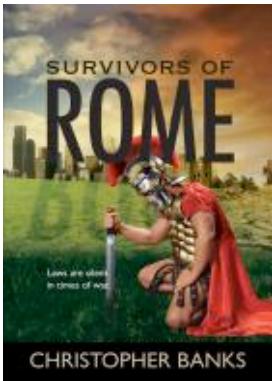


SURVIVORS OF **ROME**

Laws are silent
in times of war.

CHRISTOPHER BANKS



Is the strength of friendship, of love, enough to keep friends together? Or will it fracture in a tide of jealous envy? And what of the mysterious force that brought Adrian and his group together in the first place? Answers are revealed while deeper questions are posed in the second part of this sprawling epic adventure spanning over two-thousand years. Survivors of Rome is Book II of the New Bloodlines Cycle.

Survivors of Rome

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"He was a good man. He didn't deserve this." She said almost inaudibly.

Alam reach over and removed a piece of parchment resting under Don's hand. He read it out loud, "If you manage to survive my Lord's gift, he bid me to take something precious from you. His soul now resides in hell along with all the other nonbelievers." Alam put down the parchment and looked at Mieren. She was sad, that was obvious, but there was a quiet rage building behind her eyes. A rage that wanted to watch the world burn.

"If that's what you want." she muttered. Outside the wind grew and a low crash of thunder echoed in the distance like a dragon's growl.

"Mieren, what are you going to do?" Alam asked, concern dominating his face. Mieren yanked the sword free of Don's body, unconcerned with the dying flesh now that the soul had departed, and stalked out of the building. Her voice answered the thunder's growl,

"Burn them all."

Survivors of Rome



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Chapter 1: Everybody Needs Some Time on Their Own



Mieren stared out the second story window of her quaint beach house chewing her forefinger nail down to the skin. Outside on the beach a pair of children, a girl and a boy, no more than ten years old splashed and played in the surf. The children wore designer bath suits, white with red echelons down the center and screamed in the mirth of youth. Mieren stared at them and wondered if going back to that innocence was possible for anyone after adolescence rears its disgusting, oil-slicked head. She had been that age once. Or had she? It was so long ago now it was hard to remember that life, a life even history failed to accurately remember.

"My lady?" a young man in his early twenties said to her as he climbed the circular steps to the second floor. In the window reflection she could see it was James. He was wide-eyed and eager, handsome in his own way, but with eyes that screamed from past pains. Were her eyes any different at that age?

She let her hand fall to her side and resented herself. Things were never meant to go this far. It just kind of happened. She turned and gave James a half smile. He was concerned. She felt it.

"Something is wrong." He said to her, fear creeping into his voice. "I've done something to upset you." James rushed forward and fell at her feet, holding the hem of her brown beach skirt. He buried his face into an embroidered flower and stammered out apologies

"No, James. It is nothing. Please, stand." The boy composed himself and climbed to his feet, careful not to ruffle her skirt any further.

"But, something is wrong. I can feel it." He half asked her. He towered over her by almost a foot, a giant in stature, a child in development.

"I'm just tired." She told him. I haven't been sleeping well." That, at least, was no lie. She'd been up to see the sun peak its head over the

Hawaiian surf every day this week, despite being up late past midnight working on her projects.

"I've noticed." James said weakly. "Is it the children? Are they too loud? I could-"

"It's not the children." She told him. "I've had issues on my mind. That is all. Leave the children be." She placed a hand on his chest, in a reassuring manner.

"Still, you need your rest." He said the statement as a question, knowing his place.

"I'll try." She told him. "Go, now. Bring me up some dinner from the deli this evening. That black fish I like."

He smiled down at her, eager for a task that might bring her happiness. The boy was totally and completely smitten. He was done for. He turned to leave and stopped at the rail. "May I share your bed this evening?"

Mieren flinched at the words. If only he knew what she was doing. "Bring me the food for supper. We'll discuss it then."

James beamed out a smile and trotted lightly down the stairs and out the front door. She turned and watched him leave down the beach, giving the children a glare for good measure. Once he had gone she resumed her assault on her finger, idly determined to destroy the remainder of the pesky nail. She needed air, she thought to herself.

On the way out she grabbed an oversized sun hat and tossed a shawl around her bare shoulders.

She'd come to this tiny Hawaiian island more than six months ago. Six months after she'd had her breakthrough on Adrian's Island. That wasn't the proper name for the small piece of dirt she'd spent the last six months, but it's what she knew it as. It was the place her and Adrian had spent years, wrapped up in each other, with barely another soul for miles around. When James and his friends arrived, she saw it as a sign from the Gods. Adrian hasn't arrived yet, as planned, so she decided to begin her experiments without him. It took a few months, but in the end the elusive lock she'd been working on, that damned silver cage she hadn't even known existed for thousands of years, opened to her. What was inside scarred her. Scarred her so much she took James and fled.

"There you are." Came a familiar voice from up ahead. She raised her head and saw Adrian, wearing lose fitting pants, a white colored shirt, open

at the chest, and barefooted standing a few dozen steps from her. He was leaning against a nearly broken fence with his usual calm, cockiness. As always it was mesmerizing. "Took a while this time."

"Adrian?" she said, doing her best to hide her surprise. It didn't work. He knew her too well.

"Hello, Mieren. You're looking well." He said sweetly. She caught the hidden disappointment in his voice. He couldn't hide anything from her as well.

"Adrian, we need to talk." She said walking up to him.

"Yea, kind of figured that when you weren't on the island and stopped returning my E-mails." She stopped next to him and he gave her a polite peck on the cheek. "Should we walk into town?"

She nodded and the two turned up a dusty path toward a small, local hotel town. The two didn't say much to each other as they walked the two mile route into town. Occasionally they would lock hands, finding comfort in each other's presence, even strained as it was. It wasn't a big town, but like most of the shoreline on Hawaii was dominated by hotels and cabanas.

She guided him without words to an outdoor restaurant she liked. They sat outside and watched the surf crash in for ten minutes before the words fell out of her mouth. "I couldn't help it. It was so easy, so seductive."

Adrian nodded in agreement. "I thought you might have started without me."

"I waited. I waited six months nearly before I got bored."

"I got busy. We had trouble finding Rome's men. Some of them disappeared. Almost like a fading dream. I came as soon as I was able." She nodded her understanding. Rome's men were dangerous and needed to be caroled.

"Did you get them all?"

Adrian shook his head. "No. Pal and Alam are following leads." Mieren nodded, of course they were. They knew what duty was. "How many?" he asked out of the blue.

Mieren lowered her gaze, ashamed. "Just one. James, he is," she caught herself, "was, a good kid. The only one to object when his friends wanted to have their way."

Adrian looked at her confused, and then nodded for her to proceed.

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"They came on one of their Daddy's yachts. You know what it's like there, isolated from any bit of civilization. Besides, they were rich kids; entitlement followed them like a trail of bread crumbs."

"That doesn't make it right."

"I know!" she shouted at him, louder than she had wanted to. "I couldn't help myself. Once I got a taste, I wanted more."

Adrian nodded his understanding. "I can't imagine any drug being as powerful as that want."

"Anyway, we partied a lot. One of them decided to make his move. I stopped him." She rubbed a hand across her forehead. "I don't know, maybe I wanted them to try." Adrian sat back in his chair and took a sip of his drink. "That one, the one who owned the yacht, wouldn't take no for an answer. I warned him. When his friends came to help him, I warned them all. They didn't want to hear it. In the end they were mine. I did it how you explained it to us. Make them worship you and invade their mind. It didn't work at first. The first three snapped under the pressure. I convinced James to help me take care of the bodies.

"What was different about James" Adrian asked. He hated himself for asking, but the addiction had grabbed hold of him as well and shaking it this past year had been, well, it had been almost impossible.

"Honestly, I think he generally wanted it. He needed someone to tell him what was real. He found me." She shrugged and downed the last of her own drink.

"You know it's not that easy." Adrian told her.

"Isn't it?" she asked, not convinced. "I could take him with a thought. He wants to go, wants me to... to use him."

"Listen--"

"Mieren?" Adrian was cut off by a man standing a few feet away looking over at the two. She turned and her mouth dropped. The man was in his mid-thirties and had little hair left on top of his head. He wore older, frayed shorts and a tropical, dress shirt. Mieren, is that really you?"

"Richard?" She said lowly. Could this day get much worse, she thought. She went to stand but Richard raised his hand and took a step back.

"No, don't..." he said defeated. Adrian finished his drink and tried to make himself small. "How... How could you? Was it for him?"

"Richard, it's not like that. I promise you." She stammered out.

"Your promises don't seem to mean much, now do they? I don't even care what you did to me, but the girls... How could you just leave them? Leave us?"

Adrian decided he needed to defuse the situation as best as possible. He scraped his chair back and stood up, extending his hand toward Richard. "I, I'm..." he began. He saw the punch coming. Richard was slow, clumsy, no match for him. But given the circumstances, he took the hit. The punch was weak, but he fell to the floor anyhow, sympathizing with this poor man. This man who had given his life and soul to the girl he wanted to spend the rest of his life with, only to get seven years before she disappeared.

"Stay down or you'll get another one." Richard told Adrian. "Was it him? Is that what happened to you?"

"Richard, it's not like that!" She stood up and looked meekly up at the man she loved. The man she had made so many promises to. "It's better this way. Did you get the money?"

"I didn't want money!" he yelled back at her. "We wanted you!" The entire restaurant had stopped now, watching the drama unfold eagerly.

"I'm... I'm sorry." Was all she could say. "Are the girls O.K.?"

"Are they O.K.? No they're not O.K.! They want their mother!" He yelled back. She had no more words for him, none that mattered anyway. "We're staying at the Parks. Do us a favor and stay away from that side of the island. The girls are just starting to put their lives back together. They don't need this. Not now." He gave Adrian a glare and stormed off.

Adrian stood and moved next to her. "We should go." He told her. She didn't answer, just turned numbly and walked out of the restaurant with Adrian. They walked back in silence. After a half hour they entered Mieren's house. Adrian shut the door behind her; the click of the door closing triggered a damn busting in her psyche. Her knees buckled and she headed for the floor. Adrian caught her and scoped her up into his powerful arms. She wailed then, the cry of someone who has betrayed everything they'd ever known. Adrian carried her upstairs and sat her down on a couch next to him. She buried her face into his shoulder and wept, overcome with grief.

She wept until she didn't have tears, and then she wept some more. Her nose was red and her eyes puffy with grief when the door kicked open and slammed shut. "Mieren!" James yelled from the lower level. She tried to respond, but she couldn't find her voice. James raced up stairs and skidded

to a stop, surveying the scene before him. His confusion turned to rage toward Adrian. "What have you done!" he yelled.

Adrian let Mieren's head fall on the couch and stood. "This is getting to be a pattern" he mumbled to himself. "Slow down, son."

"Son? I'll show you!" he rushed Adrian, who rolled his eyes in annoyance. James threw a few clumsy haymakers which Adrian easily dodged, refusing to strike this unskilled pugilist.

"Will you do something?" Adrian asked her.

Mieren had had enough, enough of the secrets, enough of the lies and hiding. Enough of the torment this day had brought. She summoned up all her energy and let out an ear piercing scream of pain mixed with fear, anger, and hopelessness. She wanted to burn the world. She felt James' presence in her mind and grabbed hold. She stood and clenched her fists together. "Stop this!" she yelled, the words crescendoed into a booming, inhuman sound. The ground shook, the air felt thick and toxic.

James stopped and looked over at the woman he loved, no, revered. To him she was life itself. A look of pure ecstasy washed over his face. "Thank you, he muttered." An instant before his eyes glazed over and he fell to the ground.

Adrian looked from James to Mieren and back to James. "Mieren..." he said quietly.

"Not now!" she yelled back, her voice resounding with power. She looked at James' body with a world of remorse mixed with excitement. The look lasted just a moment before she stormed downstairs and out the door.

Adrian took a deep breath and leaned down next to the body, feeling for a pulse. As he knew, there was none to be found. For the first time in nearly two-thousand years, he wondered if being with Mieren was right.

The next morning Adrian woke to the smell of cooking bacon. He had fallen asleep on the couch apparently. The boy's body was missing without a notion of the tragedy that had occurred just a few hours ago. From down stairs a group of a half dozen teenagers wandered the kitchen, cooking and making a ruckus. Adrian looked for James, hoping the past night's activates had just been a bad dream. But, his likeness was not amongst the group. He cleared his eyes and headed down the spiral case.

A young girl with bleach blond hair, maybe fifteen years old greeted him at the base of the stairs with a plate of food. "Morning!" she offered, her mood almost inhumanly chipper.

Adrian managed a tiny smile and ran a hand through his hair. "What's all this?"

"Breakfast." Came her happy reply. She put the plate in his hand and walked away before he had time to protest.

He took a seat at the large, oak table next to a grinning blond kid wearing headphones around the top of his ears. "What's up, bro?" the boy asked before taking in a forkful of scrambled eggs.

Adrian gave him a nod. "What's going on?"

The first girl returned and messed up his hair with her hand as she moved over to a far chair. "I told you, breakfast."

"Right, but, where's Mieren?"

"Mier? She took off early after the morning surf. She said to treat you well, but she wasn't sure when she'd be back. Syrup?"

Adrian looked at the bottle she was offering and tried to understand what Mieren was going through. The appearance of her former husband, Richard, James' death, his return, it was just too much at once, he decided. "No thank you." He politely told the girl. "Who are all you?"

"I'm Cat." The girl said. "Next to you is Wes, and Mouse is at the end there. Kate, Blain, and Potter are in the kitchen." The group members gave little waves or head nods when they heard their names. "You're Adrian. Mier said you'd be worried. She said to tell you to relax, enjoy the surf, but not wait for her."

Adrian sat back in the chair and bit into a hard piece of bacon. He didn't like this. She already started on a new group of kids. He didn't like this one bit. He ate tentatively, doing his best to prolong the experience. Before long the kitchen was cleared out and only he and Cat remained. "Do you know when Mieren expects to return?"

"I'm sure it won't be long." Cat replied with a smile. "She likes to take early walks to clear her head. She usually returns once the others are off to work for the day." Adrian nodded and went back to pushing his scrambled eggs across his plate. "Are you like her?"

"Like her?" Adrian asked unwilling to give any information away.

"Yea, you know, can you do things like her?"

"Things?" Adrian asked suspiciously.

Cat gave him a look that said she knew just about everything. "Mier and me are close. We don't have secrets."

"Oh I bet she has a few." Adrian said noncommittally before taking a bite.

"Really?" Cat sat forward in her chair and folded her hands in front of her. "Like that she's almost two-thousand years old? Like she's had over two-hundred children? Or maybe that you two have been together for about an eternity?

Adrian stopped chewing and put down his fork. "She shouldn't have told you those things. If you know so much, why did you ask me if I was like her?"

Cat shrugged. "Just wanted to see what you'd say."

Adrian wiped his mouth and let his shoulders sag. What was Mieren up to now? He shrugged and grabbed hold of the parcels of power in his mind. They answered his call, eagerly giving him what he wanted. The flood of energy reminded him of what price the power came at. A moment later the salt shaker levitated up and over to Cat's face. Cat laughed and grabbed it from the air. She tossed it across the room only to have it slow and hover back to the table, completely under Adrian's will. "I thought you might be." She said confidently.

The door opened and Mieren entered just as Adrian let the salt shaker go. It crashed down to the table and toppled over, spilling fine, white grains onto the counter. "Morning!" Mieren said to Cat and Adrian as she entered the kitchen holding a grocery bag. "Glad you're awake." She placed the bag on the counter and joined the two, kissing Cat on the top of her head. "By the look on your face I'm guessing Cat's been talking about things she shouldn't be." Mieren told Adrian.

Adrian glared at Mieren, wondering what had come over the woman. "I'll, put the groceries away." Cat said attempting to remove herself from the situation as gently as possible.

Adrian waited for her to enter the kitchen then shook his head. "Mieren what are you doing? You told her? You're using these kids?"

Mieren sat down and leveled her gaze. "Don't look at me so judgmentally. You knew my mind."

"These are kids!" Adrian nearly yelled.

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"So? They're old enough to know what they're doing. Shit at their age I was married twice and you had killed dozens of men."

"You're trying to justify using them."

"I shouldn't need to justify it! They work when they want, they play when they want. All that I require is an hour of their day and a little ceremony. In exchange we live here happily and no one gets hurt."

"How can you guarantee that?" Adrian asked. "What will it take before you realize we can't play with people's souls like this?"

"I'm not playing with their souls; I'm experimenting on the nature of energy. No one is getting hurt."

"That's how you're going to justify this? By saying it's a science experiment?"

"Justify it however you want." Mieren yelled over to him. "We're doing good here. I don't need you coming in and giving me a lecture like I'm some teenage school girl not going to class."

"I shouldn't have to give lectures, you're smarter than this?"

"Am I?" Mieren asked. "We need to know more about it, we both agreed on that."

"But, not like this!" Adrian slammed his fist angrily into the table. "You can't blindly experiment on people."

"You told me we'd discover it, together. You just never showed up!"

"What about James?" Adrian asked.

Mieren recoiled as if slapped. "That was an accident."

"Exactly." Adrian told her, eager to drive home his point. "Can you still feel him in there?" he pointed to his head.

Mieren seemed to draw strength from the comment and took on a defiant stance. "I can. And you know what, it feels good. It feels good knowing I have an extra reserve of strength to draw on."

"You killed him!" Adrian accused.

"He wanted to go!" Mieren screamed back. "You heard him at the end, he thanked me."

Adrian stood up and took two steps backward. "I can't let you become this. I can cut you off. I did it to Rome, I can do it to you as well."

"Not permanently, not yet." She told him, "Unless you plan on chaining me to the bottom of the ocean, or burying me a hundred feet in the ground."

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Adrian leveled his gaze at her and furled his eyebrow. "You don't want this. I know you."

Mieren stood and stormed around the table. "Don't you tell me what I want. I know exactly what I want and I know how to take it."

Adrian shook his head, unable to think of a way through her anger, through her pain. "Fine, have it your way. But, I can't be a part of this."

"No one is asking you too." Came the bitter retort.

For the first time in hundreds of years, Adrian was at a loss for words. His head was pounding, reminding him of throbbing pulse of light from years past. He put his head down and shuffled toward the door. He stopped in the kitchen and put a hand on Cat's arm. "Good luck." He told her softly before exiting solemnly.

Chapter 2: Is This the Real Life, Is This Just Fantasy?



Adrian slowly cracked open his eyes to a throbbing white light. His head was pounding and felt like Zeus and Odin were having a pissing contest on either side of him. A persistent roar filled his ears and his entire body sizzled with static electricity, sanding every hair on his body to attention. He pushed himself up with effort and rolled into a sitting position. Snail like, the white light was replaced with outlined shadows as his vision began to return. Those shadows took the form of trees and the roar in his ears was from the raging river two-dozen feet from him.

He blinked away the last of the light and saw his companions sprawled out around him, unconscious. Adrian's mind reeled as he tried to recall who he was, where he was, what he was. He put his hands on his head and pushed away the throbbing. Adrian, that was his name. He was a solider of Rome. He was a solider of Rome. One of the few survivors. The people around him were his fellow legionnaires, survivors of a great battle. And the girl... Who was the girl?

As he strained his memory, one of the men, Rome he remembered his name being, stirred and sat up in pain, blinking open his eyes.

"What, where..." Rome trailed off.

Adrian tried his feet and found them willing. He propped himself against a near-by tree. "Rome. Do you remember much?"

Rome looked from Adrian, to the river, and back to Adrian. "Adrian?" he asked, confirming the name in his mind. "I remember some insane hermit. I remember the fight."

Adrian nodded. "Yes, I remember, now. A feast. Some sort of... of drink?" Adrian took another look around and a small smile spread to his lips. "I think I know this place."

"What?" Rome asked.

"This river." Adrian put more weight on his legs and found them stable enough. He shuffled over to the river bank and looked downriver. "Yes, I think this is the Albis. Those must be the Alps of Noricum in the distance. Aren't we near the garrison at Vindobona?"

Rome stood, using his gladius to help push him up. He joined Adrian on the river bank. "I think you're right. Look, that's Titan's peak over there."

Adrian nodded his approval. "We're only a day or two from the Vindobona, in Marcomanni. But, that's hundreds of miles from where we were. How did we get here?"

"Benevolent Gods, I'd wager." Rome answered.

"We should wake the others. With any luck we can be back in civilized lands in under a week."

"Thank the Gods. I need a good bathe and a better whore." Rome told him. Adrian chuckled, as he was expected to do. Amazing how fast cultural protocol comes back to you, even after having your head fried, he mused.

Adrian went next to the tall, dark-skinned fellow, Alam, he recalled, and put a hand on his shoulder. The man stirred at the touch and rolled onto his back. Adrian moved over to the older, portly gentleman whose name he could not quite remember and shook him gently.

"Wake up!" Rome shouted to the final man, a short, youth with fair skin. He kicked him in the side to emphasize the point.

"I'm up!" the boy yelled. "Jupiter's Beard, I'm up."

Adrian moved over to wake the woman, but received a stern look and negative head shake from Rome. "Leave the girl."

"Leave her? Adrian asked. Why?"

"She has no place in the cities. She is a barbarian who can't even speak our language."

"That's no reason to leave her in the wilderness."

"What do you think will happen to her once word reaches the cities that the exploratory legions were wiped out? She'll be beaten, raped, and killed, most likely not in that order."

The others got to their feet and were shaking off the effects of their condition. "No reason to leave the lass." The boy stated.

"Keep your mouth closed, boy." Rome told him. "You'll obey my orders or I'll have you flogged when we get to Vindobona." The boy took a step forward as to challenge his offender.

"It's Palmiro, right?" Adrian asked, attempting to diffuse the situation.

"Pal." The boy said, eyeing Rome.

"Pal." Adrian began. "Our commander is correct. There is no place for her right now. Once news reaches the outposts, anyone with even a German accent will have a target on them. You, Alam, and..."

"Ciro." The portly man answered.

"Ah yes, Ciro. You, Alam, and Ciro must see the commander safely back to the garrisons and then Rome. Word must reach the council of what occurred in Germania."

"You will come too." Rome stated.

Adrian shook his head. "No, I'll stay with the girl; find some place safe for her."

"You'll do as you're ordered." Rome shot back.

Adrian turned and squared his shoulders to Rome. "I'll not leave a woman alone in the wilderness to die, even if she is a barbarian."

"Nor I." Ciro responded. Alam and Pal echoed the sentiment.

"How incredibly noble of you all." Rome sneered at them. "Fine, bring the bitch. She'll most likely be burned alive in Rome, but what do I care?"

Adrian and Pal shook the girl awake. She roused and looked around, unsure what was going on in her groggy state. She muttered something in her language, but neither of them could understand her.

"Help her along then. If she falls behind, if anyone falls behind, we leave them." Rome said from up ahead. He picked up a large branch and began ripping off the twigs, creating a walking stick.

"Let's get you up." Adrian told her. He and Pal helped her up and then supported her weight while she regained her bearings. She asked them a few questions, but neither could understand her foreign tongue.

"Sorry, we don't understand you." Pal told her. "Can you walk?" Pal made a walking gesture with his fingers on his hand. The girl nodded.

"We head south, once we cross the Danuvius, we'll be inside the borders of the Empire and as good as home. Let's go!" Rome called. He pushed through the tree line and began the long march home.

"This ought to be fun." Ciro said sarcastically.

The troupe walked for most of that day through the brush and open plains. Eventually they left the river behind as it turned and continued south toward the Alps. They crossed paths with the occasional native out hunting

or trapping, but did not give them any trouble and received none in return. This close to the border Roman and barbarian interaction was a common occurrence. As daylight began to fade the group came upon a series of large hills that overlooked a wide expanse of river. The smell of fresh water mingled with fish and the dying sunlight glimmered off the liquid surface.

"Behold, the great Roman Empire." He said with great pride as he looked upon the land on the far side of the river. "Has mankind ever created anything so magnificent?"

The others gave one another sideways glances and did their best to ignore the spectacle.

"Yea, magnificent." Pal offered dryly. "So how do we get across? I don't see any bridge."

"You won't." Rome told him in a lecturing tone. "It is a rare barbarian that can achieve the engineering skills required to build a simple bridge. We'll have to find a boat or go for a swim. But, we'll rest here tonight on the river bank. You—" he pointed to Ciro. "Take the black one and gather some fire wood. Adrian, take the fool boy and find a defendable spot by the river. Maybe catch some fish for dinner as well." Rome set down his walking stick and began unbuckling his sword belt. The others gave Adrian looks bordering on mutiny."

"Yes, sir." He replied. "Come on all." He began down the hill and was followed by the other four. Once they reached the river Adrian washed his face and took in a deep drink.

"That son of a donkey whore, who does he think he is?" Pal told the others and kicked the ground, taking his rage out on a nearby rock.

"It would serve him right if we just left him here to rot." Ciro offered.

"No, we need him for now." Adrian told them. "Once we get home you can all scatter, do what you wish, but for now, we need him. His rank will be useful once we reach the garrisons."

"Kill him, take his insignia." Ciro offered. "Who's to know the difference?"

No, Adrian is right." Alam told Ciro, placing a calming hand on his shoulder. "Dead from barbarians or dead counted as deserters, dead is still dead."

Adrian nodded to Alam. "He's a pompous ass, but who in the cities with a little money isn't? We've all dealt with his kind before. Another week and we'll be free of him."

"What of the girl, Mieren?" Pal asked. She had waded a few feet into the river and was cleaning herself, holding her skirt up to her things. Pal's eye lingered a little longer than was probably appropriate.

"We'll deal with that when the time comes." Adrian told them. "Maybe I can get away with claiming her as a spoil of war. That might keep her alive." Adrian watched the girl wash herself and felt a little guilty, hoping she would wash just a little higher. "Let's do as Rome ordered. We'd need firewood and food anyhow."

Ciro muttered under his breath and Alam gave a wide smile at his new friend's anger as the two headed off downstream in search of driftwood. "I'm no fisherman." Pal admitted to Adrian, running his fingers through his hair.

"How hard can it be?" Adrian asked. In the water Adrian noticed Mieren looking beyond him and gave her a questioning look. She pointed behind him and uttered a few phrases in her foreign language. Adrian turned and saw a single plume of smoke rising up river, its source hidden by hill and tree. Rome must have seen the same sign of civilization as he had stood from his hilltop seat and was striding down to meet them.

"Smoke, could be a local." Rome told them once he arrived. Adrian nodded his agreement. "Let's go?"

Should we wait for the others?" Pal asked.

Rome continued his course without looking back. "You stay here and get that bitch out of the water."

Rome led Adrian up river, following the rocky shore. They rounded a bend of hills and caught sight of a small hut in the distance. A rickety looking boat was pulled up on shore and a rabbit carcass hung over a large fire pit. A small German with dark black hair went to a fro, preparing his meal. Rome pulled Adrian to the side and crept out of sight. "We'll wait for a bit, see if there are any more." Adrian nodded and sat down on the grass, eager for the rest.

The two watched for ten minutes or so and saw no sign of any other barbarians. The sound of Pal talking coming up from behind told them the others had arrived. "Go shut the twit up." Rome told Adrian.

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Adrian got to his feet and jogged back along the shore toward the others. Ciro and Alam each carried piles of dried wood and Pal was yammering on with Mieren, who was looking with confused eyes at Pal's words. As Adrian neared the group came to a stop. "What is it?" Ciro asked.

"Nothing big, there's a local up ahead with a boat. We might be able to haggle for a ride."

"Yea, haggle." Pal laughed. "I'm sure that bastard would offer the girl for passage."

"It won't come to that." Adrian assured him. "Come on." The four walked back in silence to Rome.

Rome stood when they arrived and straightened his uniform. "It's about damn time. Come along, follow me, and leave the firewood." He set off, snapping for Adrian to walk at his side. "Watch yourself." He told Adrian. "If there are others out we need to be ready to defend ourselves." Adrian nodded and followed Rome toward the man's house.

As they approached the man noticed their arrival and gave a friendly wave. He checked once more on the cooking animal and walked over to greet them. "Hell-o man of Rome!" the man said in broken Latin with a gap toothed grin. "Welcome -my home. You trade?"

Rome turned and gave Adrian a condescending laugh. "Do you believe this?" he turned back to the man and feigned a royal greeting. "Thank you for the gracious greeting, my lord. You honor us with your welcome."

The man nodded once, grinning stupidly, obviously understanding very little. "You trade?" he offered again.

"Yes!" Rome mouthed slowly. He pointed toward the man's boat then made a gesture indicating movement to the other side of the river. "You take us."

The man caught his meaning and nodded with enthusiasm. "Yes, yes! What you give?"

Rome laughed again at the man's level of intellect and put a hand on the hilt of his sword. "Your life you dumb bastard."

The man didn't understand, but saw Rome's gesture as an initial offer. "Give sword?" the man asked.

"Yes, give sword." Rome responded sarcastically.

The barbarian was obviously excited about this prospect and clapped his hands together and spun once. "It's good!" he said. "Come, eat." He

motioned toward the cooking rabbit and pot and led the others over to his house. He motioned for them to sit and hummed a tune as he finished preparing his meal.

"Rome, we don't need to kill him." Adrian told him while the man hummed nonchalantly.

"Need to? Maybe we don't need to, but, it is our duty." Rome responded. "After all, even if these barbarians weren't responsible for the murder of thousands of our brethren, he has the audacity to butcher our language. So need? No, we don't need to. But, we will."

Adrian grew frustrated and looked over at Mieren. She looked back with an almost pleading look. He had to figure out a way to end this without bloodshed and fast.

The barbarian finished his preparation, cutting the rabbit into small pieces. "Wine!" he cried. "I get you wine!" he rushed off into the hut and rummaged around.

"Wine?" Alam asked. "How does he have wine?"

"What does it matter?" Rome told him, dismissing the remark. "We'll drink his wine, take his food and boat and be done with him."

The barbarian came back out carrying a freshly opened bottle of wine. He passed it to Rome and said. "Drink!"

Rome chuckled at his good fortune and took a deep swig. It was good, fresh and tasting of summer. He passed the bottle to his left and around the circle. Alam tried to pass, but the barbarian insisted, yelling "Drink, Drink!" Alam put the bottle to his lips, but let none in, suspicion brewing in his mind. When the bottle made its transit the man placed the half empty bottle on the ground and passed around roasted rabbit bits. It wasn't a lot of meat, but was enough to sate the growing hunger in their bellies. Once everyone had eaten he passed the bottle around again.

"O.K., German." Rome said, using the word as a curse. "We'll sleep here for the night in your hut, and then you can take us across in the morning. Does that sound good?"

The German was confused by the words, but smiled and laughed, "Good!"

"Good. I'll sleep in your bed, you sleep out here." He told the man. He stood and took a step toward the tent only to find his head swim. He steadied himself and watched the world spin. "What the devils?"

"Good!" the man said again. He stood up and grabbed Rome's sword, ripping it from its sheath and plunging it into Rome's chest in a quick motion. Rome coughed and spit up blood as the man tore the blade loose and kicked Rome to the ground. Good!" he cried once again.

Adrian and the others watched the interaction as if it was a blur. The world seemed to be speeding up and their movements felt slow and clumsy. Alam, unaffected by the poison stood quickly, but lost his balance and fell backwards to the ground. The others managed to get to their feet, but Ciro was met with Rome's sword, slashed across his chest and Pal received a vicious downward stab through the back as he fell forward trying to stand.

"What is this?" Adrian asked as he pulled his gladius and held it before him. The sword felt like a lead weight and his feet refused to move.

The barbarian turned on him yelling, "Good! Good!" He easily pushed Adrian's sword to the side with Rome's blade and cut a deep gash in his leg, sending Adrian falling to the floor and onto his back. Adrian blinked away confusion as Rome's blade came streaking into his face. As he waited for oblivion, he was surprised to discover the sword deflected by Alam's blade. The large black man had recovered from his fall and intercepted the attack before it could find home.

"Good?" the man asked to Alam. Alam responded by pushing Rome's sword into the air, spinning, and driving his own gladius through the barbarian's heart. Alam let the man slide to the floor before pulling his blade from its corpse sheath.

"Not good." He said to the body. Alam ran over and looked at the wound on Adrian's leg. It was deep and grisly; he'd likely lose the leg.

"Alam?" Adrian asked. "Check..." Adrian trailed off as the poisoned wine took its toll and he fell into unconsciousness. Alam was left alone as he heard Rome grasp a final breath. He checked the others and found the blow had killed Palmiro straight out while Ciro died a few seconds after the attack.

"Gods." He said looking toward the heavens. On the other side of the fire the girl, Mieren, had fallen over and lay still on the ground. He checked and found a pulse though it was light. What now? He did his best to make Mieren and Adrian comfortable, placing them in the insane German's bed while moving the bodies of the others into a small line. He'd dig graves for them if he could, burn them if he couldn't. But, that was for the morning. For

now, he needed rest. He crawled into the hut and curled up on a pile of flour bags. All about the hut was an array of weapons, armor, food, wine, and a host of other delicacies. Evidently the man had been at his crimes for quite a long time. Exhaustion soon overtook him and he fell off into darkness.

The next morning came early and Adrian awoke as Mieren was stirring. He sat up and went to her side, hoping to spare her from the macabre scene outside. As she stirred, Adrian did as well.

"Adrian? Can you hear me?"

Adrian opened his eyes and grimaced, pressing a hand against his head. Mieren awoke and placed both hands on her ears. "Gods that's a headache. What happened?" Adrian asked.

"The barbarian, he was insane, poisoned the wine." Alam told him.

Adrian sat up onto his elbows and looked around. "The others?"

Alam shook his head slowly. "They never had a chance." Mieren rolled off the bed and stood on unsteady legs as Alam gave her his arm for support. "There's more, your leg... it's bad."

Adrian looked down and pulled off the blanket covering his leg. There was a lot of dried blood, but he felt no pain. He moved the leg and found it responsive. "What magic is this?" Alam asked, intrigued. "When I left you the leg was all but gone."

Adrian saw the hole in his pants, but found no pain at the location. He licked his fingers and rubbed away the blood. No sign of the wound remained. Not a nick, not a scratch. "It was late; maybe it looked worse than it was?"

"And this morning it's gone completely?" Alam asked.

Adrian stood and found his leg full of strength. "It feels fine. The others?" They rushed out and found the bodies where they had fallen.

"Not as lucky." Alam said sadly.

Adrian walked over to examine Rome's body. To his surprise, Rome's chest wound was nearly healed as well. He watched dumbfounded as slowly pieces of skin knit themselves back together. A groan from Ciro told him the older man was receiving the same healing.

"What is this?" Alam asked again.

Adrian stood and stumbled backwards a few paces, equally confused. It took less than ten more minutes for Rome and Ciro to fully regain consciousness.

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"Report..." Rome said as he climbed to his feet, holding his head.

"You, um, you died, sir." Alam told him.

"Don't be ridiculous solider, I'm alive." Rome shot back.

Ciro stood and joined them. "My brain is on fire." He told them holding his head.

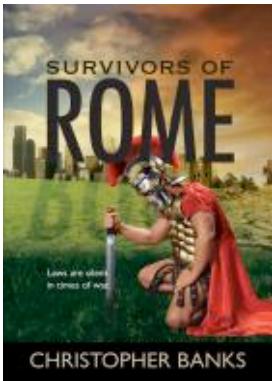
"He's telling the truth, Rome." We all had injuries that would kill us, today they're gone. I watched as your wound healed on its own." He walked over and looked at the vicious wound through Pal's back. "Look, see."

The four shuffled over there and gazed with open mouths as Palmiro's wound began closing before their eyes. "This isn't possible." Ciro said. Another fifteen minutes and Pal was pulling himself to his feet, a confused smile on his face.

"I'd rather not have that experience again." Pal said with a grunting chuckle. "Felt like a sword was being slid through my back."

"It was." Alam told him.

"Oh." Pal responded. "That makes sense." They didn't speak about what happened that day, or the next. Several weeks went by before one of them would venture on the subject again. Several weeks of wonder and thanks over their second lease on life. They crossed the river with the insane barbarian's boat and stepped for the first time of their new lives on Roman soil. A well maintained road of stone ran east and west and before long, the five companions trod upon legion built roads, none willing to look back.



Is the strength of friendship, of love, enough to keep friends together? Or will it fracture in a tide of jealous envy? And what of the mysterious force that brought Adrian and his group together in the first place? Answers are revealed while deeper questions are posed in the second part of this sprawling epic adventure spanning over two-thousand years. Survivors of Rome is Book II of the New Bloodlines Cycle.

Survivors of Rome

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