

JULIUS – JULY, 405 CE

i The Peace of Rome

Quin's head snapped back with the violence of her first slap. His cheek stung and his eyes brimmed. *Don't cry* he told himself.

Silvi hooked her leg behind his and shoved – he tumbled over backwards and his head cracked painfully on the stone floor. Quin's vision span and before he could recover, she was on top of him, knees on his shoulders, holding him down. He squirmed and twisted but was pinned by her weight. He was only nine, she already twelve, a head higher and two stone heavier. Quin dug his fingernails into his sister's forearms and left long red scratches in her white skin. Silvi responded in kind, slapping his face hard again and lifting her arms out of his restricted reach. She was laughing.

'Don't cry, little brother' she coo-ed, with mocking softness. He glared back, willing the tears of frustration back into his eyes before they spilled onto his face. *She won't get away with it this time.*

'What have you learned?' she demanded.

'Get off me!'

'Not until you tell me what you've learned'

'Nothing!'

Another painful slap across the face. 'What have you learned?'

Quin was saved from having to reply by the furious intervention of their mother, Claudia. She must have heard the crash from the next room.

'Silvi, get off your brother this instant!' Silvi obeyed, her maddening grin invisible to their mother standing behind the pair. Claudia's hands were on her hips, the slight bump of her pregnancy just starting to show through her dress.

'What's this all about?' Silvi said nothing, sullenly pointing at the wrecked loom in the corner, its threads and weights tangled hopelessly with the splintered wood. 'Quin!' their mother exclaimed with disbelief. 'It's ruined! Why would you do that?'

Quin was too shocked to reply. He opened his mouth and looked from one to the other, but nothing came out.

Silvi's vicious temper wasn't reserved just for him – she took it out on other things that annoyed her too. The loom's complex and unforgiving rules had tested her patience past its limit and it had paid the price. The fight had started when Quin had foolishly said he'd tell. None of that mattered now though. A new truth was being constructed by Silvi right in front of him.

'He can't stand me having anything nice, mother.'

Claudia's eyes also gleamed wet, and she shook her head. Her voice sounded hurt.

'It was mine before it was Silvi's, and my mother's before that.'

'I didn't –' he finally managed to choke out through his amazement at his sister's brazen lie. Their mother was too upset to listen to denials.

'I can't even look at you, Quin. And Silvi, you are not to brawl like a guttersnipe, no matter what he's done. Go – get out – both of you!'

Silvi was a canny a player of this game and meekly complied. Quin knew that it was useless to argue until later. When they were far enough away he hissed a threat at his sister's back:

'Wait until father gets back. What are you going to do then?'

She ignored him and started to hum a carefree tune to herself.

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Their father turned his horse about and squinted through the rain to try and spot any sign of movement on the road behind. Pulling his hood further forward, he wiped his sleeve across his eyes and tried to pierce the steady downpour. The landscape was cloaked in grey and had lost its edges, with trees no more than a spear's throw away smudged and threatening. The nearest of the hills they had galloped down from was only visible as a darker shadow against the slate coloured sky.

'It's no use' he called to his companions over the hiss of the rain. 'I can't see or hear a thing in this. They've either taken shelter or given up the chase. We should move on!'

The other three riders sat wordlessly astride dripping, gleaming horses that wore the insignia of the 2nd legion. The animals were breathing hard, the rain turning to steam with their heat. For several seconds, the only sound apart from the rain was the horses' laboured breathing. Finally, one of these three men said what they were all thinking.

'And the others, Marcus?'

He did not turn to look at the speaker.

'Dead, most likely, or hiding. Nothing we can do either way. We need to go'. He flicked his reins and circled back to face the others.

'But your brother...!' one of the riders started. Marcus simply repeated himself.

'We need to go'.

The horses' metal-shod hooves rang loud against the road's stone surface long after the riders had disappeared into the grey.

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The rain-soaked road rolled steadily beneath Marcus's gaze and his mind returned to the events that had led him here. The attack had come out of nowhere, a volley of arrows arriving without warning as their line of men, strung out into twos and threes, wound its way around the edge of a steep wooded hill. He had watched, confused, as the rider ahead of him slid silently out of his saddle. A dozen or so Saxons had sprung screaming out of the close-growing trees before the body had hit the ground.

The surprise and the hill had been enough of an advantage to turn what might have been a fair fight into a slaughter. His army training, dormant for ten years, had re-awakened and Marcus had found his sword in his hand without consciously making the decision to draw it. He had simply surged into the heart of the fight, chopping downwards from his mounted height to ward off the enemy's lunges and, once, plunging the broad blade into the exposed well of skin made where a man's collar-bone met his neck. The hollow had instantly filled with bright red blood and the man was dead before Marcus withdrew his sword.

Chaos had been all around him, the screams of horses and men mingling with the rasp and crunch of metal slicing into bone. He had thought, briefly, that their numbers would force the barbarians back into the woods. But his slaves were armed only with hunting spears and they ran when the first of them was killed. Overwhelmed and cut off from those at the back of the line, it was all the four of them could do to escape before they were hacked down too. Marcus's last image of the fight was his brother being pulled from a horse by two of the raiders.

He returned to the present: the road, the rain, his remaining companions. One a tall army officer, another a retired general and friend of his father, the third his young cousin visiting from the south. *Can we really be all that are left?* Marcus thought. Twenty men had set out from his villa that morning to hunt the Saxon war band that had been terrorizing the countryside. Now it was they who were being hunted, he was sure of that. Marcus turned in the saddle to look over his shoulder again, but the grey curtain of rain hid any sign or sound of pursuit.

Even escape from those behind brought its own price ahead – he would live to have to explain to his mother what had happened to Faustinus, her youngest son. And why he couldn't have saved him. The old woman would never believe or forgive him, Marcus knew in his heart, no matter what the truth of the matter. A famous line from the diary of a long-dead emperor flickered unbidden across his mind: *The universe is change. Life is judgement.*

Marcus thought of the faces of his wife Claudia, and his children Silvi and Quin and muttered to himself.

'Get home. Just get home'.

But the other riders ahead of him were slowing. Looking up for the reason, Marcus saw that the way was blocked with an overturned cart, its load of firewood strewn across the road. Not unusual on any normal day but he knew with a certainty he couldn't explain that this was not normal.

'Damn it!' he cursed, angered by his stupidity. Sticking to the road had been a mistake. It was probably what the raiders had planned on. Anger turning to resolve, he smiled grimly and shouted to his companions ahead. 'Around! We go around!' He found his sword was in his hand once more and, jabbing his heels into the flanks of his exhausted horse he surged forward for the second time that day.

Marcus's horse jumped the ditch that fringed the road with ease and landed steadily amid the spiky stubble of the wheat field beyond. He checked behind – good, the others had followed his lead and were heading off the road. Seconds later, drawing parallel with the cart, he spotted the fair-headed men who crouched hidden behind it. They had the look of those that had attacked them earlier, armed with bows and long iron swords. Another ambush, another part of their plan.

His heart filled with the elation of escape as the four horses raced through the field alongside the road, outflanking the barbarians laying in ambush.

'You don't get to fool me twice! Not twice!' Marcus shouted. The words were whipped away by the speed of his horse. The raiders, infuriated at being thwarted, screamed threats but they washed harmlessly over the riders, who were now three hundred yards in the clear. Mind racing ahead almost as fast as his horse, Marcus could see himself returning with a century of men from the city garrison to hunt them down. He smiled at the thought of revenge, and some measure of redemption for the lives he had lost earlier that day.

What happened next some would call luck, some fate, some might even see the intervening hand of a vindictive god. Perhaps it was none of those things. Whatever the cause, the effect was to alter the course of many lives, for some immediately, for some in the years after.

Marcus's mount vaulted the ditch for a second time, returning to the road with a clatter now that the danger had been skirted. But not every horse was so nimble or had so light a load. The mare which had carried the old general faithfully for years had simply run out of energy in the headlong dash from the hills. Her muscles drained and aching, she wasn't able to keep up with the pace or jump as well as the horses that carried the younger, lighter men. Her hooves hit the edge of the ditch, stumbled, failed to find enough purchase on the wet road and slid on the slimy surface. With a splintering crack, her chestnut-brown legs buckled beneath her body and the general was thrown forwards and out of the saddle. He crashed headfirst onto the road's hard surface and lay stunned and defenceless on his back.

It was the noise of the terrified horse that caught Marcus's attention. He looked back and instantly saw the trouble they were all now in. There was no time to make a decision. He instinctively wheeled around to recover his friend and called to the others to follow. The Saxons had reacted just as quickly, springing from their hiding place with a murderous, animal roar at their unexpected stroke of luck. Marcus counted six of them. On flat ground, where three mounted men could see them coming, he liked the odds. But if they were quick, it might not come to a fight.

They reached the prone body of the general in seconds and jumped down from their horses. Unconscious but breathing, blood ran down the old man's face from a nasty cut across his forehead. The Saxons were running, pausing only to loose arrows. Sixty seconds, Marcus reckoned.

'Fidelis! Fidelis – wake up!' he demanded, shaking the old man by the shoulders. The only response was a deep groan of pain. 'Take him under the arms' Marcus instructed, and together the three of them manhandled the dead-weight onto a horse and wrapped the leather reins round his wrists. Fidelis's own mount still whinnied in pain at the edge of the road, her forelegs broken. She would never walk again and the proper thing would be to end her misery, but there was no time.

'Leo –' Marcus said calmly to his cousin, 'You're the lightest of us, get on behind him and make sure he doesn't fall off. The boy's horse would be slowed, but they could go a couple of miles in this manner and get to safety. Leo, a boy of seventeen, nodded and turned to mount behind the heedless general. Marcus checked the road. Thirty seconds.

But luck, fate or the gods were not yet through with them. An iron-headed Saxon arrow, shot from a hopeless range and without a specific target whistled out of the sky – and found the boy Leo. Its weight and sharpness, sped by gravity, forced the serrated tip deep into his shoulder blade. Leo screamed in pain and shock and Marcus caught him before he could fall.

The horses, panicked, tried to bolt. The tall army officer had his mount's reins tight in his fists and was able to steady her. The other two, with no one to sooth or restrain them, galloped wide-eyed for safety. The unconscious Fidelis was carried off, bouncing wildly but somehow not falling.

Marcus held his young cousin upright and could see the blood had already drained from his face. The tip of the arrow protruded through the front of his reddening tunic.

'Don't be afraid Leo, I'm here. Can you stand?' The boy swallowed.

'I can't move my arm. I can't...' He looked down at the arrow head and fainted from the shock. Marcus laid him carefully but quickly on the ground, snapping off the arrow shaft with one hand. With a glance up and down the road at the disappearing horses and onrushing warriors, his soldier's

mind assessed their options. Fifteen seconds.

He turned to the officer, his last companion, who was still hanging onto his horse's reins. Marcus spoke deliberately and without any hint of panic, holding the soldier's eyes.

'Galerius, listen. We can't get away. Get ready, we can still make them pay a high price for the four of us'. The Saxons were sprinting now, less than fifty yards away and filled with blood-lust. Marcus turned to face them, holding his sword in front of him. He noticed, strangely disconnected from the danger racing towards him, that the rain ran down the blade and poured off its point in a steady stream.

Galerius watched Marcus, undecided. The officer's silver breastplate bore the image of an eagle, its wings spread wide in flight. His jet black hair was plastered to his face by the incessant rain. He looked back to the onrushing men, their faces snarling in anger. They reminded him of wolves. Finally, his gaze flicked to his horse, the only remaining mount. Five seconds.

'We can't *all* get away' Galerius corrected.

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