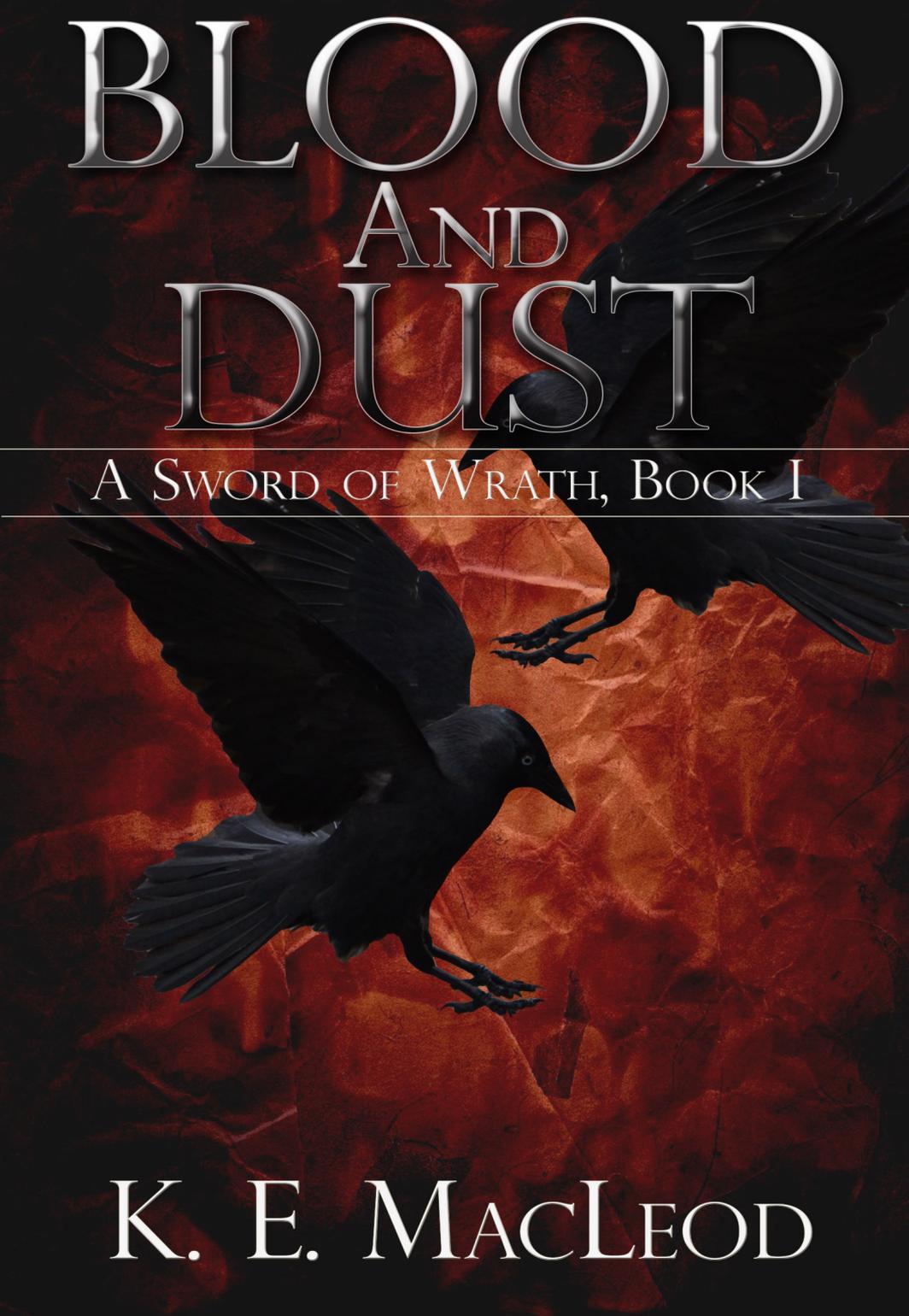


# BLOOD AND DUST

The background of the cover is a dark, textured red, resembling aged parchment or a map. Two black birds, possibly crows or ravens, are shown in flight. One bird is in the foreground, flying towards the right, with its wings spread wide. The other bird is in the background, flying towards the left, also with its wings spread. The overall mood is dark and mysterious.

A SWORD OF WRATH, BOOK I

K. E. MACLEOD

# A Sword of Wrath

## Blood and Dust

K. E. MacLeod

This book is for sale at

<http://leanpub.com/bloodanddust>

This version was published on 2014-03-01



This is a [Leanpub](#) book. Leanpub empowers authors and publishers with the Lean Publishing process.

[Lean Publishing](#) is the act of publishing an in-progress ebook using lightweight tools and many iterations to get reader feedback, pivot until you have the right book and build traction once you do.

©2013 - 2014 K. E. MacLeod

# Tweet This Book!

Please help K. E. MacLeod by spreading the word about this book on [Twitter!](#)

The suggested tweet for this book is:

I just bought A Sword of Wrath, Book I: Dust and Blood!

The suggested hashtag for this book is [#bloodanddust](#).

Find out what other people are saying about the book by clicking on this link to search for this hashtag on Twitter:

<https://twitter.com/search?q=#bloodanddust>

*To all fighters, everywhere...*

## Chapter One

*Like most heroes of old, she was born in secret...*

The old woman studied the young soldier standing beside her, his eyes wide with horror at the event unfolding before them in the tiny isolated cottage. “You’ve seen a lot of death, hmm?” she asked. “Just not very much life.” The old woman, known only as ‘Agatha’ to the few who were acquainted with her, spoke to the soldier, Kaeso, in a broken patois. He suspected, correctly, that she was not used to using the native Romulus dialect, which was common throughout the northern part of the kingdom.

“No, I-I,” he stuttered, searching for an excuse to better explain his nervousness, but not finding one, simply answered instead, “I haven’t.”

Agatha continued her work beside him. She had hair like gray straw stuffed beneath a plain piece of material tied around her head. Her body was short and stout and upon it she wore the traditional dress of her people, called a *chiton*. Over it she had placed an apron in the futile hope that she would stay clean as she assisted the heavily pregnant woman silently writhing on the table before them.

The young woman, which the soldier knew as Lady Catherine of Tyre, daughter of Lord Heron of Tyre, member of the Emperor’s Court, had fled the

kingdom of Lycania hastily and was still dressed in the pink silk *stola*, which betrayed her courtly status.

“Why doesn’t she scream, moan, *something*?” he asked, greatly disturbed by the woman’s silence.

“Because,” the portly woman answered proudly, “the women of my people do not cry out in childbirth.” She took another blood-soaked linen away from beneath the Lady Catherine and replaced it quickly with a fresh one.

The young soldier’s stomach lurched with her action. He had never seen so much blood coming from one person, not even on the battlefield. In fact, none of his lifetime of training could have ever prepared him for any of the events that had transpired in the last twenty-four hours: not for the Emperor demanding that he find the Lady Catherine and mete out her death sentence, nor for the fruitless search that brought him into the kingdom’s furthest reaches or for discovering a cottage, rotting away in the woods where he came to rest - only to find the old witch woman tending to the Lady Catherine herself in the midst of giving birth.

The woman before him continued to struggle in quiet agony, her eyes closed to the world around her. Inside, her body was stretching, tearing as the bones of her pelvis came apart to allow the passage of a baby through her womb into its new world. She

grasped the edges of the wooden table as each new wave of a contraction flowed through her - though, in truth, they had long ceased being waves and had, instead, coalesced into one great, unbearable pain. She had never known such distress and was completely unaware of her surroundings or that the sun had set and the night birds had begun their songs.

The soldier looked down and, feeling powerless to do much else, grasped her hand. Agatha, meanwhile, had continued to replace the bloody rags but her eye caught the simple, gentle gesture and she smiled sadly to herself.

“So,” she said as she worked, “which do you prefer? Life or death?”

“W-what?” The soldier pulled his gaze away from the Lady Catherine and settled it on the old woman.

“Death or life? Which is easier to watch?”

“I don’t know,” his eyes rested again on Lady Catherine. He spoke slowly, images of past battles flowing through his mind. “I’ve seen combat many times. I’ve seen my friends killed in the most brutal of ways. I have even helped to take the leg off of one of my fellow soldiers because it was infected from a stab wound but... this?”

She smirked, “Did your friend cry out when they removed his leg?”

With his free hand he smoothed Lady Catherine’s

hair away from her forehead; it was cold and clammy. His eyebrows knit together, “Yes, and even more afterwards.”

“I think if you men understood what it meant to bring life into this world, you would not be so quick to end it.”

He nodded slowly, “I fear you may be right about that.”

Agatha turned her attention back to Lady Catherine. She walked around the table and pressed her palms against the sides and then the top of the woman’s belly. Her expression grew grave as she pressed against them again, verifying her suspected fear. Reluctantly, she wiped her hands on her apron as she spoke, “Catherine? Your baby isn’t gonna make it like this.”

For the first time since the soldier had arrived, Lady Catherine opened her eyes. They were gray, he noted, and despite the redness that ringed around them, beautiful.

“Wha... what... does that mean?” she asked, breathlessly.

“She’s going die if we don’t do something.”

“Then do something... *woman!*”

Agatha shook her head, “I only know of one thing to do in this situation and I only seen it done one time before but,” her eyes flicked to the soldier’s then back to Catherine’s, “you won’t survive.”

Catherine's neck was barely able to support her head and it soon began to waver from the strain as she tried to keep it aloft while she spoke, "Then take my life... *and save my child's!*" She attempted to reach out to Agatha with her free hand, catching only the edge of the cloth of the old woman's dress and pulling her in, "Tell her... she was loved... by *both* of her parents. She was conceived in love and will....*ahhhh,*" she convulsed in pain, pausing a brief moment and then continuing on with her words, "she will cast a light upon the darkness of this world!" She released Agatha's dress and fell back against the table, her eyes closing again.

Agatha turned away from the Lady, shaking her head as she did. *Mothers*, she thought, *they always think their babies are some kind of special but all babies are the same. They cry, they stink, they eat, then they grow up.*

And she had seen her fair share grow up in her many years of living, watching as some rose up to be tyrants, others saviors but most, she believed, became nothings. Their names weren't recorded in history books and only those closest to them mourned them when they were gone.

This baby, Agatha thought, would be no different - except that her life would be harder than most. But, she resigned herself, half of the baby's blood was from

her own people and because of that, she would see to it that the child survived. She wiped her hands again on her increasingly stained apron and turned to the soldier, "I need your dagger."

His hand unconsciously went to his waistband where the *pugio* resided, "My what?"

"You heard me," she indicated his hand, "your dagger. Hand it over."

He cautiously took it from the sheath that was hooked to his waist by four large rings, and held it out to her, "What're you going to do with it?"

Agatha took it, "I'm going to finish what you came here to do." She leaned into the Lady, "Now, Catherine, I don't have any magicks or potions to ease the pain of what I'm about to do. Do you understand?"

She nodded.

"You may cry out during this, for I believe even the gods will forgive you." Agatha positioned herself at the end of the table, between Catherine's bent legs. She glanced over to the soldier, "Give her the sheath to bite down on."

His heart raced and he could feel the sweat against his forehead as it began to form. He did as the old woman said and unhooked the wooden and leather sheath from his waistband. He then slid it between Catherine's teeth and as she stared up at him in fear, she could taste the metal of the iron plate that graced

the sheath's front as it touched her tongue.

He looked upon the young woman and felt a million different sensations flow into him. Only a few hours before he had known her as a criminal whose life he was charged with ending. But, she wasn't a nameless soldier on a battlefield somewhere defying the Empire; she was a young woman who had fallen in love with the wrong person and now she lay in the midst of something that he would not have likely survived himself. This time, when he looked upon her face, he only felt awe at her strength.

Agatha, meanwhile, held the dagger flat against her forehead as she whispered a prayer to the gods. She then took it and, without further ceremony, sliced deep into the flesh of Lady Catherine's lower abdomen. As she did so, Catherine sat up from the table, crying out loudly. She grasped the soldier's hand, her eyes large and wild as they stared up into the rafters of the cottage. Her cries then became wails as Agatha continued to cut into her womb.

"I see the baby! I see her!" The old woman shouted excitedly, forgetting herself for a moment.

The soldier swallowed, "Is it...?" He wanted to say "alive" but he couldn't finish the sentence. He looked at the Lady, she was only whimpering now, her face as white as the sands of the Unclaimed Desert.

Agatha tossed the dagger to the ground, its metal

striking the dirt floor with a dull *thump*. She reached into the flesh that she had just cut open and pulled with all her might.

With each rough tug he witnessed, the room around the soldier began to sway more and more.

“Almost... *there...*” Agatha heaved and pulled and grasped until finally, with one last wrench of super strength, she freed the naked screaming newborn from its mother’s belly, holding it up by its ankle. She laughed, “I didn’t even have to swat her! Look, Catherine!” She rested the baby, covered in its mother’s blood, atop the Lady’s belly, still attached by the birthing cord.

But the Lady’s chest neither rose nor fell anymore and her hand no longer grasped the soldier’s. He set her arm gently back down onto the table and looked at the dead Lady’s face. It was free from pain; free from the burdens of the world and to him it was the most beautiful face he’d ever looked upon. He quietly and softly closed her eyes.

Agatha looked grim as she tied off the cord of the screaming child, severing its remaining connection to its mother. She then wrapped the baby in the last few clean linens she could find and drenched a piece of nearby muslin in honey, which she then put into the baby’s mouth. The baby at last fell quiet as it sucked happily at the material.

Agatha was slow to speak, sadness breaking her voice slightly, “The job you came here to do... it’s finished now.”

The soldier shook his head, “I didn’t come here to do this. I came here to bring a criminal to justice.”

“Didn’t you do that?”

His expression grew stern, “I see no criminals here.”

Agatha smiled slightly, “She was a woman of my people and she should be given a proper death ceremony so that she may grace the halls of Paradise.”

He nodded in agreement, then asked, “How is that done?”

“We burn our warriors.”

“Won’t the fire cause suspicion in your neighbors?”

She laughed shortly as she gently bounced the sleeping bundle in her arms, “My neighbors are few and far between. Those that know of me would not be surprised that the ‘crazy witch woman’ is at her experiments again.”

He nodded solemnly, “Alright then, I’ll go find some wood.”

It didn’t take long to gather enough to build a funeral pyre for the Lady Catherine in the clearing near Agatha’s home and when the last of the wood was placed upon the pile, the soldier returned to the

cottage to collect Catherine. The old woman looked on sadly as he rejoined her, carrying the limp blood and silk covered body in his arms. He then placed it gently upon the pyre.

Agatha handed him the torch that she held in her free hand. "The ground is wet," she cautioned. "It may be difficult to light."

But the gods were with them that evening and as the soldier touched the fire to the wood, it caught almost immediately. He went around the pyre, lighting what he could and then returned to Agatha, the baby against her chest making noises in its sleep.

"I guess now you return a hero, hmm?" Agatha asked, unable to keep the slight venom from her voice despite the soldier's recent assistance.

He shook his head, "If they call me that, I won't accept it. Besides," he looked at her as he spoke, the flames lighting both their faces, "I have nothing to prove that I ki... that she's dead."

Agatha produced a golden ring from beneath the folds of her dress, the seal of Tyre, a large tree, on its face. "This is her ring. Show it to the Emperor, and he'll know then."

He took it, slowly, "But, shouldn't this go to the child?"

"No," Agatha shook her head firmly, "she needs no trinkets, nor amulets or other ridiculous things

because she must *never* know where she comes from or her life will be full of strife.”

A few hours later, as the first traces of dawn began to approach painting the sky in oranges and pinks, Agatha bound the baby with leather straps tightly to the soldier’s chest - over his tunic but beneath his chain mail *hamata*.

“Do you really think this will work?” He asked with all the disbelief that claimed it wouldn’t.

“Of course - or I wouldn’t risk it!” Agatha pulled the straps tighter across his chest. “Remember, go straight to Sotiria in the Imperial Nursery. Mention my name and hand the baby directly over to her. She is one of my people and will know immediately that this is Lady Catherine’s daughter.”

“But,” the soldier looked upon the sleeping babe, “shouldn’t she have a name of some kind?”

“I don’t know, make up something,” Agatha waved a dismissive hand in the air. “But make it something Lycanian, because from here on out, that’s what she must be.”

“But, I’m not...,” he continued to stare at the squirming bundle against his chest, thinking what name he could possibly bestow on her. He thought back to the cry she gave out when Agatha first pulled her into the world and smiled. Her loud mouth reminded him of his little sister, Alexis. He nodded, “Ok.

Alexia. She'll be Alexia, then."

Agatha shrugged, "I suppose it's as good as any name. I just hope to the gods that she stays looking like her mother." She stroked the baby's head one last time.

The soldier then mounted his horse, easily, so as not to disturb the newborn.

"Can I ask," she said, handing the soldier back his cleaned *pugio*, "did her father die... as bravely?"

The soldier's eyes fell to the ground while his insides churned from the memory, "Her father died more of a warrior than I could ever be. He fought us all and in the end, it was only through the treachery of the Decanus that he was killed." He paused, then looked at Agatha, "I only wish I had known then..."

She shrugged, "That's what life is all about: wishing that you knew then what you know now. But, one day, you will be old and cynical like me and nothing will surprise you anymore. Not even yourself." She smiled sadly, "Goodbye, little one... and goodbye to you, young one. May the gods of both our peoples ride with you this night!" Agatha then slapped the hindquarters of the horse and sent them galloping into the direction of the capital.

\* \* \*

The Empire of Lycania was, some argued, as old as the beginning of the world. Legend told that the land had sprung up from the very place where the gods had first set down the Two Brothers upon the earth. While there were those that disputed such claims, no one would ever say that Lycania wasn't the most beautiful land that they had ever laid eyes on, full of rolling green hills and welcoming shade trees. The summers were pleasant with warm winds that blew in from the Western Sea and the winters were marked by a light dusting of snow, which retreated quickly at the first sight of spring.

From its midpoint, the Lycanian lands stretched out as far as the eye could see in every direction. The people who formed the communities within its borders were descendants from the long-ago conquered tribes that had once permeated the area before the arrival of the Two Brothers. But, despite their ancestral enmity, they now lived in relative peace with one another.

Historically speaking, the most active threats to Lycania had often come from the tribes *outside* of her borders, which consisted of supposed savages, or 'Bestials' as they were referred to in the elevated social circles of the Empire's elite. Thankfully, their attacks had been greatly reduced amid the last half of the century. For, during his reign, Gaius Quintus,

the previous emperor known as the 'Peacebringer,' had forged a relative peace with most of his Bestial neighbors. While not entirely welcomed, there were now several thriving communities of Bestials within Lycania - though most had arrived by either being sold into slavery by rival tribes or, very rarely, hired on as hard laborers by the extremely wealthy; the only exception being the N'bari Moon People, the fearsome gladiatorial fighters who had arrived via the *Pax Lunas* trade agreement.

Odalia, the capital of Lycania and where the White Palace stood, was built with a large rectangular wall made of stunning white limestone that ran around the entire city. Inside its walls stood a *forum*, or marketplace, a Temple of the Two Brothers and its high priestess, an educational academy for the children of Lycania's wealthy citizenry and an amphitheater with a circuit where the capital's main school of gladiators both trained and performed. Towards the back end of the walls was the White Palace, a shining behemoth beset by two large marble columns that were each polished to a gleaming perfection. A statue of each Brother stood in alcoves cut into the marble on either side of the entrance behind the columns while a relief of the Wolf-Mother herself looked down upon them all from her perch above the palace doors.

Within the expansive palace were libraries of scrolls

and books stacked high, as well as a section of small apartments where courtly visitors stayed, plus an elaborately gilded dancing and music room, a *triclinium* dining hall, ornate community baths and elaborately landscaped garden rooms. In fact, the palace was so great in size that the entire Lycanian army was housed there, the barracks being located on multiple floors of the entire left wing. Outside of the barracks was the training yard and next to it, the Emperor's family's true source of pride: his stables, filled with horses descended from those taken in victory from the Cavalli Horse People during the Desolate Wars.

The citizens of Odalia were, for the most part, content. They had been ruled all of their lives by members of the Quintus Dynasty, which had been in power for well over one hundred and fifty years. Their most recent ruler, Gaius Tiberius Quintus, had ascended to the Emperor's seat only a decade previous. But, unlike his predecessor and father, the Peacebringer, Tiberius cared very little for the pursuit of peace. He was also uninterested in the plight of anyone who was not already a part of his court, which was made up almost entirely of Lycania's most wealthy and influential landowners.

His main desire, a trait he *had* shared with his father, was for power and the insatiable need to show it off and he exercised such displays of power by

passing highly restrictive laws whenever the mood took him. Anyone who broke said laws, no matter how absurd they may have been, was found to be a traitor to the Empire and usually executed quickly without trial. After the alleged traitor's death, he would then confiscate their lands and other assets for the Empire, which often times left the lawbreaker's family destitute, forcing them to become beggars on Odalia's streets.

Tiberius' most recent laws were proving to be his most effective yet. Only months earlier he had outlawed all other gods besides the Two Brothers and the Wolf-Mother, tearing down the temples that had served the people of the land for hundreds of years. He had also recently banned the mixing of Lycanian blood with any of the Bestial tribes, claiming that the success of Lycania depended on the purity of the bloodline of its people, as the gods themselves had intended from the beginning.

In private, his laws were frequently met with resistance by his various advisors who were constantly worried about rioting from the masses. Tiberius took their words under advisement and, in response, began to increase security on the streets of Odalia. In addition, he would frequently host multi-day feasts of free food and gladiatorial combat, known as a *munus*, in order to placate the masses and silence his critics.

High atop his White Palace, Emperor Tiberius looked out over the land. He was dressed in a crimson tunic, signifying his status as royalty, and around his waist was tied his most valued personal treasure: the Sword of Irae - its silver and jeweled sheath gleaming in the sunlight. The short-sword, a relic from another time and place, had been passed down from several generations and had served as a reminder of the Twin gods' favor, which had long ago been bestowed upon his family line.

His nine-year-old son, Spurius, also dressed in the royal crimson, paced beside him, bored with the morning's lack of events. The child busied himself by kicking loose pebbles in the direction of a pair of Bestial slaves who were preparing to patch a crack in the palace wall. They tried their best to ignore him by continuing to grind stones taken from a small pile nearby, which they planned to later heat to use as concrete.

Behind them, the Emperor's legion of ever-present servants had set up a luxurious breakfast table, consisting of Lycanian bread and wine, cheese and meat from the north, and fish from the Western Sea. It was all laid out upon a silk tablecloth, courtesy of the recently conquered Golden Men, which blew gently in the wind.

Beside the Emperor stood his legate, Timonus, the

general of the Lycanian forces.

“So,” the Emperor addressed him, “any word on the execution of that treasonous whore, Lady Catherine of Tyre?” He said her name as if it were poison on his lips.

“No, sire,” the Legate held his head high as he answered, his elaborate feathered helmet resting under his arm, revealing a bare head of light brown hair that was just beginning to gray on the sides and top. His bright red cape, which twisted behind him in the wind, contrasted with the polished silver of his armor. Legate Timonus had been a faithful and loyal soldier in service to the Quintus Dynasty for his entire life and he planned on being so for the rest of it.

“I sincerely hope your man has not betrayed me.”

“No, my liege. He would do no such thing, I assure you.”

Tiberius eyed him suspiciously, “I should hope not.”

The Emperor then turned and made his way to the breakfast table and sat down. His son followed suit, picking and then flicking grapes at the servants who stood around them.

Tiberius looked over at his son, “Spurius, sit up straight.”

The boy scowled but did as his father requested.

The Emperor then motioned for one of the stew-

ards that was carrying a copper pitcher of steaming hot water wrapped in cloth and asked, “Freshly boiled?”

The servant nodded.

“Good. Keep it that way.”

He sent the young man back to his position along the wall with the other servants. The Emperor then beckoned the *praegustator* forward as he continued to speak to Timonus over his shoulder, “Any word from the forces in the West, then?” The food taster silently tried a bite of everything on the table as the other two men continued to converse.

“No, my liege,” Timonus shook his head. “Though, if I may be so bold, should I not be fighting alongside them? I feel I would be of more use in my natural capacity as general of your armies-“

Tiberius laughed wryly, “You *are* being so bold. We have been over this, Timonus; I need you here. There have been threats on my life, as you well know, and your legionaries are *more* than capable of squashing a few rebel Bestials without you.”

The taster completed his task and showing no immediate ill effects of being poisoned, was dismissed to return to his place with the others.

Timonus remained silent at Tiberius’ words to him but could not stop the thoughts that ran through his mind, shouting at him that the Emperor deserved

whatever should happen to him in the future.

A servant arrived and, upon seeing the Emperor, bent low. “Your Highness,” he said from his bowed position, “Lord Heron is here to see you.”

“Ah, yes, send him in,” Tiberius brightened as he gestured in the air.

An older man, his long white hair unkempt and a day’s worth of gray stubble on his face despite being dressed in the court’s finery, arrived before them.

Timonus cleared his throat, suddenly feeling very uncomfortable with the new arrival, “My liege, I’m afraid I have some rather important business I need to see to.”

“Of course, Legate, you are dismissed.”

“Thank you,” Timonus bowed his head quickly and turned away, glad for the growing distance that would soon be between him and whatever might occur upon the rooftop over the next while.

“Come, Lord Heron, sit,” the Emperor indicated a chair next to him.

“Sir, my liege,” the man’s voice shook, “has there been any word?”

“No, my dear Lord Heron. Your daughter is *still* missing but know that I pray that she is returned quickly so that you and your wife may know peace. Some wine?”

“You are very kind, sire, but no, thank you,” he

bowed his head. “Again, I want to thank you for showing mercy on her. She’s young and-“

Tiberius began to pour the wine for himself, “Ah, you don’t have to explain the impetuosity of youth to *me*.” He took a large gulp from his cup, then set it down, wiping his top lip on the back of his hand, “Lycanian wine is simply the *best* wine in the entire world.” He looked directly at Lord Heron, “Now, the reason that I called you up here is that there are a few things that I am curious about.”

“Anything, sire.”

The Emperor stood and took a few steps over to the pile of rocks that the slaves were working with. They tried not to look at him as he took a largish stone from the top and examined it for a second before walking back to the table and placing it in Lord Heron’s hand.

“Do you know what that is?”

“I fear my answer will sound as if I’m taking you for a fool.”

“No, no,” he smiled, “go ahead. You’re free to speak as you please.”

“It... it’s a rock, Your Highness.”

“Yes... a *rock*.” He thought for a moment, and then took the stone back into his own hand. “Let me ask you another question.”

“Absolutely, my liege.”

He indicated his tunic, “Do you know how they get the fabric of my tunic to be such a dark red color?”

“No, sir, I’m afraid such matters... are rarely on my mind.”

He laughed as he began to pace, “Now *that* is a truthful answer, my friend!” The Emperor paused for a moment, then leaned in beside Lord Heron, his hands propping him up on the tabletop, “You see, it’s red like this because of the type of dye my tailors use. Would you like to know how they acquire such dye?”

“I-, er, *yes*, my lord,” he humored Tiberius, despite his thoughts being solely on his missing daughter. “You have my curiosity piqued.”

“You see, there is a special beetle that is harvested for the red powder that they can make from its shell. And, do you know how they get the powder?”

“No, sir-“

The Emperor stood back, nodding once to the water steward who calmly stepped forth and poured boiling water into the lap of Lord Heron. The old man howled in shock and pain as the steam rose from his burning flesh.

“First, they *boil* them.” Tiberius walked behind the writhing, wailing Lord Heron, then bent down and spoke into his ear, “Then, once dried, they *crush* them.” He brought the limestone rock down upon the hand of old man that was resting on top of the table, breaking

his fingers and bringing forth more howls of pain as he tried to vainly pull his mangled and crushed digits away in disbelief.

Spurius looked on silently, a strange light glinting in his eye.

“Now, *why* do I ask such things?” Tiberius said again in Heron’s ear.

“I... I’m afraid I do not know, my lord,” he wept with disbelief.

“Because that beetle is harvested in the land of *Tyre!* As are the very rocks that built this castle! A land that *you* claim to be from!” The Emperor smashed the rock upon the ground and pulled his sword from its sheath. He then held it to Lord Heron’s throat, “Now, tell me where you are really from.”

The lord swallowed, his entire being full of fear while he cradled his broken hand even as the flesh upon his legs continued to burn, “I-I don’t know what you mean, sir.”

Tiberius pulled sword closer against Lord Heron’s throat, shouting, “*You’re a treacherous liar!* Tell me where you are really from or I will have your entire family killed!”

Lord Heron spoke at last, his words barely above a whisper as they cracked from his throat, “Th-Thera... my-my lord.”

“Thera? *Thera?* You really do take me for a fool!”

Then, without a moment's hesitation, Tiberius slit Lord Heron's throat. The stunned body of the former lord sat for a moment, sputtering, before falling forward lifelessly onto one of the breakfast plates.

The Emperor sheathed his bloodied sword and returned to his seat. Then, as the thick warm blood of Lord Heron began to pool around the legs of the table, he looked at Spurious, "Strength and firmness, son, *that's* how you lead. Strength... and firmness."

Spurius, taking the advice in stride, looked quizzically at his father, "What is Thera?"

"Thera is a fairy story, told to the children of the lower classes in order to convince them that they can somehow be better than the worthless rubbish they were born to be." He laughed derisively, "It *was* once a true land of riches but the gods wiped it clean from this world - and I have the sword that proves it! I don't know where this man is from but it is *not* Thera." He took a mouthful of bread and as he chewed, spoke to one of his servants, "Have the legion round up his family. See what you can get out of them but if they tell you the same, then kill them. In fact, kill them anyway. I have no room for liars and traitors in my court."

\* \* \*

“Sixteen years...” the man muttered to himself, his words heavy with remorse as he sat upon a fallen log that rested beside a sculpted memorial in the middle of the Aulus forest.

His name was Tacitus and he cut a forlorn figure sitting there, his long black and gray hair wrapped to its end with a piece of leather. His slightly wrinkled face, painted in the traditional decorative ink-swirled designs of the Cavalli people, told the story of a man who had been broken long ago.

The wind lightly rustled the vest made of fur pelts that he wore over a simple linen shirt and brown breeches. It then whirled red and golden leaves around his suede boots, fluttering the fringe that ringed their tops as it did.

Behind him, Tacitus heard the not entirely unexpected crunch of leaves beneath someone else’s feet and knew instantly who had arrived to disrupt his mourning. The new visitor, larger in stature and possessing a booming voice that carried throughout the dense forest, demanded “What are you doing here, *Cauda*?” He spat out the last word like a curse and it may well have been, for it was the old word meaning ‘coward.’ To a Cavalli, there was no greater insult than being called a coward.

“Same as you, Vibius.” Tacitus didn’t to look up as his gaze remained locked onto the moss-covered

statue.

“I find it odd that you would pay your respects to my wife. Especially when it is your fault she is dead.” Vibius stepped forward, his face covered in similar ink designs as Tacitus’, although his signified his allegiance to the Little Fish village of the Cavalli. “*Cauda*,” he repeated, “you are not supposed to be here.”

Tacitus stood and the other man reached for the heavy long-sword at his side. Tacitus looked into Vibius’ eyes, coolly, “I won’t fight you.” He looked back at the memorial stone, “Not here. Not in front of her.”

“You won’t fight because you are a coward. You do not even possess a sword! Your brother should’ve ended your life years ago.”

“Perhaps...,” Tacitus knelt down and began to clean the moss off of the stone. His lips parted and he began to whisper a silent prayer to the gods that he was no longer entirely sure he believed in.

Vibius’ patience with Tacitus was showing signs of wearing thin, “I want you to leave. *Now*. Because I *will* fight you in front of her, sword or no sword.”

“We are both Cavalli, Vibius,” Tacitus stood again, “therefore we are brothers in the eyes of the gods but,” he shook his head, “I should have never allowed her to marry you.” He cast a stern but silent glance at

the other man, “*That* is my regret.” He then began to walk away but before he left the clearing entirely, he stopped and turned, “You were no better at protecting her than I was.” His eyes fell on the white stone, “Goodbye, my daughter. Until another year has passed.”

He reluctantly left the clearing and took to his horse, a two-year-old bay he’d just received from a neighboring village as payment for his “good medicine.” He pulled himself up onto its back and with a last look behind him, began the return trek to his home in Two-Crows.

As the horse plodded rhythmically along throughout the dense forest, he pushed the thoughts of Vibius from his mind and wondered, instead, what he should name the mare. He wanted something regal yet simple. For once, long ago, the Cavalli, or Horse People as they were known throughout the world, had lived alongside herds and herds of the equines. They had run wild in ever-shifting masses of browns and reds upon the Lower Plains before the Desolate Wars had rendered the grasslands into a useless desert and the Lycanian forces had brought most of them back to Odalia as spoils of war.

The Desolate Wars had been a pointless endeavor brought about by Lycanian empirical greed. They had claimed that the Cavalli were Lycanians by birth and

blood and therefore the Lower Plains, and everything beneath it, rightfully belonged to the Empire. Meanwhile, the Cavalli, who believed they were descended from only *one* of the Two Brothers, disputed their claim. In the end, the Desolate Wars had brought about no true victors and was never officially resolved, though it did mar the once beautiful landscape forever.

Both sides of the conflict publicly blamed each other for the devastation of the Lower Plains, though no one could offer an explanation as to why it happened. The Cavalli, a naturally superstitious people, believed that the desertification had actually been the work of a *venefica* sorceress who had wanted to impress her lover, the Lycanian emperor Gaius, by poisoning the ground.

Whatever the source of the destruction, the Cavalli were forced to retreat into the forests of Aulus, leaving what remained of the Lower Plains a *terra nullius*, or a “no man’s land.” Then, as the desertification spread throughout the grasslands, neither the Cavalli nor the Lycanians laid any more claim to the thirty-mile stretch of arid wasteland and thus it was referred to as the Unclaimed Desert.

The Unclaimed Desert had come to serve as an unofficial armistice for the Lycanian side, since no man that had attempted to cross it had ever come

back alive. The Cavalli, on the other hand, already well versed with living in harmony with their environment, soon learned the secrets of the desert and occasionally ventured as far as the White Palace, either to scout or to pull childish pranks meant to keep the guards on their toes. This didn't happen very often, though, as the Cavalli superstitions made them terrified of the Desert's "bad medicine."

The transition of the Cavalli people from the freedom of a lifestyle of living out on the open plains to one of being forced to become forest dwellers was not an easy one and a group of rebels eventually rose up amongst the different branches of the Horse People in the intervening decade. They had begun to claim that certain families within their own people had worked with the *venefica* in order to encourage the desert to spread, though no reason why was ever given. And, thus the Cavalli then fell into a civil war, which lasted well over three years.

It was in that war that Tacitus lost his wife, Valeria, and daughter, Tacita Valeriani, whom they called Valeri. Valeri was only a young girl of sixteen when he'd arranged for her to marry Vibius, an older son of the neighboring Little Fish's village elder, hoping it would bring her a comfortable life and peace between the two peoples. Initially, she was angry with him when he told her of his decision but, being a good and

dutiful daughter, she went ahead with the nuptials. Because of the status of her new husband, which, to her relief, kept him busy and away from home, she was frequently allowed to visit her mother back in Two-Crows, which is where she found herself when the village was invaded.

Normally a peaceful village, Two-Crows held no obvious strategic advantages for an attacking band of rebels and had stayed relatively safe and hidden away during the early part of the civil war. Because of this, Two-Crows felt comfortable with sending every man over the age of thirteen to fight for their side in the war - including the village elders. They embraced the war with all the passionate vigor that men often do when fighting for a cause they believe in.

Well, most men. Tacitus, a young man of around thirty-two at the time, was not a fighter. Rather, he was a *medicus*, or one who practiced good medicine and felt that volunteering to murder men, despite the cause, went against everything he stood for. He owned no sword and carried only a dagger for survival reasons. The others of his village gave him a hard time but always quickly shut their mouths whenever he healed them and their children from a litany of different maladies.

He had three strong older brothers, and one younger, that went in his stead. They, like everyone, believed

that the village being left behind would be of little interest to those fighting on the other side. But in war, humans often become little more than beasts and late in the night, Two-Crows was ambushed.

Tacitus awoke to the screams of the women and children of the village. Leaving his own wife and daughter secured in his home, he ran out to see the enemy rebels attacking. To his horror, they slaughtered the ponies first, then began to set fire to the village homes built in amongst the trees. He watched helplessly as they pulled children from their beds and murdered them in front of him.

Filled with anger, Tacitus ran up to a group of the rebels, trying, but unable to stop them. He was repeatedly flung back, until the rebel leader, Otho, caught sight of him. Coming upon Tacitus fallen form, he laughed while the carnage continued behind him, “Why look, they *did* leave a man here. Or did they not?” Otho dragged his sword down the front of Tacitus’ breeches.

Tacitus swallowed, the forest ground cold and wet beneath him.

“Where’s your sword, *fool*?” Otho pulled his own weapon back up towards Tacitus’ bobbing throat.

“I don’t-I don’t have one...”

Otho cocked his head to the side, narrowing his eyes questioningly, “Why did they leave you here?”

“I-I am not a fighter. I would’ve been of very little use to them.”

“Aye,” Otho laughed low and darkly, “you are of very little use here as well. For what is a man without a sword? He is a woman and thus shall be treated as such! Grab him, tie him up before we burn them-“

“Wait!” Tatius yelled out to Otho as two of his Cavalli brothers grabbed each one of his arms. “If death awaits me, at least let me die knowing why you have attacked us! We offer you nothing of value! We are not a farming community, we’re too near the desert to offer protection and we’re too far away from the fighting to give you an advantage! Why would you attack us, your brothers, your fellow man?”

Otho took a few steps closer to Tacitus so that he was only a breath from his face, “You are *no* man. Neither are you the brother of Otho the Rebel.” A scream of a woman could be heard in the distance as a grin slowly spread across his face, “There are other things to fight for besides victory. Pleasures and riches, *my brother*. And, now?” He stood back, his arms outstretched, “I will take pleasure in *your* riches. Tie him up!”

Tacitus tried to fight but it was of no use, the men overpowered him quickly and bound him to two trees that sat in the middle of the village, his arms stretched far apart. Throughout the night, as they

became drunker on the ale stores they had found, the rebels intermittently beat him, some slicing his face and body with their swords while others heated their daggers in fires and laid them against his skin. They beat him so much that Tacitus' eyes became swelled to the point where he could hardly see; they shattered his jaw, breaking some of his teeth. The torture continued for hours and the only thing that helped him live through it was the thought of his wife and daughter, for he'd not seen either in the pile of bodies that had begun to form in front of him.

As dawn broke, some of the men, still drunk on stolen ale, full on stolen food and spent on stolen women mounted their horses and began to disperse. Tacitus barely clung to what little life he had left inside of him while Otho shouted for the last of the bodies to be brought out of the smoldering houses and the few survivors there were, to be left to die.

It was then that Tacitus caught sight of his wife and daughter's bodies being dragged haphazardly out of their lodge and added to the pile. Their clothes were in shreds and their faces bloodstained, though still unmistakably recognizable. He let out a cry of such woeful agony upon seeing them in that state that it reverberated throughout the entire forest, causing the crows in the trees above to awaken and entwine their cries with his.

The few rebels who remained were ordered to set the bodies alight, leaving Tacitus to wail himself until his voice cracked. Not only did he mourn the loss of his family but also the fact that the Cavalli forbade the burning of their dead, believing it prevented them the ability to walk into the halls of Heaven.

When he heard the continued anguish of his captive, Otho walked over, a smirk across his mouth as he cut Tacitus free of the ropes that held him, “Now then, perhaps you will carry a sword in the future?”

Tacitus was barely coherent; his eyes had completely swollen shut and were crusted with the dried blood that had earlier spilled down his face. “Kill me,” he whispered from his cracked, dry lips, “slow or fast, Otho, it doesn’t matter. Kill me now. I beg by the blood that we share.”

“So soon after you’ve learned your lesson? Just what kind of teacher would that make me?” He then ripped Tacitus vest and shirt apart and produced a dagger. “No, no, *Brother*, you must stay alive to tell the others about the lesson you have learned today! Here,” he pressed the dagger against the skin of his captive’s chest, “I’ll give you a reminder.” He carved the letter ‘C’ into Tacitus skin and the blood of the wound flowed down the front of his breeches.

“Look, you even *bleed* like a woman,” Otho laughed heartily as he stood and ordered his men, “leave him

by the bodies. Let the men of Two-Crows punish him in their own way.”

The day stretched on, but Tacitus had no way of knowing how long as he was unable to remain conscious for any length of the time. At some point during one of his rare moments of consciousness, the men of Two-Crows returned home.

Already disheartened by the numbers they'd lost during their campaign, the bedraggled and horseless men stood in shock at the scene before them. Slowly, as the initial impact wore away, they began to sift through the rubble, going over it in the hope that they would find survivors. It was during this search that one of the men discovered Tacitus, bloody and dirty, partially hidden by the ash pile, which had blown across his body.

Severus, the only one of Tacitus' four brothers to return home alive from battle, ran over quickly to aid him. He rinsed his brother's bloodied face with water from his own waterskin. "Tacitus? Tacitus, speak if you're able."

"Kill me, Otho...kill me and be done with it. Gods forgive me, please forgive me," he whispered, his mind temporarily gone from him.

"It's me, Brother, it's me, Severus."

"Kill me, kill me, Otho," he whispered over and over, until there was very little sound coming from

his lips. Severus then hoisted the beaten and broken body of his brother upon his shoulder and began to walk toward the remains of his own home - the outside of which was badly burned while the inside had remained largely untouched. Upon seeing him do so, the village men began to gather around.

One of them shouted, "Is he alive?"

Severus didn't look back at the man as he answered, "He may be."

"Then ask him why he didn't fight!"

"Yeah!" Another chimed in, "Why is the coward alive? A true man would've fought! He would've died with honor!"

Still another, "He is a true coward!"

Severus walked into his house and laid his brother upon his own bed. The villagers, still in their war coverings and paint, crowded around the gutted doorway, all talking at once. Severus turned and glared at them as he pushed his way through, "Get away from my home!"

The oldest village Elder, Seneca, a man of white hair and frail body who had nevertheless joined them in fighting the rebels, addressed Severus, "Tacitus should face trial. The Cavalli are not men of weakness."

Severus nostrils flared with anger, "I have lost three brothers already, I will *not* lose another."

The crowd grew agitated and began asking for Severus to be reprimanded as well.

Frustrated with those he had just fought beside not even a fortnight ago, he looked out over the crowd and shouted, “You know me! Who am I?”

The crowd mumbled.

“*Who am I?*” he demanded at the top of his lungs.

“The Chaos-bringer!” Someone shouted back.

“The Giant Killer!”

“The Sword Bearer!”

“The Defeater of the Rebels!”

“That’s right! I have many names as I am the bravest among you. I have shown in battle that I have no fear and have led you in many victories and given you stories that you will pass on for generations to come. If I have no fear of the Giants, no fear of the Rebels and no fear of death, what makes you think I will be afraid of *you?*” Severus pulled his sword from its sheath and with two hands upon its hilt, lifted the sword high, then plunged it deep into the ground before Seneca.

“From where my sword sits, and everything behind it, is now mine. What once belonged to my brothers is now mine. I take their dwellings and pledge to protect this village as I bear my brother’s cowardly mantle upon my own back. But, I swear by the *gods*, that if any of you cross the land where this sword has

marked without being asked, I will thrust it through your hearts.” He looked around the crowd, his chest rising and falling as he seethed, his eyes landing on the Elder.

The Elder spoke slow and loud, “I agree with the Sword Bearer. His bravery in our recent battles has proven that the gods are on his side and as long as he aligns with us, we shall honor his request. Tend to your women and children, those of you that still have them. If you have been among those that have lost here today, we will perform the purification ceremony tonight and plead with the gods to allow them into Heaven.” The crowd was silent, but unmoving. Seneca shouted, “That is all for now, tend to your flocks!”

When the crowds had dissipated, Seneca spoke to Severus, “To bear your brother’s shame will not be easy.”

“Yet, it will be so,” was the only response the warrior gave as he turned away and went back into his home.

In the many weeks that followed, Severus tended to Tacitus, nursing him back to health and even using his brother’s own advice for which remedies to apply when he was able to speak again. But, despite the fact that he loved his remaining brother very much, Severus couldn’t deny that there was an underlying resentment that he felt towards Tacitus’ cowardice

during the attack - though he would never say so aloud, even as he spent the next generation trying to redeem his family's bloodline.

Meanwhile, in the decade and a half that had followed the Cavalli Rebellion, the people of Two-Crows had rebuilt. Only the fewest of trees still bore the scars of the events that had occurred and where the ashes of the dead were once piled, there now stood a Willow tree, whose branches hung low with the sadness of its weeping. Tacitus rode his new horse into the village and while the people had never quite fully accepted him again, he was happy to be back in the place that he called home.

The village was quiet as Tacitus entered, for most of her inhabitants were away honoring their lost ancestors for the Day of Remembrances. In the midst of the silence, he could hear the telltale sound of his brother laboring hard in the distance, working on what he hoped would soon house the village's own Order of the Sword, an ancient guild that had once thrived eons ago within the Cavalli.

Tacitus tied off the horse in front of his home, which had been rebuilt upon its old site. Like the other buildings in the Two-Crows village, it was a half-barrel shaped wooden structure with a thatched roof that went all the way down to the ground. It was located between two trees and its outside was decorated

with various Cavalli symbols meaning good medicine and health.

“Hello, Brother,” an unexpected voice spoke as Tacitus tended his horse.

He turned at the musical sound, unable to hide the smile that spread too easily upon his face at the appearance of his very pregnant sister-in-law, Nona.

“Hello, Nona, how are you getting along?”

She held a basket of herbs against her side, her dark red hair piled in a mound of braids atop her head as her green eyes seemed more tired than normal, “The time grows closer.” Nona patted her swollen belly, “It’s a boy this time.”

He laughed, “So sure?”

“Yes,” she smiled back, “very. He doesn’t fight as hard as Aelia, though.” The light in her eyes dulled slightly as she tried to maintain her smile, “I do hope Severus will be pleased.”

Tacitus glanced across the grove towards his brother and watched as the other man set stones into the wall that would one day surround a new set of barracks, “He will be pleased, regardless.” He looked back at Nona, suddenly feeling very self-conscious. “Well, I-I have a remedy setting up that I need to get back to.”

“Did you find any new plants while you were away?”

“No.” He smiled again, “I will probably need to

venture out into the desert for some new ones one of these days.”

Her face paled slightly, “Please don’t, Tacitus, there is dark magic there.”

“Nona, you know I don’t believe-“

“Please,” her hand rested on his chest and his heart began to pound at her touch. “I would never recover if you... if something happened to you.”

He closed his eyes, “Nona, please don’t. I can’t.”

She pulled her hand away, sadness touching her eyes, “You have your brother’s honor. It’s the one thing I *do* love in him.” Her eyes drifted towards her husband as he continuously worked, then back to Tacitus. She tried to change the subject, though her smile was still full of sorrow, “I’ve left a new book of forest vegetation on your table.”

“Thank you, Nona. We will speak again.” He turned away and left her there, reluctantly, as he walked into his house. Once inside he saw the book she had mentioned, “*A History of the Plants of the Aulus Forest*” resting on his front room table. He smiled upon seeing it and lifted it up slowly, admiring its simple cover. As he did, a small folded piece of paper slipped out onto the table. He picked it up and opened it, reading to himself, “My heart and soul are yours, always... even if this body is not.” Tacitus crumbled the paper up immediately and tossed it into the fire

burning in the hearth.

He took a deep breath and cleared his mind, then walked into the back room of his house. He set the book on top of a nearby shelf, which was already overflowing with tomes of various shapes, sizes and origins. A large heavy oaken table rested in the center of the small room with a thick rough-hewn cloth thrown across the top of it, outlining whatever mess lay beneath. On top of the cloth rested several reports from the scouts that his brother had sent out across the land. He took a certain pride in the fact that only the Cavalli knew the secrets of the desert and, according to one of the reports, it looked as if it would be that way for a while, yet. The scout in the Mountains of Selene reported that the N'bari wished to continue their treaty with the Cavalli for another year, while the scout to the west had nothing to report, as there was nothing out in the west except for a few small villages. The scout to the north in Odalia said that the Lycanians still openly declared that the Forest of Aulus was rightfully theirs.

Tacitus nodded to himself as he read. This was what he wanted. He hoped, secretly, that the Lycanians would *always* claim the Cavalli land, for that way he may one day have the chance to redeem himself.

He threw back the cloth that covered the table and revealed a scaled model of Odalia and the White

Palace. He smirked as he leaned over it, shifting a few things to reflect the new info gleaned from one of the scout's more detailed reports.

One day he would lead a rebellion and one day Lycania would fall. Tacitus subconsciously placed a hand over his chest, feeling the scar beneath his shirt. He would redeem himself, one way or another, and make his family's name worthy again.

\* \* \*

Juko had a headache and the constant jostling of the wooden cage-cart in which he was sat in was doing him no favors. It shook loudly next to his ears and had done so for the entire duration of the journey from the Crystal Port on the Eastern Shore. He was also sharing the small space within the cage with nine other men, only two of which were from the land of Noba as he was. The rest seemed an even-handed collection of Golden and Hairy Men.

The walls of Lycania's capital rose up ahead of the horse drawn cart and even Juko had to admit it was an awesome sight to behold. As a N'bari born in the Mountains of Selene, he'd certainly seen his share of breathtaking beauty and now could easily add Odalia to that list.

The driver of the cart pulled the horses to a halt when they arrived at the front gate. As he did, a

guard walked over and addressed him, “Slaves again, Leonas?”

“Nope. *These* boys are gladiators!” he proclaimed proudly, handing his official papers over for inspection.

The guard was pleasantly surprised, “Oh, excellent! So, how does this group look? What do you think their chances are?”

The driver shrugged, “Compared to the last ones?” He shook his head, “Well, none of ‘em are as big as the other guys I hauled in before.”

“Yeah, but that doesn’t mean they can’t fight!”

The driver let out a loud laugh, “Yessir, true enough!”

“Alright, everything looks good here. You can go on through, then.” He handed the driver back his papers and rattled the cage as it went by, “See you boys in the arena! Hope you make me lots of money!”

Juko remained silent as he sat in the back of the cage, watching the scene unfold before him as the others good-naturedly laughed along with the guard. He hadn’t engaged with the others for the entire trip because, unlike them, he wasn’t there of his own free will.

A few weeks previous, word had reached Noba that his brother, Suna, had been arrested on the ridiculous premise of breaking a Lycanian law by having an illicit relationship with a woman from the Empire.

Juko's father, the N'bari chieftain of their clan, had sent him in search of Suna. He had hoped to avoid an international incident and so opted to send his son in as a gladiatorial recruit, just as Suna had been. While it was true that Juko had trained by his brother's side growing up, he had never wanted to be a gladiator himself, instead opting for a life of service within his clan. But, despite his reservations, he knew he would try by any means necessary to retrieve Suna for his father.

After they had passed through the gates, the cage then continued to rattle through the streets of Odalia as her citizens came away from their tasks and obligations to cheer the arrival of the new gladiators. The others in the cage played up to the crowds, flexing their muscles, pantomiming fights with one another and generally reveling in the moment that they had been trained for their entire lives. Juko turned around and looked over his shoulder, glancing at the cheering throngs through the wooden slats of the cage. He saw a lady pull up her skirts, revealing to him that she wore nothing underneath as she gave him a wink. Juko quickly turned away, his expression stern.

The driver carried them around the market once more before finally leading them to the Amphitheater. When they arrived at its entrance, the driver gleefully called out, "Open the gates!"

Juko looked up at the towering, rounded structure and despite his attempt to remain stoic, his heart leapt at the sheer size of it. It reminded him of being home and looking up at the mountain peaks that surrounded his village.

Along with his awe, Juko also couldn't fight the lingering incredulity that a N'bari could ever be so welcomed into the capital of the Lycanian Empire without having his own head handed to him. The two lands were ancient enemies and it wasn't until the Peacebringer Emperor had forged the *Pax Lunas* treaty that they were ever able to even co-exist in such close proximity to one another.

For the Lycanians, in their fear, saw the ancient N'bari Moon People across the waters to the far south-east as a bloodthirsty Bestial tribe that were capable of little more than animal savagery in their minds. They were known throughout the land for their fierce hand-to-hand combat fighting skills, large size and indomitable wills. This made for a formidable enemy to the Lycanian armies, who were small in stature by comparison and used to fighting from a distance with arrows and spears.

Emperor Gaius' original intention when he set forth from the White Palace towards Noba was not peace but had been actually to conquer the Spice Route - a main supply artery that led across the

ocean and directly into the N'bari Mountains. Had he been successful, the conquest would have cut off the N'bari's sole existing trade route. With it in his possession, Gaius would've been able to levy a tax on all items coming in and out Noba, as well as control the prices he paid for his imports.

Unfortunately for the Lycanian forces, the ensuing battle was bloody and full of casualty. When his imminent demise became inevitable, Gaius switched strategies and offered the N'bari chieftains a compromise: Lycania would trade its many sought-after spices, wheat and wines in exchange for fighters from Noba, which they could then train as gladiators to serve as entertainment for the people of the Empire. The bloodsport of gladiatorial combat had become increasingly in demand in the capital and brought in much gold to the Lycanian coffers. The promoters of the sport had recently discovered that the more exotic the fighter, the higher price people paid to witness the carnage - the Moon People being the most lucrative. The N'bari agreed to the terms and the treaty was signed.

The new gladiators rode past the entrance of the Amphitheater, the wheels of the cart kicking up the dust of the circuit grounds. As they came to a stop, the large heavy doors of the structure closed behind them with a resounding *thud* that Juko could feel

within his chest while, despite the thickness of the walls surrounding them, he could still hear the people outside cheering their arrival

“Well, men,” the driver jumped down from the carriage and walked around to open the cage, “welcome to your new home!”

The men excitedly exited the cage, leaving Juko, who had waited until the cart was empty before he, too, climbed out. When he did so and, at last, stood upon the ground of the arena, Juko felt nothing but wonderment at what he saw before him. The Amphitheater was huge, maybe even large enough to house his entire village. The seats that surrounded the circuit began at the ground level and went upwards in a diagonal as they rose higher. The dirt of the arena had been used so often that he could see ruts carved into the terrain from the many chariot races that had been held there.

The driver walked up to Juko and placed an arm around his shoulders. It was laughable to anyone watching as the driver was very short, with a large belly and Juko was tall and muscular.

“Did you know,” the driver began, “that they can even close up the doors and fill this place with water? Watched them do it myself last year with these small boats that they used to recreate the Battle of the West Sea against the Icanthians.”

Juko looked at the driver, who seemed unaware that the N'bari wasn't sharing in his enthusiasm.

The driver patted him on the back, "Well, pick up your things and get in there. They'll take the best beds before you know it."

Juko glanced around to see where the driver was indicating and saw that his hand pointed towards a double set of metal doors that led to the gladiators' underground quarters. Juko nodded and muttered a polite, "Thank you," as he followed the others.

Unlike most of the men he had seen so far, Juko had brought nothing with him on his journey. All he possessed were the clothes on his back, which included an extra long black tunic studded geometrically with teeny bits of metal mined from the mountains of his homeland. The tunic rested over a thick set of black breeches, which were stuffed into a heavy pair of dark leather boots. He also carried no weapon as he had been trained in the N'bari style of hand-to-hand fighting since birth and had never felt the need.

Once through the heavy doors, he had to wait for his eyes to adjust to the dimness of the room. Every few feet, brass braziers hung from the ceiling against bricked columns, casting little light in the room. Beds lined both sides of the long tunnel-like area, which ended in a small alcove in the back. He walked slowly, eyeing each bed and wondered which had been his

brother's.

Juko made his way to the alcove where a small window with iron bars had been set near the ceiling. The last two beds were located there, placed against the back wall so that they faced into the rest of the room, unlike the other beds that lined the sidewalls and faced each other. He picked the empty bed on the left and sat upon it. It was surprisingly soft and felt unnatural compared to his stone-based bed at home, which he had covered in a thick pile of straw and animal hides. He wasn't entirely sure how his sleep would fare upon the softness of the new bed but reminded himself that it was only temporary.

"You're from the north, aren't you?" A voice spoke to him in his native Noban tongue. He looked up at the entrance to the alcove and saw a very large man, his skin so dark that were it not for the window behind Juko casting light into the room, he would've been hard to discern in the shadows.

Juko stood and gave a slight, respectful bow, "Yes, I am."

"Grasshopper Clan?"

He smiled the restrained smile of one who was used to performing ambassadorial duties, "That is correct."

The other man nodded and Juko couldn't help but notice the thickness of his neck as he spoke, "I'm from

the south. I thought you light-skins up north didn't usually send fighters."

"Light-skin" would seem a misnomer to most Lycanians had they overheard its usage, for even though Juko was far lighter than the other man, he still appeared darker than the average resident of Odalia.

"Yes, that's true."

The other man looked at him slightly suspiciously for a moment, then eased into a bright smile, "My name is T'tembo, I am from the Lion Clan of the south."

"I am Juko."

"Well, Juko, I will be your neighbor," he indicated the other well lived-in bed area beside him in the alcove.

Juko nodded and offered another slight smile, which then turned into a frown as he sat back down, having momentarily forgotten about the discomfort of the bed.

T'tembo laughed, "Yes, the beds are difficult to get used to. They use bird feathers, believe it or not!"

"It is a very odd notion," Juko said and pressed down on the bed, feeling the feathers shift beneath his hand.

"You know, we had another fighter from your clan. He was much bigger than you, though. His name was Suna, do you know him?"

Juko's heart stopped, "He was here?"

"Yes, so you do know of him?"

"He's my brother. I heard he was arrested!"

The other man nodded glumly, "He was but no one knows what's happened since."

Juko stood, "Where is he being held?"

"The Palace, I would think."

Juko turned to leave the alcove, walking quickly towards the doors of the living quarters but T'tembo called out to him before he reached them, "That is not a good idea, Juko."

"You do not understand," he arrogantly spat back at him, "I have to find my brother; that is why I am here."

"Then, you won't get very far."

"And why's that?" Juko asked, slightly annoyed.

He answered matter-of-factly, "Because the Amphitheater is locked."

Juko seemed undaunted, "Then I'll just ask them to unlock it."

T'tembo laughed a hearty, deep laugh, "You can't. You're a *gladiator* now."

"So? Then they'll respect me all the—"

"No. Let me rephrase: You are a *slave* now."

T'tembo's words hit Juko like a hard punch to the gut. He stepped towards the other man, "What do you mean?"

“What I mean is, they can dress it up all they want, call it ‘fighters’ or ‘gladiators’ or whatever but we are slaves to the Lycanian Empire. Once those doors outside shut, they also locked. Your place is here and you can’t leave.”

“No, that can’t be,” Juko shook his head. “The recruiter-“

“Everything they told us during recruitment is a lie. Very few fighters survive to get their freedom. And the big house and the beautiful women they promised? I’ve been here two years and *this*, “ he pointed back to his bed, “is my big beautiful house. I barely make enough from the fights to pay my room and board and I am currently undefeated.”

“No,” Juko shook his head, “that can’t be right. The *Pax Lunas*-“

“The *Pax Lunas* wasn’t worth the papyrus it was written on.” He placed a meaty hand on Juko’s shoulder, “Look at us, my friend, we are *all* slaves.” T’tembo turned Juko to face the other men who were laughing and talking excitedly with one another about their future conquests as he concluded, “they just don’t know it yet.”

“But-“

The heavy metal doors to the quarters opened and an older man, dressed in gray Lycanian robes and carrying a horsehair flywhisk, entered with a much

younger and attractive male, dressed in pastels. The older man's rough expression was set very stern as he looked over everyone in the room, swishing the flywhisk at either side of his face while he walked.

T'tembo whispered to Juko as if it had meant something, "That's Euric, the Vandal."

"Hello, men," he addressed them, his voice rough and gravely but with a showman's timbre. "My name is Euric and I am your *lanista*." He paused in front of a short but stout Hairy Man, "Your *owner*." He continued walking, swatting at unseen flies on either side of his face, "I'm in charge of your training. I also set up your fights and," he paused before Juko and looked him up and down, "I'm in charge of arranging your funerals." He turned from Juko and continued to address the other gladiators, "The rules here are simple. First, don't die. Then again, if you do die, I suppose the other rules don't matter. We don't bring women here. If you fancy the brothels, I will have Leonas make a trip once a week to cart you off to the Ala District to take care of your needs. You are not allowed outside the walls of the Amphitheater without reason. You see, those people out there?" he indicated the doors with his flywhisk, "they may love you in the arena but they'll hate you in the streets."

He paced as he continued to speak, "We train everyday. Meals are set and we eat them together. Laun-

dry is done once a week, unless you die, then your clothes are taken and sent back to your families.” He stopped and looked at them as if trying to remember anything he had forgotten in his welcoming speech, “Oh and disputes and disagreements are handled out there,” he indicated the doors again, “in the arena. We do not bring them in here.” He looked around the quarters again, “Well, I believe that is all. Enjoy your off time for the moment for tomorrow begins training.” Euric walked away but Juko called out to him before he could reach the doors, “Wait, *sir!*”

“Sir?” he turned, a slight grin on his face. “Well, haven’t we been raised properly.” Euric narrowed his eyes as he studied Juko further, “You know, you... look very familiar. Have we met before?”

“Yes, no - I mean, that is what I need to speak to you about.” Juko hesitated a moment before continuing, “I... I’m not sure that I should be here. No, I *shouldn’t* be here. I came as a favor to my father, to find my brother.”

Euric laughed, “You shouldn’t be here? What do you mean you *shouldn’t* be here? There is no one here that shouldn’t be here. If so,” he looked into Juko’s dark eyes with his own blue ones, “then they are a fool. You *are* here and you are here until you die.”

“But, sir, I need to find my brother-“

The *lanista* was impatient, “And just who is this

brother? Why should I even know him?”

“He is Suna, son of Mutebe, chieftain of the Grasshopper Clan in Noba.”

The Vandal’s face fell. He closed his eyes and shook his head, “I’m... I’m sorry to inform you, son, but your brother... is dead.”

Juko began to shake with the revelation in the other man’s words. “What?” he gasped when he could at last find a voice with which to do so.

Euric nodded, “He died not long ago... and for that I truly *am* sorry.”

Juko fought back the rush of emotion that threatened to overwhelm him as his world fell apart. He lifted his head with a defiant lilt, “Then I must retrieve his body and return to my father.”

“Son,” Euric placed a sympathetic hand on his arm, “even if I knew where they were keeping his body, you cannot leave.”

Juko’s stared around the room in disbelief, at last becoming aware of the bars that were set into the windows that surrounded him, “What do you mean?”

The *lanista* looked into the young N’bari’s eyes, “There are only two ways that you may cease being a gladiator: you either earn your freedom in the dust of the arena... or you die trying.”

\* \* \*

Kaeso was exhausted, as he had never ridden so far for so long in all of his life. He had not eaten or slept since leaving Odalia the previous day; not even after he had stumbled upon Agatha's cottage during the night. He continued to ride, despite the ache of his muscles as he clung to his horse. Meanwhile, the baby Alexia was still carefully tucked away behind his *hamata*, having slept most of the ride - he only hoped she would remain sleeping for a little while longer.

Suddenly, Odalia came into view and upon seeing its brilliant white walls Kaeso pushed his horse harder. He knew the mare was just as tired as he was but if she would just give him these last few meters, he would reward her with extra parsnips at the stables.

As he neared the capital's walls, Kaeso felt a mixture of both joy and terror for while he had safely made it home, he still had to pass through the gates without being questioned and *then* find his way through the White Palace to the Imperial Nursery.

Kaeso slowed his horse at the gate and was immediately greeted by one of the guards he was familiar with, "You've returned, I see."

"Yes; exhausted but yes."

"The Decanus wants to see you, *immediately*."

"Oh?" Kaeso panicked slightly, "I-I have to secure my horse first and then wash the road dirt off -"

The guard shrugged dismissively, "It's your fu-

neral.”

He opened the doors and let Kaeso through. The soldier and his secret slumbering bundle rode through the market, weaving in and out of the stalls in order to avoid stopping and speaking with as many people as he could. He passed the Temple of the Two Brothers and offered a quick prayer of protection as he did. To his relief, Alexia remained asleep as they then rode towards the White Palace’s stables. Kaeso was halted before entering by another guard minding the stables, “*Salve*, Kaeso. You know the Decanus is looking for you?”

“Yes, I heard. Just putting my horse up. She rode all night, so I thought she deserved a res-“

“Alright, go on through, then.”

Kaeso led his horse into the stable area and dismounted. The baby sighed loudly as he did and he froze in terror for a second. Then, after a moment, when it became clear that no one else had heard the sound, he took a deep breath and led his horse to the stable. He passed the reins to the boy on duty, telling him, “Brush her down, give her plenty to drink and extra feed.”

The boy nodded and Kaeso continued his cautious trek through the back entrance into the barracks of the Lycanian forces. He took another deep breath and nervously twiddled his fingers down by his sides as he

walked into the highly restricted, heavily armed area. Kaeso tried to remember the layout of the Palace past the barracks. If he remembered correctly, the Imperial Nursery wasn't too far away from where he currently stood.

He walked through the large marble-arched hallway and heard the din of the barracks around him as the patrol shifts prepared to change over for the afternoon watch. He heard another sleepy gurgle from the baby and again prayed to the gods for their protection. Kaeso's heart pounded so hard within his chest that he was sure everyone could hear it echoing throughout the halls.

*Please, please, please, please...* he pleaded silently to the gods, telling himself that it was only a few more steps and he would be away from the barracks. After that, it was just one more hallway to the left, a short right and then-

"*Milite Kaeso!*" The Decanus stepped into view in front of him.

Kaeso's stomach dropped to his knees and his eyes widened.

"You were ordered to report to me immediately," the Decanus was a tall imposing man, with low, thick eyebrows and the coldest set of blue eyes that the young soldier had ever seen on another human being. "Why have you not done so?"

“I-I-“ Kaeso stuttered helplessly.

The Decanus shook his head, “I’ll let it go this time because I have more pressing matters to attend. Were you successful?”

“Y-yes,” Kaeso swallowed deeply and felt around in his belt pouch for the ring. He found it quickly and handed it over to the Decanus with a shaking hand. “Here-here is my proof, sir.”

The Decanus took it and examined it closely, “Ah, yes - that is *definitely* the official seal of Tyre.” He looked back up at Kaeso, “Excellent work, Milite. I’ll be sure the Centurion hears of this and lets the Emperor know. You could very well be looking at a promotion.”

Kaeso felt the baby’s hand squeeze against his chest through his tunic, “Th-uh, thank you, sir.”

“Let us retire to my room and I’ll pour you a drink-  
“

“Actually, sir, I’m really-“

The Decanus smiled knowingly, “I know, I know.” He laughed and put an arm around Kaeso’s shoulders, “Go ask Ginny for a special, tell her I sent you. You deserve to enjoy yourself for a couple of hours. *This*,” he indicated the ring, “is worth it.”

Kaeso forced a laugh but in truth he was fairly certain that he going to throw up if he had to stand there much longer. He bowed to the Decanus and

walked quickly down the hallway. As he did, he could hear the baby waking up and beginning to whimper. Seeing no one else around, he put a protective arm across his chest and ran as fast as he could through the hallway. He then made the final turn that would lead him to the nursery.

As he rounded the corner, Kaeso came to an abrupt stop at what appeared before him. It was a slew of young women sitting around the hallway in various states of relaxation. Some were reclining on plush settees as others practiced their dancing, while still others sewed tapestry and at least one sat in a corner strumming a harp. Kaeso silently cursed himself as he had forgotten that the nursery was located on the Hidden Women's wing of the palace.

The Hidden Women, or Men, depending on the preferences of who was ruling at the time, belonged exclusively to the Emperor. They were usually taken as infants from handsome couples throughout the empire and raised in the Imperial Nursery. It didn't matter the status of the parents, as long as infant fit the official criteria for beauty, which also changed upon the whims of the Emperor. New infants were brought in every seven years in order to replenish the fading beauty of the oldest group. None of the Hidden Women ever asked what happened when they reached a certain age. In fact, no one knew what that age was

as it, too, changed from ruler to ruler.

The life of the Hidden Women, while appearing opulent and privileged, could also be perilous as any other man outside of the Emperor was forbidden to look upon them and if such an act were discovered, the Hidden women would be killed immediately. The very rare times that the Hidden Women were found outside of their section of the palace, their faces were covered in white lace veils.

Kaeso put a hand up to his head, shielding his eyes just as one of the ladies caught sight of him, shouting angrily, “By the gods, you’re not supposed to be here!”

The other women stopped what they were doing and looked up. He heard a few gasp as they covered their faces and fled the hallway.

“No, no, I know, forgive me, ladies,” he kept his hand up. “I’m here by special request. Just going to deliver a message to the Nursery and I’ll be away. I’ve seen no one! I swear!”

“I do not like this! We are supposed to have-“

“I apologize!” He ran immediately to the heavy wooden door that was located along the wall beside him and banged loudly on its surface. A panel slid open and he saw a pair of black eyes examining him, “You can’t be here.”

“Sotiria?”

“Who asks?”

“Agatha sent me.”

He heard the sound of a heavy lock shifting and the door opened. He walked in to the all-white marble sitting area. Green plants rested every few feet and comfortable plush lounges, much like the ones outside of the room, lined the walls.

Sotiria, who looked very similar in stature and appearance to Agatha, eyed Kaeso suspiciously, “Well? Where is she?”

He nervously removed his weapons and then took off the *hamata*. As he did, the metal jangle of the chain mail woke the baby and she instantly began to wail at the top of her tiny lungs.

Sotiria’s face softened, “Oh, oh, oh, poor dear, come here.” She took the red-faced baby out of the binds and cradled her against her overflowing bosom.

“She’s-she’s probably hungry. I don’t think she’s had anything to eat since... since we left Agatha’s cottage.”

“Ah, that’s just fine, we’ll take care of that, won’t we?” she spoke soothingly to the infant, whose wails soon began to fade into whimpers.

Kaeso quickly dressed again and as he did, Sotiria stated, “It was a very kind thing that you have done.”

He shook his head, “No, not kind - just the *right* thing. Will she be safe here among the Hidden Women?”

“As safe as I can make her,” Sotiria held up a stack

of papers from a table beside her. Kaeso could see the official seals in the corners. “I’ve already drawn up the papers. She is now the child of a lovely farming couple who recently perished in an unfortunate accident.”

He smiled slightly, “Now, *that’s* very brave.”

“It isn’t the first time I’ve done this,” she winked at him. “All I need now is to put in a name-“

“Alexia,” he spoke up quickly. “Her-her name is Alexia.” He gave a sheepish smile to the old woman.

“Alright,” Sotiria nodded, “‘Alexia’ it is.”

“I guess I should go, now that she’s safe.” He walked awkwardly over to Sotiria and smiled down at the baby who stared back at him with wide, gray eyes. “Good luck, Alexia.”

Sotiria smiled, “She knows you’ve done right by her.”

He looked up at the woman and laughed slightly as he spoke, “Well, then I mean this in the best possible way, but I hope I *never* set eyes on her again for the rest of my life!”

\* \* \*