these uncivilized barbarians the true meaning of pain!" Rome pumped a fist and jumped down from his tree. He had probably been expecting rousing cheers for his speech, but these men were too tired and hungry to care about vengeance. Most were even now wondering why they had joined this cursed expedition to begin with. Adrian met Rome and clasped his wrist.

"Good luck." Rome said. "Take the black fellow and his troop south. I'll take the young and short one with me. March until the sun is low on the horizon and then head back north if you haven't found anything or gotten word from me." Adrian nodded then clasped Rome on the shoulder.

"We'll send a runner if we find the legions. If not, we'll see you back here late tonight." Adrian repeated the order.

Rome spun and barked orders to Ciro and Pal. Adrian watched the thirty or so men move off then turned to Alam and the remaining two dozen or so soldiers. "Well, the sooner we go the sooner we can be back. Let's get moving." Adrian took the lead and began picking his way south through the trees.

It didn't take long for Adrian to figure out that marching on the river bank was much easier than weaving between trees. He had been worried about his men's feet becoming wet, but an hour into the march, the rain began to fall again, wiping away any chance for a dry night. The group traveled single file as they went. The ground dropped off at points causing Adrian to annoyingly turn his ankle slightly from time to time. From the occasional curses he heard behind him it was apparent he wasn't alone in his pain.

"Do you think we might miss their tracks traveling so close to the river?" Alam asked from directly behind him.

He half turned and called back over his shoulder. "If it's as big of a force as Rome thinks, they'll need water as badly as we do. We shouldn't have any problems seeing evidence of their refilling."

"If the rain doesn't wash their tracks away first." Alam countered. Adrian conceded the point and increased his pace slightly.

Three hours later the rain had intensified from an annoying drizzle to a heavy down pour. Adrian moved the group back into the trees, hoping the canopy would protect them from the brunt of the wetness. The going was much slower, but much drier. When they reached a small clearing he called a halt and let his men rest.

"We're not going to find anything, are we?" Alam asked taking a seat next to him. Adrian had admitted that to himself long ago. The chances of finding anything were slim.

"No, I don't suspect we are. I honestly don't think many men could have broken out of the hell storm we saw back there last night. And any group that did would be hounded from all sides."

Alam lowered his head. "The barbarians are much faster in the woods than we are. Survivors wouldn't stand much of a chance."

"Unless they stayed in small bands and headed as far away from the fighting as possible."

"Like us." Alam admitted. "So what are we doing here then?"

Adrian pulled his cloak up tighter over his head. "Going through the motions. Rome would never let us leave if he thought we were abandoning the legion. He has to be convinced that we are all that's left."

Alam drew in a heavy breath. "Where does that leave us?"

"It leaves us tired, cold, and wet." He said to his friend. "The sun is low enough. We'll let the men rest another ten minutes and than head back."

"You don't suspect the others found anything either, do you?"

Adrian grinned at this friend. "No, no I don't. I suspect it will be me, you, Ciro, and Pal trying to keep these boys from running off on their own all while doing our best to keep Rome happy. Tell the men twenty minutes.

The return trip was much worse than the trip out. The rain hadn't ceased to fall for hours and Adrian decided it best to stick to the forest. With no path to guide them every step became a battle with sharp jutting branches or razor prickly bushes. Because the going was so rough, the sun had set hours ago and the moon was high in the sky before the two groups joined up again. Adrian recognized the somber look on Rome's face and knew before any words escaped his lips, he had come up empty as well.

"Nothing?" Rome asked seeing Adrian's sour mood.

"Nothing but cursed rain and damn trees." Adrian replied. Men on both sides greeted each other halfheartedly before collapsing to rest on the ground, their strength drained from the hike. Alam moved over and joined Ciro and Pal seeking shelter under a large oak. "What now?" Adrian asked.

"I guess we fend for ourselves." Rome said, looking over at the exhausted men.

"North or South?"

Rome thought over the prospect for a few seconds. Adrian wasn't sure what he would do in his situation. If they went north the journey to the sea is much faster, but the Empire had few friends sailing the Northern Sea. If they went south the march would take weeks, but they had a better chance of finding an allied city or town.

"North I think." Rome finally said, after mulling over the prospects for a few seconds. "The trip is faster, and if we're lucky, we'll find a transport to Britain or northern Gaul." Even as the words came out of his mouth, Adrian knew Rome wasn't sure of his decision. "We'll

spend the night here. Tell the men they have an extended rest tonight. We'll wait till midday tomorrow before leaving."

Adrian gave Rome a questioning look. "It will be a long journey, and they'll need their strength. Set the lieutenants up near that ridge and see to the watch." Rome slipped off his cloak and headed for a large cluster of trees near a small ridge. "And get some rest." He called back to Adrian.

Adrian waited until Rome was out of sight before heading over to the lieutenants.

"What's the word?" Pal asked, even now managing a smile.

"Rest and lots of it." Adrian answered. "Set the watch and tell the men they can sleep in tomorrow."

"Late start?" Ciro asked. Adrian nodded yes, and then followed Rome up the ridge.

The next afternoon, the band followed the river north. The extra rest had been a godsend for the weary legionnaires. The weather had taken a turn for the better and the rain had stopped in the late morning. Unfortunately, a thick cloud cover remained and a fall wind had begun gusting from the north. Despite the dreary conditions, the men seemed in good spirits as they splashed along the riverbank.

Six hours later, what had been an eager march turned into a dreary procession as tired legs and wet feet bogged down morale. For the past few hours they had seen no sign of friend or foe. In fact, Adrian could not remember the last time he had seen a wild animal in the brush or bird fly by. It must be the size of our force, he thought. They were too large not to scare away animals. That was not a good thing. If animals knew they were coming so far in advance, it was only a matter of time until they stumbled across a barbarian force or were spotted by a villager. As he thought of everything that could go wrong, he pulled out a hard biscuit and bit off a corner with his teeth. The biscuit was tough, but delicious and it filled the growing emptiness in his stomach for the time being. He finished the last bite and noticed he was still hungry. He suddenly thought of the limited rations he had remaining and did the math. Even if they were successfully able to hunt,



something that seemed unlikely given the group's size and noise, they would run out of food in a matter of days. And this didn't include the twenty or so men who had lost their rations along with their packs during the fighting. Dividing their food further made starving to death a very real possibility. A grim look on his face, he jogged up next to Rome at the head of the column.

Rome glanced next to him and saw the look on his face. "Been thinking too much, haven't you." He said. It wasn't a question he wanted an answer to.

"I imagine we'll have three, maybe four days, even at half rations." Adrian said in a low tone so as to not let the man behind them hear.

"Probably less than that." Rome replied, nodding his head in agreement. "If we don't find something the men will get weaker and weaker until they won't be able to stand let alone march."

"You've a plan?" Adrian asked.

Rome plodded ahead for several seconds without answering before finally replying. "It can't be too long before we reach a village. The barbarians have them everywhere on large enough rivers. With a little luck the men that live there will still be off looting and fighting the legion. We should be able to walk right in and take as much as we can carry."

Adrian thought it over in his head. It made sense. There was always the moral question of taking hard earned food from villagers, but this was life and death here. The villagers would be able to adapt and help one another through the winter. His troops needed food now.

As if on cue a large splash came from the distance up ahead. Rome raised his hand for a stop and the hand signal was repeated down the line, bringing the lumbering column to a halt. The splash was followed by several high pitched yells and laughter. Rome nodded his head for Adrian to follow and the two picked their way through the trees down to the river.

Up ahead a ways was a long rope bridge that connected the two sides. On the far end was a small village that could house maybe two-hundred people. The bridge was occupied by scattered clusters of

children dressed in wool cloths. The children raced around playing some sort of game, several of them leaped off the bridge with high pitched, playful yells into the water. They then swam to the shore and repeated the process over again.

Rome maneuvered a bit closer, using the bushes for cover. "The village there. I don't see any men."

Adrian scanned the village and had to agree. "It looks like mostly women and children. But, they must have left someone behind to guard."

"I'm sure they did. But a few old men with axes shouldn't be too hard to subdue. What do you think?"

Adrian had to agree again. "It looks like our best bet. In another month or so the villages will be locked down for winter. We should stock up while we can."

Adrian watched as a few of the boys swam over to their side of the river bank. The group ran upstream to a well shielded inlet. Resting on the riverbank there were a dozen small boats. The boys pushed two of the boats into the river and leaped aboard. The current was fairly weak and the boys were able to maintain their position with oars as they took turns sailing at one another in some odd barbarian children's game.

"Look there." He whispered pointing to the boys.

Rome leaned out and watched the boys. "What of it?"

"If there are enough boats there for the men, we might be able to fill them with more than we could normally carry."

Rome thought over the prospect for a second. "Sailing is easier and faster than walking. We'll have to head south, but the river most likely meets up with a larger waterway."

For some reason Adrian hadn't thought of sailing south with the current. "That's even better. It would give the men the rest they needed and still allow us to make progress toward home."

Rome nodded. "Agreed."

The two headed back to the troops who were mostly sitting, resting for the trip to come. Rome found a tiny clearing and leaned against a tree as Adrian went to collect the lieutenants. Alam, Pal, and

Ciro were escorted to the clearing by Adrian and took spots around the clearing.

Rome broke off a small branch from a nearby tree and squatted down next to them. "There is a village up ahead. It looks to be deserted of any type of resistance, mostly just women and children. Adrian and I have come up with a plan." Rome carved two parallel straight lines in the mud and placed a large box on one side and an "X" on the other side. "This is the river. We're here and the village is here." He said pointing to the "X" and the box. "Up here are several boats. Adrian, you'll take the men and see to the village. Nothing fancy here. Just get in, subdue any creditable threats, gather any provisions you find at the village square, and wait for me to bring the boats over."

"Do you want me to bring any of the lieutenants?" Adrian asked.

"No, I want the best we have with me to make sure we get the boats across. Without them this whole plan goes sour. You three, pick out two of the best men you have and bring them with you. We'll be securing the boats and sailing them to the far bank. Once there we'll meet up with Adrian and board the supplies."

The three make shift lieutenants nodded their agreement. Alam spoke up in his thick accent. "I'm not sure who my best men are?"

"Then pick any two that don't look like they are about to fall over from exhaustion." Rome snapped back. "If anything goes wrong pull your men to the opposite bank, we'll cut the bridge and go from there. Any questions?"

Adrian snapped off a small twig from a tree behind him and placed two dots on either end of the line representing the bridge. "Maybe I should leave two men on either end of the bridge to cut it if need be."

"Good idea." Rome responded. "Make sure they are men that can swim, in case they are left on the wrong side. Anything else?" Rome waited a few seconds and looked at each of the men. "Good, we'll attack tonight at dusk."

Adrian crouched along the river bank just inside the tree line. The rope bridge and a path leading up to and beyond it lay only about twenty feet from him. Behind him three dozen Roman Legionaries waited in hiding with him. Rome, Alam, Ciro, Pal, and six others had scurried across the path ten minutes ago and were picking their way through the forest toward the boats. The men around him were mostly boys, but they had all had their training and they were all well armed. Any resistance they met would be no match for them.

The sun dipped below the tree line and Adrian leaped to his feet, staying low as he jogged out onto the path. As instructed the first two men behind him took positions on either side of the bridge. They were both big lads with barrel chests and thick arms. If something went terribly wrong he suspected they'd have the bridge supports half way cut in no time.

He darted across the bridge a tail of iron clad men in his wake. The bridge was wobbly and not very secure and he was forced to hold onto the side for support as he went. His feet hit solid ground again on the opposite bank and the next two men peeled off to guard this side of the bridge. Suddenly a shriek went up from the village. It was obvious they had been spotted.

Adrian led his men straight into town as more and more cries went up. The village was larger than it looked from the river bank, extending into the forest several hundred yards. The few people that were out of their tents and huts at this time ran off with wild cries as they saw Adrian and his force approach. Once in the center of the village his men began moving off to the huts, bursting in and securing them. He saw one man backhand a rebellious barbarian woman, sending her to the ground. He doubted she would get up again any time soon. All around cries were slowly being silenced and two minutes later soldiers began bringing to him the first baskets of grain and corn.

"Lufal nar genta' porOn!" A yell called from the far end of the village.

In the torchlight Adrian could see half dozen old men with axes advancing toward him. The men were obviously in the final years of

their lives and he suspected they were left behind more so because they could not make the trip west rather than any type of guard. The old men were no match for him and his troops, but they were willing to give their lives in a last heroic stand.

“You two, with me.” Adrian called to two men near him. “You three,” he pointed to three men he passed as he advanced on the old barbarians, “over here.” Adrian and his small band met the barbarian grandfathers as the last specks of sun glittered in the air. As he advanced Adrian saluted them with his sword without breaking stride.

In a mad rush the Germans came at them. Adrian sidestepped the first clumsy axe swing and plunged his gladius deep into the man’s cut, sending him to the ground with a howl of pain. His men fared much the same, though one young man wasn’t fast enough and caught the edge of an axe across his arm. In a matter of moments the Germans were all down except for one last man who had shown restraint when the initial attack came. They surrounded the man who yelled boldly at them in his harsh barbarian tongue. The man spun his axe over his head yelling and cursing. With no way out and no alternative he charged the nearest Roman soldier taking the full brunt of the man’s sword to his chest. In his last moments of life, with his last ounce of strength, the old man raged through the pain and lowered his vicious axe into the Roman’s head, splitting it in two. The rest of Adrian’s troop set at the man stabbing and slicing him until he lay motionless on the ground.

Adrian wiped the blood from his blade and sheathed it. “Get back to it now.” He told the men who had helped him dispatch the old men. The men ran off to their duty as Adrian looked down at the remains of the dead. These Germans were uncivilized and uncultured, but they fought hard. The young headless Roman boy next to him was testament to that. Adrian felt a twinge of regret at having to slay the old men, but this was war. In war you either killed the man standing against you or he killed you. Besides, he had given them one last taste of glory, one last chance to feel young again.

Around the village his men were busy stockpiling food and resources. Things in hand, he decided to jog down to the river to see how Rome and the others were faring.

Rome made his way down to the beach in the twilight as Adrian and the rest of the men poured across the bridge. The beach was deserted except for a pair of lovers lying on the ground kissing passionately. He waited there until the force had crossed the bridge than began to get up. A loud disturbance from the other side of the clearing made him stop. The two lovers stopped their tryst as six large, well armed barbarians stepped into the clearing. They stood up, obviously scared. The man shielded the female from the others as the armed barbarians strolled into the clearing uttering something in their odd language.

It quickly became apparent what was happening. The armed barbarians seized the frightened man and began punching him viciously. Two others grabbed the frantic woman and held her down. The largest German motioned for his friends to hold the man on his knees as he drew his axe. The woman screamed a brief scream before she was knocked to the ground. She lifted her head just in time to watch her lover's head become separated from its body. The axe-wielding leader kicked over the dead man's body and tossed his axe into the ground.

He then turned on the woman and walked over to lean over her. A quick rip and her simple dress was in tatters. She kicked and bit at the man before his friends took hold of her arms. They laughed as their leader began to undo his trousers.

Ciro leaned in to Rome, whispering in his ear. "Sir, we have to do something!" He said probably a little too loudly.

Rome glanced over at him with an incredulous look. "No, we don't. This is obviously some sort of vindictive barbarian thing."

"But they're going to rape her and probably kill her when they're done." *Ciro* responded angrily.

"Probably." Rome muttered back. "Then they will leave and we can go about our business. There is no reason to risk ourselves for a stupid barbarian whore."

Ciro leaned back amazed. "It's not right." He said, no longer whispering.

Rome turned on him in anger. "Neither is being stuck out here in this gods-forsaken wilderness! Neither is living in tree huts and interbreeding. Nothing about these people is right."

Ciro looked back at Alam and Pal. The two had overheard the entire exchange and weren't happy with Rome's answers either. They each gave him a supportive nod and drew their blades.

Ciro stood up and walked boldly into the clearing. Rome cursed from behind him. "Let her go." He said, though he was sure they couldn't understand him. Behind him Alam, Pal, and a few of the men exited the brush as well.

The barbarians whirled on them in the fading sunlight. The lead German stood, placing a booted foot on the woman's chest. "Well look what we have here, boys. Must be a few of the little Roman boys that escaped us." He responded in perfect Latin.

Ciro was taken aback. He stumbled for a second, losing his composure.

"I think we frightened the little one." The lead man said in a mocking tone. "Did we frighten you little one?"

Seeing Cairo stutter, Rome stood and walked out with his customary air of authority. "So, there is a smidgeon of civilization amongst you clouts after all. I would have never realized it from your smell."

"That smell, Roman, is your death." The barbarian shot back. "Maybe if you run now you'll have a head start while I finish my business with the bitch." The other barbarians laughed heartedly at their leader's joke.

Rome drew his sword and held it idly at his side. "I have fifty men across the river, looting your village. I dare say a few of them might be doing the very same to some of your women as well."

The barbarian turned and spat a globe of phlegm onto the helpless girl's face. "These people?" He smiled. "They are not my people, but they will be my slaves, the few we leave alive."

Now it was Rome's turn to lose his composure. The barbarian gestured toward the bridge downriver. From their position Rome could make out dozens of barbarian men howling and rushing across. The few men Adrian had left to guard that side were dead, their bodies floating in the river.

"Surprised?" the German mocked. "We'll burn the village and take the women while their men are away. If you're lucky maybe a big, strapping warrior will take you as his pet. Spend his nights filling you with manhood, Eh? I hear you Romans like that kind of thing."

Rome stepped forward seething anger. It was what the man wanted, obviously, to send him into a rage. He shuttered visibly, but held his temper. He wouldn't let this barbarian scum bait him into a bad attack. Instead he forced a smile to his lips. "We'll be sure to bring your head back to Rome with us. Maybe let our children kick it around as a ball. Kill them all."

Rome and Ciro maneuvered around to the right while Alam and Pal moved left. The six legionaries they had brought with them came out and filled the middle gap. Each side dropped all semblance of mirth now, seeing the battle would be difficult. The barbarians formed a semi-circle, their backs to the water and each hefted a sturdy looking battle axe.

Rome and Ciro made the first move, darting in toward the nearest man, their weapons jetting out to pierce armor and skin. The man parried Rome's thrust with his axe but took a light scratch from Ciro.

Alam and Pal were not as delicate. Pal launched his sword at the closest German, piercing the barbarian's side as Alam flourished his sword in a spinning arc landing several good blows on the wounded man.

Finally, the rest of the troops rushed in wildly using emotion more than skill.

The barbarians were eager to meet them and attacked back with much more skill. Axes chopped and battered into Roman flesh as the



much larger Germans were able to over power most of the legionnaires. Three soldiers went down with three axe swings. The remaining three stabbed and bashed for all they were worth scoring several minor wounds.

"Get over there, help them!" Rome yelled to *Ciro* as he squared off against the leader.

*Ciro* hesitated for a split second then ran over to the legionaries to aid them. He scored a quick victory by piercing a wounded German's flank, but was sent reeling as the man backhanded him to the mud. *Ciro* looked up as the large man's axe headed down toward his chest. The axe stopped and the momentum was blasted from the barbarian as *Alam* and *Pal* ran across the field and crashed into the man.

Rome and the leader circled each other carefully, both breathing hard from the fight.

"You Romans, so convinced you're the light of the world, the peak of civilization."

"We are, barbarian filth." Rome spat back.

"Please. My wife is taller and manlier than you. How can you be the pinnacle of civilization when she could best you in an arm wrestling match"

"If you give me directions to her, when I'm done with you, I'll go show her what a real man feels like. We may be small of stature, but that hasn't stopped us from keeping your kind in the mud for three hundred years." Rome ended his statement by darting in and out quickly, feigning one direction before scoring a quick hit in another.

The barbarian flinched and swung back, forcing Rome to leap back. "I've never met a man who admitted to being small before. It's good you are comfortable with your shortcomings before you die. His axe chopped down and then quickly from side to side, forcing Rome back even further. As he shuffled back, Rome's foot hit a root and he toppled to the ground.

He rolled to the side fervently; the German close behind. A boot to his chest caused his rolling momentum to push him further than he anticipated and he ended splashing into the river. He quickly cleared the water from his eyes just as the barbarian came crashing in with a

downward swing. Rome dodged to the side a hair's breath from eating the axe and punched the man in the face.

His axe stuck in the mud, the barbarian leader accepted the hit to the face and drew a hand axe from a sheathe on his leg. He aimed low, catching Rome in the calf. The blow was off balanced and awkward though, so was only superficial.

Rome jumped back, wincing in pain. The German came at him again knocking his sword aside with his axe and falling onto him. Rome lost the grip on his sword along with most of the air in his chest when the massive man landed on him. He had to keep his head up to stay above the water which put the man's mouth right next to his. The barbarian grinned, his foul breath washing over Rome and causing him to cough. The next second the larger man leaned forward forcing his head below water with his forehead. Rome tried desperately to reach for a weapon, but their arms and legs were tangled together making them useless.

Rome tried to force his head out of the water, but the man's head was too big and his neck muscles too strong. He thrashed and thrashed trying to jar the man loose, but the German seemed to have a death hold on his entire body. Suddenly, a scream echoed out from the barbarian, sounding like a weird distorted dog cry under the waves. The German's body shuttered several times until finally Rome found no resistance and lifted his head up. With a gasp his mouth broke the surface and took in a lungful of sweet air. Standing over the dead body of the barbarian and holding a bloody sword was the German woman they had saved.

She managed a weak smile and helped roll the barbarian leader's body off Rome. Rome clawed his way to the shore and sat on his knees regaining his breath. Up ahead the battle was coming to a close with the others. The last barbarian fell as Alam shoved his sword into the man's throat from the side. They had lost all but one of the legionaries and Pal had suffered a nasty cut across his sword arm, but they had been victorious.

Seeing him climb out of the water, the men rushed over to Rome. Alam and Pal helped him stand on shaky legs. Ciro retrieved Rome's sword from the river and brought it over to him.

"I'm fine!" Rome yelled at them. He stepped over to the barbarian's body and kicked the corpse in the face twice, his anger and embarrassment erupting. When he was done he calmed himself. "I hope she was worth our losses." He said, glancing at the woman who was still standing in the river.

Ciro looked at her then back to the bodies of their dead companions. He knew he had done the right thing, but the cost was very high.

A cry from the bridge told them that they had been spotted. By now the sound of a terrible fight came from the village and even more barbarians were pouring across the bridge.

"Let's get out of here before they come down here looking for us." Rome said moving toward the boats.

"What about the girl?" Ciro asked.

Rome glanced at her with a frown. "Bring her with. She's earned at least another day of life."

The men set about getting the boats ready. It quickly became apparent that two men were needed for the oars on each vessel in order to make any steady progress, so they could only take three vessels; Rome and Alam in one, Ciro and the woman in another, and Pal and the legionnaire in the third. The vessels were small and easy to manage. They set out into the river toward the opposite shore just as another group of barbarians emerged from the shoreline at their position. A few of them chased the boats into the river, but the current and oars quickly put them beyond reach.

"What about Adrian and the others?" Alam asked Rome.

Rome glanced over at the fighting. "I don't think any of them are going to make it." He said with a sigh. "No sense sacrificing ourselves as well."

Alam turned to argue, but Rome gave him such a scowl that he decided against it. They paddled down river a ways, watching the

fight in the village. In the midst of brown and black firs, a group of roman red gleamed.

“Look there!” Pal shouted.

The nearest group of barbarians fell suddenly to the ground as Roman troops crashed into them. Adrian and a group of perhaps ten men had broken out of the village and were running in disarray for the river. Most were injured and half limped more than ran. Behind them the barbarians had regrouped and were chasing them down.

“Get as close to the bank as you can, but don’t stop!” Rome yelled to the other ships. “Those bastards will be on us fast if we loose too much momentum.”

The three vessels maneuvered ten feet or so off the rivers edge. They watched as Adrian led the charge down the hill and along the river bank. When the bank finally ended in a jutting cliff, he leaped into the water and swam toward the crafts. Soldiers behind him followed suit, tossing shields aside and stripping off whatever armor they could get off.

They watched as the barbarians caught up with the wounded men and ended their fight. One man reached the river’s edge and leaped only to be cut almost in two in midair by a German’s axe. The body went up whole, but landed in two with a grisly spray of blood.

Adrian reached the trailing vessel first and caught the edge, holding onto the side. He crawled up, exhausted, but still managed to turn and extend his arm to another legionnaire that was right behind him.

In the end five others joined Adrian in the vessels. A few of the men swimming never reached the boats in time and more then one man wasn’t strong enough to pull himself and his armor out of the water. Once aboard the eleven survivors paddled as fast as their arms could carry them, sending their vessels flying downriver. The current was not fast, but it was enough that the vessels quickly outdistanced the ground pursuit.

Rome steered his vessel over to Adrian’s and nodded a grim nod of approval to Adrian. “I assume you didn’t get any of the supplies

back with you then?" He asked, knowing full well Adrian had barely made it aboard with his life let alone with any food.

"Sorry, sir. Wasn't really a priority what with everything going south like that. Sorry luck their men coming back right when we got there."

"Wasn't their men." Rome answered. He pointed up to the last vessel that held the German woman. "They were there for pretty much the same reason we were. She's probably the last one alive or not in chains from that village."

"Where'd you pick her up?" Adrian asked wondering.

"During the fight. Don't ask." Rome said, stopping further inquiry.

"Well what in Hades name do we do now? We've got the boats, but we've got fewer resources and even fewer men." Pal called from his craft.

Rome paddled for a few seconds in silence before responding. "We'll do what we can. Keep heading south on the river, see where it takes us. There is bound to be plenty of villages on the river, maybe we'll be able to sneak into a few."

"Maybe she can help." Adrian noted, nodding toward the woman. "She probably knows the area around here better than us and she might even be able to buy us some food."

"Roman coin probably isn't much good around here, but it's worth a shot." He agreed. "Now all we have to do is learn how to speak barbarian."

They rowed in shifts, two men slept while two others rowed. Adrian and Rome did their best to communicate with the woman, but she didn't seem to understand anything they asked. Pantomiming for food only caused her to shake her head vigorously, no. She was either too scared or didn't know what they were talking about. For six days and nights the group floated south. They stopped for nothing, relieving themselves over the side of the boat if necessary and sharing what limited resources they had left amongst each other.

Twice they passed small villages on the river bank, but no one paid much attention to them. Adrian assumed they must have thought they were simply passing Germans heading downriver.

On the sixth day Adrian and Rome agreed they had to make land and attempt to hunt some food. Their rations were almost non-existent and they had to do something before they grew too weak for it to matter. They made landfall and split into three teams. Rome, Adrian, the woman, and Brutus, a legionnaire headed south. Pal, Alam, and Ciro headed north. And the remaining four legionaries went west. Their task was to hunt for half a day, catch what they could, then to return just before nightfall.

As they hunted Adrian spent most his time with the woman. Using basic communication methods he found out her name was Mieren. They exchanged words for tree, dirt, and food before Rome got annoyed at their ramblings and ordered silence. The four trekked south for several hours, making crude spears out of branches as they went. They did see a deer at one time, but the creature was too fleet of foot for them to catch and several hours of tracking ended with little reward. Finally, with the sun low over the western canopy, Rome called a halt to their expedition and they headed back.

As they approached the area where the boats were landed, Rome dropped back and spoke with Adrian. "This isn't going to work. We're not prepared or skilled enough to finish this type of journey."

Adrian gave him a wondering look. "What other alternatives do we have?"

Rome put a hand on his shoulder and stopped him, letting the other two go ahead. "We might have to eliminate all non-essential personnel."

"Non-essential?" Rome repeated with disdain. "Everyone is essential."

"You know as good as I do that the good of the many outweigh the good of the few. If we have to cut rationing the girl and the soldiers go first."

Adrian looked into Rome's eyes, but saw no hesitation. He was serious and he meant to go through with whatever he had to in order to survive. "Let's just wait and see if the others found anything." He said slowly.

Rome nodded then moved on. Adrian mulled over Rome's words in his head. There was no way he was going to let any of them be sacrificed just so he or Rome could live. It wasn't his way to sacrifice anyone and he'd be damned if he ever left someone behind that might be saved.

They found the clearing with the boats and stopped suddenly. In the clearing were twenty or so barbarians looking at the boats in obvious confusion. The Germans wore thick furs and appeared to be inspecting the crafts as if they had never seen anything like them before.

Adrian peered across the clearing and saw the other two groups in the brush. They had arrived early and were just as confused as he was. He made a circling gesture with his hand and pointed off to the side. Affirmative nods came from both sides and Adrian led the group carefully around to the side. The eleven met a hundred or so paces from the Germans and crouched low, whispering to one another.

"Who the hells are they?" Pal whispered to no one in particular.

"That doesn't matter." Rome answered. "What matters is they found our transport. We'll have to either drive them off or wait till they leave."

Adrian looked around at the group. Pal, Ciro, and Alam's packs seemed to be full. They must have had more success hunting than he had. "We should wait them out here. We might win in a straight up fight, but we'll lose a few of us in the process. Let's just see what they do."

"I have to agree." Rome said. "Sometimes a fight is just not worth the risk." With that he glanced at the woman. "So, everyone stay quiet and we'll wait for them to leave. Adrian, you and I will keep watch."

Adrian nodded and the two headed over to get a good view of the clearing. Since they had been gone, another ten or so barbarians had joined them along the river bank.

"Looks like a fight is out of the question." Adrian whispered to Rome. Rome agreed and they watched as another few Germans filtered into the clearing. The new men produced hatchets and began breaking the boats apart.

“What are they doing!?” Rome asked a bit too loudly.

“They must want the wood more than the ships.” Adrian responded.

They watched in horror as the Germans dismantled the first ship. “Vile barbarians!” Rome added, losing his temper.

Adrian pinched him to keep him quiet, but the damage had been done. One of the barbarians, a young man near the outer ring looked over toward the noise with wonder. He took a few cautious steps toward Adrian and Rome’s hiding spot peering into the brush. Suddenly he stopped and yelled a warning, pointing at them.

“Shit!” Rome cursed then ran off toward the others. Adrian was right on his heels as commotion quickly spread amongst the Germans.

Rome and Adrian crashed through their men’s camp. “Go, Go!” Rome yelled. Adrian stopped and helped the woman to her feet, dragging her along. The men needed no explanation and leaped to their feet, dashing off through the woods.

A few seconds after the last man left the clearing the Germans crashed through the trees to their clearing. The lead man ripped out his axe and scanned the area. Behind him the boy that had spotted Adrian and Rome pushed past the others. He bent down and examined the ground pointing and yelling toward the numerous booted prints in the mud. The larger man silenced the boy with a hand on his chest. Another second passed before the Romans could be heard racing through the forest. He yelled a wild cry and hurried after his prey.

From up ahead Adrian did his best to avoid branches and tree limbs as they went rebounding wildly toward him from Rome’s hurried flight. He still gripped the woman’s hand half pulling her through the forest as fast as he could go. They were in the middle of no where, surrounded by barbarians that knew the land, and now only had a few seconds head start on their enemies. Yes, things were really bad.

A loud cry from behind them told Adrian that one of his men had been caught. The man screamed twice, the second scream cutting off abruptly. Adrian could imagine the barbarians catching the last man in



the legs with their first blow and silencing him forever with their second. Savages.

“Over here.” Rome said, veering toward the south.

Adrian didn’t miss a step and followed Rome without slowing. The woman’s hand was becoming slick with sweat, but she clenched on for dear life. The group burst into a small clearing and Adrian could see Rome was heading for a large group of rocks.

“Where are we going, Sir!” Adrian yelled.

Rome didn’t answer and a few minutes later the group was standing on the edge of the rock formation that climbed thirty feet above ground. Rome stopped at the base and took several deep breaths as Adrian caught up to him. “We both know we can’t outrun those bastards.” He told Adrian. “This is our best chance, maybe we’ll take enough of them down that the rest will get scared and run off.”

Adrian knew he was grasping at straws, but he didn’t have any alternatives. A second later the rest of the group burst into the clearing sucking in precious air. The sprint had left most of them exhausted with the exception of Pal, who, despite their circumstances still managed a wide grin.

“What now?” Alam asked, bending over with his hands on his thighs.

“We go up.” Rome responded. “We’ll defend the high ground and make these bastards wish they had never been born.”

The others looked to Adrian with skeptical eyes. Rome put on a determined face exuding confidence.

“Let’s go!” Rome expelled between hard breaths.

Rome led the charge up the hill. The climb was not easy as the slope was hard going at times and the rocks loose. Adrian helped the woman where he could, but he was hard pressed to make the climb himself weighed down by his armor and out of breath.

As he reached the top he heard a cry from behind and turned in time to see one of the legionaries lose his grip and tumble down the hill. Ciro tried to make a grab for the man as he slid by, but nearly lost his own balance in the process. The man landed with a hard crash and

lay on his back groaning. The rest of the group reached the top a few seconds after.

"Get up, man!" Adrian yelled from the peak. The man cursed and tried to sit up, but screamed in pain with the effort. Something was broke, most likely his back.

"Let's go back for him, there's still time." Pal said beginning to pick his way back down the slope.

Alam grabbed him by the shoulder, stopping him. He shook his head, no, nodding toward the tree line about a hundred feet away. "It's too late."

The barbarians had caught them and burst into the clearing. They saw the Romans immediately. The lead German pointed toward them and led the rush toward the mound.

"You two, over there!" Rome ordered Alam and one of the legionnaires. "You three, there." Rome pointed to defensive positions with his sword setting the men up at the best defendable spots. "Adrian, you and I will take the center."

Adrian drew his sword and nodded to Rome. Thirty-some of the Germans had followed them and they were all well armed. Adrian pushed the woman back against the rocks and motioned for her to stay. He doubted he would survive this, but maybe she could talk her way out of it after they were dead.

The wounded man at the bottom of the hill screamed in agony as the lead German dug his boot into his neck. The Germans laughed and began circling the hill looking for the easiest route up.

"We're not going to survive this one." Adrian whispered to Rome.

Rome returned his knowingly look. "No, no we're not. But, we're going to take our fair share of them with us."

Adrian looked at the man he had known for several years. Rome was cocky, pompous, and often annoying, but he was brave and he meant to die that way.

They watched as the Germans began chopping limbs off their fallen comrade below. The man roared in pain as an axe severed his arm. The barbarians took each severed limb and shoved it in the fallen man's face, laughing and jeering all the while. By the time they got to

his second leg the legionnaire had already fallen unconscious. Their fun done, the Germans beheaded him and tossed his head up the hill. It landed about half way up and promptly began rolling down the hill again.

Adrian felt a tug on his sleeve and turned around to see the woman pulling on him. He looked at her as she chattered at a frantic pace in her language. He gently pushed her back and turned to meet the barbarians who seemed to be sharpening their weapons at the base of the hill.

The woman would not let it be though and grabbed his hand, pulling him back toward her. He turned and shouted at her, "What?" She pulled him back with him.

Rome looked annoyed at the whole situation. "Hurry up, see what she wants then get back here and die with me in battle."

Adrian let the woman pull her back toward the rocks. She led him by the hand around the top and over to a small crevice. The opening was a squeeze, but appeared to lead up into a cave. It didn't look big, but it would fit their small band and the Germans would have a hell of the time squeezing in while avoiding their swords.

He smiled pushed the woman toward the opening. "Good work. Get in there." Adrian dashed back to Rome and saw the barbarians had just started their ascent, picking their way carefully amongst the loose rocks.

"Sir, a cave! The opening is small, but I think we can fit. We should be able to hold them off longer in there."

Rome gripped his sword harder and alternated quick looks between the barbarians and Adrian. "Are you sure?"

"Positive. Let's go!" Adrian rushed over to the entrance yelling to the men. "Get over here, quickly!" The men hesitated, but seeing Rome trailing Adrian they followed.

Adrian reached the entrance as the woman was making her way through. He turned and began squeezing his way through the opening. It was indeed tight and several times he had to duck his head or alter his hip angle to get through, but eventually he made it through.

Inside the cave was larger than it looked and sunlight streamed in through dozens of small openings in the ceiling. The floor slopped down gently thirty feet or so and appeared to branch off in several directions. If they were lucky the cave system was extensive and had other openings.

Rome appeared next and Adrian helped the officer through the last few steps. Adrian stayed at his post and helped Pal and Alam through next. The small boy had little trouble twisting through the opening, but Alam had as much trouble as Adrian had. One of the legionnaires came through next followed by *Ciro*, who had stripped off his armor for an easier fit.

"Had to ditch my armor to make it through!" he proclaimed. "A few times there I cursed eating too many of my wife's pies." The larger man patted his ample belly as Adrian pulled him the rest of the way through.

Adrian peered into the opening and noticed the last two legionnaires were lagging behind. Both were bigger men and also had had to strip off their armor before entering. "Hurry up you two, before--"

Adrian cut off as the barbarian leader's face appeared in the opening. He reached in a meaty hand and seized the trailing man by the back of the neck. A quick jerk and the German smashed the man's face into the rock in front of him. He repeated the attack twice more, blood oozing out of the Roman's face. Finally he pulled the unconscious man from the opening and pushed his body back toward his comrades.

Adrian snarled at the Germans in anger. "Bastards!" he then turned to the last legionnaire working his way through. "On the double, man!"

The legionnaire was going as fast as he could, but his size precluded any expeditious movement. "I'm sorry, sir. I'm going as fast as I can." He yelled back in fear.

"Well go faster, damn it. And don't call me, Sir!" Adrian yelled back.

The barbarian watched the man's process and tried to follow, but he stood a full half meter taller than Adrian and most certainly wasn't going to fit. Realizing his predicament, the German stepped back and drew one of several hatchets from his belt. He carefully took aim and launched the weapon underhand through the opening.

The legionnaire grunted at the impact as the axe dug deep into his thigh.

"Faster!" Adrian shouted.

Outside the barbarians were laughing at their leader's game, urging him on. The man took another hatchet and repeated the process, but this one clattered harmless off a rock. Groans of disappointment came from the group followed by sporadic laughter.

Adrian grasped the man's hand as he neared the exit. From the entrance he could see the barbarian taking aim again. The crowd outside went silent as they watched from behind. The leader let his last hatchet go and it flew true.

"Arrrr!" the legionnaire yelled as the second hatchet found flesh. A roar of approval and laughter went up from the barbarians as the weapon hit.

Finally, the man got through and collapsed to the ground. Adrian yanked both the hatchets from the man's leg. The man grimaced and winced with each tug.

Pal rushed over and inspected the wound. "Well, the second one is deep." He said pulling a spare shirt and a jar of powder from his pack. "But, we should be able to get it under control." He poured some of the powder in the wounds and wrapped the shirt tightly around his leg. To his credit, the injured man took the treatment with remarkably few complaints.

Adrian peeked out and saw the barbarian leader grinning back at him, his mouth missing several teeth. The man pointed a finger at him, his eyes wide and wild. The barbarians then began sitting down cross-legged and eating pieces of cooked meat. They laughed and joked with one another as they enjoyed their evening meal.

Adrian looked around the opening and down toward the cave system. There had better be another way out of here, because it didn't look like the Germans were leaving any time soon.

After fleeing a disastrous foray into Germania, a band of legion survivors happens upon an enigmatic hermit who imparts a unique gift. Now, decades later, one of the gifted few threatens to unleash a power great enough to dominate the world. Can Adrian and his band of misfits stop their brother before it's too late? A stunning tale of epic adventure spanning the breadth of history.

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