

Severus truly hated the cold. He hated the way that the water in the air stuck to everything, and that nothing would flow away and replenish itself. The only flowing water seemed to come from the Rhine, and the frigid nature of the river made it unpleasant even to approach. Severus swore that the very air was colder around the water.

Rome – or even Italy – this was not. There were no vineyards to take comfortable strolls through, nor grand cities with their parades to peruse. Even in the summer things seemed to be too cold, and the winters here weren't just filled with rain, but with snow of all things. It may have not been so bad if not for his mother. Gods how he loved her and needed her to stay away from him at the same time. But she could hardly stand being away from the eternal city and its beauty. She seemed to hate the world she inhabited more by the day, and her mood did not help his. As much as Severus hated the cold, his mother damned its existence. For every bit that he despised the stagnant and frozen water, his mother burned with enough hatred for the legion's warmth until spring.

The only thing that kept him somewhat sane was the fact that he was confident that it would all be over soon. The Germans would be sure to treat when faced with the might of Rome, much as how the Sassinids did those short years back. Severus groaned to himself slightly; how he tired of the provinces. He longed for his Imperial palace, true baths to remove the stench of the blackened forests here, and a climate befitting his upbringing and station. Just as soon as his messengers returned, the peace could be brokered.

“Yield legionarres!” The voice was curt and menacing. It was surely that brute... what was his name? Severus gave himself a moment before finding it. Maximinus. However good the man was as a soldier, and however much his reputation preceded him in these camps, Severus cared little for the man. Lowly born, roughly spoken, horrendously brutish, and with absolutely no knowledge of proper conduct around patrician family's and men of rank. Severus idly wondered what brought him to his tent today; he was under the impression that the next several days would be fairly uneventful.

“That grunting brute should lower his voice in your presence, be sure to mention that when he barges in here, as I'm sure he will.” Severus looked over to his mother, laying by the fire with a look in her eyes that seemed to be both utterly bored and completely hateful at the same time. He noticed his personal guards looking carefully - though trying their best to remain neutral in appearance – at how he would react to another of his mother's frequent directions. He did his best to nod in a manner befitting one in control. But when he turned to face Maximinus, his blood froze and he completely forgot how to act as an emperor. The problem was that, while he had spent many nights by himself thinking of how he should or would react to different situations, he never really thought on how he should die as an emperor. He had simply assumed that the day would be very far from him and his time in the present.

Maximinus' entrance cast aside any hope that Severus' death would come years from now, looking over on a reinvigorated Rome before passing control to one of the sons he had planned to have very soon. The man not only entered in full armour and with his sword drawn, but also had around him a small entourage. Just as Severus was hoping that his guards might afford him some small measure of time to escape and find legionarres true to their emperor, even they turned to Maximinus and silently lined up beside him. All his time in his chambers, all those long nights contemplating the proper way to act in all things, and he was completely at a loss. He tried to think, to say something that would turn the hate filled men in front of him away from

their deadly desires, or at the very least something clever and poignant so that the historians would remember some years from now, but nothing came to him.

“Your tone is always too harsh in this place Maximinus. Be sure to correct it in the presence of your emperor.” True to form, Severus’ mother spoke the last words for both of them, and they were oblivious, mildly drunken, and arrogantly condescending to their last.

As if by silent signal, the men in the tent advanced with no words on the two of them. The initial entry of men moved straight at Severus, while the former guards assaulted his mother. He tried to pick up his sword, but he forgot where he placed it. A small dagger is all he could produce before Maximinus was upon him, and in one slap of his massive palm, Severus saw nothing but stars as he dropped the knife and dropped to his knees. He tried to stand and attack again, but a sword slashed across his back. With a shriek of pain, Severus fell all the way to the ground, roiling in the ugly pain of the gash. While his senses were still with him, he looked over to his mother, who did not even have the privilege of blades; the guards were simply striking her, over and over. Heavy hands slammed into soft skin, and even the cries that she tried to usher forth seemed to be hit down into the dirt, as she was lifted from the ground again and again, rudely and savagely, only to be slapped or kicked or punched once more. Severus saw a broken tooth fly from her mouth, and in his anger he attempted to stand and attack once more, but there was no need. He was hoisted to his feet, and before he could really react, he felt the terrible heat and pain of knives plunging into his abdomen, again and again. His legs had no strength left and he simply wanted to collapse, but he was still held aloft, being stabbed still again and again, until he was almost convinced that this would be his existence forever now.

Then black.

But then not. Severus was on the ground again, looking over to where the grotesque and swollen visage of his mother starred back at him, though not really seeing. There was breath bubbling blood from her mouth, but he doubted that meant much at. Then there was a howl of pain from his stomach as it reverberated through the whole of him.

And then there was nothing but blackness.

And then again Severus found the world before him again, but more gray somehow. He tried to speak, but no words would come forth. He tried to stand, but his body no longer felt like his own. It simply felt like a shell he was hiding inside for a few moments. He liked that idea. He would just hide for a moment, close his eyes on the horrible things they were witnessing, and this would all drift pass.

Blackness washed over again.

Then the blackness receded. Severus could feel rope binding his feet, and he could feel movement; he was being pulled along. Slowly and deliberately he could feel his ugly wounds dragging on cold mud, and the pain crippled his body and made it cry out like a feral dog being kicked. But that was okay, for this body was simply a shell; just here for a brief moment. He saw his mother again, and knew she was alright too; her shell was taking the pain it was being subjected to, and she was fine beneath that. Somewhere, far off, he thought he might be dying, but he knew that this wasn’t how emperor’s died.

Then, the blackness was all that was left.

Soxerius woke with a start and covered in a sheen of sweat. The perspiration on his head wasn't caused by the damnedable country and its heat he found himself in, it was from the

memories that had cycled his legs in his sleep. Beautiful, cold, dark forests, with trees older than even Rome. The snow stacked high and pure all around him, and his tracks only the second marks in them. His breath swirling around his head as he strode though, tall and proud and only 14. And always the pursuit, feeling it in his lungs.

But that feeling faded again, like it always did when he woke. He feared the mornings more than any time in the day, especially right after he woke, because he wasn't sure that his life would have that feeling any longer in it. That fear wasn't what it once was though.

Soxerius had never seen a Persian, or certainly a Sassanid Persian in his life. For that matter he had never seen most people of any different stripe than the Germanic tribe lands from where he heralded from. But here he was, about as far flung from his home town as he could be. The desert air was harsh in his lungs, the sand got everywhere; in his eyes, his ears, into his very joints it seemed. He hated it all really, but he loved seeing it, seeing the world, and he loved the opportunity to hunt.

It wasn't glamorous by any means. As an auxiliary, he had to deal with Roman scorn as they marched and worked. More often than not he was digging shit trenches after the days march was done, and sneering legionnaires would piss in them before they were half dug, still expecting him to continue. But many other days, he was lucky to be able to join in the foraging for wild game, and find himself in strange wilderness with his bow.

The commanders couldn't abide the standard meal of oily bread and porridge, and beans were just as bad to them. No, their tastes were much more refined than that, and couldn't deal with stooping to consume the meal of the common man. This mentality was especially true of those commanders whose birth was higher in status. So meat needed to be hunted at least half the days of the march, and while he could be looked down on because he was no citizen, Soxerius' skill with a bow and arrow was second to none in the entire marching column. So his talents were made use of, and even if it were simply for rabbit or anything else small, the officers would take it. And Soxerius would relish the chance to stalk in a wild that might as well have been the banks of the River Styx for how far away it was from where he started.

But the mornings still were nothing he relished. Long marches under the command of another Germanic that was from a township a couple miles from his...though it should have been several miles further in his opinion. It was in the morning where the sand seemed to clog his pores and pool in his crotch during the night, and the heat that crept into the morning so early kept him from sleeping well, so he dredged himself along on tired and resentful feet. Even though most others around him complained more moving through the mountains earlier in their trek, Soxerius preferred the wind of ice over sand, and the sun at least seemed to bow to the clouds every now and again there. But ever since coming down into the country proper, the heat oppressed his mood, and the game was much harder to come by. The other problem of course was now that they were approaching their enemies, marches were slower, camps had to be constructed more strongly, and everything seemed to be moving along at a snails pace.

But there was something else in the air now, something better. Something that gave the danger a tinge of excitement and anticipation. Soxerius was barely 17, and he didn't know what that feeling was at first until there was conversation around a fire that he overheard.

It was the anticipation to kill.

There were of course other reasons for the excitement in the camps. There was certainly the wish to end the aggression towards Rome and crush her enemies for her safety. People wanted to plunder and be rich; especially as the pay continued to dwindle in these recent years. There was always the hope to gain glory and advance ones position, either in the legions or in

society. But the thing that seemed to give the air a special malice that everyone wanted to breathe deep on was the chance to kill. The men about the fire talked about their first kills, each one in more detail than any could remember their first time laying with a woman; even among those with the filthiest and more interesting stories of such events. The temperature of the day, the weapon they used - if any - and most often, the person they killed. Did they see it coming, did they fight well, did their end come swiftly or not, was their a mess even. It was certainly something that was talked of long after the fire died and anyone sensible would have turned in for the night to deal with the march in the morning.

Soxerius didn't know if he would relish the first time he killed a man. Or even if he would know when he did. He had been drilled, over and over again, that when the armies met, he would likely be off to the side volleying missiles at the Sassanid's until they ran or he was overrun. How was he to know if any of the dozens of arrows he would be able to throw in even the smallest of windows of time would find a mark well enough to kill?

But still, Soxerius breathed deep on the feeling like all those around him; likely more because he had never tasted the heady mixture before, except in the hunt of animals. And he doubted very much that the last look he saw in a deer as it bled out at his feet would be very much like the feeling of killing a man.

He wished he could feel that excitement more in this dreaded mornings though. This place may have offered much that he couldn't have seen or experienced before leaving his home behind, but it was also clearly adept at giving him experiences that he cared very little for. It wasn't until the Centurion of his Auxillary called for him that Soxerius was able to forgive this land its sand and heat. He was about to be given exactly what he wanted.

"Wine?" The offer was genial but distant at the same time. Soxerius wondered if that was simply how Roman's learned to deal with outsiders from a young age.

"Perhaps beer if you have it." That illicit a smile from the Centurion, a gesture that felt condescending more than it actually was. The man sent off his attendant to fetch something more to the young German's tastes. Soxerius couldn't help but feel a small modicum of respect for the officer. Most people in his station didn't bother to look in the direction of the auxiliary forces, nor trust them enough to shake themselves after a piss. But the man stood before him with no one to protect him lest the German's latent barbarianism took hold and endangered the mans life.

"I feel one day you will reach for the goblet over the tankard; after all, I would make the assumption that you are here to gain citizenship."

"Among other desires...sir." There was a pause while the commander waited for Soxerius to continue, and he in turn waited for him to continue talking. He wasn't trying to be coy or hold information back intentionally, he just wasn't used to a situation in which the man of superior standing paused his talking long enough for him to speak in anything more than three word utterances. When it became clear that he was waiting to Soxerius to continue, he stammered before continuing,

"The things that I am able to see as an auxiliary, to experience in the world, are not things I could from where I came from, so I left that place." The older man nodded knowingly, and his attendant brought for them two flasks, leaving immediately afterwards.

"To Rome." Said the Centurion, though there was conviction lacking when he raised his cup.

"To beer and laughter." The older man smiled slightly at that in approval. "It is something my Opa would say."

“He sounds like a wise man with wise things to say.”

“Occasionally.” That comment was followed by a pause, and the two men drank deeply of the thick brew. Soxerius did his best not to grimace at the quality of Roman beer on the march. Still better than the wine rations he thought.

“I would say that you do not seem overly interested in Roman citizenship as a reason to being here son.”

“It seems like a fine thing, though there is much more that is important to me.” The Centurion simply nodded and finished his cup in a single pull. Soxerius rightly assumed that meant that the true reason he had been summoned was about to be broached.

“I get the feeling that victory is important to you Soxerius. I feel that you are a man that looks for challenges to overcome, things to see, and perhaps even glories to call your own.”

“Glories I can take or leave. I’m here to experience the world and earn the coin to see more than I have.”

“And Rome is a means to an end in there?” Soxerius felt his chest get tight, and he wondered if he was here for his loyalties to be tested. The Centurion saw the tension and continued, “Don’t worry son, I don’t mean that as a poor thing. There’s nothing wrong with using Rome for your own goals as long as Rome is getting its fair end of the bargain. I’m using service here to get a piece of land back in my home Briton. And to do that I will do what is needed against Rome’s enemies so that I may see that farm of mine in the future.”

“May I presume that I’ve been summoned here to discuss what it is I can do to ensure Rome’s victory?” In the only moment of the exchange, the Centurion took on a tone that Soxerius was much more used to coming from Roman commanders.

“I would think that there won’t be very much discussion on the topic to be honest,” and then, like that, the airy tone and scorn was gone from his demeanor, and he continued as if it were never there, or that he had even heard the young German, “You never come back from your foraging excursions without something killed.”

“There’s already game for those that know where to find it.”

“But that’s the thing young man; not many know where to find the kills. And fewer still have your skill completing the task. You’re the only forager who has never come back to camp empty handed.” Soxerius didn’t want to admit he didn’t enjoy the idea of arriving empty handed for the shame that would burn in him for it, and the punishment that the felt would be doled out to rub salt in such a wound.

“So I suppose I’m not here to be told to keep the meat abundant.”

“I’m here because I want you to spill more blood actually, just the blood of those that would seek to defy the Empire.” For all his attempts at remain aloof, Soxerius was still far from 20, and the way this man talked was hypnotizing. He leaned in, hanging on every syllable.

“Before I continue, you need to swear to me here that this conversation of ours goes no further than us.”

“Absolutely.”

“Good. I may want to win this war in the most efficient way possible, but the tactics that I would have you employ may be looked down upon by others. Though as I have said, my mind is firmly on life after this damned desert. That farm of mine won’t care what I did to grind the Sassanid’s into submission. So that’s why you stand here. Because we can engage the enemy, and make a fine showing of it and make them pay for their insolence. But they will fight and kill too many Romans for my liking. And they’ll kill less if something disrupts their efforts to wage war. Say, if messengers don’t get to where they need to go, or supplies are lost on route, or important

men must travel under heavy guard for fear of ambush. These are things that someone with the talent of a bow and a hunter could do, even in the strange desert. The right garb and knowledge of the land, and when the battle comes, many fewer Romans will have to die. And that improves my odds of leaving here alive.”

Soxerius thought on what was being asked of him. Not just to fight, throw missiles into a mass, but to kill for the Romans. To maliciously seek out those that Rome deemed worthy of death and deal it to them. In the same moment, he also felt the Centurion watching him closely for his reactions, or perhaps for his fears and trepidations.

“Point me in the direction you wish me to go, and I will make the Sassanids bleed for every grain of sand they tread on.” The two men smiled mirthlessly at one another; the smile of large cats in their jungle.

The action was over so quickly that it hardly felt as if it had begun. The dust still hung thick in the air when the horses had either fallen or run off from, and Soxerius knew that he would have to move with some small modicum of speed lest there be other patrols around here that would see the commotion and come to investigate.

“I told you there were too many!” Soxerius grimaced at the grating voice that cut through the dust and found him almost already annoyed by this companion he had been stuck with.

“Ashad, quiet is an important thing to remember out here...please.”

“Appologies. It’s just, that, I did tell you that there were too many didn’t I?”

“Yes, you did, and you were wrong,” Soxerius looked around from the middle of the carnage that they had just caused. Seven dead Sassanids, and two of the horses from the small group also dead in the dirty sand, “We dispatched them all; none got away to tell of what happened here.”

“But it could have easily turned badly for us! I had to stand down the last rider and spear his attendant. I was to join you to guide you through the land and make sure that *you* could accomplish the killing better. I don’t recall-” The man stopped talking as the archer stepped close to him and bore him down with his dark and intense eyes.

“You are with me to assist me. Today I determined that you would have to make good on your frequent boasts of skill with a spear.” Soxerius and Ashad simply stared at each other for a good moment longer, before the much taller and younger German continued,

“But I would say that you have fulfilled everything that I needed of you, and would suggest you go and return to camp. I will stay and do what I must until the first true battle, at which point I too will return and speak very highly and loudly of your bravery and skill today. Is that satisfactory to you?”

The dark skinned man ignored the slight he felt was under the pleasant words; he simply nodded. He had learned that words were not of high value to the rather stoic youth, so he did not waste them. Ashad simply took one last look around,

“Good luck to you then. We will share drinks upon your return.” And then he was gone.

Soxerius did not harbour much fondness for the man, or have the highest opinion of him. He acted like a man much larger and stronger, but only if that man was a braggart. Still, there was no denying that he could move over the earth as quietly as Soxerius, but faster. Ashad also knew these lands like few others; but now Soxerius did as well. It was something he planned to make use of in the coming days out here on his own.

But first the bodies. He had no plans to move them or respectfully lay them out. He always thought that the splayed out dead left to the wild and the beasts within it sent the message

he was aiming to send to his enemies; death awaits you. They did have on their person though all sorts of things that he wanted. The money was useful, especially if there was a town close enough that wouldn't ask questions of the oddly tall pale skinned man dressed in the locale attire. Weapons less so as Soxerius only made use of a small knife and his bow. Anything else would not be useful to him out here. The food they had on their person was usually some terrible salted meat, but it was better than starving. And of course he needed to recover what arrows he could that had found their mark. It was a difficult thing to resupply bolts out here.

Soxerius started picking his way through the bodies, working in the order in which they had been killed. The small band looked like it could have either been a patrol or a messenger, but Soxerius wanted to find out. He knelt down next to the first victim, who had been crushed to death after the opening two arrows had struck and killed his horse very quickly; the first arrow to panic the beast and get it to rear, the second to kill it outright. Soxerius opened many of his attacks this way to spread confusion, but it yielded the happy coincidence of killing the rider today. The arrows pulled out easy enough from the horse flesh, but the man was carrying little of value besides a few copper pieces.

The next two victims had looked like terrible and dangerous men in life, but now in death like any other undignified mess; one had even voided his bowels as he quickly bled out. They had emerged from the back of the small chariot, clearly the body guard for whoever important was riding. Their armor gleamed, their blades held what looked like wickedly sharp and curved blades, and the sneers worn by both let you know that taking life was no thing to them. They would have easily killed both Soxerius and Ashad in moments had they been able to close in where the first arrows had been loosed from, but they weren't given the chance. In the dust and whinnies of the dying horse, it wasn't very clear that it had been a hidden archer that caused the horse to fall. These two had simply jumped out looking for the kill they hoped was there, not pausing long enough to realize what might be happening. The first one dropped instantly with an arrow into the eye socket – a shot that even Soxerius had to admit was a touch on the lucky side – and the second with two in rapid succession that struck the hip and groin of the man. His awareness of an assailant with a bow had only helped him avoid the quick end of his partner, and little else. In the now calming morning light, the second of the two guards was still dying in the sand. Soxerius didn't really have time to deal with the mans pleads, so before he looted the mans corpse, he brought a hard heel down onto his head three times in rapid succession to finish the mans delirious babbling with a sick and wet sound.

The next three were really just riders to shore up the numbers of the party and make it look like less of a target. But true fighters they were not. Soxerius had killed one before too much longer after the body guards, and the other two had turned to flee. Ashad had reluctantly emerged to delay their flight, and even managed to skewer the one horse and later the rider several times. The other had made it a short distance, but was still painfully within the range of Soxerius' arrow. He didn't even bother approaching that rider further out in the grassy expanse he had attempted to flee into; the other two contained little of value.

“But you, you look like you might have something interesting for me.” Soxerius approached the body he had just addressed. It was a young man - probably almost his age - in high class military garb. But he was too young to stand to the panic and death that greeted his party on the road that day, and attempted to flee. Not nearly fast enough, and Soxerius had buried an arrow into his chest. As he approached though, there was something wrong with how the body was splayed in the dirt. It wasn't anything he was able to put his fingers on, but it was there. So airing on the side of caution, Soxerius, while still two steps from the fallen nobleman, attempted to turn him

over with the tip of his bow. He had been right to be suspicious.

The young man spun as fast as his wound would let him with a dagger in hand, and made a stabbing slash that would have made an ugly woman out of Soxerius if he had been standing a little closer. Disappointment flashed on the Persians face, but still, he valiantly tried to lunge as Soxerius.

It was easy enough to kick the knife from the mans grasp, and bend down to be eye level with him. He grabbed him by the hair and made him crane to talk with him, straining the bloody looking arrow wound that, now that he could see it more clearly, Soxerius could see wasn't going to kill this man anytime soon.

"Fucking Romans! Can't even kill a man, have to send their German dogs out to get it done!" Soxerius didn't say anything to that, simply pulled the mans hair - and thus his whole body - more sharply. He grimaced so hard it looked like he was going to crack a tooth, but he didn't cry out. Warrior or not, this Sassanid was facing death with some dignity. Soxerius pulled a little harder still before beginning to talk.

"What were you carrying?" He didn't really know how to go about this process of interrogation, but he tried to approach it by saying as few words as possible.

"I don't have anything." It was all the man could grasp without calling out in pain. The lie was obvious though, so he also braced for what was to come next.

Soxerius punch the man three times, hard, in the wound that seeped slowing from his ribs. For all the muscle it tore through, it didn't look like it had wounded anything vital; it was quite the unfortunate oddity for the dying man. With the blows, he cried out, but stifled his sounds, biting down on his tongue to control himself so hard that it drew blood.

"This many of you, you had something somewhat important. A message? Supplies? Information? I'll find it after I kill you, you're only causing yourself more pain."

"Go get fucked by your Roman masters dog." He clenched his teeth as Soxerius drew out and arrow and dug it around in the man's wounds. Now he screamed with unfettered voice, the sound of it seeming to fade and collapse not far from them in the shrub grass.

"Tell me, this could go on quite a while."

"Your women might start to blather if you give them a little fingering like that back where you're from, but if I'm to die, I will die a man," he paused again, steeling his resolve, before continuing, "try to remember that when my cousins pluck your eyes from your feeble body."

Soxerius nodded at the man, and when he tensed expecting another round of agonizing interrogation, Soxerius simply slid around him and opened his throat with one deft and messy stroke; he still hadn't perfectly translated draining a deer to cutting the throat of a man. Arterial spray soaked his hand and the dirt in front of the two men, before it became a gurgle that simply soaked the robes of the young man. He kicked once, twice, and was gone mid way through the third. Soxerius fished out the two ugliest coins he had salvaged off the other men, and laid them in the young Persians eyes after easing his husk onto the desert floor.

Soxerius took a moment to look down on the Sassanid's body, and he thought about how this felt compared to the first man he had killed, only three weeks ago. He reflected on the scout that was trying to gain knowledge about the Roman armies composition, stalking around and feeling secure in the fact that no one was around. But forests were forests, and no one moved through them as quietly as Soxerius, and he had tracked him all morning, all afternoon, and long into the night. Only when the moon was moving away from sight did he come upon him, restlessly sleeping in the cradle of a small low land tree. He had actually been waking from sleep at that moment, while Soxerius had been considering giving up on his pursuit and finally sleeping for a

spell. His bloodshot eyes were the last thing the Persian saw in the waning moon light, right before the shaft that he had loosed a half moment before - the sound of which had caused him to turn in Soxerius' direction - passed right through the mans neck.

There was something hollow in the act. Soxerius had expected to feel something more as he watched the man struggle against the death that had been dealt to him, holding his neck as if he would be able to keep the blood from leaking out if he just held it in. But it wasn't any different than taking down a deer. To be fair, he had enjoyed the challenge of finding an animal that was much more clever than a deer, but there wasn't much more to the act. The man died, and what Soxerius thought was going to be a heady feeling of power was simply a satisfaction of a hunt well completed mixed with a small detachment.

Soxerius had thought that the feeling was taped by the fact he was so very over tired, but after finally taking the rest of the night to lay his head down in the area the scout had been (it was a good place to rest), had had returned to the now cold and stiff body to find the feeling he felt while looking down at it was still the same; smug but detached.

He had left the body like that, twisted in that final moment of panic and pain, laid out in the elements and to the mercy of nature, but the image of the man and the feelings that he conjured up stayed with him. The next man he killed, it was the same thing, until Soxerius realized he probably would never get the feeling from a kill he heard about the camp fire. It didn't depress him, but he didn't enjoy the revelation either.

Soxerius shook the thoughts from his brain and went about his task. Despite their isolation out here, the commotion of the dying horses still showed in the mostly dissipated cloud of dust, and the shouts of the dying Persian may have found ears out there in the wastes, though it certainly was unlikely.

It didn't take long to find what he had been guarding. There were only so many places that it could be, and because they were clearly travelling light and trying to reach their destination quickly, the number of men and the equipment they had with them was certainly limited. In the chariot he found what he had been looking for. An exquisitely inlaid piece of gold - about an eighth of what would be largely considered a standard bar - had been hidden close to the now abandoned reigns. Soxerius couldn't understand what was written on the bar, except for three words; enemy, pay, and the name of the fortified town a quarters day march to the south. Was this supposed to be some sort of advance on payment for siding with the Persians in their struggle? Were the Sassanids so divided that they must pay their own citizenry to side with them?

When all was said and done, Soxerius cared very little for what the gold meant. The enemies of Rome were dead, and whatever they carried - be it simply this token or a message with it - was now gone or his. He found himself wondering if this act would help the old Centurion gain his farm on Briton, or why someone would reject the world simply to till an insignificantly small piece of it.

Colonia Claudia Ara Agrippinensium may not have been Rome, but that was one of the reasons that Belphaxus enjoyed the city so. Reclining in the baths at the moment drove the point home to him. Perhaps they were not as grand as the ones could be found in the eternal city, but nor was it as crowded. Here, in Colonia Claudia, Belphaxus felt the ability to stretch his elbows around...especially when he had paid off the officials to make its use this morning a private

affair for himself and his guests.

To be fair though, one of the men that was coming to meet him was not a guest but a client of his. And in all truth, Belphaxus knew that this man was no true client to him. Some barbarian that tried so very hard to ingratiate himself into his company, but he had seen the hate burning in the mans eyes. It was only a matter of some careful questions to determine that this man did not cross the Rhine with servitude towards Rome in mind. Sure, some underpaid border guard may have simply assumed he was another able body to till the fields, or perhaps even someone who might join the legions. More likely he had bribed or snuck his way over the border. In whatever the case, Belphaxus had plenty of contacts that could find out information on someone from the wild Germanic provinces, and he quickly learned this was the brother of a woman who had come to him for a chance to be part of civilization. Apparently the life of a whore was not the lifestyle he wanted for his sister, but she had been happy to get away from the cold and wildness of her life for the chance to work the houses that Belphaxus had contact with in Carthage. And it was by no means a terrible way for a barbarian to make the coin to buy your freedom, and likely citizenship. Belphaxus ran excellent establishments in that corner of the empire, and she was pretty for being untamed, not to mention her look would be exotic to the citizenry down there. She would spend a number of years on her back, and then the world would be for her; she could continue the life in the houses or move on to whatever her heart desired. He had to smile at the foolishness of the brother for being so upset at him for giving his sister the opportunity to live a true and Roman life.

But he would never have the chance. He was coming here today, and Belphaxus had little doubt he would make a move to end his life. The hate in the mans eyes could hardly be contained, so when he arranged a private bathing session with the two of them, Belphaxus knew the man would make his move. What was his name again? Having a large entourage certainly had benefits, but it did become awkward when he had to struggle to remember the name of someone who hung out more on the fringe. Varilexen? Something like that; some ugly attempt at a common roman name. Not that it mattered, Belphaxus had no need of the mans name, just his blood.

Belphaxus was brought out of his thoughts in the warm steam when the false client entered himself. His smile today seemed genuine and broad, and he could guess why that would be the case. They greeted like old friends and proceeded to sit together for a time, talking of the state of the city and the empire, expressing concern for military morale under Severus. For all the hate that the man could barely keep from showing on his surface, he at least understood how to conduct yourself in the bath house. Under different circumstances he was sure he would have made fine Roman.

But Belphaxus knew that the time was nearing, and that his other guests would soon be waiting in the hot sulphur pools for him to arrive. And these were men that Belphaxus had little intention of making wait for too long; powerful patrician men who had journeyed far to enjoy his hospitality, and men that could help him get what he wanted. These were also men that would make an excellent audience for his death should the plotting Varilexen be able to work his will. That made it easy enough to assume where the man would seek to strike.

“Let us procure our strigil’s and join the others.” It was all Belphaxus had to say and the young german leapt up. It was almost too easy. The young man was so gracious, but at the same time doing his best conceal the fact that his simply tool had a blade honed so many more times that necessary to give it a wicked sharpness that Belphaxus could see without even a good examination. True, he was looking for it, but still. The man was certainly an enthusiastic

assassin, but a poor one. They strode lazily for the door, and of course he was offered it by the young man. On the other side were his guests. Belphaxus had one chance to do this properly. He strode through with a wide smile, but with a quick pace. Nothing that was suspicious to anyone, but it did give him that half moment of grace away from his would be killer. At the first sign one of his rising guests gave even the mildest look of concern, he took his cue and moved.

The German was reaching forward and slightly off balance, the small and sharpened strigil raised and coming for him while at the same time he was trying to say something against the imperialism of Rome. It would have been a messy death, cut open with the small blade, and probably having to be finished off as he lay on the ground bleeding and twitching. But Belphaxus was ready.

His small stature came to his advantage here, as the German - who was quite the hulking form - had to bend down to hold him while he attempted to open with the blade. But Belphaxus did what could have been expected; he fell forward and he turned to face his attacker, while at the same time grabbing and pulling down the man with him. Caught off balance on the slick tile, the German came tumbling after him. Not wanting to lose the knife that was his strongest advantage, Varilexen was only able to semi break his fall as he came down on the unforgiving marble face first. There was the hard sound of impact as Belphaxus rolled away, but the German was scrambling up fast already, if a touch unsteadily, Belphaxus put his hand on the ledge that was closest to him and found what he needed. As the German charged, Belphaxus removed the tile that he had loosened the night before, and holding it like a discus, hurled it with a small half rotation; all that he had time for before the German was upon him.

It was a true throw, and caught the charging bulk on the underside of his jaw. Belphaxus saw the impact crack the bone under the skin and the teeth as they collided with each other from the force. To the man's credit, not even this caused him to drop the knife or fall straight down, but now he was truly disoriented, even though he still moved forward. Belphaxus deftly stepped to the side, and with a rotation of his body as his assailant went past, threw him with extra force into the marble wall.

Finally the strigil came from his grasp, and the German tumbled to the ground. Amazingly though, almost as soon as he made such a harsh collision with the stone of the baths - again - the man was getting to his feet to attack again. Admirable or not, the man's balance and sense were too far gone for him now, even though he had two hands and probably two stone on the smaller Roman. Belphaxus moved close and delivered a devastating kick to the man's stomach, and instantly the wind went from him. A driving heel broke the man's ankle, and a devastating downward fist not only further broke the jaw, but drove the nose of the German into the ledge when the tile had been pulled from. Finally, he seemed to have no fight left in him, and he collapsed against the floor, dazed and bleeding and broken, even as he attempted to right himself and find Belphaxus to still kill him.

Casually, the Roman picked the blade up that was to be his end. With an almost dramatic flourish, he turned to his guests.

"Apologies for greeting you so poorly guests, but I hope you enjoyed the spectacle," the men in attendance - eight in all - had remained impassively watching from their seats in near the hot sulphur pools. All were old and certainly weren't going to risk their lives for the likes of Belphaxus, but their faces had remained impassive in the exchange. One had risen slightly, ready to call his slaves should the assailant prevail and turn his attentions on them, but that clearly had not been necessary. Belphaxus continued as he moved behind the man,

"But, as you can see, the frontiers are far from a tame and safe place. We have the legions

to guard us and our own resolve and skill to keep us safe, but still, men seek to defy Rome,” with that he slid behind the German before continuing, “And attempts can be brave, occurring in the very heart of the civilization that they hope to destroy. Hopefully we can discuss keeping Rome and her eternal city safe for the future.” With his prearranged words finished, Belphaxus moved to his finale. Stoic as these men may have been, they were still men, and they were still Romans, and were always prone to a good and flashy display.

He grabbed the German's hair, who had recovered enough by this point to struggle and Belphaxus lifted him half off the marble floor. He swore some in his rough Latin and in some Germanic, but with a shaken mind and a broken jaw, it only seemed to come across as gibberish. Belphaxus did admit it did add to the show. With deliberation, he inserted the sharpened tool into the man's stomach, but right above the hip bone. The scream came out deep and guttural, and with all the considerable strength he could muster, Belphaxus drew the tool in a horrific jagged cut through the man's midsection before it hit and buried in bone just shy of the man's chest. The deep scream became a piercing and frightened wail, then a whimper, and then nothing at all as Belphaxus released the body and let it collapse in the pile of viscera that had spilled before them both. The sound was a sickly wet thud, followed by the clatter of the knife next to the body. He stepped around them both and smiled widely.

“Now then, I think we should enjoy these legendary baths together, and discuss this important frontier to the empire.”

“No one is denying that things are difficult, especially here next to these, savages,” Survlis looked at the messy remains of the German that no one had cleaned up yet when he said savages before continuing, “but I don't know what you expect the Senate to do about it. The army serves the whim of the emperor, and we are men of Rome, not as well versed in the matters of the provinces as the governors and legates are.”

The men around Belphaxus nodded slowly, but not enthusiastically. For one, no one was moving very fast that morning, as the heat of the pools they lounged in had taken from most of them the will to be overly energetic. But more than that, many of the men assembled here – while they held technically higher political positions in more established families – respected and trusted Belphaxus, and if he spoke towards a particular course, it was at the very minimum heavily considered. Besides that, Belphaxus also held more estates and wealth than almost the entire collection put together. Political power might not have been his, but half these men had bought slaves from Belphaxus, and all of them had enriched him when they used the lavatories of Colonia Claudia; Belphaxus had interesting channels that flowed money back towards him.

“Brethren, the Senate may beat in the heart of the Empire, but her stretch is great indeed, and in places, threatened. Much like the heart of a man, should the skin be pierced by evil in the extremities, the heart is threatened. You men have the ear and attention of the emperor, you have the channels of discussion open with the legates and governors that you speak of. I merely suggest that the border that is the Rhine be stronger than it is now, for the sake of the entire empire. The corrupting influence of those beneath should be staunches as effectively as possible.”

“But Belphaxus,” Survlis started again, “aren't these people you refer to, don't they have the ability to become citizens themselves, to strengthen the empire as they add to it?”

Belphaxus stifled a cruel smile, holding it close for himself alone. This man was worse every copper he had been paid to pretend to question Belphaxus' plans and propositions. There was always going to be dissent, so why not bring up your own so that you are in the proper

position to dispel it?

“Rome was built by those that wished to be a part of it, to sacrifice and bleed to build it. These savages seek to exploit her and bend her advantages to their will. Too few cross the Rhine with thoughts of helping make Rome great, enriching themselves in the process. They want the money that we have, the peace that we bleed for, and the civilization that they can not truly comprehend. They want the Roman life without actually realizing that they need to become proper people to attain what they desire. There will always be room for those in the empire that understand that what we have is ours by right of birth, but only theirs by right of sweat and sacrifice, and those should be allowed in faster and faster. But the rest? They must be turned back and punished more harshly than what happens now.” Belphaxus took the time to pause, look each man in the eyes, and breath deep of the sulphurous water the swirled around him.

“I need your influence to implement that proper harshness. Crucifixion for those that break Roman laws on Roman soil, regardless of the infraction. The wailing cries of a man caught stealing or a man caught murdering act equally well as deterrents to others. Death to those that seek to cross into our territory without consent. No more coddling enemies of the state by simply turning them away; young children seem innocent, but without the right orientation, they grow up to be enemies of Rome, and if a foolish legionare pulls them from the river instead of properly letting them drown, then that enemy grow up in the empire herself. And more men, to make sure that the Rhine runs red with the blood of our enemies as they covet what we have and what they don't understand.”

Belphaxus looked around and saw that he had convinced these men. They were old and just wanted some modicum of stability in the empire, like it used to be under those like Trajan and Aurelius. The only problem was, it never existed. Belphaxus was a student of history, and it had taught him one lesson over and over again; the empire often roiled it what looked like turmoil. But it was simply the nature of the beat. Things seemed chaotic with rebellions and power struggles, but Rome was never truly threatened. She stood strong and proud, even if incompetent or frivolous emperors sat the throne. They would have their time and be gone, and the empire would persist. Because people like him would protect it.

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Soxerius felt like he was back in the forest; the cold air, the snow drifts higher than his hips when they collected against an agreeable stand of trees, the pine needles still so sharply green in all the white of winter, the sky just barely visible from where he ran through the underbrush. He felt the sweat of exertion as he ran, and then -

Soxerius slapped the fly that had settled on next to the bead of sweat that started to trickle from his forehead, and suddenly he was awake. He didn't know why he was sweating at all. The tent he was cramped into was freezing cold, even with the four other men in it with him, and it's heavy fabric keeping out all but the worst drafts. The mountain air found some way to spread through every bit of the tent, and now that he had the sweat beading on his forehead, Soxerius quickly developed a chill, shivering as he tried to rouse himself from sleep.

He left the tent as bundled as he could get, still some time before the horns would sound for the march to begin again. But it had been that way for the last week. As much as he wanted to sleep through the night and just be somewhat well rested for the march that was to follow, he just couldn't seem to. The cold didn't help, but it certainly wasn't that much worse that he was used to from the winters back home. True, he was largely able to hunker down and avoid the cold

indoors there, but still, it wasn't that foreign to him. The march was no worse leaving the Sassanid territory than it had been going in on the surface of things, but in reality it was so much worse. It was a morally crushing exercise that tested the loyalty of every man, and every morning there was at least talk of one more desertion. The men mumbled about how it was likely a unit was going to be decimated as a message to the others, but Soxerius couldn't imagine that the commanders would dare behave in such a way.

They couldn't turn on the marching men, not at this point in the march. They were still far from home, and the fact they were running with their tails tucked after a series of stunning victories was embarrassing and infuriating to every man here. The emperor's name was spoken with in the same breath as the most foul ill wishes, and more telling than that is that the commanders that overheard such things did little to prevent talk like that from continuing. It all felt like things were going to reach a crossroad, and it wasn't going to be good from most angles. Soxerius half heartedly tried to stoke a small fire for some warmth as his thoughts whirled darkly in his head.

"You! Come here!" Soxerius almost sighed, but knew better than that. The man that was calling him was the second in command to the Centurion that had originally sent him out into the Persian territories to kill and disrupt the war effort of the Sassanids. Soxerius looked over and saw him standing even broader than his wide frame demanded. Apparently he thought his square figure was something to be proud of and accented, and damned to those that pointed out to him he just looked like a grumpy stone when he splayed out his stance like that. To be fair, most probably didn't deem it wise to point anything negative out to the man; he was not the level headed man his superior was. His temper flared hot, his olive skin often flushed red at some perceived slight he was trying to even the score on. Soxerius had little use for the man, but sadly with the old Centurion's health fading faster and faster with each day, his dealings with him increased with each morning. He grimly thought what he wanted now.

"It's Soxerius, sir. What do you require?"

"Like I give a fuck for your name. He beckons you." And that was it. He turned with an unnecessary flourish of his cloak, and strode off in a different direction. As he closed in on the command he coveted so strongly, he made less and less of a show of obeying the centurion he was supposed to serve until death. Soxerius, truly, had little use for the man.

"You look pale." Soxerius couldn't help but smile mildly at the observation, but it was tinged with sadness because the man before him looked so pale his skin was almost translucent.

"My people rarely get darker than this; actually, this is a healthy hue back from where I hail." The old man coughed as he laughed, and Soxerius could see he wasn't long for this world. He felt sad at the thought; mildly. He was the one that had granted him his opportunity to make his first kill. And not just on the grand field of battle, where his efforts drowned away in the mass of bodies, and he may never know if he slew a single combatant on the day. He had given him looking in the eyes the first man he killed and being able to dwell on what that meant to him. Unfortunately, it had meant little, and Soxerius wondered if that's why this man's death meant less to him.

"Well, then you look good," there was a pause as the man collected his thoughts, "I'm clearly not going to make it back to that farm of mine Soxerius." The tall German simply nodded at that admission. There was little denying that the Centurion looked like he was not going to make it much further.

"The world will be less without you." It was a pleasantry his family usually had on hand by

deathbeds and wakes.

“Kind words. But I did not bring you in here for those, Jupiter knows. The man that will replace me soon is a monstrously wrong choice, but it is to be. I fear there will be terrible unrest, mutinous talks, deaths and executions. And it will be by far the worse for the auxiliaries, because he will be able to get away with more on your kind.” Soxerius nodded again; he had considered that things would get bad, but the scenario that was being laid out before him was even worse than he anticipated. He began to honestly wonder about escape. It wasn’t a good option, being hunted as a deserter until he could get outside the reach of the empire, but that was better than being on the wrong end of brutal military discipline.

“It seems like there will be bad days ahead.”

“For some, but I still have some power here on my deathbed,” the man reached for a small scroll, and the act looked so painful and laboured that Soxerius was taken aback; this man wasn’t just short lived for this world, he was imminently on a death pedestal, “Here. This is your freedom, and your life.” Soxerius took the parchment warily, but when he opened it he was even shorter for words. “I...how?”

“That farm of mine was quite the big one back home for me...a reward for many loyal years and many triumphant victories. Those come with favours that can be granted, and I often look for someone on campaign to earn something like this. I have a feeling I only collected less than half the goods you disrupted, which means you hurt those Persian fucks...badly.” The Centurion coughed again, a small touch of blood coming forth with the breath.

“But, citizenship, in one flourish?”

“Not much of a flourish, but essentially. It does come with one final price; hand me that glass next to you and stay with me a while...tell me where you’ll go starting today. And make no mistake, the faster the better. Surrender everything of Rome’s to that useless cunt of a predecessor, and be gone before the column marches away.”

“Yes...of course...sir.” Soxerius handed the man the goblet of wine and something else harsh to the eyes, and watched him pull it down with as much speed as his weakened efforts would allow him.

“Now tell me, what does a young man do with his life after all this.”

“I will see my mother and father again, but only briefly. Where I come from, it’s too small for me. When the world exists out here like this, I couldn’t imagine staying on the edge of my family’s bog tilling the earth my dead ancestors did...not that I’m in line to inherit it in the first place. No, I will go to Colonia Claudia. I have a man there I will call on for work.”

“And who would that be,” the Centurion asked, even as his gaze started to wane as if in extreme fatigue.

“A man by the name of Belpaxus Septe-”

“You don’t mean to tell me you think you’re just going to work for the likes of Belpaxus.” Soxerius thought about being surprised the old man would know him so readily, but holding his citizenship in his hands like he did now, he now realized his circle of contacts and sphere of influence were much larger than he could have anticipated.

“I made an impression on him, some years ago. A fine kill that ended up having an even finer bounty on it. In fact, I still have dreams about that hunt, that kill. It was a once in a lifetime kill, and I was barely fifteen. Wolves-”

“But you should see your mother soon.”

“Ye, yes sir, I was-”

“She misses you so, she told me often, not that she could admit that to anyone else.”

“Sir?” But Soxerius looked over, and he realized that there was a conversation happening that he couldn’t truly grasp at.

“I understand that none of us can deny the boatman, but you should still visit. Oh how she wailed when you were taken. It hurt, the blessing shattering the baren womb taken again.”

“I am sorry...father.”

“Janness, no need for those. It is simply good to talk with you a while. Like I said, the boatman waits for none. Dare I hope for him to have some gentleness in him?”

“You dare. His skiff hardly makes a sound, and the rocking is more like in a gentle breeze than on a river.”

“Well, that sounds...that sounds excellent. But, just...just promise you’ll see your dear mother.”

“I promise.” And then in the final breath he would give, the man settled with a smile on his face. Soxerius left in his next breath, and did as the old Centurion instructed. He surrendered everything that the military had granted him, presented the scroll to the new commander, and was gone before the sun had truly raised over the fog of morning.

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Belphaxus didn’t often wander the streets of his city; people that he owned could do most of his purchasing and errands. But there were some things that he needed to walk the streets himself for. And for the small round of Gladiatorial combat he wanted to host, it was best for him to come into the streets himself to gather what was needed. As much as his slaves carried his word, he found that there was even more leniency granted to his actual presence. And if he wanted to invite a good share of the garrison for the event in- or at least close to - the city, he needed certain permissions that were best procured in person.

But after his business was concluded with the **mayor**, there was always business he could attend to having come into the city from his opulent Roman style villa outside the city gates he spent the majority of his time at. Besides, it was good for the people to see him mingling with them, and to buy some of their wares even if he had no use for it. And truth be told, Belphaxus enjoyed the thrum of the mob. So much of Rome vibrated through the mass of humanity that occupied the cities of the empire. Luckily for him, the mob here was manageable and small by comparison to other places. It was, in his opinion, simply the right size.

So Belphaxus mannered from stall to stall, savouring wares that had made their way from all over. He was partial to a Hispanians style of bread, so he made sure to order a great quantity for the games. A shipment of dye of his own was late in arriving, so he purchased a little from a vendor to tide him over. And always there was more to see and buy and smell and experience. How he loved this world, where the furthest corners of it could be delivered to you; if you had the means of course.

His clients were sure to make his way clear, and conclude the finer points on the deals that he made. The slaves that he bought were corralled by a small shifty Sicilian that handled those affairs for him, while a Germanic was sure that all of them were fed even as they moved along the cobblestones about their business. A pair of Briton’s were the ones that made sure the way stayed clear for him, allowing or not people to approach him, but always keeping a wary eye on them. Belphaxus was glad that he had found such a dumb and ill tempered pair to fill this role; it certainly did keep the less desirable persons from him.

“Oh grand Belphaxus!” Fuck Hades sideways, he thought, this was not a promising introduction. To be fair, he respected those that respected him, but subtly was important lest your praise be

deemed disingenuous.

“And who is it that approaches?” An average looking German was halted by his bodyguards; his dark and greasy hair did not hide the greed shining through them, and Belphaxus could plainly see why. Over the German's shoulder was slung the body of a wolf. But no normal specimen. This was the beast that had been decimating his sheep herds North of here, he was sure of it. The thing had certainly been beaten around and its once proud fur was matted, but this was surely the hellish ghost he had spotted but been able to ride down when he tried going out to the fields himself to stop the damnedable thing from ruining his business in the small woolled animals.

“I am the one they call Marnixus,” Belphaxus did his best not to roll his eyes at this German's attempt to give himself the mildly modified moniker of a God, “and I am here to present to you the body of a wolf spawned of Hades itself.” With a flourish the opportunistic man laid the body on the ground. Stretched out it was easily half as long again as any normal wolf, and the fur - even in its state - could be seen to be twice the coat of lesser animals that shared its parentage. Belphaxus did have to give it to the man, unpleasant as he seemed to be. This was the beast that had caused him so very much trouble in the past months, dead and delivered to him. How bounties of enough size had a way to produce results. Sadly, they also produced opportunists. “How impressive you were able to bring the beast down on your own!”

“I am a mighty hunter, sir!”

“No doubt. How ever were you able to track the beast? I pursued him myself on horseback, and not even then was I able to match his speed and endurance!”

“Patience was the key my lord! Many nights was the time it took to track him down, but when he attempted to flee his den when I finally found it, I shot him down.”

“Good! Quite the target, no? Even with his speed, he presents more area to hit than most of his ilk. You much be quite the Bowman; keen eye that misses nothing!” Belphaxus could see the man bask in the praise from the likes of him. He must be imagining he would be invited into the Roman's inner circle on the spot. How his greed shone through. About the only thing he wasn't doing was licking his lips.

“My lord is too kind! But it is true, the Gods blessed me more than a hawk when it comes to my sight.”

“Yes, so the question is,” Belphaxus snapped his fingers, and the Britons each grabbed one of the man's arms in unison, essentially chaining the man to the spot, “how is it that you missed the fact that this beast is actually a bitch.” The Roman turned the wolf on its back, and the lack of manhood seemed to accuse the German more than any other words could.

“Ah, ah... ah simple slip of the tongue! That is all, nothing more.” Belphaxus moved close enough to smell the ugly scent of this savage, and with a contemptuous sneer on his face, picked up his foot and drove his heel down onto the man's foot with all the force of his considerable leg strength. He screamed sharply in surprise and pain, and soon people began to gather on the fringes of his entourage. Belphaxus looked at the faces in the crowd, made eye contact with a couple of the guards and soldiers that were there. He made eye contact with each one he saw, and nodded slowly, with each responding in kind.

“You try and lie to me? You try and swindle some other out of their reward? How dare you!” The man's lie dissolved as fast as his cowardice surfaced as he was held bound, trying to support himself on one unbroken foot.

“I'm sorry! I should never have!”

“Did you steal this animal? Did you try and take credit on the work of a good and honest citizen of Rome?” True panic blossomed on the man's face,

“NO! No, I did no such thing. I bought the body as you see it, nothing more. No ill blood was spilled for it, and-” Belphaxus rounded on him quickly and drove his elbow savagely into this ribs. He heard three distinct and satisfying cracks, and the man cried out again, though not as loud this time as the breath it required inflamed the pain in his ribs now.

“Answer truly savage! Did you seek to relieve a true and civilized man his proper due?”

“THERE!” The man did his best to gesture, the left side of his body sagging and broken, while the whole of him was still held in place fast by the unmoving and unflinching Britons. In the throng of people that had gathered to watch, the man had seen the one he bought the wolf from; a scrawny Germanic of 15, though he was taller than man in the crowd, “There’s the one that killed your wolf! I bought the thing from him, he just didn’t know you had the bounty on it!” Belphaxus looked the rail thin and awkward looking german youth up and down, then faced back at the coward before him. Faster than most could really follow, he drove his fist into the mans face.

“A boy like that killed no wolf like that you liar!” This time, there weren’t many protests from the broken man; his face was already swollen from the multiple fractures, and blood seemed to dribble out of every orifice. But still he sputtered,

“I swear, that’s the one...I swear it...” He sagged in the grips of his captors, and Belphaxus gave him a look once or twice over. He nodded to the Britons, who released him and let him fall to the street. He made a small attempt to right himself, to remove himself from the situation, but then it was too late. The two impassive thugs hovered over him, and after only a moment of hesitation, proceeded to kick and stomp him relentlessly until his cries and weak attempts to shield himself halted. Belphaxus rounded on the crowds,

“Let this be a lesson to any of you that would seek to deceived your betters or take from honest Romans what they have earned!” And with that the mass started to disperse, but Belphaxus was already among them, looking for someone that didn’t blend in very well at all.

“You, boy! I’d care for a word!” The Roman was ready to have his men pursue the slight individual, but with bravery and confidence uncharacteristic of the youths age, he stopped his movements of moving away with the mob, and turned to face Belphaxus.

It was an odd pairing, the two of them. While they had only been born on separate sides of the river Rhine, they looked like they had been born into totally separate worlds. The German was tall and willow tree thin, pale and draped in furs and leathers. The Roman was short but powerfully built, even as his hair started to take on a wisp of white and gray. The two men appraised each other neutrally, and it was Belphaxus that spoke first.

"That man claimed it was you that killed the beast that was such a thorn in my side. I hope you forgive me for saying, but that seems unlikely."

"Perhaps, but it is the truth." Belphaxus looked the youth up and down once more before continuing.

"I suppose if anyone was going to run the monster down, it would be someone with your stride."

"It helped, but she was still terribly fast. The rest of her pack though, they led me to her." The Roman smiled widely, and gestured for the German to walk with him. His first response was to look warily at what remained of the man that had claimed the wolf's demise as his own doing.

"Ah, yes, a touch of a show. We live right on the border, and unless you make clear to the savages what the might of Rome will do to her enemies, they tend to get ideas."

"You know that I'm a barbarian don't you?"

"Your garb did give it away. No matter, that is the glory of Rome. Civilization and culture

are attainable for all those that dare to seek it. Please, I assure you I'm normally quite civil. I'd love to hear how this hulking bitch met her end." The tall youth considered another half moment longer, but with a small smile, graciously accepted the offer. As the two men strode off, they began a conversation that would stretch on for years.

"Not to think too highly of my reputation, but may I assume you know my name."

"I caught it in the crowd, yes."

"Good. Well, all the same, I am Belphaxus, and in many ways this is my little corner of the empire. Good day to you..."

"Soxerius."

The sun was setting as the two men made their way out of the city gates. The hour was not too terribly late, but the winter months were not quite over yet, and the light was still scare in the day.

"You tell quite the tale when you're prompted enough young Soxerius." Belphaxus had found it a bit tough to extract details from the young German regarding his kill, but when he finally did he was glad he put in the effort. The young man seemed to have an odd vibrancy about him, and his tale was certainly an entertaining one.

"I assure you it's all true." Belphaxus couldn't help but smile at the youthful worry the boy exhibited, probably wondering if his honesty was being questioned. But then he reminded himself under what conditions he had first seen the Roman, and thought it would be a wise move to air on the side of caution lest he be thought a liar and swindler.

"Of course. You do not strike me as one that has dishonesty dwelling within him."

"I do try to avoid it." Belphaxus took care to note that the man had not mentioned he did try to be honest, just to avoid dishonesty. He was certainly a young man, but he did seem to have a certain wisdom about him. Or perhaps he just knew that saying less was much better than saying more.

"Good man. Tell me, you must hail from beyond the Rhine."

"Not by much, but by some."

"But here you stride, into the empire. What brings you here besides the promise of coin for your kill?"

"I am looking for the chance to see the empire, and the world in its entirety."

"Ha! Well, good. Though I fear I must break the bad news to you that the empire is the entirety of the world that's worth seeing. You know, I am usually in the business of looking for capable people to work for me. And I have influence in many stretches of the empire. I own wineries just outside of Rome, brothels in Carthage, a Ludis that is just south of the Rubicon; in fact, I'm hosting games soon and some of my best fighters from there are on route."

"I had heard of these games...but not in a favorable light. There are some East of the Rhine that say you are exploiting Germans for the amusement of Romans."

"I am exploiting Germans and Romans alike for the amusement of all, and besides, the prize for your brethren is citizenship; should they survive." It sounded nice he knew, but Belphaxus left out the details that dozens of Germans would be pitted against each other in one on one combat, and when a victor emerged, he would have to beat some of the best gladiators he could muster to win the citizenship. The officials of the province had no problem dangling the promise of becoming a full citizen in front of the most dangerous looking barbarians, just so long as few were able to attain the prize. There was usually one that could eek out a victory, or perform admirably enough that he would be spared and awarded still. But they certainly were the

exceptions that proved the rule; few survived the day.

“I have no doubt that it is a fair deal offered for the prize that is available. I merely meant to convey what others thought about it.”

The two men walked a distance longer before Soxerius, having considered the mans offer, responded to it.

“I am humbled that you would deem me worthy to take up position next to you as a client, but I am not yet able to commit to such a thing. The auxillaries also have courted me, but in truth my family still has use of me and I will not turn from them until they are ready for me to do so.”

“In my employ you could provide for your family so much better than you could helping them till some bog.”

“Perhaps, but they would not accept a place on this side of the Rhine. They are old and stubborn.” Belphaxus made an exasperated sigh, and was about to say something disparaging about the barbarians so close to his home, when he saw from the corner of his eyes a heated look in Soxerius' eyes, even though the boy looked straight ahead. He wondered what that was about, but in the end he decided it was best to let the comment go unsaid. At the very least he could respect the young mans respect for family, and for his parents. He imagined he could make a fine Roman one day.

“Well, if you decide to join the auxillaries, know that I will be here when you finish with them, and I can even more use the type of man with experience in the military.” He stopped and offered his arm to the youth, hardly more than a boy, who grasped and shook arms with the Roman like a true man would. Yes, they would see each other again someday.

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The forest brought back memories. The bog that was just through the stand could be smelt as if he had plunged his face into it. And the fires that burned in the hearths of his village made trails of smoke that could be seen from where he stood, on the far side of the field that was just now starting to show its spring growth. The memories flooded him, but never did he think to himself, “I'm home.”

With a small start, he realized that when he left for the Persian state and its war, he had not just left the home of his childhood in body, but in spirit too. Things had changed here and instead of the tinge of a man whose home was shifted in the night - the worry and curiosity that would come with such a discovery – he just observed it and felt little else. This wasn't home to him anymore.

And with that realization came two more. First, he had no place to truly call his own anymore. And second, the thought did little to move him.

“Soxerius!” The voice was unsettlingly like his own. Even though he had eight siblings, it seems they had all been born with the same voice. Sure, his family could tell one from the other, but unless you had known them for more than a couple years, there was really no way to tell who was calling you until you saw them. But Soxerius could tell it was his younger brother, and when he looked to his left he could see him emerging from the treeline himself with a bundle of dry wood under his arms.

“Adalbern. You look good.” And he did. Sun kissed his cheeks, muscles had grown on him, and stubble even started to sprout from the face that was so small and frail when he left those years ago.

“And you...you still look like a stoic tree made to talk.” He smiled broadly at his own joke, and Soxerius did chuckle at his brothers jest.

Then the moment was gone and Soxerius could see the darkness behind the eyes that just a moment ago were so very bright. Soxerius didn't force anything, but he stepped in such a way that he was ever so slightly in Adalberns path. Either he addressed him with his concern or he stepped around – in which case it was much worse that Soxerius would have wanted to believe possible.

Adalbern almost looked like he was going to move to step around his brother, but then thought better of the move and stopped, so close to Soxerius that when he spoke he spoke in whispers; or was that because his words frightened him to say them too loud.

“Men came in this morning; Chercheri. They're making noise of rebellion and raids, and they're looking for all willing Germans to come with them. And they're not making very kind words about those that sympathize with the Romans. Which is everyone that's not interested in joining their plundering. There's not enough of them to truly threaten people to join them, or bully most townships, but they're causing some unrest...especially with our parents when they heard that you were off in the auxiliaries.” Soxerius thought on that for a moment, then strode off with purpose towards his old home. He could hear his brother over his shoulder “Just be careful!”

Soxerius strode into this family's large and spacious house. With so many surviving children, the place needed to have a size, and often it doubled as a place for meeting in the village; even when business from many townships found its way here. But that wasn't much of a blessing now, as eight men laden for war were seated about, with one more at the head table in the spot of honour with Soxerius' father on his right. Before he could consider doing anything, there was a man behind him at the door. No play no but to stride in further. The man who was seated so arrogantly at his fathers table addressed him.

“Ah, the fearless Roman lap dog, back from wiping imperial ass in the desert.”

“Who are you and what is going on here?”

“I am Varsetsus, and I am here because Rome is arrogant and weak, and we are seeking true Germans to punish them. Not that you would know anything about that.” The men in the building chuckled dangerously around him. Soxerius was just thinking how fortunate he was that he wasn't garbed in any imperial armour or cloth; chances are he would have been dead already.

“Are you going to assault the fort or the city?” Soxerius knew he was playing a dangerous game here, but he felt it was his best move. And it seemed to be paying off, as the one who called himself Varsetsus seemed taken aback.

“Um, why?” Soxerius boldly sat himself next to the foul but huge man.

“Because I want to know what you want. Do you want the glory of capturing a legionary eagle? The spoils of gold from merchants? Or the women of a sacked city? I want to know if you're goals align with mine.” The man thought for a while, and asked the question that Soxerius hoped he would.

“And what is it that you seek little man?”

“The women. Colonia Claudia has many, and if it were to burn under our torches, we could make away with many, on top of having our bags weighed down with silver and gold.” Soxerius felt like he had played this appropriately; then the man struck him up the side of his face, and he knew that he had.

“You are a shit, but I feel you are one that is going to help us do this right. We are riding out for our township, and then we leave to meet our brethren south of here in the morning. Meet

us at our home before morning, lest some terrible tragedy befall this place.” With that he rose, and the rest of them followed him out the door. He heard somewhere down the road a horse rear, and there were some shouts and whinnies, and the men were gone. Soxerius' father rounded on him quickly.

“Are you mad? These fools will bring the weight of the Romans onto our heads, and all will be lost. And you seek to join them? After you just fought for the empire?”

“It is good to see you too father. Mother.” Soxerius hugged his mother, who didn't say anything. She never had to.

“Don't ignore this son. This is a problem.”

“Father, had I not sided with them, we'd likely all be dead. By making him believe I shared their cause, they simply expect me to join them in the morning.”

“And when you don't? They'll come back here and burn this house to the ground!”

“Please, I ask that you trust me. We don't have much time together. After tonight, I won't be coming back here; I won't be able to. But neither will those men. So please, let me spend a night in the company of my family.” His father looked like he was going to say something more, but Adalbern came through the door in that moment,

“Truly brother, you will leave again?”

“Truly brother, and I would not expect to see any of you again afterwards.” There was no small tinge of sadness in his brother's eyes, and Soxerius was tempted to take it back, but he shook the thought off. There was nothing left for him here, and the path that he was on now looked like it would simply endanger those he loved. So he would leave it all behind after one final piece of business. Until then, he would spend as much time as he could here. He already heard one of his sisters coming down the road, her shrill laugh piercing the mid day air. Grating to most, but to Soxerius, he decided to cherish it, and everything else around him.

Varsetus wondered where his men were. It was likely that one or two of them would have been late, but all eight of them having not shown up? They must have thought they were to meet somewhere else, or else he had gotten the timing wrong. He was starting to consider riding back to town to see what had happened when that lanky Roman sympathizer stepped out onto the road...in what looked like a cloud of a Roman legionary. He wondered what in the name of Janus he was doing when he deftly notched an arrow, and by the time he pieced it together, it was too late. All those sinewy muscles and that immense armspan made the arrow fly true and imperceptibly fast, burying itself in Varsetus' knee, shattering the kneecap. He screamed and fell from his mount, who trotted away a short distance.

Soxerius drew another bolt, but at about a third of his potential power, and shot it into the horse's flank. It whined in a terrible fright and ran away as fast as its legs would take it. Then it was just him and the hulking man before him.

To his credit, he was reaching for his spear and shield as if he could prepare himself he stood a chance. But the existing wound and the fall made him far too slow, and Soxerius put another bolt into his shoulder where arm and body met. He cried out again, and this time with some fear because he knew he was helpless before this silent assaulter.

“Why?! What do you think you're doing?! The rest of my men will be here at any moment and they'll tear you to pieces.” Soxerius strode right up to the man and stomped down on his elbow, effectively ending his attempts to pull himself along and hold himself up. He cried out and collapsed. Soxerius knelt down and got very close to the man's face.

“Your men are dead. Enough alcohol enhances even my ability to move through a town in the middle of the night undetected. I suppose it seemed fitting to raise glasses to what was to come, but it worked out best for me only.”

“You're lying.” Soxerius continued as if he didn't hear the man.

“And now, after making threats at my family, you will die on this road, murdered by an agent or Rome, or so those two gawkers over there will see.” Varsetsus looked over and did indeed see two young women on their way back from the well.

“Help! Bring help!” Soxerius let him yell for a moment, before producing a blade and holding it to his neck.

“That's enough, they've seen what they need to, now best to make myself scarce before they bring people that know how to fight.”

“You coward! Why not fight me properly with swords instead of your sneaking and archery cowardice! Why fight me at all!?”

“Because I'm much, much better at fighting like a coward. As to why, let's just say I don't like being told what to do.”

“Stop, we can-”

But it was too late for anything more. Soxerius made a fast and brutal cut, straight into the neck and then pushing up the jaw line as far as he could make it to the ear. The mans blood flowed out in three great big rushing spurts, and then it slowed to a trickle as he died rapidly. Soxerius heard commotion from some distance off, and made his way West. He would miss the province that gave him life and helped make him who he was, but there was much more in the world for him than this.

Soxerius found himself wandering the banks of the Rhine somewhat aimlessly. He really wondered to himself what the next step should be. As much as he didn't expect to spend much time in his home township, he didn't think that he'd have to leave after one short night. And not even a true night at that, but only until the darkness had gone still and he had been able to sneak out into it to conduct the ugly business of killing those that threatened his kin.

And to be fair, he didn't know if this Belphaxus still conducted business around Colonia Claudia, or if the man was even still alive, or if he would remember that one German youth all those years ago that killed the great wolf. Truth be told, he didn't know if it was worth it to go and try and make contact with the man again. Could he really offer him what he was looking for in this world, whatever that was?

So Soxerius continued to sulk down the bank of the river. North for a bit at first, but then he thought that there would be a better crossing further south, so he changed direction and made his way in that direction. He continued to move, but without much vigor, and often with his eyes being drawn to the water, his mind leaving his body for contemplation somewhere else in the ether.

It was probably for that reason that Soxerius didn't notice the band of men that approached until they were already upon him.

“Not man Germans out and about this close to Roman territory; that is, unless, they're trying to reach that Roman territory.” Soxerius looked up slowly and saw a group of average looking Germanic tribesmen in front of him. From which tribe or tribes they came from, Soxerius didn't have any guesses to, but the one that spoke had a dangerous glint in his eyes. He counted about a dozen, most with spears, and in the same moment started to think about his chances if he dove into the river for escape compared to simply sprinting away on the uneven

ground.

“Well, I understand the best ford to cross is in this direction, as I'm guessing that's what you're looking for. I'm sure the Romans would greet you warmly.” The jest at these men who had clearly put in some effort to look distinctly un-Roman was not well received, and Soxerius could see scowls among those still mostly back in the tree line, and the smile fade from the one that stood in his path.

“You speak boldly to the enemies of you masters there dog. Especially after seeing what you did to our breatheren yesterday morning.”

“I don't know what you're talking about.”

“No? I suppose there are other archers in the woods that had cause to quarrel with Varsetsus, with your skill and size and build. Such a common thing around here.” Soxerius didn't like that this man so clearly knew of his deeds, and began considering seeing how many of them he could kill or maim with his bow before they overwhelmed him. Before he could continue with that line of thought, though, the man spoke again.

“Fear not, we are not in the habit of killing those that had legitimate quarrel. Varsetsus was a loud and dangerous fool – much like the men that deemed it wise to follow his lead – and it was only a matter of time before they threatened the wrong person. You and your family have nothing to fear from us.”

“Which makes me wonder what it is that you want from me.”

“Support, like we want from all Germans. We want the support to show the Romans we will not be their subjects, free to do with as they like. To take from our lands when it suits them, or to steal our young away to go into slavery if they happen to venture too close to the wrong type of Roman. We want to be free of this curse they call cities and civilization, so that we may uphold the old ways; the true ways.”

“I am not one to take sides in a fight I have no stake in.”

“We do not ask for you to side with us. Warriors we have, willing to kill and plunder. Those that will surely lead short lives. But we are always in need of support, especially from those that can show it in more tangible ways.”

“And here's the heart of it.” Soxerius said sardonically.

“Yes! This is the heart of it boy, and I'd ask you keep a respectful tone.” Soxerius thought of something to say, but settled on nothing at all and simply dipped his eyes in a small showing of apology and respect. “I have nephews; ten and eleven. My brother was taken by the summer's bog fever, and his wife became desperate about how she was to make her way without him, so she crossed the Rhine. Last I heard, she was subjected to slavery and the boys were sold off somewhere foreign. I know that you can travel freely in the Empire, and might have some fortune in finding them. If you could find anything out...it would be, appreciated.”

“And should I find anything out.”

“Varsetsus and I did not share much, but we call the same place home. You may send word for me there should anything be discovered.” With no more words he wished to say, the man moved to the side, and Soxerius slowly and cautiously passed by. His pace was now quickened, and his senses sharpened. If he made attempt at a decent pace, he should be inside the empire by night fall.

to appear properly civilized and cultured, but truth be told he always preferred the chalice when it was unadulterated. He told himself that he sipped it slowly enough so it was a fine thing, but in the end he really didn't care that much about the perceptions of those that would sniff at his actions. Everyone in this province followed his lead, and well they should. One simply had to appreciate the view he enjoyed now to know why.

It was a wonderful view from his veranda. Not only was the scenic nature of the landscape rolling away from his villa beautiful – with its fields of grain, pastures for grazing, stands of trees, and brooks that seemed to meander as if they had free will to take a scenic look through the countryside – but it was made all the more wonderful by the fact that it was all his. He remembered being a boy with his father, when the holdings of their family were maybe half of just what he could see now. And he remembered the words that his father had left him with,

“There is no greater feeling than being the one who drives your destiny, of being in control of your future and your world. Remember that son.”

And he had. In all his dealings, Belphaxus made sure to maintain as much control over the situation as he could. He discovered the surest way to do this in most circumstances was to wrest control from someone else through force. Luckily for him, he was very good at such things. But he also had a talent for moving deftly when the situation demanded it, and that had helped him almost as much. But those were the reasons that he could recline in solitude tonight, and look for as far as his eyes would carry his vision, and see only that which was his.

Well, almost everything he viewed was his. Coming up the beaten path to his front gate came someone he neither employed nor owned. Which was mildly concerning because there was supposed to be men out in the dusk that would alert him to such intrusions. Usually it was just so he could be prepared to greet and entertain important people or receive urgent messages, but every now and again it served the purpose of helping him see trouble coming before it was already upon him. Apparently his system had failed tonight.

Quietly Belphaxus had an attendant prepare his household guard. The man coming up the walk didn't appear to have anyone else with him, and if he had meant him harm he likely would not be sauntering up to the front gate in plain view of anyone who bothered to look out onto the path, especially while there was still daylight about. But still, he felt it wasn't a terrible idea to have a couple men handy.

“Halt there sir. You are on my property and I have no knowledge of you. What brings you this way?” The man continued to walk for several more paces, to the point that Belphaxus was about to should down to him again or even to his guards to neutralize the man. But he called back.

“I do believe you have knowledge of myself sir. If nothing else I'd hope the wolf we met over would adorn a wall of yours.” Belphaxus smiled at the odd change of fate that brought this young barbarian here, but it also made him wary. Much closer and he would be an easy target for the quality of archer the young man happened to be.

“Do come in. But you'll need to leave your weapons with the attendants at the door.” Belphaxus could see the young Soxerius knowingly smile at that, and strode up to the large double doors. What a strange night, Belphaxus thought to himself. What an excellent, odd, night.

“Do you find it to be a fitting place for your kill.” Soxerius had just finished admiring his former kill on the hearth room's wall of prominence. It was certainly a spot of honour, especially after all these years.

“It is a fitting end to such a hard won hunt.” Soxerius' eyes shifted slightly, as if he was

seeing something that wasn't there anymore...memories of the past Belphaxus could see.

“Please, come and join me. I was enjoying a fine glass of red on the Veranda; you will join me.” The two men walked in silence to the waiting drinks, Soxerius taking in the opulence of the place and beginning to grasp a bit more the scope of power the man in his company commanded, while Belphaxus sized up the German who had shown up here tonight.

The two of them reclined on the chairs situated with the best view, and an attendant filled a goblet for Soxerius. He took a single sip.

“An old Centurion in Persia told me that one day Rome would make a wine drinker out of me. I had no idea the shift would be so immediate.” Belphaxus smiled at the flattery. He enjoyed a man that could do it properly.

“I'm sure you'll be a fine Roman one day as your tastes develop.”

“Actually, the Centurion didn't just share advice with me in the desert sands. He also gave me this.” Soxerius handed the small parchment that he had guarded zealously and carried with him ever since he had received it; the one that made him officially a subject of the empire. Belphaxus read it, a darkness creeping into his eyes.

“What is it that you did to deserve this?”

“I killed Persians.”

“So do other Persians, but I would be loathe to grant them all the rights of the empire.” Soxerius felt like he had just stumbled head first into a cave filled with a sleeping bear. The danger felt imminent and enormous, but still just a potential kind. He did his best to progress cautiously.

“But I killed many important ones, and turned them on each other when they were supposed to be fighting the legions. Messengers by the wagon full, and dignitaries who dared to travel under guard of less than a dozen. I killed and bled for Rome, and I did it exceptionally well, which is why I was awarded this honour.” Belphaxus darkly looked the parchment over again, looked like he was considering something, then spoke.

“Citizenship isn't something that is simply awarded, or even earned. It is something that is trained and breathed into you as your former barbarism is drained out...remember that.” Belphaxus handed the parchment back to the German, and the two sat in an uncomfortable silence for a time. After a time Soxerius brought up what he hoped would ingratiate him more with Belphaxus.

“I feel some information I have is important, and you being a man of importance, you seemed the best one to bring it to,” Soxerius paused for a moment, but only a small one, “There are tribes East of the Rhine, and they're amassing to attack Roman territory. They feel the time is right with the Sassanids providing distractions, and the emperor no man of the military himself.” Belphaxus turned this information over in his head; thinking of what he could do with it.

“I have a feeling you will be a useful man to employ. Would you accept that?”

“I would, on occasion.”

“Naturally. What pay would a man like me offer you though? Your lust for gold seems mild at best.”

“Today, information is all I seek for that which I provided you. There are young boys, sold to slavery, that I might seek out.” Belphaxus nodded while Soxerius went into the details of the two, but it was unnecessary; he knew where they had ended up. It was actually rather convenient for Belphaxus; there were things he wanted taken care of in that corner of the Empire.

“We will discuss details in the morning. For now wine has made me weary and dull. You

will be my guest and share an honoured spot over the breaking of our fast among my clients. Until the morning.” Soxerius nodded.

“Until the morning.”

After the German had been established in his sleeping chambers, Belphaxus called his attendant to his chambers.

“Maximinus, the Thracian...I would like to share words with him soon. Make sure a messenger greets him for the morning with my invitation for dinner...tell him to deliver a message of great importance.”

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Soxerius stumbled through the thick and soft snow, almost warm under his feet. He couldn't hold his head up but he could still shuffle forward. But the snow was so bright, the sky the was so blue, the world was simply harsh on his eyes. And all the time, the burning of his muscles, now spent but still working, his lungs feeling shredded but still forced to draw breath.

And always the snow, crunching under foot in the slow methodical stagger that he tried to maintain. The sound of it filled his world like the light off of it filled his vision with spots whenever he tried to look away. But then slowly, the sound of snow gave way to a wounded pant, and that was Soxerius' world.

Then the world was reality again as the cart Soxerius found himself on bounced harshly and shook him from the partial sleep he found himself in. He looked about and saw grass, so much more than he had ever seen. The countryside was so green it almost hurt Soxerius' eyes, replacing the fading visions of snow from his dream. He was used to the forests and shrubbery of home, but there was always a darkness to it. Whether it was the bogs or all the moss and shade under towering pines, there was always a tinge of gray and black when you were in the Germanic forests.

But not here. The hills seemed to roll away forever, like a vibrant green sky underfoot. A breathtaking sight, truly. It's beauty was, however, tempered by the fact that without the trees, there was no shelter for the wind, and it whipped over all those blades of grass without mercy for those standing on top of it. Soxerius did his best to wrap himself in the cloak he had acquired for the journey (which he was very grateful to have done now) and continued to scan the countryside for trouble from the back of the cart he bounced along on. Soxerius heard a sharp cackle come from the driver of the vehicle he was perched on as he turned back to him.

“I wouldn't worry so much young sir. This far south of Hardians there isn't much danger to speak of. Raiders like to stay close to their country, and those that venture this far south don't usually get three or four caravans before the legions string them up on the crosses.” The withered and hunched man cackled again, coughed up a little spittle from the effort, and steered the cart back towards the center of the small path that passed for a road.

After Persia and Colonia Claudia, this hardly seemed to be a Roman province at all. The people did not seem so interested in upholding Roman lifestyle, just mildly content to live under the rule of Romans but keep to their own ways. The city that he had docked in was little more than a dock and an inn with a brothel attached. The roads – which were usually the most obvious sign for someone who had grown up where only small dirt paths existed that it was Roman territory – were much smaller than he had seen elsewhere in the empire. Sure, this was Rome, but it did seem more like a minor Rome.

He wondered to himself why Belphegor would have business in a place like that, and he did his best to replay the conversation they had had before he left.

“Did you know I have eight sons Soxerius?”

“No.”

“Well, I do. And men tell me constantly that it's a blessing. So many sons. I think they are mildly jealous that they're from three wives too. But what's a man to do with so many sons? Each one wants his inheritance, and each one wishes to leverage your assistance into advantage in the world. But a man has only so many favours to grant or call in, and only so much inheritance to go around. But my father, his father, and his father, they were all burdened with many sons as well, so our family knows better than most how to deal with such things.” Soxerius simply nodded, and Belphegor grunted with annoyance. “Now, I know you enjoy to play the stoic, but it wouldn't kill you to contribute at least a polite question every now and again.”

“Apologies.”

“Accepted. And anyway, it's certainly much better than suffering an abundance of fools words. It's that stoicism I was hoping to use actually to my own ends. You see, back to the issue of sons; eight is a great number, but our family has developed ways of dealing with such things. Mainly, to disperse the sons so that they aren't constantly at war with one another, and having them manage the holdings we have in other provinces. That way each son is established with the advantages of our family, but has the opportunity to make something of themselves, on their own.”

“An elegant solution.”

“With flattery and fine words like those, you should think to speak more often Soxerius. But thank you, I do believe it is rather a good idea myself. But we've always been based in Colonia Claudia; I was simply lucky enough to be born the eldest, and so when my father passed the farm was mine. Of course, I have other businesses here; mostly trade and slaves. My father was always concerned about perception about slave traders, but I took **GUYS** approach; you can't smell the piss on coins you make from a toilet, so I didn't feel concerned about having to smell the barbarism from the people I sold.”

“I thought you also bartered the sale of those with citizenship.”

“Oh, well of course. But the true backbone of the business is in Germanics. People want to buy the beastly types as thugs and bodyguards, or the lithe and supple ones as whores or house attendants. People want German slaves, and many Germans see it as a way into civilization, so there's a great deal of money to be made from the man that facilitates all those dealings.”

“But that's not the point I wished to make. I was hoping that you could deliver a stern message to my son, and in exchange you can have the boys you seek.”

“You know where they are?”

“As fortune would have it, they were sold to my son. He is bringing them up to work as house slaves. One word and they will accompany you back here once the message is delivered.”

The cart lurch to a stop, and Soxerius realized he had been half asleep as he thought back to exchange with Belphaxus. The old mans talk of raiders being rare this south in Briton had clearly lulled him.

“We're here young sir.” Belphaxus reached for a coin, but the man waved him off, “Belphaxus is a man one does favours for...it is much better than to be paid by him.”

“I am simply his messenger.”

“Then you can send message that I am a true friend to his and his own.” The man stared with at Soxerius with an energy that didn't seem he should have been able to produce. Soxerius put the coin away.

“Very well. Be back here in two days time, and we will repeat this journey.”

“Good! Good young sir, I will see you then.”

Soxerius wasn't sure what he was going to find when he entered the grand villa of Belphaxus' son, but it certainly wasn't what he would have imagined.

Barnexsis kept a house that was very odd indeed. While the structure was surely Roman, the attendant that came to door fully nude was all Briton. She had the look of a wild woman, but there eyes were a give away; they looked like those of a simply farmer. But the style of her hair and the painting on her face, they were almost as if to make her look like a savage. Soxerius silently followed her inside, and Soxerius' confusion for the place deepened. There were no tile mosaics here of the farm they sat in the middle of, just crude slashes of paint depicting a forest scene. The central garden was wild and overgrown, while the columns seemed to be purposely destressed to give them the look of ruins almost. And everywhere Soxerius looked, he saw more attendants; more than could have ever been needed. All were stark naked, all were done up in the style of a pict or other type of Briton savage. Soxerius could feel Belphaxus shaking his son in shame somewhere else in the empire, his son not exactly following good Roman traditions.

Soxerius' guide stopped without a word in front of a door frame and simply ushered Soxerius inside. There was a new look to her now, something that bordered somewhere between fear and loathing. He wasn't kept wondering long as to why.

“You?! My father sent a fucking German? What a man!” Soxerius turned to see a man emerge from the shadows of what looked like a small seating area. Or perhaps it was two men; it was difficult to tell at once. Barnexsis emerged from the shadows, his enormous stomach hanging low, stressing his fat legs and making his chins quiver in the effort to stand. His skin was poor and greasy, and Soxerius could imagine the man rarely attended the bath houses or put in much effort to clean himself in his own home.

The man lumbered toward Soxerius, and came in close enough that he could smell his last two meals; lots of lamb if he had to guess. His teeth were stained with the gallons of wine he consumed daily, and the blemishes of his skin seemed to jump out now that they were close enough to touch. It was an uncomfortable position, but Soxerius was glad at least that he was taller than the man, and could look down at him while he was looking down on him.

Soxerius didn't say anything. In this instance, it wasn't because he didn't know the best thing to say so he simply kept his mouth shut; he already found this man so unlikable that he did

not trust his tongue to remain civil. So he simply stared the man in his eyes, waiting for what eventually did come.

“Mmmm, don't like jokes? Fine! Fine, whatever. Just a joke though, have got nothing against the Germans...my mom was half herself. I just, thought...well, it was a rather late night for me. Let me get you a glass of something strong and proper.”

“Thank you.” It was all Soxerius was willing to give out at the moment. The enormous man waved a hand, and Soxerius heard scurrying, and almost as if by magic, a fresh goblet of fine Gaulic red was served up to him. He took it without a word

“Walk with me! Tonight we will prepare something appropriate for our guest,” the man began as he stalked away. Soxerius kept pace, but just a little too slow, and the grand man adjusted his pace to Soxerius', “and of course the dessert in this place is the best.” When Barnexis said this last line, he let his hand drag over the breasts on nearest attendant. Soxerius had had enough; he understood why it was that Belphaxus had little desire to come here himself.

“Let us talk somewhere private; I would deliver what I'm holding in private.”

“While I trust every last person in the house, sir, out of respect for a guest, I shall accommodate!” He said this last line loudly and proudly, and Soxerius was curious if those that kept this house were actually grateful to be within this mans employ, or they merely tolerated his swaggering and loud words. The two men rounded back from their small walk to the room they had started, and they went in, Soxerius closing the solid door behind them. He didn't waste his time; he did not have the patience to linger in this place. In one movement, Soxerius slapped the man in the face – hard – and pushed him into a chair that groaned with strain as it accommodated the mans weight.

“That was the first part of your father's message, so don't be killing a messenger for that.” Barnexis simply looked up at him stunned, and Soxerius thought it was true what the mans father had told him as he left; Barnexis was not in a position where many challenged his authority.

“Your father is sick of your conduct. Even in Colonia Claudia, he hears of your debauchery, your attendants, your feasts, and your girth. You may be in this backwater, but this is still Rome, and you are to conduct yourself accordingly. That is why, in three months time, a woman will arrive here, and she is to be your wife. You will listen to her and follow her instruction, and your father will be so pleased that he will not have to remove you from the seat he put you in. The rest of the message and the details of this instruction is here.” Soxerius handed the man the letter, and waited.

Soxerius didn't expect the man to take the news well, and while he didn't truly believe he'd act against a messenger of his father, he started looking about in case he needed to defend himself or escape. Barnexis finished the letter and threw it with little regard onto the table.

“My father is a fool if he thinks I am to stand for this.”

“Belphaxus is many things. Fool is not one by my knowledge.”

“Then you are a fool, believing this message. Does he think he can still order me around from the other side of the world? Does he think that the distance between us will stay the same? It grows day over day, and his power in this place fades as it does. If you or your father don't see that, then fools are what you are. Myself on the other hand, I have come to accept this. I have adjusted, and surround myself with those that are loyal to this land; and to me! ENTER!” The man's girth didn't interfere with his voice, and his call was loud, soon answered by two tribal looking men with loaded slings, rushing into the room. Soxerius assessed the men, and stifled a chuckle at the ridiculous weapons he assumed they were being forced to wield, along with the

fact that they were naked like everyone else in this place except for Barnexsis. But he was still concerned; close quarters were certainly not his strength, and as funny as they looked, they were still large and had the potential to subdue him.

For his part, Barnexsis reclined like he was in the pools of a bath house, an immensely pleased smile on his face. Soxerius still wondered if the man would deem to use violence in this situation, or if he was simply posturing with these men. Soxerius felt bad for them, having to follow this mans orders. Soxerius held the fat mans gaze to see what he would do next in the situation. They waited a good long while, but in the end, it was Barnexsis that spoke first.

“So, I think you will send a message to my father for me. It will have quite the different tone than this garbage that you sent me. And, if you have an issue with that, then these two will break your legs. The slings are impressive at throwing stones, but they'll shatter your knees almost as easily.” At that Barnexsis started to titter in a girlish sort of laugh, and Soxerius had had enough.

“You, where in Briton do you come from?” Soxerius asked the man closest to him, long and dirty matted hair, blonde. He looked unsure, but answered anyway.

“North of Hadrians wall.”

“Of course, of course, and your friend? The same?”

“Why, yes, of course.”

“And was your fealty to the king or your chieftain?” The men looked confused, and Barnexsis did too. Silence followed the question, and it settled in the room uncomfortably. The two men exchanged uneasy glances.

“I don't mean to be rude, I just assumed you two grew up in close circumstances, and was wondering if that involved a king or chieftain...or perhaps a warlock even?” Neither of the men said anything, so Soxerius continued, “You see, I have my doubts you two both come from North of Hadrians. Maybe one of you, but most likely someones playing a game, taking advantage of a fat Roman that thinks he knows more than he does. It's a sad thing, really, but it doesn't have to continue, I tell you that. You see, this Roman has a more powerful Roman telling him what to do...something that he doesn't like. But if it happens that I leave here and make these things happen, you will see a change around here. It will become a more...proper...Roman household. Baths, plumbing perhaps, togas and steel even. All you two would have to do, is step out of the room again. Of course, if you wish to take your orders from this man still, I'd stay.”

Barnexsis started to titter again.

“You really think you can walk in here and my loyal savages will just take your side?”

“I was raised a farmer, three miles from here.” It was all the man with the blonde hair said, and he stepped out of the room. Barnexsis looked as if his heart had stopped.

“I came from two miles away.” And the other man left the room, and it was Soxerius and Barnexsis again.

“You should be careful as who you employ, they may just be Roman Britons, and not your savage dolls.” Barnexsis looked as if he were to say something, but Soxerius closed the distance in a couple quick steps, produced a knife, and slammed it into the table top. “You won't speak any longer. You will obey the instructions in that letter, including telling me where the two Germanic boys have ended up.” Soxerius looked him up and down contemptuously before continuing, “And you are not to extract retribution against those men. The world is not that small yet, and you would be good to remember that lest some ill will befell you.”

Soxerius left before much longer, leaving the fat man to sit sadly, and alone.

Soxerius took his time crossing the open country after leaving the villa of Barnexsis. The mans home smelled of overly rich food and flesh. Both scents were actually ones that Soxerius enjoyed, but for how much they overpowered him while he was there, and the way that they combined, it had turned his stomach. So while Soxerius walked towards the encampment that apparently held the boys, he didn't run or hurry himself. The moist and foggy air seemed to cleanse the stench of the place from his nose, and the sights were still beautiful to his eyes, so Soxerius lingered as he walked.

Eventually though, Soxerius reached his destination. The encampment had a temporary look about it, but he thought that might be because he was just comparing it to the forts around Colonia Claudia, with its garrison buildings that had stood on the same spot that the one from a hundred years ago stood. What he also found interesting is that there was a small and solid looking stone structure just outside the encampment. It was so unique looking in the midst of the military wooden structures that Soxerius almost just walked in. But he knew his time was short and the journey back would be all the longer if he found who he was looking for.

Soxerius greeted the guards at the gates, who seemed unimpressed with his presence here. But with the mention of Barnexsis and the weight that carried because of his father, a Centurion was soon leading him around the camp, pleading the case for more troops, more rotations, and more money for their outpost.

“The Britons are a wild people. People like Hardrian and Trajan saw that, and that is why they worked so hard to make this place safe. If the proper men were in power, I believe we could get the proper support to make this place the most prosperous Roman province of them all. Finish what Julius Caesar himself started all those years ago now. You must tell me that you will impress to Belpaxus and his son of our need.” Soxerius wasn't hardly listening, but knew enough to chime in at the appropriate time.

“My word is good on this matter; they will hear it from my mouth just as soon as I hold company with them again.” The man's grin widened, and they continued walking down the rows of lodgings, scanning inside for the boys Soxerius sought.

Upon arriving, he had learned that they were being raised to attend to the needs of the men. Something to keep their spirits up in the dreary winter months; get wine for them when needed, or to bring hot soups and drinks to night watchmen. It was an interesting position to be in as a slave; much could be learned in your tenure, and the coins that one could collect was usually good enough that freedom could be bought much sooner than other places one would work. And what's more than that, once freed, those who worked in such a capacity often had developed a martial knowledge and instinct that made them excellent leaders in the legions (though most moved on to serve in posts where they hadn't once been the camp slaves).

But that life would not be theirs then. Instead they would probably spend their time attending to a Germanic warlord, which was likely to get them killed much faster than working for the legions. But it was not Soxerius' place. He would do what he could.

“Before I go about my business though, a question. The building, on the outskirts of the fort; what is it.”

“A church to the Christian god.”

“You have Christians this far north?”

“Many,” the man said, revealing a chi rho symbol tattooed on the underside of his forearm, “the word of God has reached all over the empire, and soon shall grow to prominence.”

“If you say so.”

“Do you not believe me?”

“It was my understanding that the Romans held many gods in high esteem. It seems unlikely that this Christian one would replace the others.”

“Unlikely, but that is how Christianity persists; in the face of poor odds. But make no mistake, soon the empire will follow our true path, and it will start here in Briton. We will make Rome not just an empire of this world, but the next as well.”

Soxerius found the boys, and they left without much exchange between them. Their mother had passed away on the journey to Briton, though she had been with them until then. He didn't like to think what they may have been subjected to passing through the home of Barnexsis, but by now they were used to being shuttled around in this world, and a man that talked their native tongue seemed to be the best man to follow and stick close to.

So they followed him, saying little to Soxerius but exchanging many whispers back and forth to themselves. It was fine by Soxerius, for they stayed close and didn't demand anything from him. They all traveled on the wizened old mans cart back to the docks of the 'city,' traveled the choppy straight again, and made much of the long journey back to the Rhine on foot.

The whole while Soxerius kept thinking back to the Christian Centurion, and what he said about an empire in the next world. There seemed to be some riddle in there that Soxerius didn't quite understand, and couldn't figure out for all the times his brain returned to it.

In the end, his distracting thoughts did not keep him from his task. After weeks of travel, the three of them arrived back in Colonia Claudia, and then across the Rhine where the boys were delivered to the warlord that had 'requested' this task of him. Astonishment and joy were celebrated that night, for a man that was already gone from it all again before the first light of morning. Whether or not the Christians were going to build an empire for the next world, Soxerius wasn't done exploring the one he had.

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Belphaxus looked out over the one hundred assembled gladiators in front of him and couldn't help by smile to himself. Who needed to control a legion when any man of business could buy and train his own.

Well, not exactly were they legions he supposed, but having that much killing potential just sitting around so close to the Rubicon and simply several days fast march away, he would be a fool not to take advantage of that.

“You will take the main doors, you will push your way inside, and they you will kill every last person in the building, save my nephew and his wife; should she still be alive.” Belphaxus looked out over on the crowd again, and he saw the look that he wanted to; the look of a man with bloodlust raising in him veins.

To be fair, Belphaxus was feeling it some too. Several days ago a band of Germanics had taken a less important holding of his, North of where he situated himself and right along the Rhine. It was a more vulnerable spot to try and farm and raise grazing animals, but because of that the holding was vast. But it was undesirable for most Romans; it was far from the city and close to the anarchy of the Germanic provinces. As such, none of his own sons had taken it when it passed down from his uncle to him and his control. But that was the thing having such a large and spread family; there was always one worthy of the opportunity and willing to work for it.

Belphaxus imagined that his cousin was none too happy being in control of a villa that was being squatted on by savages, but he felt that some of the blame lay at the feet of the man

that was supposed to be in charge. Half the house servants in the villa were trained with some degree of martial expertise, and the villa itself – while small and unremarkable to the look of it – was actually built to be more a fortress than a simple dwelling. The walls were additionally thick, and the main doors were stronger than most two times over. To scale it was difficult because of the lack of holds the outer walls had, as well as their natural height. It was designed to be able to easily repel roving bands that the reports said had taken the place. He would have to have a serious talk with his cousin; again, assuming the man yet lived.

“March then!” Belphaxus channeled every last bit of military commander that he could, hoping that this would take those savages by surprise. He'd prefer to keep his villa intact, but it wasn't worth a damned thing unless he could drive the interlopers away from the place. And sometimes messages had to be sent regardless.

The march to the villa took no more than half a day, but when they arrived, it was a curious thing; there was decidedly little activity around the place. Belphaxus did notice that the main gates closed quickly when they were still some distance away, but he had overseen the design of this building and did know what to exploit if they had to. Even still, the lack of activity around the villa was suspicious. He imagined that the number of raiders would be small, but at least noticeable. Belphaxus and his makeshift century of oddly and variably armed gladiators came right to the front entrance without spying a soul, and inside there was no sound to be heard at all.

“Cousin, it is Belphaxus calling on you. Are you in there.” There was a long, long delay, and Belphaxus considered ways of getting into the compound besides yelling. The South facing wall actually was the most scaleable, but if it really became tough, the wine cellar was actually buried slightly beyond the reach of the wall and could be dug to in a days time without difficulty.

“Uncle, so good to hear from you again, but I was not expecting you; the villa is in no shape to accept a man of your stature into it.”

“I have ventured to many places that my stature wouldn't normally deem acceptable for me to enter, but sometimes that's where the gifts of life hide from us. Please, open the door and we can have a proper conversation.” Despite the fact that his cousin was close and they could talk, his embodiment remained elusive and Belphaxus found himself scanning for the source of the voice.

More time passed and Belphaxus felt himself grow impatient and irritable, more so the longer passed without a response. He wondered if the man was being held against his will in there, or if there had been an immense misunderstanding and he was wasting a great deal of time of his, and his nephew was simply self conscious about hosting him in the home that he owned in all technicality. But Belphaxus had had his men come up here after first word and observe what had been happening. They had both reported a good deal of marauding Germanics making the small villa their base to operate from. There was something amiss in all this, Belphaxus knew it. Finally, the response came.

“I'm...I'm afraid that the gates have been having some issues uncle. Perhaps I can come out from the side and join you for a ride, and we can discuss what happens to be on your mind.”

Belphaxus nodded slowly at the ploy; it was a good plan with his misdirection and offering to ride somewhere else with him, but now he was convinced that he needed to see what greeted him on the other side of those doors.

“I come with men that need rest, water, and food. They are in need of your hospitality.”

“Yet I have nothing proper to serve them.”

“Then you will have to serve them something that is improper.”

Again, the silence, and Belpxaxus had had enough. As prearranged, he signalled to about 15 men, and sent them around to the East facing door (just a small and minor access one). They should be enough to keep anyone from coming up behind the main contingent without warning; not to mention they may be able to breach the villa from there. He had another 20 men form up around the main door, and looking at it and the men at his disposal, and the weapons that they carried would likely be sufficient to break it down to splinters. The door was certainly showing its age. Before he could give any further signals, though, he heard the voice again, sounding much more defeated than before it seemed.

“Listen Belpxaxus, perhaps I could just spend some time talking to you alone. Things have changed a lot since last business was established and intrusted to me.”

“We may talk when you open these doors! Now please do so or I feel that this situation will deteriorate quickly for all parties involved.” Even more silence followed that last statement, and Soxerius was getting very impatient with the process. When the moment came that he had decided to simply breach the doors, he heard them unlatching from the other side.

Belpxaxus signaled for his men to hold. He felt that something was certainly amiss, but the danger they faced was not extreme. He rode to the front and greeted his cousin from high on his steed when the doors finally did part.

“Uncle, like I said, there is a situation that I would wish to discuss.”

“In time.” Belpxaxus prodded his horse forward and his cousin was forced to jump from his path. Almost immediately, he wished that he had allowed his men to go first.

The villa, as Belpxaxus had been thinking to himself earlier, was certainly not a large one, simply functional and resistant to being taken over. But then why, he thought to himself, were there so many people in it? As Belpxaxus rode into the main opening, he saw dozens and dozens of people milling about and doing their best to stick into the shadows. He did his best to look through windows and doorways, and even more were crowded in the space that was too small for this many people. And these weren't the slaves of the villa, though there were a good number that looked like they were in the middle of tending to the affairs of keeping the house. They looked mostly to be Germanics, with some scraps of true clothing, but there was not near enough to go around so they kept themselves draped in the furs and leathers of their home townships. Belpxaxus could hear his men coming in from behind him, and felt a sense of impending slaughter if they weren't instructed soon. Skilled killers they were, more so than the average centurion even, but they were used to fighting for themselves and by themselves, so military discipline was not something that they had excessive amounts of.

“Form up! On me, and do it now!” Belpxaxus roared at the men streaming in behind him, and killers they may be, but there were more people contained in these walls, and without assessing the situation for the best outcome, things could get away from him very fast. Luckily, the gladiators doing their best to play soldier formed up in the open square of the entry, rows made to create a box that faced out on every side. Now was the time for answers, and to gain control.

“Come to me nephew, right now.” The man shuffled as he came, knowing that their could be little good that came of this for him. “Tell me true...are these here under your employ?”

“Well, mostly uncle. They listen to me, but they are free to their own thoughts and wills.”

“Then you shall tell them they will be contained in here for the time being, but that they have nothing to fear. We shall discuss this situation on the veranda.”

And so it was. It luckily went by with very little difficulty. The people in the villa took one look at the men that corralled them and then watched them, and could see immediately that disobeying would be a deathly unwise decision. It took seemingly no time at all to Belphaxus – he supposed the relatively small size of the villa contributed to that – all the people within had been herded into the same opening that Belphaxus' horse had been reined up next to his cousins. The gladiators milled about, and kept a close eye on all those that had been found in the villa. Halfway through the task, Belphaxus noticed that there were very few men among those that had been collected. Those that were in attendance were either very old, young, or the infirm. It was curious; and worrying. But now was the time for answers.

“By Romulus cousin, what is happening here?”

“Well, these people, they live here-”

“Live? All of them? There's six score in the courtyard right now, and I haven't even asked where the men are...or are there none, and this is some sick, Germanic, marriage perversion?”

“No! No uncle, I am still true to my wife and children. There are men, but they are not here.”

“Ah! Good, I suppose they are roaming the countryside looking for plunder and more wives perhaps. Or do they just go about defiling the soil of Rome?!”

“No, please uncle, understand, these are good people here. They do not agree with killing and raiding Roman territory, they simply want to be part of it. In fact, the men are out now and are on patrol, hunting their kin that would do harm to the empire. They are *protecting* Rome, right now. They see what we have, and they come over, but they are driven under the heels of the cruel when they simply want to make good Romans! So...their leader came to me, some years back-”

“Years!” Belphaxus heard the term and felt his vision go red, his stomach turn. For moons upon moons there were these 'people' on the soil of the empire, exploiting and defiling it. The notion made him sick and violent.

“Uncle! Please! Like I've said, these are good men, simply looking for an opportunity that didn't exist elsewhere. We already trade with them, we already associate with them; if not for the river we would be full kin. So I gave them a home, I gave them jobs, and I gave them hope! And they wished to protect that by repelling those that would cross the Rhine to destroy and pillage Rome.”

Belphaxus didn't know how to respond. He left from his own villa earlier that day expecting at worst to find his family killed and the villa burned down; but this? It disgusted him that he was a part of a weakening of the border, in a time when they needed to be strengthened. The Germanics were threatening peace, and his own blood relative actually invited Germans onto Roman soil? And he actually believed that they were out there protecting Rome right now? Belphaxus had little doubt that these men that were absent were actually raiding Roman homes right now. How could his cousin not see he was being used? Belphaxus looked over at his cousin and realized with fear that there was more. Belphaxus realized then that his cousin's family wasn't being separately held. Which means they either weren't here, or, they were with the Germanics.

“Tell me nephew. What does your family think of the arrangement?” The look of fear that his cousin tried to hide told him more than any words. “You son...does he intend to take one of these dogs for a bride?” Belphaxus remembered the day his cousin brought his son into this world...so many years of marriage and no children had come forth. But then one day, they had been provided with a blessing from the Gods; a boy was born during the ides of December, the coldest one that Belphaxus could remember in the entirety of his life. And not a sickly one that

was often the case after so many childless years; he was a tall, strong, proud, smart, and wickedly handsome man now. A true gift from Olympus; and *this* was how he repaid them, but spitting on the land that gave them life and opportunity.

“It's worse than I dared; your son loves one of them, doesn't he.”

“Th-the heart wants...what it wants, uncle.” There was a terrible and long silence in the moment that followed. Belphaxus didn't know what to say, was at a loss for words as he simply struggled to maintain his emotions. His cousin simply sat and tried to look as small as possible; when he had been a small boy he had seen his uncle nail a thief to a cross, and the look of wicked determination he had that day had stuck in the mans memory, even to this day. Finally, Belphaxus broke the silence.

“This...this is worse than blasphemy.”

“But uncl-”

“This is DEFILEMENT of Rome herself!” Belphaxus didn't let his nephew even finish part of the thought, his emotions and rage now running over, “to do this to the land, inviting these savages to squat here? To allow them to roar and rape the country!”

“But they're protecting the land!” The man rose with the line, and Belphaxus turned and struck him with the back of his hand, hard enough to sprawl his nephew onto the ground.

“Do NOT be such a fool as that! That river may be the divider, but these people are not our kin! They are parasites and savages, looking to exploit! You come to Rome to serve her, and in good time, *then* you may earn the right to call yourself her citizen.” Even from the ground though, the man would not be subdued to easily, as it looked like a dangerous situation developing fast now.

“How do you live the past so still? Citizenship is for all free men of the empire! That law is decades old now.” Belphaxus flew towards his nephew and kicked him savagely in the ribs, and as he gasped and wheezed, he Belphaxus knelt down and spoke into his ear with so much malice that it was dangerously close to dripping off his tongue.

“Laws come and go in this age of ours, and I care not what some decree from some greedy man says. True Romans are more than freemen that live inside our borders, and this day I shall make that point.” Marcellus tried to follow his uncle, but he could still barely breath, and the mans stride took him out of sight almost immediately. The night was coming now, and so was the darkness.

The fire burned massive in the initial courtyard. There was plenty of wood stocked in the villa, and the gladiators made good use of it. Now the flames climbed high as the sky continued to darken, but in the summer months here, there would be light for some time still. Missed in the flames there was plenty of smoke, as there had been greenery gathered as well to make the smoke visible for miles.

The plan was simple; draw the marauding men in as they believed their families to be in danger, and kill them as they recklessly approached. The hundred gladiators and their expertise would be more than enough to win the day.

Or so Belphaxus had thought. When the smoke brought the Germanics in, there were many more than he expected. Based of the number of children and women, no more the four score would arrive he had told himself. Now he looked to see as many fighting men – many on horseback – as there were Germans in the villa now. His gladiators were to fight a 2:1 battle.

Belphaxus knew that his men could still win the day, but they were not men used to such odds or large scale battles. Only several of the 100 had taken place in spectacles of large groups;

most were trained but inexperienced, and many more had fought in a handful of small matches. Their resolve might dwindle when they discovered the odds. They weren't soldiers, they didn't have the same discipline. So as the Germans returned from whatever it was they were doing to his Rome, Belphaxus moved to take away the option of surrender from his men.

Belphaxus moved into the courtyard with purpose, his gladius by his side and his polished armor making him stand much taller than his actual stature in the yard.

“Our foe approaches, and his lust for killing has been stirred. They have their bastard gods of woods and bogs and piles of shit sated with their kills and blasphemy on Roman soil. So we must make offering to true and strong gods, and victory will surely be ours!” Belphaxus knew that his ludis was not far from the temple of Jupiter in **CITY**, and he could see some of the more devout followers of the old way nodding along with him. Now Belphaxus did his best to move quick. He strode forward and grabbed a woman seemingly at random. But this was no random act. He had been watching the prisoners for some time now, and guessed that this was the betrothed to Marcellus' son. When the young man cried out in offense, he knew he had it right. Belphaxus paid his shouts no heed. He knew that the young man would spring forward, and that the two men had had instructed to be ready would grab him, and that soon things would then tumble away from control.

And that's how it happened. Belphaxus turned back to see the man kicking against the two massive gladiators that stood on either of him, holding him back. The woman, to her credit, simply cried slightly as she was dragged away from the rest of the group, maintaining dignity. He cried out and frothed at the mouth, struggling vainly. Most the others held themselves back, but there was so much hate in their eyes as the firelight glinted off them. They wouldn't for much longer.

“To Mars! May he guide your blows this night.” And with no other warning, he drew his sword, opened the throat of the woman, and shoved her into the fire in the center of the yard.

Chaos broke almost instantly. The husband lost all his sense, and broke free of one of the men holding him. He turned and punched the other in the face with his free hand, but it only bought him enough time to see the sword of the first man crash into his face. He fell back after the sickening crunch, the sound subdued under the hateful cries of fury from his parents. And as their somewhat leader rose from the crowd to rush Belphaxus and the gladiators, so too did many of the Germanics. But it was a foolish and doomed attempt to take the men by numbers, as there were too many of them still, they were ready, and not the whole of the mass of them rose up. But it was enough.

“They seek to aid their brethren! Cut them down to the last!” It was the last audible thing in the courtyard that anyone heard, as after Belphaxus shouted the order, the yard was consumed with the shouts of slaughter. The gladiators, concerned for their safety and satisfying their bloodlust, cut through the unarmed massed like tall grass. Those that tried to hide from the slaughter will killed next to those that threw themselves with everything in them at their assailants. The sound was horrible, and Belphaxus knew that it was being carried into the darkening night sky.

And then, so soon, it was over. One gladiators had been overwhelmed by some of the captives, but he was the only casualty for the Romans; every German now lay dead or dying in the dirt. Many were split open by ugly slashes, many more stabbed or bludgeoned. The men under Belphaxus' command looked horrifying; splattered with blood and the urge to kill awakened in them all. That was good, Belphaxus thought, for they would need that to survive the night.

Time was short though; the hooves of hoofs could now be heard approaching. Belphaxus urged his men to their positions, with the main contingent to ambush those that came through the main gate, and a score of men by the side door to come around behind them. Trap them and kill them, simple. Belphaxus walked among the men, ensuring them of victory and making sure they knew he would fight alongside them. He may have been a man of wealth and means, but he served once in his youth, and trained each day before the baths to keep his body strong and sense sharp. He was deadly with his gladius, and could likely out wrestle a good number of the men around him now. He would draw blood like all the rest here today.

And then he had his chance. The first of the Germanics rode in through the front gate with abandon, perhaps trying to get back to the villa in time to stop the massacre that had already taken place. In the fire, Belphaxus could see the rage that crossed their faces a half second after the recognition of what had happened.

Then a net landed on the first rider, then the next, and soon they were being dragged down and stabbed with sword and trident. Soon, the men on foot joined the fray, and the sound was like it was birthed from the mouth of Hades. The clashing of steel rang out, and the shouts of rage and pain and slaughter filled the air. Men struggled against one another, stabbing and hacking and slashing. Belphaxus fought next to the two men that had held and killed his nephews son, stabbing over and over again, every opportunity that he was granted. It was going so well; Belphaxus knew these men of Rome would triumph over the barbarians, especially when the rest came up behind them and finished them off, hacking them all to pieces from both sides.

But the reinforcements never arrived. The battle continued, the gladiators slowly but surely pushing the Germans back, but there was no second wall of men to finish them off. In the midst of confusion, the realization of what happened struck him, and he spun and ducked in one movement.

It saved his life, as a volley of arrows went over his head, burying into the backmost line of gladiators. Some clanged off armor, or struck softly or weakly, but too many hit deadly marks. Some fell over in pain, finished off where they lay by German spears, while others died outright. Things were now turned against them, and Belphaxus grabbed the men around him and rallied several more to face this new threat.

“To me!” He tried to yell in the din of battle. He didn't know if many men heard, but many recognized the threat and turned to face it. These were mostly archers here, and just beyond the line of Germans, Belphaxus could see the 20 dead gladiators, most of them full of arrows. What a cowardly way to fight, he thought. The men at his sides raised their shields and did their best to approach the Germans, but one man stumbled as a shaft struck his calf, and another with one in his foot. Belphaxus saw the battle falling apart, and abandoned the slow march forward.

“CHARGE!” Moving fast and low, but always with his shield in front of him, Belphaxus charged the line of Germans. The few spearmen that were protecting the archers did their best to keep Belphaxus from breaching their lines, but even as he aged, he never seemed to lose very much of his speed. In a flurry of steps, he feigned then charged forward, avoiding the spear tips and slamming his shield into one of them to get to the bowmen, who were unprepared for him.

Belphaxus roared in triumph, and heard behind him the spearmen get hacked down in their confusion to keep defending from the others that he had been able to rally or turn and stab him in the back. For his own sake, the old Roman dodged and slashed, aiming mostly at the extended arms of the archers as they tried to shoot him at such close range, leaving a trail of mangled men, clucking at stumps or screaming as their arm hung loosely but whatever bit of tissue that

Belphaxus hadn't hacked through. The slaughter of the air filled his lungs, and Belphaxus laughed into the darkening sky.

He turned after the killing and saw that the reinforcements for the Germans had been destroyed, but they had served their purpose. Of the dozen men he was able to rally to assault them, only half still stood, the rest with arrows or spears protruding from their fallen bodies. Worse still were those left to defend against the initial horde. They had been surrounded when their left flank left to fight the archers, and they were struggling in their exhaustion to hold off the men that fought with fury to kill them, many already fallen. But now the advantage was theirs again; partially.

Belphaxus and his men charged the rear ranks of the Germans, and slew near a dozen before they turned to face the threat. But their own tired muscles were catching up with them too, and both sides tried to shove the other down with shields to be able to deliver the killing blows. Belphaxus himself felt pushed back as one German had turned to face him, but then he saw his throat explode out as a trident struck the back of his neck. The Germans, now surrounded and exhausted, still did not give an inch. They didn't throw down their weapons or look for quarter; none even made a move to flee. That was a shame too, because Germanic cowardice would have saved a score of Roman lives. As it was, they killed and slashed to the last man, to which they finally got whittled down to. A beast of a man with dark hair, matted with blood. He was down on one knee as the fighting concluded, panting and bleeding profusely from a dozen wounds. But Belphaxus wanted this kill for himself; he had seen the way this man commanded in the fury of battle...this was the chieftain.

"So, you thought yourself able to take from Rome." Belphaxus strutted around the man, having kicked away the ax he had been wielding.

"We sought only to strengthen your world, and to be part of it." It was all he could spit out between his gasps for breath. Belphaxus stood directly in front of him, and raised his chin up with the flat portion of his sword.

"Look upon a true Roman, that which you could never be." With that, he drove the gladius forward, through the man's neck, and he died with barely a sigh, falling off the blade.

For a long while no words were spoken, the men simply stared at the carnage in awe and shock. The fire continued to crackle in amongst them, but now their numbers were three short of 20; truly the battle had left few survivors. Belphaxus breathed heavily on the air of victory, though none of his fellow survivors looked like they were pleased in the least.

"Rome is better for what we did here today." It was all he said, all he could think to say. These men had lost their brothers here, but one day they would see that it was for the best. One day they would know, like he did now, that some victories were worth any price.

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He was breathing so hard, it was making him delirious. He couldn't catch his breath even as he sucked in harder and harder, but still he couldn't let his legs stop moving. He found the breaks in the snow that allowed him to speed along even faster, while his quarry was slowed as it moved through the snow. But it was still so fast, unnaturally so. He only had one chance, and he was so scared he'd miss his chance, because he felt like his heart would stop for lack of breath at any moment. But he couldn't stop, even as he became light-headed and the colours in the forest started to blur. He couldn't keep going, but he couldn't stop, and all the while his legs kept

moving beneath him.

And then with a start, Soxerius was back in the hold to the ship. They had bumped up against the dock – or at least he hoped that is what they had bumped into – and roused him again from the same dream. But now it just wasn't the memory that gave him the vitality he needed after a voyage by sea, but the possibility that there was more out there like it on the streets he could even now hear.

Soxerius bound from the lower levels of the smallish ship that had carried him from Italia to Sicily to Carthage. The journey had been no worse than most that made the voyage, but for someone that was used to moving only under the power of his long legs, the movement of the seas and the surrender of control made him uneasy. When the prospect of walking on solid ground was so close, it was invigorating.

“Three days, and we sail again. No more, this city is dangerous to be in now.” Soxerius turned to the captain and was about to ask him to go on, but the small Egyptian was done speaking and back about his tasks. Soxerius had no doubt that this ship would leave in three days times; as unfriendly as the captain was, he was always punctual and had a reputation for someone that carried through with what he promised or scheduled. He would have nodded at the man if he wasn't already swearing and cursing the small crew up and down to get to work unloading and uploading cargo. Soxerius was glad that a broker of Belphaxus had made arrangements for him to travel here; the Egyptian looked like the kind of man that would have no qualms making demands of high payments for the passage he provided.

He jumped down from the ship and lost himself in the crowd of the morning. People milled about everywhere with their tasks, but they all moved with purpose. Soxerius had none at the moment, and allowed himself to be carried away in the sea of humanity.

Soxerius couldn't imagine a city more glorious than Carthage. The very streets seemed to hum with energy; though he supposed that could partially be due to the heat that was being flung from every surface exposed to the sun. As more of the morning passed, he simply meandered the streets close to the docks from where he had come, his task mostly forgotten at the moment. He reminded himself that the ship had had excellent seas; favourable winds, mild weather, and no threats of pirates...they had arrived in Carthage quickly, and there was time to absorb the feel of this city.

So that is what Soxerius did; he wandered and experienced. Every turned street seemed to contain another smell that made him salivate all over again. Every vendor seemed to have another brilliant piece of coloured fabric. And the women woke in him what the sea voyage had pushed down due to his unease on open water. At one point an unescorted woman strode by, and he found himself completely hypnotized by her dark ebony skin to the point that it took the realization that he was halfway back to the docks before he even saw that he was following her. He shook the trance the woman had laid on him, but not the affect she had had on his physicality. Did Belphaxus not say he owned a number of establishments of the perfect nature for his mood? Soxerius grinned as he headed off in a direction that he thought was likely the right direction based off what Belphaxus had told him before he left for this city.

The morning had passed into afternoon, then further into evening, and Soxerius sadly had to acknowledge that his business here would have to be started when night fell. Luckily for him he had chosen this brothel because of its close proximity to the residence he was to approach at midnight for assistance; so there was time yet to linger.

The woman that he had shared the past several hours with lay in repose on the bed, much

like she had when he walked into the room. He had provided good coin and the knowledge that he worked for Belphaxus, and while that had caused some mild concern considering the situation here in Carthage, it still assured him extra considerations; mostly time.

He had said that he wished to be with a woman of exceptionally dark skin, and the proprietor of the house had certainly accommodated. He came into the room to find her as she was in the present; gloriously nude and so dark that she seemed to blend with the very shadows on the room. He had enjoyed the opportunity to simply watch her move among them, letting his gaze wander inappropriately as she approached him.

Soxerius had no knowledge of the land that he was in, but he liked to think the woman before him came from some far off and exotic land, south of the massive waste of sand he had heard of that was some days march from the city. Somewhere where men did not tread and dark incantations would call spirits and demons from beyond.

It was fanciful thinking, but the woman knew her business and spoiled no secrets, keeping the mystery in her silence. She knew what he came seeking; no conversations of the heart and the soul, but the unknown and the new. Her eyes communicated all the desires he was supposed to believe she had, and they did it excellently. He lay with her – intensely and briefly – and afterwards she still did not say a word. Soxerius enjoyed the silence, and found it an excellent moment for contemplation. Unfortunately for him in his condition, the only thing of worth that he could think up of any worth was the desire to behave like a Roman and take a bath.

Luckily for him, the time and services he was being provided for allowed for him to be bathed by the dark skinned beauty in the privy of the room they shared. The water didn't run, but it was brought up fast enough. And so he reclined and allowed her hands to kneel his flesh and soak his skin in water, and then oil. Finally, he allowed this stranger to scrape and shave the mixture from his skin with the deftness and skill of a mosaic artist, finding real pleasure in the vulnerability of the act he usually enjoyed the least in the odd Roman ritual. It was odd the trust afforded to strangers in her position, Soxerius thought to himself. But then he was thinking very little again, and lay down with her again, much longer than before, so that when they finished they were both utterly spent.

And that brought him to now, Soxerius thought. He had dressed again, taking special care to conceal the knives he brought with him. As awkward as he felt with no bow or quiver close at hand, he knew the items would be odd and of little use to him here in the crowded streets of Carthage. He looked over one last time to the woman on the bed, and considered breaking the illusion. He sat for quite some time, wondering if it would be better to leave the encounter as it had been or to actually ask her name; should he have the deception that fooled no one or the truth that served no purpose?

Unfortunately for Soxerius, he had never been much of a student for philosophy, and he let the woman lay sleeping and undisturbed as he left; not out of the wish to maintain the fantasy, but simply because it seemed like the kind thing to do to not wake her from her well deserved dreams.

Soxerius was leaving through the main gallery, when something caught his eye; white skin. Not normally something that caused a man to look again, but it did stand out among the shades of the women, and especially because it was so very white. This wasn't the white skin of Italians, but that of his people. He looked again, and her eyes met his, and he saw recognition in the broad smile that lit up across her face.

Soxerius felt guilty, because he had no knowledge of who this person was, but she smiled in such a way that he was compelled to stop walking for the door. After a brief exchange of

business, he was sharing a jug of wine with the young woman overlooking the limited view the establishment had of a small market square. He had no interest in spending his time with her in the way he had spent it with his inigma woman; It was still a fascinating view for Soxerius.

“I can't say I recall meeting in my travels.” It was all he could think to say to start the conversation.

“You didn't, I just know who you are. Soxerius, the slayer of Cerberus is how some of the smaller boys in our township described you. That killing of the wolf gained you some fame in the Germanic territories. Besides, living here from where I started, I know Belphaxus, and it has become the word around that if you know him, you're best to know about the tall skinny German that conducts business for him around the empire.” Soxerius was a little surprised that his relationship with Belphaxus was becoming common – and more than that – important knowledge. He wasn't sure if he should think himself flattered that he was linked to such a powerful figure, or concerned that his enemies would become his as well. Things weren't as they used to be, and he didn't think that would bode well for Belphaxus and his holdings. But those days were not here yet.

“Well then consider me flattered.”

“No, that honour is mine that you would stop to have a drink with me, and even pay for the pleasure. But I do appreciate your time and don't intend to take much of it.” Soxerius looked out over the limited view they had of a small market square, thinking how alien it seemed and how much he liked it still.

“Time I have; it is your company that I will be lacking until you rectify that.”

“Charming. Are you sure you grew up East of the Rhine.” She smiled at him, and he noticed a serenity in her eyes that was startlingly clear, “But in fact, I was wondering if you had any news from there. Stories we get here are always so far fetched, and of course come from those that only a fool would dare to trust.”

“Is there anything you wish to know?”

“Not particularly. I left that world behind for this one, looking for some modicum of peace, but I learned that it doesn't exist in this world. Still, it is where I grew up, and I always like to hear of it.”

“Things were bad for quite a while Maximinus, for as bad as he was on the citizenry of Rome, was much worse as he waged his campaign in Germania. Some tribes sought to defy, they were utterly wiped out, and everyone else ran into the forest when the Romans came for them. There is some peace there now, but it seems tenuous.”

“Mmm, how sad. And what of Colonia Claudia? I alwas did love her.”

“She still stands unmarked. After Severus was killed, the offensive really went to the Romans, and the Germans are now so deep in the woods hiding, it's actually quite quiet on the frontier. Maximinus may be gone, but the memory of his bruatality lingers.”

“For now.”

“For now.” They sat a while longer, simply drinking. Soxerius asked what had registered somewhere in his brain from before.

“You said that peace doesn't exist in this world, but you seem so serene. Also, there has been peace for long periods before. How can you say it doesn't exist.”

“I didn't say it doesn't exist, I just said that it doesn't exist in this world; not lasting peace. Nothing in this world lasts Soxerius, that's why I've been looking else where for my peace and stability.” It only took Soxerius a moment to realize what she was talking about.

“Are you a...Christian?” Soxerius paused to look around before he said it, which elicited

a chuckle from his companion.

“Please don't worry yourself Soxerius, there aren't any formal persecutions going on at the moment. And yes, I am, though I typically have people call me Lieva.” Soxerius leaned back and took that in. Did this woman know Belphegor's son through their faith? Why did he seem to keep running into these people? How did she work here and keep true to her faith? Soxerius wanted to ask it all, but there was something wonderful about the woman's aura; her calm seem to transfer into his very being. So he simply sat with her, and the two of them shared the last of the wine, while they concerned themselves with nothing else of the world.

“Carthage has such amazing spectacle Soxerius...and I think it was this that sent me to the Christians. The Vandals enjoy shows of bravado, and do so with with wickedly curved blades in duels that can be either very friendly, or between enemies of generations. The way these men danced with death, always on some line between here and the next life; it affected me as I wondered about that transition, and its permanence among all the impermanence of the world. These questions led me to the church; odd that they're fond of condemning the duels of the market square.” She sipped slowly from her goblet, “Would you know of that which I speak?”

Soxerius had been tracking the wolf for three days now. He had killed three of its pack mates, but they were just incidental to his goal. They she demon had to be stopped; it would be stopped. For too many nights, sheep had been killed and devoured in the middle of the night, and the morning left little sign of what had done it. Traps seemed to work at capturing wolves in the area, but always sickly and small looking things. And always the killings continued. Soxerius knew that this was his chance, to prove himself worthy as a man, to show that he was able to go out into the world and thrive in it. So the next time a sheep brayed in the night as it was dragged off, Soxerius went after it.

He was lucky that the spring was fast approaching, but even still, there was snow everywhere and the cold seeped into his bones at night. When he dared stop long enough for a fire, though, there was always snow to melt for sustenance, and the early season mushrooms kept him sustained past the hastily stripped and eaten wolf meat as he pursued his quarry.

Soxerius had only seen the beast once, early that night he started chasing her. He followed the drag tracks to a small hill, where the beast was devouring it hungrily as her pack mates circled eating what they could. Soxerius had notched an arrow in hopes of bringing her down immediately, but his scent and sounds were on the wind to her, and with one short and angry howl against the moon, she ran into the night, taking her pack with her.

So Soxerius followed. He followed North and then West, cutting back and forth and to and fro. When he felt like he was getting lucky, he wouldn't see a track for the better part of a day, and when he felt like it was time to give up, the straggler of the pack would appear. These creatures were so tired from following the grand wolf among them that they were put down with ease, but Soxerius felt their exhaustion of trying to follow the great wolf, but every kill him made he felt closer to his goal and he couldn't abandon it now. He had little idea where he had ended up in his pursuit, as little looked familiar, but he could still probably find his way home following the right markers. It wasn't something he thought about much. He just thought about the wolf and the pursuit that seemed to take him from one end of the world to the other.

In fact, it was all Soxerius could think about, all that was driving him forward at this point. Because he knew he was close, and he was going to finish this.

It was another desperate afternoon, but finally, Soxerius saw tracks. And not only did he see the tracks, he saw movement through the trees. One solitary wolf, but massive compared to its ilk.

But in one heart breaking moment, the wolf saw Soxerius, and began to run. Soxerius knew he had nothing left past this day; his feet ached with every step, he was underslept and fed, and every fibre of his being was exhausted in a way that felt like it could kill him. So he ran after the beast. He dodged trees and snow, finding the fastest way through the brush. And there was something else that gave him hope; running water. Soxerius could hear a strong current directly ahead, directly between him and the wolf. It was the break that he needed, the only one that he could hope for in this final pursuit. Either the wolf got away for good or Soxerius finally made his kill. Either the wolf went into the water and gave him the chance to take the shot before she reached the other side, or else she ran along the river and gave Soxerius a real chance to close the distance enough to get a shot off. Soxerius truly hoped the river was wide enough to impede the beast, because if she decided to run parallel, Soxerius didn't think he stood much of a chance of emerging victorious. So naturally, when the wolf reached the waters edge, she veered sharply and ran along it, against the current. Soxerius cursed and tried to will his legs to move even faster. If he angled right he might have a chance, he just needed a clear shot. He could see the loping legs of the wolf, but there were just too many trees to make any sort of attempt. But with every passing moment his target got further and further away. All was not lost though; there was a small clearing approaching, and it was his last shot. He just had to make it out into it shortly after the she wolf and he could take the shot if she wasn't too far away. Through the trees he could see the wolf was lagging too; running lop sided as it tried to maintain its speed, tried to put as much distance between it and its pursuer. But for every bit as tired and worn out as the wolf was, Soxerius was several times worse. The distance grew more and more, and he became concerned he wouldn't have the chance to strike the beast when he emerged from the treeline. In the next moment, the wolf broke from tree cover and started to run with wild abandon, probably feeling the fear of exposure without the trees above her. Soxerius couldn't believe how much speed the creature seemed to be able to generate in its exhaustion, but he couldn't let her get away. He pumped his legs with everything in himself, and just a bit more than that. His heart pounded and his legs threatened to collapse all together, but he couldn't give up; he was so close to the clearing, so close to his one shot. The wolf kept widening the distance, but Soxerius had come to far to see it as the lost cause, so he ran with an ugly wheezing sprint. Only then did he realize he was sprinting. There was to be nothing left in him after this, but it was his only chance, even if wasn't much of one. He ran to the point of collapse, and just when he thought he might black out from the pain in his side, he emerged from the treeline. In one deft movement, he threw a knee into the hardpacked snow on clearings edge and notched his arrow. He scanned through the dots in his vision to see the wolf still moving away from him at a depressing speed. Gods, he thought, how is that thing still moving so fast. He pulled the bowstring back as far as he could pull it, saw that it wasn't enough, and in one final arch and cry of pain, pulled it back just a little further and released it at the perfectly arched 45 degree angle. Soxerius collapsed into the snow, eating a full facefull before being able to roll slightly to his side to see the last impossible trajectory path of his arrow as it came down into the lower spine of the wolf. She fell into a painful heap with a yelp, and then all was silent.

The world was completely black save for the moon and an odd assortment of torches and lamps scattered in the square. Most had made their way home and away from the blankness of

the night, but for Soxerius, who had hunted in the black forest, it was nothing strange or difficult to deal with; well, almost. He seemed to have a poor habit of catching a look into a torch and ruining his night vision until his eyes had time to adjust again. He spent the time waiting for his contact practicing scanning around him but not compromising his ability to see in the dark.

It was during this he saw a man that roughly met the description of the one he was supposed to meet here. Rough and ugly tunic, jet black and curly hair, with a beard to match. He had an awkward gait about him, and Soxerius realized that he walk with a limp. He held back and waited, thinking that Belphaxus would have mentioned something like that to him.

But as it had been prearranged by the messenger that only beat Soxerius to the city by a couple days, the man approached the small – but to Soxerius' eyes, ornate – fountain that occupied a small piece of real estate in the rough center of the square. Once there, he produced two coins of similar size, then tossed they one by one off the marble work in the center and into the water. Then he sat and waited, apparently tired by the effort.

Soxerius did admit the man was not in peak physical condition, but he seemed rather haggard, as if more than his journey and task were weighing on him. He sat on the edge of the fountain, breathing hard and leaning his elbows against his knees. Soxerius took a final scan of his surroundings and approached him.

“What is your name?” The man almost looked startled that Soxerius produced himself, but he did his best to rise graciously to meet him, though the effort came across as forced and nervous.

“Ah, you must be Soxerius, Belphaxus' man. I have heard much about you. My name is Xertan. Come with me, and we'll discuss what needs to be done.”

“I already know what must be done. To extract Balphaxis to the from where he is held and return him to his father. Barring that, see that he meets his end in a manner befitting a Roman instead of executed by the state, so that Belphaxus will retain control of his holdings down here.”

“I, well, yes, that is what needs to be done.”

“Good. So let us save us both some time, and have our discussion here about how it is I'm to do this.” Soxerius already did not like this man, and moreover was getting an increasing impression that he was not as trustworthy as he was led to believe. So the sooner he could conclude his business with him, the better.

“Are you sure? Out in the open? I have wine back-”

“Yes, I am sure. We are nothing more than strangers in the night, shadows to anyone watching. And the open is good, it provides one with options should something go awry.” Soxerius looked down at the man from the height of his tall stance, and even the dark knew his unwavering gaze would shake the type of man before him.

“Uh, ye, yes, here is fine. Fine considerations for safety and security to.” Soxerius sat on the ledge to the fountain himself, and listened. He listened to Xertan tell him about the building Balphaxis was being held in, where in it his room was being located, the number of guards. He listened with intensity and silence as he explained the locks, and produced copies of the keys he would need. Soxerius' eyes were set straight ahead as he weighed the facts.

“There was never any hope of getting him out of this city alive, was there?” The man nervously wrung his hands. Soxerius didn't know what the man had sent in his last letter to Belphaxus, but he was guessing it gave more hope for rescue than he had just been granted.

“Please, you must understand that the situation has changed since I wrote. Before the factions seemed disorganized and no one was to prevail easily above any other. Now power has

been consolidated, and it has been so against Balfaxis' favour. We can always remove him from the house if we were to have several more men, but we would not be able to remove him from the city; the agents that work against him are too many and too strong now."

Soxerius considered the information grimly. He didn't know how Belfaxus would respond to the news that his son did not escape Carthage, but died there instead. At the very least, he could provide to him a blade so that he may take his own life. Soxerius had not grown up in Roman culture, but he understood having control over the final moments of your life, the freedom one could feel in that. And then there was the practicality that Belfaxus would gain back ownership of the brothels his son had been running here, instead of having them transfer to the governor upon his execution. The only thing that kept him alive now was apparently the current governor had to be properly brought into the fold of the new ruling faction of Carthage; either that or be replaced by someone they found suitably controllable.

"Then I must provide him the opportunity to fall upon his sword."

"Yes, yes, sad but true. Now, in the morning a guard that is paid from my pocket takes up position at the rear of the house, and he can let you in. You may present the sword to him there, or try and remove him from the house so that he may kill himself publicly. After either case, you must make haste out of the city."

"Why wait until morning?"

"Pardon?"

"The morning, is hours and hours away. Carthage sleeps now, and the opportunity will not be better. You did provide to me keys so that I may move through any doors I might find, yes?"

"Well, I suppose..."

"And may I presume the guard is less in the middle of the night?"

"Perhaps...I, I just..." The man trailed off and Soxerius' suspicion of the man raised up more.

"What is that worries you so Xertan? Is someone aware of your involvement with Belfaxus? Or do you always stammer?" Soxerius wanted to push the man some, to see what would result.

"You must understand, it's like I said, things have changed in this city, and I have not entirely been on the proper side of things. I do this one last thing for Belfaxus, but they I will be gone from here." Soxerius leaned very close to him, letting the stale wine on his teeth invade the mans sense. At the same time, he had produced one of the knives he had hidden on his person, and pressed it dangerously close to Xertan's manhood.

"Tell me true, have they approached you?" Xertan began to shake, and even in the cool night perspiration beaded on his forehead.

"No...no."

"And is all this information accurate?"

"Yes, of course. Like I said, I do this task, but I am gone afterwards. I do not want the agents...the men of Belfaxus, hunting me to kill me in the night." Soxerius looked at the man one last time, doing his best to determine if he was telling the truth. He probably could have started cutting him to see if what he said was true, but time was pressing now and the cries might attract attention. He resheathed his blade, and Xertan's whole body slumped in relief, to the point Soxerius wondered if he had wet himself.

"Leave the city by sunrise, and I will tell Belfaxus that you performed admirably in a terrible situation." Soxerius didn't wait to hear the mans stammers of thanks; the mans voice was

aggravating even in memory. He simply moved out into the darkened streets with speed and purpose; there was much to be done before the night was to end.

Night watchmen were always such an odd assortment, Soxerius thought to himself. The most and least vigilant night watchmen Soxerius ever had to deal with or evade always worked during the night. And there was no clear way to separate the two disparate types...some old men slept most the night away, while some old men were so engrained with years of the shift they were like all seeing old owls. Some young guards wiled the night away with wine and gambling, while others were keen to prove their worth and catch prowlers in the night, and patrolled constantly at no regular interval. Fat men would have exceptional eyesight, and fit men would be exceptionally lazy. Italians would calmly assess intrusions, and Greeks would abandon all reason in the same situation.

Soxerius looked back over his shoulder and smiled at the fortune he had at running into two guards who happened to have been arguing about the disparity in their performance and zeal for their job. The one accused the other of being overly ambitious, finding cause for worry constantly and finding nothing, while the other countered that they weren't even really doing their job.

Unfortunately for them, their distraction had made it easy to slip in the back door and murder them both before they had a chance to raise any alarm or even react. One slash to the first's throat, and a flurry of stabs into the other's chest, and it was all over. Soxerius turned from where the bodies lay now, knowing that speed was important before those two were discovered, and let himself into the barred room that served as the prison for Belphaxus' son.

For being their enemy, the suite of Balphaxis was much nicer than it had any right to be. It was clean and had everything squared away, with a fine wash basin, bed, and desk even. Soxerius was surprised to find that it was lit up at this odd hour between being very late and very early, with Balphaxis at the desk writing.

"No, this isn't a confession," it was all the man said, not even deeming to turn around. He wore no shirt, and Soxerius thought it likely because of all the hideous bruises on the man's torso. None where they could not be covered by normal garb however. While Soxerius had never known the man's mother, it looked plain to see that he had taken after his mother and father equally. He lacked Belphaxus' deeply hued skin tone, but was built like him; short and powerful. He had the darkness of his father's hair, but not the type or even amount; while Belphaxus still had a full head of thick hair, his son's was thinning and receding.

"What are you writing then?" It was all that came to Soxerius to say in the moment, even though he knew time was short.

"Meditations on true living. Based on the commotion that was happening around here yesterday, I imagined that someone might come for me, so I have decided to spend my last day writing thoughts to help others." The man stopped what he was doing to turn around, mildly surprised to see Soxerius, and sprayed with blood at that.

"I hope you have written what you wished to, for it is time for you to depart. I am your father's man."

"Admirable for you to make it this far, but I'm afraid rescue is beyond possible at this moment; the entire city knows my face and there isn't a single sailor that would smuggle me out the docks or a single citizen or slave that would immediately sell me out if I was seen among them."

“I come here to offer a different means of escape.” Soxerius produced the dead guards sword in what he felt was a self evident offer. But Balphaxis simply starred blankly at him. “Fall on the sword, for the honour of your house and the protection of its holdings.” The beaten man smiled at Soxerius though, nothing more.

“Ha, suicide? If I wanted to kill myself, don't you think I'd have had the opportunity by now?” Soxerius had thought about this, but he had simply assumed that he was being held in such a way that he couldn't take his own life. Now that he stopped to think, there was something else he felt like he was missing too...

“Besides, much to my fathers chagrin, I am a follower of Christ. Killing oneself is a sin that I could not take part in.” Soxerius starred at the man dumbfounded. Time was running out and this Roman – of all people – was refusing the ability to kill himself. The whole situation was a disaster, to the stammering and cowardly Xertan, this Christian Roman, and the fact that every moment longer Soxerius spent here, the more in danger he felt. But why? Then he knew, and his stomach lurched.

“Wait one moment; what did you mean you prepared yourself after you heard commotion yesterday?”

“I have baptized myself, as well as I could under these conditions, to prepare myself fo-”

“No! No no no, the commotion, what the hell were you talking about there?”

“Oh, just that I heard there were extra preparations being made for the morning shift to come. More men I think? The door is thick and...pardon, what is it?” But Soxerius wasn't listening, he was only cursing himself and straining to hear out into the streets. The thick walls of the place and the movement of the early risers made it difficult, but he could hear off in the distance the sound of heavily laden boots hitting earth. He was out of time.

Soxerius came at the Roman head on, fast and angry,

“Are you to tell me you won't fall on your sword?”

“I told you, no! This sin is too great, and-” That was the last thing he was ever to say, as Soxerius grabbed him roughly by the shoulder and drove the sword part way into the man, before throwing him down onto the handle to allow it to pierce him the rest of the way. He rolled over to his side, shocked and silent, gushing blood and then dying. Soxerius turned for the door, but in the frame he saw that it was too late.

“Halt German.” Soxerius looked down the hall to his left and saw five men, one of whom had spoken to him and was clearly leading these men. He looked to the right and saw two men guarding the door he had come in beyond the bodies of the watchmen.

“Who are you?” Soxerius was racking his brain with a way out of this, but there were two exits only, and the men at each looked like real soldiers, not just mob thugs or militia for hires. Armour, full swords, and even the look of men with the discipline of soldiers. The archer knew that he was no match for any one of them.

“Men who wish to see Balphaxis executed for his crimes against the empire and the province of Africa.”

“He merely had dealings with the Gordians, long before their run into the seat of power. That is no reason to execute anyone.”

“Oh, I know about that. But the excuse sounds rather good doesn't it? That little shit and his father will have to keep their filthy fingers on affairs that actually concern them out in Gaul.”

“Perhaps not. It would seem our mutual friend has tragically thrown himself on a sword and ended his life in a traditionally valorous action. His father is granted controls on his property again, and you get to go back to fucking yourself.” The mans eyes squinted in anger down at

Soxerius, and he could tell the man was truly ugly. Soxerius thought that perhaps that was the cause of his apparently foul temper.

For a while, no one seemed to know what to say. No one wanted to be the one to make the first move, and Soxerius' exchange of words with the ugly man had hit a stall. Though he did look like he was contemplating something, and then finally, deciding on a course of action.

“To hells with it all. Belphaxus will have to wait quite some time to hear about what transpired here, and even longer to be able to respond properly. Make no mistake! This Rome was not the one that he grew up in, and the distance between Carthage and Colonia Claudia has grown several times over. His son committed suicide? Fine. But it will be a long time before he can establish any sort of influence here again. As for you; perhaps we'll burn what's left of you out of respect in the brothels of Belphaxus that are being sacked now. What say you to that you pig-hound?”

Soxerius weighed everything again, and took his only shot. He drew both his daggers, and channeling every bellow he had ever heard come from his fathers considerable lungs, rushed the two soldiers at the back door. Soldiers or not, disciplined or not, Soxerius had thrown out a guttural and instinctive challenge to these men, and they took it. They yelled back, and charged themselves.

But Soxerius saw how the steps would play out, and the advantage was his, because the two men would reach the bodies on the floor just half a breath before Soxerius, putting them off balance and vulnerable. To complete the gambit, Soxerius switched the grip he had on one of his knives, and at two paces from the body, hurled it at the guard slightly back of the first one with all the might he could generate in the space.

Soxerius had absolutely no talent in throwing knives, but he was doing it for the distraction and not to kill the man. Amazingly, the handle struck the breast plate of the man he threw it at, and then the blade rotated around and cut him deeply on the hip. He bellowed in pain and stumbled back just as his partner made contact with the bodies at his feet and stumbled forward, creating the only chance Soxerius would get. Running forward at full speed, Soxerius jumped head first into the gap between the two men that had opened and thigh level, hurtling himself through the two temporarily distracted men and dragging his second knife over the leg of the uninjured man. He cried out and toppled over, at about the same time Soxerius came down onto the hallway floor with a crash and string of profanity.

But even as he swore, he was struggling to his feet and getting out of the range of the sword of the man with the chin wound. Having regained his senses, he was on top of Soxerius in an instant, and the German did the only thing he could think to keep him from being hacked to pieces; he threw his second knife into the mans face. The soldier swore loudly and dodged back, being slapped with the flat portion of the knife, but being otherwise uninjured. He rushed forward again to run Soxerius through, but he was already out the door and running like a man possessed.

Soxerius ran like only he could, even in the foreign city. The back alleys were cluttered but posed little issue for him to jump over. The crowds were just trees that moved a little bit with predictable tides, and Soxerius' long days in the forests of home made him impressively adept at moving through them.

He eventually wound his way back to the brothel he had spent his first day in, once he was convinced he had lost his pursuers. The place was ransacked, and even from outside he could smell blood in the air; he was not happy at the prospect of entering, but he knew he must to

be thorough.

Inside the broken door frame, the bodies of two guards and what Soxerius presumed was one of the assailants to the business lay cut up and bled open on the floor. Down the hall, he saw the bodies of several of the women he had seen, plus another one of the assailants, with so many stab wounds in his chest he did not like to think of what he did to warrant such ferocity in the dealing of his death.

Soxerius bound up the stairs, not wishing to linger in this place longer than he had to. Chances were that he would be safe, as all the men looking for him now were probably congregated by the docks waiting to spring forth if he appeared. But still he moved with haste.

Upstairs the carnage was generally the same; quite a few bodies of the women who called this place home and work, with a couple badly mutilated bodies of those that assaulted the house in the first place, with their chests perforated at least a dozen times each and one have most his face slashed apart. Near the end of that hall, he saw on the ground the woman he had laid with, almost peaceful looking in all the carnage except for the single stab wound that looked like it had drained her life from her quickly.

It was then that he heard the mild shuffling in the room he had stayed in. Soxerius paused a moment to listen, and when he was convinced it wasn't an ambush, he kicked the door open and slid inside with all the grace and haste he could muster. There on the floor was a man mostly dead, slashed about the neck several times rather deep (though none seemed to intersect with the most important structures of the neck somehow) and stabbed at least once in the abdomen. He struggled to maintain his consciousness, and when Soxerius bent down to ask him what transpired, he did nothing but whimper for his mother, looking as Soxerius pleadingly but never really seeing the man. Soxerius simply stood and drove the heel of his boot into the mans temple to end what was left of his existence on this plane.

“Soxerius.” The voice was so faint that even under most quiet settings, it would have gone by unnoticed. But Soxerius turned to find Lieva slouched against the back wall. Next to her lay a wickedly sharp looking and bloodstained knife. In her hands she held her stomach together as best she could from the ugly looking sword wound in it, though her blood had leaked out in a quantity that told Soxerius she was not long for this world. He moved quickly to her side, reached to help her, then pulled back when he realized he could only make things worse.

“Lieva...I'm.” Soxerius stopped. What did he want to say? “I'm going to avenge this; I will spill the blood of all that had a hand in this.” Surprisingly, she chuckled. A fresh rivulet of blood came from her wound, though she didn't wince. She was beyond the pain, and not much longer for this world he knew.

“Hardly seems necessary. When they had dispatched the guards, they really let their guard down, especially if you look harmless; until I'm latched to you with my knife in you. I think that was the last one who came in to do us harm.” She gestured at the man with the caved in skull, acknowledging but not really seeing his gruesome end.

“But there are others, and they will pay for this.”

“Soxerius, just remember what we talked about,” when Soxerius looked at he puzzled, she continued, “The world is too big and life is too short. You can't live your whole life in it...you can't...listen. Just leave this place. If you seek vengeance you won't escape, but if you simply get on a boat and leave, you can be gone from this place. I don't need you to kill for me. But you can do one thing...for me. Grab that jug of water.” Soxerius, puzzled, did as he was bid.

“Help...help me lean back some. Good, there. Now, ask me if I accept Christ and his love.”

“What?”

“Just ask me if I accept! And when I do, pour the water on my forehead.” As perplexed as Soxerius was, he did as he was bid, and afterwards the most serene smile spread on Lieva's face. He didn't know if he had ever seen such a look on someone waiting for the ferry man.

“Thank you...remember what we...talked...” but she never finished the words, and she never would. Soxerius sat for quite some time, her head cradled in his arms. The sun went from being high in the sky, to low, to gone, and Soxerius simply held Lieva. He held her and tried to think about what had happened, because it felt incredibly important. But he couldn't get it, couldn't grasp it, not all of it. All he knew is that the men responsible for this would live, he would be sailing out in the morning.

The small Persian bow Soxerius carried with him felt ridiculous. He was used to bows of his own design and dimensions; something to take advantage of the fact his arm span was enormous. But this was the only thing he could find under the circumstances, and he promised himself it would be all he needed to sail away from this place. The quiver he had acquired with it was stuffed over full of arrows, and now was time to make good on his intention to make it to the boat he came in on on time to depart this city he had enjoyed so much and so briefly.

With the sun rising and Soxerius having no notion of how many men he would encounter, he thought his best chance was simply to move with the crowd as close to the boats as he could, then to loose as many arrows as fast as possible at anyone who happened to be guarding that exit to the city. There was so many ways to leave a city this big, he had to imagine that the thugs hunting him down would be spread out. While they could call for others, with a fast and purposeful stride, he should be able to reach his boat without much difficulty.

Soxerius was doing his best to calm his breathing in the alcove of a small store front that hadn't opened yet, waiting for the first tendrils of light to become full day before making his move to the boat. With any luck he would make it just as the impatient captain was wanting to push off to retrace the journey they had made, and the delay leaving this place would be minimal. The plan seemed solid enough, Soxerius was just doing his best to channel all his fears and thoughts into the purpose set before him. It was something he was prone to do before a hunt or a kill; something to allow him to put all his energy in his task and leave no room for doubt or fear. Which was important now, because he felt so very out of his element. There were no trees here, no great wide spaces and easy places to hide or even bogs to skirt and lose pursuers in. This city, whose strangeness was what Soxerius loved about it, was also what made him nervous in the moment. What was exciting was now unknown and dangerous, and Soxerius found himself thinking about the serenity he had witnessed in Lieva.

He wished in the moment he could have a part of that. His heart felt sick trying to focus his mind. He was light headed and the strange bow in his hand made him feel weak and exposed. Soxerius imagined a good part of what he was feeling was utter sleep exhaustion from being awake for so long and asleep for so little time these days in Carthage. If he survived this, Soxerius intended to offer thanks to this christian god of Lieva's, and then promptly fall asleep for the entirety of the sea voyage.

And then the moment was here, and Soxerius moved. His mind, as burnt as it felt in it state, was sharp driving Soxerius with all its willpower. His eyes were ugly in the depth of their bloodshotness, but they missed nothing as Soxerius did his best to blend in with the crowd he moved in. Sadly difficult as he found himself far and away about the tallest person of those around him. He knew that his attempt to blend in here would be short lived.

“The German!” The call came from a rooftop not so far above or so far away, and Soxerius cursed, wishing that he had lasted longer than that before being detected. Soxerius looked up and to his right to see a young and skinny man on the roof of the building in front of him, a short three stories up. He was also drawing the string on his own Persian bow, looking for the possibility of a shot among all the people gathered around him.

Soxerius didn't have that issue and deftly and quickly drew an arrow, notched it, drew it back what felt like an embarrassingly short distance, and let fly at the man. The shot was such that under normal circumstances, the bolt should have struck the young man directly in the heart, killing him before he had collapsed fully to the ground. Soxerius watched as his arrow sailed towards the roof and buried itself in the man's foot. He cursed and reached for another arrow, but as he notched it, he saw the man cry out in pain, attempt to grab at the bolt in his foot, before losing his balance and actually falling straight off the roof. Soxerius didn't know what to make of that. He was upset and unsettled at missing his shot so blatantly, but there would be time to dissect the morning's events later. What mattered for now is that there was one less man between him and his goal. Soxerius jogged forward, not wanting to linger now that his crowd had dispersed from him, and there was a dead man who was but one in an army.

Halfway to the boat, the army showed itself. Two dozen men came from around a previously unseen corner, brandishing ugly and exotic and deadly looking weapons. Soxerius' only saving grace is it looked like they all came from the same direction.

“Well, fuck.” As much as Soxerius had imagined that this might happen, he was also hoping that there might have been the potential just to sneak on board the boat and not raise any alarms. Soxerius sighed at the simple notion – forever unfulfilled – as he snapped into a state of total focus.

While still walking in the direction of the boat but not actually looking where he was walking, Soxerius started to loose arrows. As pathetic as the little weapon felt in his hand, Soxerius did find it had more give than a simple wooden bow, and its small size made it amazingly fast to draw and fire from. As the men rushed towards him, Soxerius drew and fired at such a rate that usually three bowmen would have been needed. He still didn't have a feel for his weapon, and his shots were not placed with the usual deadly accuracy he was used to being able to produce. So Soxerius simply drew and fired faster; if he couldn't hit them well, he'd hit them many times over.

And he did. The single man hail of arrows sapped the charge from these thugs. Soxerius was thankful that the men were not trained soldiers, simply street hustlers and killers. The first man struck was done so in the shoulder only, but it made him stumble and the men around him scattered at the sight of their comrade hitting the ground full with his face. Had they continued to charge, Soxerius would have had to run and take his chances. As it were, the hail of shafts he sent at his assailants took from them their advantage of numbers as none seemed to want to be the one to commit fully to leading it. That was fine with Soxerius, who continued to firing as fast as his overtired muscles would let him, again and again, until the quiver started to feel frighteningly low and he had to pace his shots more slowly. The men cowering behind stalls or around the corners of buildings sensed a slackening of the threat, and began to more aggressively move between their cover and even start to consider a full on charge once again, even though four of their fellows lay dead or dying in the dirt. Soxerius saw the emboldening of his attackers, put all his effort into one last shot (that sadly only ended up grazing the most forward positioned man), then turned and ran for the boat.

Soxerius heard the feet slamming behind him as the thugs once again bravely charged

now that the highest threat of death or injury was behind them. A couple stragglers brought up the rear with arrow wounds, but there were so many left that Soxerius hoped the captain was as punctual as he claimed. He had kept the gap between them sizeable, and he was very close to his escape, but he knew that this would be close.

Soxerius thanked all the dieties known to him when he saw the crew of the boat loosing the ropes that kept the boat in dock; he had arrived at about the best possible time. The men working from the deck saw the commotion coming towards them, and began to work at double time, starting to shove off and away already, calling out for the oars to start. Soxerius' stomach sank when he realized that they were pulling away a little too fast, and now he wasn't sure if he could actually make it on. He channeled his fears to move his feet even faster, and in the moment he was sure the boat was too far off the dock to catch it, he threw himself into the space left by the rapidly retreating boat and caught just enough of the rigging that hadn't been brought up on deck yet to move away with the boat.

He scrambled onto the deck, and while some of the crew members swore themselves purple at him for his actions, Soxerius couldn't understand any of it. Besides, they were all still too busy hurrying to get themselves out into the sea before the men back on the dock were able to string and fire their own bows. Soxerius did his own part to make sure they never loosed arrow one.

Turning back to see the gang of men attempt to prepare their missiles, Soxerius loosed the rest of his bolts with abandon, knowing now there was no need to save any more of them. This time, there was nothing but a few loose barrels to hide behind. This time, they were unprepared for the shafts that flew at them in the harsh morning sun. This time, Soxerius had adjusted his shots to compensate for the oddly short bow. One, two, three, then seven men fell with arrows in their torsos, neck, even one lucky shot the pierced a mans skull shallowly. They all turned and ran, unprepared and undisciplined to even consider returning fire.

Soxerius pulled the bow back on his last arrow, sighting the fleeing men and seeing a muscled and fat hulk of man with what looked like a maul making his way to safe distance, and he was just almost there. Soxerius flashed back to the forests of his youth, and the clearing with the wolf that almost got away again. Then for some reason, thoughts of Lieva came to him, and he thought about what she had said. Her talk of peace and the state of the world...and he imagined seeing her serene smile that one last time.

Soxerius shot the arrow, and it buried into the mans lower back. His kidney, pierced by the bolt and shredded now. Soxerius knew the man would die, taking perhaps the rest of the morning to do so in the agony he must be now feeling. The thought didn't make Soxerius feel better about anything; killing Belpexus' son, fleeing and possibly never returning to such a place as this, or the dead women of the brothel. He didn't even know if it was righteousness he felt now, but it did feel proper, in a way. And it didn't. Soxerius tried to watch the last man to be struck down by him, but he simply lay in the heap where he collapsed.

He supposed that was it. He would talk to the captain, and then deal with the very important matter of some sleep. Perhaps he would better understand the details of his trip once he was rested.

“Dead then?”

“Yes. The city was turned against him, and there was no means of escape possible.”

“Did you provide to him the means then to fall on his sword?”

“Yes. He took the opportunity valiantly.” Soxerius lied.

“Good. I know he was quite taken by this...Christianity, but I'm glad he did the proper Roman thing in the end. Now I suppose I'll have to find someone to take over the management of my holdings in Carthage. Who's seeing to things in the interim?”

Soxerius did not relish telling Belphaxus the details of what had transpired after he had killed his son. But he knew that there was no hiding this from him, nor was there any way to make the blow of it softened. So he did his best to simply tell him what had transpired. How his enemies had seized their opportunity with such force that there was nothing left for Belphaxus afterwards. The businesses had been destroyed, all the proper men paid off, and Soxerius had barely escaped from the city with his life. There was nothing now in Carthage that belonged to Belphaxus. After he finished explaining the situation, there was a long silence as Belphaxus did his best to process the information. Soxerius did his best to keep quiet, to let the man think on what had happened.

“And you didn't even kill the man responsible?” Belphaxus rounded on Soxerius in a sudden movement, and he felt himself pressed back against the veranda and its view. Somewhere in the distance a large fire burned, sending gray smoke into the sky.

“No, I did not. I had no knowledge of who was in charge, or how to go about assaulting them. I made the decision to return to you with news of what had transpired, instead of waging a prolonged battle from which my chances of survival were low.” Belphaxus opened his mouth as if to say something more, but instead he stopped himself, and turned away, angrily hurling a goblet out onto the road. To broke faintly, and the silence returned. Soxerius took some time, before speaking,

“I am sorry I could not avenge-” But Belphaxus waved his explanation off.

“I am sorry for losing my calm. This is not your fault, and I am grateful you gave my son the opportunity to end his life properly. But with you needing to deliver this message, I can not send you back to kill these men as they now have knowledge of you. I can not charge my gladiators with such an undertaking because they lack the delicacy to handle this, and their numbers are still so pitifully low after I had to retake my fucking villa on the Rhine from cursed Germanics.” Belphaxus stopped himself mid-tirade, taking time to breath the anger out of his lungs. He looked out onto all that he owned, and found a centering in that, though he was perturbed by the fact there was a fire throwing great amounts of soot into the air close to what was his. He shrugged it off and turned back to Soxerius,

“I feel the storm gathering, and true sons of Rome will be forced to rise. To that end, there is something else I'd like you to do,” Belphaxus took the bag of coins that he had placed on the table and tossed it to Soxerius, “that should be the other half of what was agreed upon for your trip to Carthage, plus that amount again for what I ask of you next.” Soxerius caught the bag and felt it's heft. The amount seemed appropriate,

“Thanks Belphaxus. Though I am curious what you would have me do for the same amount of coin that nearly got me killed quite a few times over in Africa.” Despite everything, Belphaxus reluctantly grinned at Soxerius' attitude.

“Do you seek to extract a higher price from me young Soxerius? Has the danger of my employ made you consider higher compensation?”

“Nothing of the sort. I'm just interested in knowing what I will see next.”

“Sights are a poor substitute for coin. But I suppose that is the sort of wise clarity that will take some years to develop.” The two men smiled again, but then Belphaxus continued, “I'm

afraid I will be sending you no where you are unfamiliar with. I need you to go East, across the Rhine, and make contact with your former kinsmen. I need to know what is stirring, because I know something is but most I have sent across the river to get information have not returned, and those that have I do not trust. Taking my villa was one thing, and Maximinus' victories have quieted rumblings, but I know the nature of these things. Most people must be suppressed at least twice over before they realize the might of Rome and submit. That means an uprising is no doubt brewing, and I wish to be prepared for it." Belphaxus studied Soxerius' face, and saw a darkening there that was rarely present on the young man. "What troubles you Soxerius? This seemed a simple matter. You must have some fame still for killing the wolves, and some regard held to you returning those little whelps from Briton some years back now."

"It has been many years since I've returned to my birthplace is all," it was all Soxerius ventured on the topic, but his thoughts swirled about him, and part of him was not sure why. It seemed every time he tried to leave the place, something drew him back to it, or forced him back. Returning after campaign just seemed like a natural thing, but it had resulted in him killing many of his former country men, and the act indebted him to the man that sent him to retrieve his nephews from the other corner of the empire. Even the return of those boys was a trip fraught with tension, and Soxerius hadn't even dared to visit with his family during the time. The malice of the men he drank with the night he returned the young boys was palpable, and Soxerius wondered if he would fare any better in the bogs of home than Belphaxus' other scouts.

Soxerius noticed that Belphaxus was watching him closely, as if trying to divine the thoughts that stormed behind his eyes. Soxerius shook them away and opened the coin bag, starting to talk to draw attention away from his troubled thoughts as they related to home.

"Why is it that you must always pay in gold then Belphaxus? Us commoners can make much better use of silver, though I appreciate that it is not full of copper; I don't think I could carry the generous coin you may me in such a denomination. No...I..." Belphaxus had turned back to his calming view as Soxerius started to talk of coins, clearly trying to dispell whatever thoughts were troubling him about his homeland, but then he looked back over his should as he trailed off.

"What is hades are you doing boy?" Belphaxus saw Soxerius with a gold coin on a table in front of him, and he had one of his knives out as well. Belphaxus was momentarily given pause to the fact that this Germanic carried weapons in his presence and he thought so very little about it. He was glad that civilization had been born into this man.

But it wasn't the presence of the knife that perplexed Belphaxus; it was the face that Soxerius was using to cut into the gold coin. What the hell was the young man trying to prove? The edge of his blade? Because gold was a poor metal to impress anyone with the sharpness of his blade. But when the blade was retracted, Belphaxus saw what the German had suspected intially; the core of the coin was not gold at all, but have the appearance of lead instead. His ears started to burn with anger and disbelief; these coins were direct from the mint themselves. This forgery was by no street urchin, nor by some gang of thugs. These coins were minted by the empire herself, and she was giving poor goods. Belphaxus could think of no profanity strong enough for the situation. Soxerius, on the other hand, while almost timid about other things in their dealings, pulled no punches now.

"Perhaps I could get my pay in bullion this time."

The forest had a stillness that Soxerius found unsettling. To anyone else, it would just seem like the dark and quiet German forests that spread as far as exploration had discovered to

the East. But having grown up in them, hunting in them since he could hold a bow, the feel to it was off. It wasn't just the silence, but how it was broken. Usually, somewhere the shout of men could be semi-heard, or the felling of trees; even the trails of smoke that would indicate a fire on the horizon were absent. But the animals were ever more present. Usually they were forced to hide lest they become dinner, but today it seemed they strode proudly and loudly through the underbrush, unconcerned that there were hunters out there.

Soxerius was further perplexed when the first two townships he came across were empty and abandoned. Yes, they were very small and prone to empty periods being so close to vengeful Romans – the exploits of Germanicus hundreds of years earlier were still told to frighten children to bed here – but they had been empty for some time and the fact that neither even showed signs of any habitation was a bad one.

It was a long while working his way on foot, but Soxerius had traversed the empire by the movement of his feet more than once, and in what seemed like almost no time, he arrived at his own township. He felt that here he might be able to find some answers.

But the place was abandoned as well. Half the homes had fallen down from neglect or fire, and the other half had no one in them. Most the fields were untended, and the silence here had an uneasy feel to it, even more so than the rest of the forest Soxerius had found himself wandering through. He would have simply moved on if it hadn't been for the one small tended plot, that stood right next to his family's old dwelling. Soxerius approached, but with bow ready and on silent and cautious feet, unsure of how the next few moments would play out for him.

“Have you ever been told that you look like you're soiling yourself when you move like that?” Soxerius spun halfway around, reacting before thinking – as he spun – that that voice was unsettlingly like his own. By the time he rounded fully, he had slackened his bow string in time to pose no threat to his brother.

“Adalbern! Gods, finally someone.” Soxerius smiled unhindered, his natural stoicism broken by the sight of his brother before him. But...wait, there was something not right, he thought to himself. His smile quickly faded as he realized that his brother returned none of his own, or that the colour that had been in his cheeks the last time he saw him was gone, replaced with a severity of aura that ill suited the cheerful young man he had known growing up. Soxerius waited for his brother to say something else, but no words were offered forward.

“Brother, what is the matter? Where is everyone? Where is our family?” Adalbern smiled sadly.

“Do you ask with concern brother? Or are you simply asking questions for Romans?” Soxerius began to get upset, when he stopped dead and realized that he was here at the behest of Belphaxus; left to his own devices Soxerius would likely not have returned to this place in his lifetime.

“You must admit it is an odd thing brother. I'm just asking the question.” Adalbern regarded his brother coldly for a minute more, then stepped fully out from behind the tree he had been behind. Soxerius saw the long sword slung about his waist, and again Soxerius' curiosity was peaked. His brother had never been one for violence; of course now, it looked like he had seen more than he would have liked.

“Come, to the house. I'm afraid it is certainly more disheveled than I would like it to be, but it will serve for a meal and conversation. There is much I'm sure...you, would like to hear.”

“It is sad that mother and father have passed, though I suppose I can't be too surprised about that.”

“It was in the same winter at least. They always seemed to only half function unless the other one was present.”

“True...it is a small comfort they rest together. And our siblings?”

“Aranius and Caldornix passed to disease. The others...well that is a story I can't tell until I tell you of the fate of our village here.” Adalbern paused again, seeming to try and arrange the words in his head before his spoke.

“Maximinus coming through the forest was bad; truly and awfully. I knew that there would be repercussions from the raids and the campaigns that had been organized under Severus. Everyone knew the emperor was not a military commander, just some senator or patrician or something. So people pushed and expected there to be no consequences. But when they killed him and Maximinus just assumed control of the empire...no one imagined that that was going to happen. And some people even assumed it would just be a continuation of Severus' rule, and they sent messengers to treat about the gold the dead emperor had been suggesting.” Adalbern stopped, and looked as if to shudder to Soxerius' eyes, however subtly.

“I heard about what happened to them, crucified and defiled, left to hang and rot for days...if they were lucky. They let one man come back from that and deliver news of what had happened to his fellows, and even to them. It was then that people knew that the wind was changing. Many made plans to flee East should the Romans arrive in their townships, though many – far too many truly – decided it was a time to stand to Rome, assert their power in the face of the empire and all that. You know the sorts; brave and able to gather men to them, but blind to the reality in which they live.

“When Maximinus came through the forest, there were no negotiations, or mercy. It was as if the vengeful spirit of Jupiter came and assaulted us all.”

“Brother, I did not know you kept the Roman gods.”

“I don't, but they gave the Romans victory after horrible victory. No spirits or dieties from our lands stood before the legions that came through. I imagined it was very much like Germanicus marching, from what my old Oma used to tell me. Every meeting in the field was a crushing defeat for us, the Romans never seemed to be able to be taken off guard, and their supply lines were so well defended and mapped that we lost scores of skirmishes trying to disrupt them even a little bit. They even had their own hunting parties in the forest, killing Germanics on sight, with no regard for their place of birth or allegiances in the conflict. That attitude persisted to townships they came across, like ours. We were never known for siding when it came to these matters. We were even usually on the side of Rome when it came down to it. But that mattered not. A handful had stayed in hopes that the Romans would recognize them as friendly, or at least neutral. Most of those were killed where they stood or ran, with a couple being dragged off to be sold to slavery. I had hidden myself, but it broke my heart with cowardice to see my friends run through while I kept myself hidden and quiet.”

“There are no swordsmen in the empire to be able to defeat a century brother. Your death would have gained nothing.”

“My mind knows these things and tells them to me often, yet my heart still judges me for my actions. No matter now.” There was a heavy silence in the air for some time, and Soxerius wished to ask his brother regarding the chainmail and sword he carried now. Surely it was merely for protection in these dangerous times, but there was always the chance there was more malice to it than that.

“Anyway, like I said, a terrible thing, and the forests were silent for some time after he left. But I think you know now what that violence produced.”

“A desire for revenge,” said Soxerius, nodding.

“Yes, and that's where these Franks come in. In all the fleeing East, there was little regard to who we came across. That happened to be the Franks. And the anger and fear that was stewing in all the refugees, it found something to stoke; the greed of those that wished to plunder. The Franks did not know the cruelty of Maximinus, and so they are not afraid to raise forces to push across the Rhine. And with so many without homes and desiring revenge, these Franks have plenty of men willing to join with them, to kill with them. And when word went out that Maximinus had been killed by his own troops, again the notion that the Romans were weaker and exposed circulated. War has been being prepared for, and it would seem we are on the brink now.” The two men sat not saying anything for some time, both finishing the thin stew that Adalbern had warmed for the two of them. Soxerius was grateful for the warm food, but the news made the dish seem just a little cold. Belphaxus had indeed been correct; there was a response coming, years of pain pent up and being released back at the Romans.

“I am at least glad that you are back from the river brother, and that the fighting will not touch you here. Regardless of the outcome, you should be able to rebuild your life here.”

Adalbern snorted derisively, and Soxerius felt he would not like the words that came next.

“I don't believe that I can rebuild what was once here Soxerius. But I can find some measure of peace over what occurred here.” He touched the hilt of the blade lightly, and a cold determination inhabited his eyes.

“Brother, don't tell me you will follow this foolish thrust into Roman territory. The empire knows that there limited places that a significant number of men can cross, and they will cut you down like they did in the fields when Maximinus campaigned.”

“We will not face the Romans head on brother. We will do what we do best, and hunt the Romans, harry them and force their attentions to divide, and then the hammer blow will shatter the doors to the empire, and we will have our vengeance.”

“And I suppose this is what the rest of our kin have planned too?”

“It is.”

“But you can make your life here, you have enough.”

“You more than most should understand that there are some things that happen that make this little plot of land a little too small Soxerius. Most our kin are with the Franks now, training riders and archers. But there is one that is not amongst them.” By the way he said those words, Soxerius knew who it was that hadn't survived the campaign of Maximinus, but he dared not open his mouth while he brother went on.

“She didn't try to stay here, she was smarter than that. She fled East, like so many others. But a Roman scouting party came across them as they fled. Some fools in the party threw rock slings, and the Romans closed on them quickly. Every last one was run through or slashed open. Auda survived the onslaught when another body fell upon her, so she was still bleeding and moving and suffering when I came across what was left of those that had fled. When I heard that Romans had killed fleeing Germans in the morning, I set off fearing the worst, and found even more than that. She had been there most the day, trapped and dying slowly. I do give thanks that I was able to hold her head in my arms one last time, but it wasn't worth her suffering, or what I had to do next.

“I...I just held her until she nodded for me to continue, so I did. I...I held my hand over her mouth and nose. And she tried so hard not to fight it, to make it easier for me. But the body has its own powerful wills, and right before she slipped away, she slapped as me and struggled. She tried to twist free, but I held here still and kept telling myself it would be worse to have to do

it a second time. I...I wanted to let her breath but I knew I couldn't, so I held her down and suffocated her and cried tearless sobs while I did it. The act took mere moments, but it felt like an entire day had passed while I held her. It just seemed to go on..." The silence that followed the story that Adalbern couldn't stop once he had started felt burnt and improper now. Soxerius was always on the fringe of his family, happy for the company but able to leave it. Adalbern and Auda had not been born a full year apart, and could always be found in each others company as they grew up on the farm. Soxerius couldn't imagine what suffocating her had done to his brother, nor did he wish to. But now it was the two of them, staring at the future that now approached unwanted in its form, and neither being able to think of something to say.

Soxerius looked around the room instead and did indeed find the place in disrepair. The frame seemed to sag, and soot and dirt collected in the corners of the floor and roof. When his siblings marched to Rome, he wondered if any would live to come back to this place.

"I wish that I could convince you to not do this brother, but I know those words will not move you. I just hope that you live to see this farm again."

"I don't know if I will come back to it. It was always my hope, and now things have changed. You know of this, don't you?"

Soxerius leaned back, feeling oddly compelled to share now what had hadn't told anyone else.

Soxerius panted and wheezed, trying to suck air into his lungs that didn't seem to do anything for him but cause pain in this moment. Somewhere in the distance he heard the pained pants of the animal he had somehow managed to strike. Or was that still him, moaning and flailing in the snow trying to find his footing? Soxerius wasn't sure and he wasn't in the condition to find out right now; he lay flat on his back and started to think about how good it would be to simply sleep for a moment or two.

No! Somewhere from deep in him, he heard the instruction and turned himself over. He could still scarcely keep himself from passing out due to exhaustion, but he knew he needed to get over to the wolf. He tried to orient himself so that he could stand, but after spinning for several moments, he gave up on that.

Instead, Soxerius simply began to pull himself along the clearing, hoping the simple fact he was moving in the right direction would be enough to get his feet underneath him. And it did work, but only after he had dragged himself – at the most painfully slow pace one could imagine – half way there. At that point, he hauled himself up to two knees, then two feet..then back down to one knee, before finally being able to stand straight and tall. Shortly after he slouched and hobbled his way over to the wolf.

When Soxerius arrived, the creature looked as exhausted as he felt. It's tongue was out and darting back and forth in the effort of breath. Wheezing sounds came from the animals lungs as it continued to try and suck in enough breath to keep its body working properly, or even at all. But the difference between Soxerius and the wolf was clearly the injury; Soxerius may have felt like he was dying, but the wolf was.

The arrow had pierced the animals back, severing the spine and rendering the hind legs useless. Soxerius thought about how much effort that one shot took for him, and simply went about observing the fruits of his labour, impressed with himself and amazed the fates let him make such a shot. This animal would be his fame in the townships, and perhaps even across the Rhine. He had heard how it had terrorized some patricians goats or something. It was good to take stock of his accomplishment here.

Soxerius noticed that the animal was not as big as one would be led to believe. To be certain, the thing was huge compared to other wolves, but not as huge as it looked. The fur of the creature was long and gorgeous, rich enough to fill out the appearance that it was truly a monstrosity. It was taller than it was large, and truly skinnier than it was muscular.

Soxerius finally brought himself around to look the creature in the eye. He squatted down next to the creatures face, and then immediately stumbled back as the creature attempted to make a move to snap its jaws shut on his neck. Soxerius smiled at that as he picked himself up; defiant until the end, what a grand way to live life he thought. He looked into the creatures eyes again, this time from a safe distance, and saw the pain now. The tired and the hurt seemed to all come to the surface, and her breathing got more and more erratic. Soxerius suddenly felt very responsible for the creatures suffering.

It was a moment that Soxerius wanted so badly to make last days, not the passing seconds that he knew it only could. He wanted to feel the true pride in finally striking down the beast that had – for so long – defied all those that lived around him. He wanted to revel in the physical high he felt, now being able to rest in a sense; no longer having to constantly be running or moving was so relaxing he felt as if he may drift away in blissful sleep on his feet at any moment. He also wanted to taste the sadness that tempered his other emotions. His other successes usually just felt right in all ways, but in a mild sort of way to. The elation he felt now was like nothing else, but there was something else to it. He had to register that this was a once in a lifetime kill, and that there was a sadness reaching that height, for now he had to descend. And there was the sadness looking him in the face right now too. The reason it was such a spectacular kill was also the reason the moment was saddened; this magnificance would no long walk though this world, and only its hollowed out shell of a body would persist.

It was an odd mix, a wonderful thing, but it was a shortlived thing, and soon Soxerius felt cold, and resigned to moving on. In a deft movement, he knelt, drew his knife, and dragged it over the wolfs neck.

It didn't take long after that. Soxerius continued to watch the creatures eyes, still hungering to hurt him so badly, though eventually they just faded away, and all that was left was the glassy look of the dead. Soxerius looked into the animals eyes a moment longer, then he picked up the body and carried it back home.

Home, or his township, celebrated racously that night, grateful the animal was gone and wanting to celebrate the accomplishments of one their own. So the party went late into the night for most. However, Soxerius was early to sleep, to be alone with his thoughts. These thoughts led to his departure from it all, two short years later.

“I know what it is to no longer feel a connection to your home brother, but you should let this conflict pass you buy. No amount of blood will bring her back.”

“It's not about bringing her back, it's all about the blood. It's about standing to cruelty and righting the wrongs of this world. That is godly work. That is why you should join us.”

“What?”

“You do not mishear my words brother; join our fight. Kill these Romans that degrade and enslave our people. Those that use us and expect us to be grateful about it. Spill the blood of the imperial dogs and make right the suffering of your own sister.” Soxerius was taken aback; he had lived so long sitting between two sides in a conflict or operating in the spaces between large scale violence, and now it was odd to think of him taking up cause with an army.

“I do not have the power to right that wrong brother. Nor can I side with you on this, like

I can not side with the Romans West of the Rhine,” his brother only gazed at him accusingly, so Soxerius continued, “I loved Auda, but this fight is not mine brother. Killing Romans will not give her back to you. My path in this life is to simply keep walking on it, and that means skipping all of this.” Soxerius expected the silence to settle on him and his brother again, but instead Adalbern pushed back from the table with what looked like confirmation in his eyes.

“You are a cold man.” He stood then, wiping the broth that had collected in his beard. How it still looked so odd on him, Soxerius thought idly. It was a small bit of connection he tried to hold onto, because he knew it would be gone in the next moment.

“Leave this place, and venture no further East. I will not tell my brothers-in-arms about your visit here, and I will let you leave back for Roman territory without threat of violence. But linger, and I will forget this last act of kindness between brothers. Go tell your masters what comes for them; I wish all the more legions to greet me.”

Soxerius re-entered Roman territory as night was falling, but he felt compelled to make his way to Belphaxus still, even if it meant marching himself weary through the night.

He had been wrestling with his departure from Adalbern the entire way back to, and then over, the Rhine. Why had he not joined up with his former kinsmen? He didn't feel like he had any particular qualms with killing Romans, and after hearing about how Auda met her end, he could hardly be blamed for taking up arms against the empire.

But his answer was right there in his musing. They were his former kinsmen, not his kinsmen truly anymore. He had spent more years now living among the Romans than he had the Germanics, if only just.

But then why did he not entertain the notion of taking up arms against the Germanics and defending Roman territory? He supposed he knew the answer to that as well; he did not feel a particular kinship with the Romans either. He had certainly lived among them for many a year now, employing and being employed, but he never felt like he truly was one of them. Soxerius just didn't know if that was because he was not allowed to become like them, or if it was because he didn't wish to join in with them.

But he did feel compelled to tell Belphaxus of this development. He knew little of the Franks except for the mutterings he had heard around a campfire. He was never prone to take much from those encounters ever since he heard legionaries talk about the twelve person marriages he heard the Germanics practiced when he didn't think Soxerius was listening. But from what his brother had told him, their lust for plunder and war looked like it had not been overly exaggerated from those tales.

And as detached as he felt from both sides in this conflict, he did have an affinity for Colonia Cluadia. The place had always felt proper to him; like he had a place there. It fit will along the Rhine and in his life, and he did not wish it to be burned. And while Belphaxus may be many things, he was also one who loved the Empire, and would take steps to protect it when threatened. He just hoped that there was time to stop the anger from the east from consuming the one place that almost felt like home to him still, so he picked up his pace as the world around him became blacker and blacker.

Soxerius had finally arrived in the middle of the night to Belphaxus' villa. He noticed an increased number of men protecting the home itself and the man who dwelt within it, but he had no time to go through the proper channels. The men out in the fields were easy enough to avoid, but those posted to guard the villa itself proved to be difficult to avoid; in that Soxerius actually

had to exert himself to sneak past them. But with feet that couldn't be heard even when they were shadowing your own steps not a full arms-breadth from behind, muscles that allowed him to scale the walls with speed and grace, and speed that would allow passing in the time it took to look behind you, Soxerius was inside Belphaxus' bed chamber, undetected, shortly after having committed to circumventing his guards.

“Belphaxus, please do not be alarmed, but I need you to wake up.” At first it seemed as if Belphaxus simply rolled over in his sleep at the sound of the young Germans voice, but then he exploded from the sheets – sword in hand – and came directly at Soxerius. He barely dodged to the side in time, and luckily, by the time that Belphaxus raised he sword again, he recognized the man before him, and lowered the weapon slowly. Outside, the hurrying of the guards could be heard right before the doors burst open.

“Belphaxus! Intruder!” The four men at the door began a brave charge to save their employer in no actual danger.

“HALT!” Even half asleep still, the tone and command of the mans voice stopped every last one of them in their tracks, “A man in my employ, to test how well you're looking out for me; apparently there is work to do. Rouse my servants, now!” He turned his back on the men, and they slinked away with do as they were bid before they licked their wounded egos.

“Were you really expecting me to test your new security?”

“Gods no! I nearly pissed the bed when I heard you speak to me, but better to look cruel and odd than caught off guard. So why in the hells are you here in the middle of the night, making my men look like fools and scaring half my remaining years away?”

“I felt that this issue should be brought to your attention as soon as possible, even if that meant circumventing the normal means.” Soxerius took a deep breath, feeling like he was committing treason against his family, and told Belphaxus what he had found, what he had heard. The empty villages, the gathering force of angry scattered tribes and greedy Franks, ready to plunder and kill. It took little time to tell the tale, but still Soxerius felt drained when he had concluded.

“So it is as I expected, except worse. I figured the raids may increase, but full on attack is quite another thing all together...especially with conflict rising again in Persia and Legions being recalled to prepare for the campaign that is sure to arise there,” there was a small, cruel smile that appeared on Belphaxus' face then, “But I do have a plan for this as well. It's quite the thing actually, I never imagined that I would have a chance to call on this favour owed to me in my lifetime.” Belphaxus put on a loose robe as he laid his gladus down, though not too far away; he liked it close by himself in times like these. His slaves entered, looking tired but alert enough.

“Porridge, and my maps of Gaul.” There was a flurry of activity, and before much longer the two men were having a light meal while they looked down on spread parchment maps of the areas around Colonia Claudia.

“Belgica is where we must go, and immediately.”

“But what is in that place? I travelled through there on my way to Briton; it seemed little more than low lying farms, cows, and a couple cobbled together docks.”

“It is little more than that, truly, but there are some things about the place that make it more significant. Those docks are the ones that supply Briton with its fresh rotations of soldiers, and keeps the grain from the place flowing towards the eternal city. So they're important to protect, which means soldiers. And because it is close to both the Rhine and Briton, it is a place that those with some off duty time can go to leave the stress of their posts. More soldiers, and more likely in need of coin. Finally, the governor owes me that favor I was talking about.”

“Anything you would deem to share?” Soxerius was aware that his curiosity often got the better of him, but couldn't help himself from asking the question anyway. Belphexus just smiled at the one thing that got the usually stoic Soxerius to speak more than two words at a time.

“Let's just say he was involved in a plot to collect wills safe-guarded by the vestal virgins that never came to fruition, and thanks to me never came to be public knowledge. Such a thing can bring to ruin men as powerful as the emperor. But in either case, he will certainly help me gather additional men to protect this city and province. Can I count on you to ride with me to Belgica? I'm afraid to say that the roads are not what they once were, and I can always use your skill at being unsettlingly silent to assist in negotiations.” Soxerius looked down at the hand that Belphexus offered him, a gesture he had never extended to the man who had been born on the wrong side of the empires dividing line. Not knowing if it was the right decision, he gripped Belphexus' arm in his.

“To Belgica then.”

Soxerius was very unused to riding atop a horse; as much as he recognized their utility, he had always preferred to move under the power of his own two feet. But Belphexus had insisted that they ride together, especially as Soxerius was supposed to be the head bodyguard for the aging Roman on this journey. Soxerius had told him that if there was trouble, he would immediately dismount as he had little experience firing from horse back. Additionally, the size of his bow was not conducive for using from horseback anyway. Belphexus had laughed at the sight of him hurriedly dismounting to fight raiders, and assured him the image he struck on horseback was ugly enough to protect him anyway.

Their journey to Belgica had been a successful one, but now they moved back to Colonia Claudia with haste. The fall months were here and getting colder, and Soxerius knew that the attack would occur soon. The Germanics would want to attack right before the winter snow, as the legions would not pursue the attackers through the winter, giving them time to prepare for the eventual counter attack. He told Belphexus as much, while the two of them broke bread with the legatus, Antonius, in charge of the formations and marching orders of the legion that they found themselves at the head of.

In fairness, it wasn't a true legion. Roughly 3500 men had been gathered through Belphexus calling in his favor with the governor and collecting a number of soldiers outside of active duty, lured by the notion of plunder. But they followed orders well enough, and the legatus which had been assigned to lead the soldier to the Rhine was a competent – if arrogant – man. Soxerius had little fondness for Antonius, but the legion followed his orders and marched quickly under his direction. It was what they needed. So while Soxerius didn't enjoy listening to the man go on about pirates in the North Sea, and how a “couple Franks and rock chucking Germans” didn't concern him or his men, Soxerius endured with a tight lipped smile.

“The battle will be swift and victory ours!” the man assured the other two, having half heatedly listened to Soxerius talk briefly about what he believed was coming for the Rhine. Soxerius suppressed sighing with annoyance at the mans dismissal of the threat that came for the East, but Soxerius had the comforts of the legatus' tent to distract him. While Antonius would not be thought of as a man with a fondness for decadence on the march, neither would he be considered a man of spartan sensibilities. The tent had one more brazier than it actually needed, and two more slaves than were truly necessary. It kept their surroundings warm and their persons well tended to, though most men who came to speak with the man just saw the plain furnishings and impressive looking map that dominated the main table. Soxerius saw how the men respected

him. It was likely why they were only two days march from their destination now.

And as Soxerius spent more time marching among the legion, the more he was reminded about the power of a marching Roman legion; even if it wasn't a true one. As much as a braggart that Antonius seemed to be, Soxerius did have a difficult time believing that whatever was coming over the Rhine would be able to stand to the might of these forces coupled with what already existed stationed on the Rhine, depleted as it might be in preparation for additional campaigns in Persia.

"Well then let us toast to the gods. May we honour them with victory...which I would like to discuss the mechanics of with you both." Soxerius again had to suppress his reaction, but this time it was surprise. For the years that he had been handling tasks for Belphaxus in the far flung reaches of the Empire or in his own backyard, he was always directed, and never consulted. It was true the Roman seemed to have a fair amount of respect for his abilities and his results, Soxerius had never had his opinion acknowledged in their tenure together. He stood with uncertainty; and a small sway from the fine wine the slaves seemed to fill his cup with constantly. Antonius moved to the other side of Belphaxus.

"Here are the crossings that the Germanics will be forced to utilize to assault the empire. Here is the most heavily guarded and closest to Colonia Claudia, here is too far south and might even attract the attention of additional forces, but here," he said, stabbing the crossing that was north of the city and not too far from the small villa he controlled, "is likely the spot they will deem to cross to make their assault."

"I agree. But I have it on authority that the attackers will be using distraction tactics to draw attention away from the main force; I would assume they will have small parties harry the forces closest to the city while they move their main contingent across the river at that northern crossing." Soxerius did his best to speak with some air of military knowledge.

"Those fools! That gives us the perfect early warning to when their main force will attempt to cross the Rhine!" Antonius exclaimed, revealing that he, too, had been enjoying the fine wine Belphaxus had provided in an amount that would be deemed excessive. Soxerius breathed slowly at the comment, but had to admit to himself the fact remained true.

"Yes, well then I suppose the legions will have a chance to prepare and be all the more able to repel the Germans as they attempt to cross the Rhine. They will either have to abandon their campaign or exhaust their numbers and resources throwing themselves against the Rhine's defended positions." Soxerius felt a glimmer of hope over the outcome; not just for the city of Colonia Claudia, but for his brothers. If they were stopped from even crossing the Rhine, the deaths would be far fewer than if they met the legions on the West banks of the river.

It would be the last feeling like that Soxerius would have for quite a while.

"That is an option, but it is not one we will exercise." Both Soxerius and Antonius turned to Belphaxus, who finally spoke again.

"Why?" Antonius was the one that came to the words first, clumsily, though Soxerius had equal curiosity for the decision.

"Because if we simply push these barbarians back from defended banks, they will try again, and who knows when. Likely when we don't have the men we have now to assist us."

"But by then there may be additional legions back from campaign in Persia, or even newly recruited and trained legions to take up defense at the border." Soxerius said.

"But those forces may not arrive in time for the next assault. And those men will not be strongly guided by true Roman sons."

"Roman sons like you?" Soxerius was not sure where the words came from in him, but

they came forth still. There was something in how Belphaxus was speaking that seemed more sinister than he had seen in the man before.

“Yes, like me.” Belphaxus turned to Soxerius then, and the dark resolve that shone in his eyes unsettled Soxerius more than anything he could remember in his lifetime. There was a pause, heavily laden with unspoken threats.

“Then, if you do not think it best to repel them at the border, what is the course of action?” Antonius said, just to say something to try and alleviate the tension that seemed to have very suddenly come about in the conversation. The other two men get their gazes locked a moment longer, than Belphaxus turned back to the map and gestured. The way he did it, no one in the tent had any doubt who was in control of the thousands of men ready to kill for the empire. Antonius may give the men the marching order, but he had been explained to very clearly, by the governor, that Belphaxus held ultimate authority.

“We wait for them, here,” Belphaxus gestured to a position just a little bit away from the northernmost crossing, “and we keep out patrols out at all parts of the night. When the Germanics move across the river and begin their march to the city, we will take this approach,” he said, tracing a line away from the river and toward the city, sweeping back to both eventually, “so that when the barbarians are throwing themselves against the walls of the city, we will come upon them trapping them against the river and routing them. By the time the blood ceases to flow, they will all be dead or enslaved.” Belphaxus took a step back, looking rather pleased with himself.

“Cunning...though many more men will die this way, plus the city herself will be endangered.” Antonius mused as he looked down at the map, envisioning the marches no doubt.

“Necessary sacrifices must be made, but this is the proper way to ensure that the savages know not to meddle with the might that is Rome.”

Soxerius, for his part, had no words for the plan. From some perspective, he understood it. By allowing the raiders crossing into the empire, they could be killed and shackled to the man almost, leaving little opportunity for escape. And if properly outmaneuvered, the Germanics would stand little chance of repelling a second force or Romans after throwing their might against the initial stationed forces and the walls of the city. He thought about how proper timing and surprise could yield unheralded victories, like the countless retellings of Arminus' slaughter of three legions in the forests of his homeland he had to endure growing up. And he recognized the need for brutality to combat it as it came East even now. He thought about the way his brother spoke of killing Romans for the sake of killing Romans, how he imagined the Franks licked their lips at the thought of their own plunder and slave taking.

It made sense, but the whole thing felt so wrong.

“What troubles you Soxerius? Your eyes look far in unsettling thoughts.” Belphaxus asked the man with no trace of sympathy. He simply watched him with an unwavering gaze, seeming to judge every movement and non-movement.

“I...I just think that this battle will leave many scarred man. I believe when you reach your destination, I will take my leave of you for some time. You will be well protected riding with Antonius and his guards, complementing your own. You will not need me with you, and I believe I will not wish to bear witness to it.” Belphaxus regarded Soxerius coldly.

“I would insist that you stand alongside me. Your bow and skill with it could very well turn the battle in our favour. And think of the carnage you could reap with men ensuring your arm never rested.”

“Belphaxus, I understand you think I would be useful, but-”

“Soxerius, I *insist*. This is something that is very important for you. Do you recall when we first talked of your citizenship all those years ago? I told you that such a thing was not granted with a wave of the hand and a scribbling on a parchment. It can not even be truly earned. It must be trained and breathed into you, like life. And it takes the place of your former barbarism, that must be dispelled and forsaken. This, *this* is the thing that will take away from you your final deficiencies in the form of your savagery. This, will make you truly a Roman.”

“I am already a true Roman Belpaxus! By Imperial decree, the moment they let me serve the military. Freeman, that's all one has to be a citizen of Rome.”

“If you believe that then you have learned nothing from me. You may walk on the soil of the empire, you may shed blood for her, but these things can be done by anyone. Slaves walk the soil of Rome and spill the blood of her enemies. Romans, true Romans, live for Rome, and are truly a part of her. This will allow you that privilege. How can you refuse this task that would make you truly civilized?”

“You have NEVER asked me, once, to turn my bow against my own kin. And now you expect me to fall in line and murder them en masse?” Soxerius couldn't think of anything else to think of in the situation, and knew the words would not move Belpaxus.

“YES, because you should not see them as your people anymore. You have all the makings of a fine and honourable a Roman! You fought and killed for the empire. You have killed and dealt for me, and my ends are for the empire. You and me, we are part of something that is eternal! And that, that is worth killing those that we once shared commonality with.” The men began to raise their voices more and more, and it was becoming more and more likely that violence would be the result. They circled each other as they talked, as if wrestlers in the ring. The guards at the entrance to the tent seemed ready to spring forth, but a small gesture from Antonius kept them in place. Both men were considering their next words and their next moves when the arrival of a messenger interrupted them.

“Sir, message from the legion at Colonia Claudia!” The young man panted, and he had the look of a man who had ridden most the night. He was one of Belpaxus'; he knew his face from the villa. How he knew where to find him, he could not guess. Belpaxus turned from Soxerius, but kept his periferal vision on his form as he took the parchment. He read it silently, then wordlessly – yet angrily – threw it down upon the map.

“We are out of time. The Germanics have already started their small scale raids against the legion and the city. We must march as quickly as possible; this two day march can take us no longer than one now,” he turned then on Soxerius, and the former German felt as if a lion were turning to consider him slowly. Soxerius felt that he might be able to escape out the back of the tent should the guards be called in, but he didn't like his chances in general in this moment. He thought how it would have been smarter to play the part of the doting servant, not the unwilling soldier.

“And you? If you do not fight with us, what will you do? Fight for your Germans?”

“I can not fight for them any more than I can for you.” Soxerius said. In response, Belpaxus snorted. The modicum of respect that seemed to have developed towards Soxerius by Belpaxus was now gone.

“Leave then. We will save your little room in the city if we can...” He looked like he wanted to say something more. An insult, but not truly. Or perhaps a final condemnation, but enough had been said already. Maybe an expression of disapointment, but his eyes said that already. Instead, he said nothing, and simply turned away from the man that had done so much for him over the years. Soxerius turned into the night and started to walk.

Belphaxus rode with Antonius at the front of their force, marching them at a relentless pace directly for the city. As much as Belphaxus wanted to trap the Germanics against the bank of the river and the wall of the city, it was no good to lose the city if they showed up too late to accomplish their plan. Not knowing if they had enough time to reinforce the stationed legion in time, the decision was made to make directly for the city.

“Will the men be prepared for a fight at this march?” Belphaxus knew that the day had been a long one, but again, Antonius had proven his worth in moving the columns at an impressive rate.

“Yes, but not well. The afternoon wanes, and this would be a proper opportunity for rest. Should we need to meet the enemy directly after the march, it would be best to be rested now; especially if we march on straight through to Colonia Claudia, it will be night as we arrive and the men will need some rest.” Belphaxus loathed the idea of stopping for anything, but the man was right. If he wanted to be ready to march these men into battle directly after the journey they had just undertaken, they would need to rest sometime. Better now than while they waited on the outskirts to the city while it burned.

“Then call a halt, and have the men full of bread and marching as soon as the meal is settled.”

The mass of men marching into the darkening sky took the much appreciated rest with enthusiasm. While there was no time to establish tents or very decent fires, kindling still provided enough heat to make some rough loaves for all the men assembled. Belphaxus strode through the men, shaking hands and making talk of small matters with them. He liked to think himself somewhat a student of history, and he liked to think that because there were many important lessons there. Tonight he took from Hadrian, who looked over such a large empire that experienced such peace under him. High discipline among the men was key, and such a thing was very likely fostered by the fact he visited every outpost in his reign more than once. That was a man you fought for, who would inspire men to charge when things seemed lost. He had seen the busts of Hadrian, and thought himself somewhat similarly chiseled individual. Soon though, he was in the legatus' tent, sipping heavily watered down wine with Antonius and staring at the map, trying to formulate contingencies for the march depending where the Germanics would make it to while they approached the city. It was all for naught though, as again, a messenger burst into the commanders tent breathlessly with word of the Germanics movements.

The news was about as bad as it could be, short of word the barbarians had already taken the city, plundered it, and left with all the women.

“So the Germanics have reached the main gates?” The young messenger nodded breathlessly, still trying to suck in enough breath to keep himself standing.

“What are there numbers?” Antonius asked, ever the competent legatus.

“Ten thousands perhaps?”

“Fool, there is no way that is possible. Is that your own inflated guess?”

“Those were the words of the legatus in the city, sir. He was able to sneak me away to bring word that they were now under siege, and the size of the force. I thought it was at least twice that number.” Antonius frowned at that news; he expected that with the second legion, they'd at least have the Germanics one to one in terms of numbers. The disfavour for the Romans in the count worried him slightly.

“Very good young man, but for now, take a rest. You,” Belphaxus pointed to one of the

slave attendants, “see to this man, whatever he needs.” The messenger nodded his thanks, and – still wheezing – took his leave of the other men.

“Thoughts Antonius?”

“They will concentrate their power to these gates, based off of what you have told me of the city and the boy told us about the assault. That gives us the opportunity to perform a crushing pincher movement; round the city from both sides simultaneously, and crush the Germanic's in between. They will be completely boxed in, and when the panic sets in, they'll fall like sickly trees.” The man nodded, then rechecked the lay out of the map, then nodded again.

“Good. I suppose we shall resume the march as soon as possible, and meet these dogs under the light of the moon.”

The last portion of the march towards Colonia Claudia was the most quiet leg of the journey. Part of it would be because the order had gone out that they were marching on the Germanic's immediately after the march so the men were to maintain silence as much as it was possible. But more than that, the mindset of the legionaries had changed. Battle was no longer simply a possibility; with every step they took they approached bloodshed and violence. Some of the men that marched looked hungry for it, while others looked nauseated by the notion. But they were all focused on the conflict that became closer and closer to them.

But that was done now, and the columns drew up for battle. The night had fallen fully, but the moon was still thankfully giving enough light for the men to form up. They were tired and sore from a day of marching, but still, they were prepared for the battle ahead. Just ahead of them, the city of Colonia Claudia stood, the lights and torches of the place giving a shimmering orange to the night. But they illuminated a desperate scene; the gates had fallen, at least partially, and Germanic's were moving into the city, while a contingent of them still fought the portion of the legion that didn't make it into the city before the siege began. The fires that now burned weren't just from torches and lamps, but the city herself. Belphaxus felt his throat tighten at the sight of it.

“The city has already been breached. We will have to come around and take them from their rear guard. Perhaps split into two forces and move around the city on either side still, like before.” Antonius, having seen to his duties of organizing the men, had rejoined with Belphaxus to offer his opinion of the battle plan.

“No, they would be able to hold the gate if there are enough of them, and then we hold no advantage,” Belphaxus began, already knowing what the best course of action would be, “What we will need to do is enter the city from the other side, march through the streets and meet them head on.”

“And fight in the streets? What will become of the city?” Antonius asked.

Belphaxus had no words left for the man, for any of them. If they couldn't see with necessary vision, then they would follow or be trampled underfoot by the might of Rome. He simply glared as Antonius.

“Ready your men. I wish to see the bodies of those barbarians heaped high to greet the morning light.

Soxerius didn't know what he was doing. He had always floated through his life with no overarching sense of direction, but what he did had at least made sense to him in some way. But this, it was something that defied him. He just knew that he was compelled to see this through until the end.

After walking away from the camp that night, he thought about heading to Greece; he had never seen the place, and they were supposed to have the best theatre. But he couldn't shake the thought of the Germanic's clashing with the legions, and the death that would follow. He had briefly thought about going back to his apartment for the gold he had there, but it did not seem worth the risk to his well being. He didn't need it. But he couldn't put the sight of Colonia Claudia out of his head, and before too long he found himself jogging for the city, desperate to stay ahead of the legions. Maybe, maybe, if he could find his brother, he could warn him of the impending legionary reinforcements. Maybe he would turn from the battle, or many would, and so many would be spared death under the blade.

But why did he care? His brother had turned his back to him, and was unlikely to greet him with anything but violence if he could find him among the army that had crossed the Rhine. And while he certainly had a love for his brother, he had walked away from home when he was 17 and never felt like it was the wrong decision. Were the concerns of these men now anything he should concern himself with?

Perhaps his affinity for Colonia Claudia was what drove him forward, and the thought that he could help keep it from being destroyed was what moved his feet forward. Maybe it had nothing to do with his brothers then. It was those thoughts that swirled through Soxerius' head as he finally came over the final ridge, hearing the din of battle already in the night sky air, and saw the city. He saw it on fire, and he saw the Germanic's pouring in from one end and the legion he had left pouring in from the other end, destined to meet in the middle. It was a horrible thing to bear witness to.

As much as he'd like to try and logically determine his motivations, they escaped Soxerius' mental faculties as he simply watched in horrible awe at the scene that played out below him. For whatever reason he was here, it was undeniably an important moment in the lives of many, and he would play his role the best he could; whatever that may be.

Adalbern struggled to stay upright in the flood of humanity that surged forward when the gates were finally smashed down. It was not an easy task, especially walking on the bodies of his fallen comrades, dead and semi-dead. But then he was in the city, and he was able to move and swing his sword in a proper arch. Which was a good thing too, because almost as soon as he was through, the legionaries that had made it within the walls before they had besieged the city greeted him with their shields and their shouts of battle. Adalbern was about to charge their shields headlong, when he saw a comrade rush the shields, hit them harmlessly, and then get stabbed through a tiny gap in them. What cowardly tactics.

So Adalbern circled, easily outpacing the tightly packed mass of soldiers. Sadly for them they were not as well shielded from their flank, and he was able to swing his sword in a low arch and sever the Achilles of the outermost soldier. He fell with a shriek, and Adalbern finished him with a brutal stab into his lower gut, right below his armor, in a move that quickly induced the man into shock, from which he never woke. He didn't even bother with the rest of the soldiers, now that they had corrected their formation to provide more protection to their flanks. More of his people were streaming into the city, and he let himself get swept along. This damnedable place would burn to the ground.

Soxerius had come in through the entrance the Romans did, then immediately ducked into some side street when a group of men looked as if they recognized him. But the night was black now, and they were forming up for a hurried march to meet the Germanic's in the city's

heart, so they paid him little heed when he disappeared around the corner.

Soxerius ran. He thought about how often his legs saved his life; Carthage, the forests of home, even on campaign in Persia, more than once he was saved by the movement of his feet. Now he ran to try and staunch this wound. There was still time before the two forces met in the city center. So he ran, trying to ignore the unlikelyhood of finding anyway to lend a sympathetic ear.

Then he turned the next corner, came out into the one of the main streets connections (a sizable road in itself) and was face to face with four Germanic's. By now the city was full of divided forces, and these four were out wrecking havoc, no longer concerned with military advantage. At their feet lay half a dozen bodies of women and children, looking like they had been caught fleeing the burning city. Soxerius felt a deep loathing for these men.

“ROMAN!” It was all the one had to shout, and the other three took up the call as well, drew their weapons, and advanced quickly.

“Idiots, this is no son of Jupiter! Look upon his feet!” The four men paused, confused by the instruction shouted in their native tongue, and then again by the fact that the man before them was wearing Germanic foot coverings, not Roman sandals. It was all the delay Soxerius needed.

Moving rapidly forward, he drew his knives and slashed them in quick succession as he ran forward and through them. When he came out on the other side, all four were wounded, though only one mortally. He gurgled as his final words and collapsed. The other three, furious, advanced, but their injuries made them slow and unsteady, and Soxerius readied his bow and was able to calmly back away and shoot three shafts quickly, felling the men before they could close the distance in their awkward shuffling. Soxerius quickly moved to pull out the arrows from his victims, looking around while he did.

“Brother! Where are you? We must speak.” Adalbern emerged from the shadows of a small alcove.

“Soxerius.”

“Adalbern! You must listen, you must draw back as many men as you can as fast as you can.”

“I can see why, what with the city burning and being pillaged as we speak, it seems like a great time to give up.”

“Things are changing! Roman reinforcements have arrived, and even now advance upon your brethren. The battle is lost, leave while you still have-”

“Feet to carry you. That's just what I could have said. Because I certainly intend to hack the feet off of every savage I find defiling my city.” Soxerius whirled to see Belphaxus step out of the same alley he came from moments before, “I was looking to see if you came back Soxerius, and when I saw you moving to the alleys, I just had to see what you were doing. Apparently treason was your ploy, but it will do your brother and his allies no good. The legion marches, and they will rout these damned barbarians soon.”

“It is a poor assumption that I would wish to run now Soxerius; this is what I was looking for this while time.” Adalbern locked eyes with Belphaxus, and the two men drew their swords. Each raised their shields. Then they cried battle and rushed each other.

Somehow, the noise of the city burning, the men fighting and dying somewhere not too far away; it all faded into the background for Soxerius as he saw the two men smash their shields against one another, then swing wildly to strike the other one out of luck more than skill. On habit, Soxerius drew an arrow and notched it, ready to take sight. Adalbern saw the move though.

“Don't. Fucking. Do it. This is something that must be done.”

“Put it away Soxerius, this is between us now.” said Belphaxus, shortly before he parried and brutal downward strike towards him.

Soxerius couldn't tear his eyes away from the struggle; mostly because as it continued, he could see his brother was outmatched by the battle hardened Belphaxus. He drew the bow string taught, and sighted the Roman. But Belphaxus seemed to know the arrow was hovering there, because he kept Adalbern between him and Soxerius. He passed up the opportunity to move around and finish him more than once, when he struck him with his shield or swatted the blade Adalbern was carrying to the side with his. Soxerius kept looking for his opening, but none presented itself.

“You should have stayed with me Soxerius!” should Belphaxus, “You could continue you to see the empire, and enjoy it all the more knowing you protected it. Now, you'll just die another dog,” in a flurry, Belphaxus hacked down three quick times onto Adalbern, enough to daze him, and then simply ducked low and down the tip of his sword upward, piercing the groin and into the torso, “like your brother.”

For his part, Adalbern just gave a disappointed grunt, looking incredulously at the aging Roman who had just mortally wounded him, before the last of his life left him with a sigh. But he didn't fall over; Belphaxus still used the body to shield himself from Soxerius taught bow.

“Let him down Roman, and you can die like you have some honour.”

“Actually, you'd need to put down that bow, and then you'd have the opportunity to slay me with honour. Now you're just some barbarian, whelped by a whore and thinking a bow is an honourable way to fight.” The two men circled each other the best that they could, each looking for the opening that would afford them the kill they lusted for.

But the sound of hooves shattered the hope for Belphaxus, for they were German riders. Three of them came onto the street some way away, and he knew he was doomed. Perhaps he could duck into an alley, but Soxerius would find his mark, and if it didn't kill him outright, he'd bleed a trail right back to him. But he couldn't stand up to three mounted horsemen, even on the best of days. He started to think about how to ditch into the nearest alley, when Soxerius adjusted his aim and fired the arrow into the chest of the first barbarian. The second was so surprised to see the man who was threatening the roman turn on them, he didn't even try to avoid the arrow that pierced his neck straight through and through. The third horseman man an attempt to avoid the archer, but Soxerius struck the horse, which in its pain bucked the rider; conveniently at Belphaxus' feet, who jabbed quickly to kill the man.

“Put, my, brother down” Soxerius said, lowering his bow and quiver, drawing his twin knives, “and face me like you have a thread of decency in you.”

For his part, Belphaxus just smiled. An archer Soxerius was. An actual blade to blade fighter, absolutely not. Additionally, he enjoyed his odds in armour, shield, and gladius when compared to Soxerius' knives and nothing else. The two men circled each other one last time, giving the moment an extra one of consideration for what was about to occur, and then Belphaxus lept forward in attack first.

His sword slashed down, then left to right, and even upwads from right to left. Soxerius, though, was never where he had just been, when the sword would have cut him down brutally. Belphaxus was entertained at the mans speed, but when he failed to connect to anything the next three chops, his frustration grew.

“Hold your ground coward. This outcome is inevitable. It is favoured by the gods.”

“Nothing if favoured by the gods, haven't you realized this yet? Not even your precious Rome. And when you die here tonight, it shall be proven.”

“Ha, blasphemy!” Belphaxus hack again, missed, and attempted to smash Soxerius with his shield. He simply allowed himself to roll off the shield, negating all the destructive power in the blow, “Rome is eternal, and you and all your half witted cousins will be yet another grave littering the gates to the empire.”

“You're a fool Belphaxus. All this, it will fade with time.” Soxerius, having been dodging the blows of Belphaxus all confrontation, suddenly turned and kicked, sweeping the Romans legs from under him. He fell with a crash, but savagely swung where Soxerius would have been if he had leapt forward in an attempt to finish the fight. Belphaxus got to his feet, and came at Soxerius again; but more cautiously this time. He closed the distance, and stabbed forward instead of slashing. In what was almost a lazy movement, he deflect the blade with his knife, and circle the man quickly, but then pulled back.

“You will watch Rome continue to gain glory as you rot on the banks of the styx you shit!” Belphaxus tried to put emphasis into the words, but by now he was panting. Soxerius danced in close, feigned a stab, then kicked out again, but this time catching Belphaxus directly in the center of the breast plate. He stayed upright, but only barely. He counter attacked with ferocity, but Soxerius was just too fast, his legs too long, for Belphaxus to corner him on his own.

“Rome is minting false coins, and barely suppressing uprisings. I would question your eternal glory,” Soxerius moved in swiftly, dodged the swipe of the blade, then grabbed and ripped the shield away from Belphaxus, “And even now, Colonia Claudia burns. Just like Rome will one day.” A vision of the eternal city ablaze flashing in Belphaxus mind, and in the fury it cause, he charged forward. Soxerius parried the blade, though was still grazed by it. In a flurry, he grabbed the wrist of Belphaxus, twisted it and put him off guard, then pulled him forward as he drove his elbow outward, meeting on the Romans cheek. There was a sickening crunch, and Belphaxus fell to the ground stunned, his sword dropped and forgotten. He lay there panting a moment, but still trying to wrestle Soxerius down.

For his part, Soxerius helped him out by climbing on top of the defeated man. His knife rested on his shattered cheek.

“Do it, you dog. You will see though, Rome is eternal, and your life as part of it is over from this day. You'll live shunned my civilization, and die miserable in its gutters.”

“No Belphaxus, you won't have your death by my hand,” he drove the knife though Belphaxus' left hand, pinning it to the rough road beneath, though ruining the knife. Belphaxus cried out, but stifled most of the curses the pain produced, “because I want you to see what is to become of your empire. It crumbles all over, and soon you shall see as much. Of course, you only need to be half a man to observe such a thing.” In a deft movement, Soxerius drew his second blade, inserted into Belphaxus' left eye socket, and plucked the orb from its place.

Belphaxus screamed, horribly into the night, the pain so bad he scarcely noticed Soxerius stomp on his left left and arm as well, rendering them useless forever. He just cried and whimpered in the street, holding eye. Soxerius wondered who he would be found by, but by the sound of it, the Germanic's were not trapped between two legions, and were being slaughtered. Soxerius surveyed the place. It was no longer home. It was time to leave.

The shattered husk of Belphaxus sat on his veranda, like he had almost every day for these past fifteen years. He looked out over his holdings with his one good eye, drinking some

wine with his one good hand. It was the stance he had for so many days now. It was where he was when he heard of the capture of emperor, as tale after tale of rebellion reached him, and as word of the great plague reached him. The view of his holdings didn't lift his spirits like they once did; after all, he could only hold onto them for so long. He sipped the wine slowly, and watched the world get darker.