

A
novel by

S.P. SOMTOW



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THE AQUILLIAD

Aquila in the New World

Could a Roman
General survive
an untamed
America?
Perhaps...with
the aid of the
wily Indian
Aquila!



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CHAPTER I

ONCE, WHEN I WAS VERY YOUNG, FATHER TOOK ME in the motor-car to the Via Appia, to see a man being crucified. It was some slave, some minor offense that I don't recall; but it was the first time I had ever seen such a thing. All the way there—and the way from our estate is olive-tree country, beautiful in the height of summer—Father was lecturing me about the good old-fashioned values. It was as much for the benefit of Nikias my tutor as for myself.

As we approached the Via Appia we would run across peasants or slaves; I remember that their awe at seeing my father's gilded motor-car, with its steam chamber stoked by uniformed slaves, with its miniature Ionian columns supporting a canopy of Indish silk, was sometimes comical, sometimes touching. Only someone of at least the rank of tribune might possess such a vehicle—although they are much slower than horses—for their secret parts are manufactured, somewhere deep in the heart of the Temple of Capitoline Jove, by tongueless and footless slaves who can reveal little of the mysterious rites involved. Truly the Emperor Nero must favor my father, who had never plotted against him and always sent him curious and witty gifts, such as that funny glowing shroud from Asia Minor that had been used to wrap up the living corn-god, sacrificed each year only to be found reborn in some unfortunate young man.

It was stifling. My toga praetexta was drenched with sweat. When we got to the crucifixion, it was late in the day and hard to get a good view; and even my father was weary of lecturing me, and did so only intermittently as Briseis the pretty little cupbearer filled and refilled our goblets with snow-chilled Falernian. I was young then, as I have said, and remember little of the poor wretch's agonies; he put on a good show at first, shrieking hideously as the ropes were tightened and the cross raised, but presently he sank into lethargy, his eyes (which I only saw by virtue of being perched on the motor-car's driver's seat) glazed over, and flies stormed all over him. We gorged ourselves on melons and on a concoction of peacocks' brains and honey.

As we started home, my father, stimulated by the sight of bloodshed, harangued me all over again, standing proudly over the prow of the motor-car with his white mane and his senator's toga trailing in the evening breeze.

"Titus, old boy," he growled gruffly, dropping pointedly into Latin instead of using the Greek of casual conversations, "remember that you're a Roman. As a citizen you'll never be crucified, of course; but even so, a lesson well learnt and all that. The old ways are the best—I don't mean to espouse the Republic or anything foolish like that, Jove forbid, only to make sure you grow up straight and true and my son, eh, what! We should never have let those slimy Greeks come over and transform us into culture vultures... in the old days men were hard, fighting hard, playing hard, not like your mincing tutor over here." (Nikias and I were giggling in the back over some childish matter.)

"Listen, young man, when I talk to you! After all, the Divine Emperor Lucius Domitius (or Nero as he likes to be called) may do all this acting and singing, but he chose me, a sober and staunch man of courage and integrity, to receive the gift of this magical horseless chariot, of whose locomotive secrets only the gods Vulcan and Jove know."

"But Sire," said curly-haired, beardless Nikias of the gaudy tunic and scented hair, "it is said that this device was invented by a Greek scientist, Epaminondas of Alexandria, by enlarging on the theses of the ancients Aristotle and Archimedes; that this same Greek now holds an important, but secret, position in the Temple of Jove; that this mysterious engine, over which rites must be said and sacrificial blood spilt before it will run, is a simple mechanical device, the basis also of the equally mysterious ships which even now have returned from Terra Nova laden with curiosities—"

"Impudent scum! You can't buy a decent slave for a thousand gold pieces," my father said. "I suppose I'll have to beat you for impertinence." He pulled a little flail from a fold in his toga. "Damn these horseless monstrosities anyway! Nothing to whip, the thing just chugs along without any *feel* to it—" At that he began to lay into my poor tutor; but it was more of a gesture than anything, and he missed more often than not.

"Tell me about Terra Nova, Nikias!" I cried. It was the first interesting thing to happen that day. "Is it true they've found barbarians?"

"Yes, and giant chickens, too, that go *gobble-gobble-gobble*, and *vast* herds of aurochs, and the fiercest barbarians imaginable—thousands in number! Why, they decimated the Tenth Legion before General Gaius Pomponius Piso—"

"Insufferable!" my father said. "Everyone knows that the Roman army, in its discipline, its order, and its bravery, has not been beaten in a thousand years."

"Tell that to the Parthians," said Nikias, deftly dodging a blow.

"They must be really fierce, these Terra Novans," I said. I know I had stars in my eyes, because even then I knew I was going to be a general and have a legion all to myself. Father could afford, after all, the kind of bribery that would get me some minor foothold in the establishment, and I'd go from there. "Are they as fierce as the Britons?"

"Fiercer. Wilder," said Nikias, and then added (keeping an eye out for my father) "but I'm not going to tell you a thing about them until *after* you've memorized all the aorist and second aorist forms of these contracted verbs. See, when alpha, epsilon or omicron stems come into conjunction with the conjugatory endings—"

"Bloody Greek grammar," my father grumbled as we pulled into the estate.

"He's just jealous," Nikias whispered in my ear, "and besides the Emperor only invites him to those parties so that wily Petronius can make fun of him when they have those poetry-improvising sessions, and your blessed father, who can't tell a hexameter from a hole in the ground, has to get up and warble to the lyre—I hear Petronius is writing him into his new novel, and the in-group at the palace is just in *stitches*—"

Perhaps I've painted too genial a picture of those days. But alas, they were all too short. My father lost favor with the Emperor, got accused by the Empress Poppaea of some tom foolery, and was permitted to commit suicide. Despite the law, which is quite firm on the fact that descendants of traitors who honorably run on their swords may inherit as though the escutcheon had never been blighted, the Emperor somehow managed to confiscate the estate.

It was Nikias, that slimy Greek as Father used to call him, who saved my hide. He had a cousin, a eunuch, who was high up in the palace bureaucracy, who had become a millionaire simply by accepting one out of every three bribes that came his way, regardless of whether he followed up on the request to which the bribe was attached; and so our truncated family came to live at court.

Meanwhile I grew tall. Nero and a few other emperors expired in various unpleasant ways. Terra Nova was all the rage for a while, and several modern cities with all the amenities—baths, arenas, circuses—were built, mostly along the eastern shore of that huge land mass, and procurators sent to govern the thriving colonies of settlers and Romanized natives. The legions pushed westward into what is now the province of Lacotia. Some of our horses escaped and began to breed in the wild; the Terra Novans, in only a few years, became by all accounts the most adept of horsemen.

Frankly, I changed a great deal after Father's death, which taught me a salutary lesson about the human

condition. I determined to become a fine Roman; to become, in fact, the very man my father had thought himself to be. I boned up on my Caesar and on all those battles; I studied Xenophon and all the Greek military historians; went off with the legion and got myself a few border commands; saw action in Britain, when the Picts came down on Eburacum, and again against some recalcitrant barbarians on the Dacian border....

After a while I was noticed by the Divine Domitian; and it was on the very day that the Emperor granted Roman citizenship to all the barbarians of Terra Nova, and awarded himself the title of *Pater Maximus Candidusque*, or *White and Greatest Father*, that he also honored me with the command of the Thirty-fourth Legion.

CHAPTER II

TITUS, OLD CHAP," THE EMPEROR SAID TO ME, "have I conquered anything lately?"

We were ensconced in the Imperial Box at the Circus; Domitian was choking on a pickled lark's tongue with laughter over some lions who were making mincemeat of a bunch of recalcitrant Judaeans. His favorite, a peculiar-looking dwarf with an enormous head and staring eyes, sat at his feet.

"Well," I said, feeling very silly to be out of uniform and having long since lost interest in the sight of gore, "there's not much of the world left, Your Magnificence. West of Lacotia, perhaps, in Terra Nova —"

"Boring, boring, boring, you silly general. Those savages are fierce, and they certainly put on a spectacle in the arena, though I suppose you haven't seen any of the new shows, being out in the backwaters quelling Visigoths and Picts."

"True, my lord, but—"

"I want spectacle, Titus!" The crowd was roaring now as the slaves with meathooks dragged the corpses out through the gates of death. A lone lion straggled. Domitian clapped his pudgy hands; a bow and arrow was handed him on a silver platter. He waved for silence, and it fell just like that, twenty thousand people gulping in mid-sentence. "I haven't had an interesting spectacle since... last year, when I had Amazons in motor-cars fighting pygmies on bicycles."

"Yes, where are the motor-cars these days, my Lord? I haven't seen a single one since I got back from the campaign."

"Shush, shush, old chap." He clambered up onto the seat of his throne and transfixed the lion in the neck with a single shot. The crowd burst out in carefully rehearsed spontaneous cheering. He sat down as they began to flood the arena for a mock sea-battle. "Ah yes, the motor-cars—I used them all up in the one circus show, Titus, and the priests of Jove haven't deigned to cough up another one."

"And how's Epaminondas of Alexandria?" I said pointedly.

"Oh, we tortured him. Didn't get anything, though; it seems that his 'visions from the future' have ceased. At least we got all the shipbuilding secrets from him before he passed on, or else we'd lose all contact with the New World. But you're changing the subject," he said warningly.

"Of course, my lord. The spectacle."

"Do you remember... Marcus Ulpius Trajanus?"

"How could I forget? Brilliant strategist. Taught me everything I know, Trajan did. Very clever of him to lead the Dacians up the wrong way on the Danube...."

"A little too brilliant," said Domitian. "Oh, he had plans—big plans. Subjugate the Parthians. Blah blah blah. Well, we got Cappadocia out of it, but after that he went a bit far—wanted to march on up the Tigris and push the Parthians into India or some other such grandiose notion. Fortunately, I was able to send him off to subdue the Seminolii, an absolutely frightful tribe of Terra Novan savages. Maybe I should recall him, but you know how it is. These ships—even with Epaminondas's improvements—I mean the revelations of Jupiter Optimus Maximus—take a year to get here. And as it happens, the Parthians are attacking now."

"Which Parthians, Sire? I thought they were all wrangling over the throne since old Vologesus died."

"God knows. Some petty king of theirs, fancies himself Vologesus's successor, busy reuniting the place. Just a few thousand of them, Titus old chap, I'm sure they'll easily be defeated by one of our matchless legions, eh, what? I wouldn't even bother with it much, except that ...the point is, my precious aurochs herds are in danger."

"Excuse me, Sire, but... I've been on campaign so long..."

"The aurochs herds, you fool! You know, *bison*. I've been breeding them in Cappadocia for the arena. Good grazing, you know. You've no idea what trouble it is to capture the damned creatures, to send good legionaries up through Dacia and into the forests of Sarmatia north of the Black Sea... and every one of the soldiers itching to slaughter barbarians! And since the aurochs have been rendered virtually extinct by the demands of the games—you remember Vespasian and his hundred-day opening celebration of the Coliseum, don't you?—these Imperial aurochs are the only ones to be had on short notice. I understand that gigantic ones roam the Great Plains of Lacotia in Terra Nova, but shipping costs are prohibitive. I'd have to impose some capricious tax on adultery or theatergoers or pumpkins."

"I see."

"You'll do more than see! You'll lead the expeditionary force, that's what you'll do!"

"Yes, my Lord," I said, my heart sinking. At least I would miss the reign of terror which, rumor had it, Domitian was about to instigate. I had no desire to end up being devoured by lions—or crocodiles, I reflected grimly as I saw them being released into the flooded arena to mop up the survivors of the sea-battle.

"You'll take the Thirty-fourth," he said. "What a spectacle! I may even come and watch the carnage."

"But your subjects need you here in Rome, Caesar," I said.

"Beware, beware, I've a purge coming. Your best bet is to be far from here; and fighting is, after all, the only thing you do well."

That was true. I remembered the last major purge; for a moment, after twenty-odd years, I saw my father as he lay dying on a couch, back on the estate with the olive groves. "Thank you, Caesar, for the signal honor," I said, going down on one knee; but Domitian was busy shooting the crocodiles, cackling with glee as the draining arena churned red.

We set sail shortly from Brundisium. We used traditional triremes because it wasn't too far; but to show our status as purveyors of the Imperial Wrath, we were preceded and followed by a full escort of the new fast little ships. They wove in and out among our old-fashioned ones, making a thorough nuisance of themselves.

The Thirty-fourth was garrisoned in Thrace at the time, fresh from its foray into the land of the Dacians. My tutor Nikias was there, wizened but waggish as ever. We marched eastward.

At first it was clear that we were in the land of the Pax Romana. Town after town followed the prefabricated Roman pattern: country estates of the rich, a temple to the local god and another to Jove or Augustus or someone, a circus for family entertainments, an enormous public baths, insular apartment complexes for the poor, markets, and so forth. The terrain would change from the hills of Bithynia to the plains of Galatia, but the towns all looked alike; it was one of the less agreeable aspects of the Empire.

Naturally I adhered to strict discipline throughout. I didn't hesitate to have men flogged or executed, and all down the good straight Roman roads I never once heard a sour rhythm in the thump, thump, thump of infantry, nor did the legion's eagles once waver as the aquiliferi held them high. In spite of himself, Father had made a man of me.

When I got to Cappadocia I found that Domitian had been grossly misinformed.

The Parthian host had pushed right through the mountains and into the western plain of Cappadocia, where lies a great salt lake. We were outnumbered five to one, and they had already taken the border town of Domitianopolis, only a year old. The precious herds of aurochs and their grazing grounds were behind the enemy lines!

I did my dogged best. We set up castra about a mile from where they were, up the side of a hill, and engaged them in the traditional manner, to little avail. There were just too many of them. In the second battle I lost one of my eagles, the sacrificial ram had three livers and its heart on the wrong side, and I sat down to compose a letter to Caesar asking for help. I retired my legion to the next town, Trajanopolis (ah, human vanity) and prepared for reinforcements.

Some weeks later came the reply, as I was having my back rubbed in the local baths:

To Titus Papinianus, Dux of the Thirty-fourth, greeting:

Well, Titus old boy, got more than you bargained for, eh? Well, there's not too much I can do. Terra Nova's acting up—for some reason the Seminolii (who are a union of the southeastern savages, formed when we drove the Chrichii, the Chirochii, and the Choctavii southwards, and these barbarians interbred with certain of our runaway Nubian slaves) think there's something wrong with our teaching them to take baths and go to the circus and so on. Trajan is busy quelling them—only the northern provinces, Iracuavia and Lacotia, are friendly.

So I'm afraid there's little I can do, unless I want to expose some other border elsewhere.

A curiosity, though, Titus. In his last shipment of entertainers for the arena, the impresario Lucretius Lupus, who is vacationing in Terra Nova, sent me a whole tribe of Lacotians. Their leader, Aquila (actually some barbaric tongue-twister, but it *means* eagle) was the very man who defeated Pomponius Piso thirty-five years ago. They were supposed to do battle against Numidian archers in the Coliseum, but... why not?

I'm sending them on the next ship. Who knows, perhaps these Lacotians may know something—and they're screamingly funny besides. Fight well—come back with your shield or on it, as the saying goes.

Ave atque vale,

Titus Flavius Domitianus, Caesar, Augustus, Imperator, Pater Patriae, Pater Maximus Candidusque, and various other titles, your Emperor and God.

Apparently I was a victim of the purge, after all. But at least I would fulfill my childhood dream of meeting one of those legendary Terra Novan savages face to face, before I died gloriously in battle.

CHAPTER III

IT HAD BEEN AN EXHAUSTING DAY. WE HAD RETURNED to the old castra, and I was studying the war histories, trying to work out a viable stratagem, and, for fear of keeping the legion too idle, had detailed two maniples of infantry to dig more trenches and build more ramparts. Alone in the shade of my praetorium with a flagon of Chian wine, I tried different ways of deploying our meager artillery, our scorpiones, ballistae, and catapultae, by arranging pebbles around a clay model of the terrain. About two thousand men, a third of the legion, were dead or wounded. It was depressing.

I'd fallen asleep at the table. A lamp burned still, causing the shadows to flit along the flaps of my praetorium. I was in my bare tunic; outside, guards watched, their pila crossed over the entrance. Suddenly I opened my eyes.

The shadow on the wall... was there someone in the room with me? I listened. Was it a breathing? Ah no, my own, but—

There. A shadow on the wall, dancing against the quivering lamplight... I reached for my dagger. It was jerked out of my hands. I whirled around. In the eerie flickering, an apparition leered at me.

"Jupiter defend me!" I cried, doing every avert-the-omen sign I could remember.

The ghost did not disappear. It didn't move either. I took a good cool look at it (I knew by now I must be dreaming, or else why would the guards not have noticed?) and Virgil's description of the hell-beings of Avernus, whom Aeneas saw on his descent into Hades, was nothing compared to this.

It was a weatherbeaten face with a hooked nose and hawklike brown eyes, and it was painted in garish reds and yellows and striped with black. Its hair was long and white; and, in a headband, a number of eagle feathers stuck out.

It was almost naked; it stooped with age, and its chest sagged like an old man's. A breechclout of some kind of leather hid its privates. It smelled of some strange oil; if it had bathed at all, it was no Roman bath it took.

It grinned at me.

"Who in Hades are you?" I gasped at last, when pinching myself several more times resulted only in an itchy arm. "And how did you get in here?"

It shrugged. "I've never yet met a Roman I couldn't creep up on," it said genially.

"You mean you're—"

"Hechitu welo. I am Aquila the Barbarian."

"Oh, but you *do* speak Latin, I see."

"What do you think? We've been taking your baths, reading your ghastly poets, and watching your indecently gory spectacles for the past thirty-five years."

So this was the famous tactician who had demolished the legions of Pomponius Piso! "I'm pleased," I said, "to have such a distinguished leader as yourself working under my command."

"Under *your* command!" The savage began to cackle.

I was somewhat disgruntled; he said, "The White and Greatest Father said nothing about working under anybody. We came of our own free will, in friendship, to make war with honor if we so choose. Do you have any wine?"

"Oh. Sorry." I picked up the flagon to pour some, but he relieved me of the whole thing and began to guzzle. "And your men? How many are there?"

"How should I know? Who can count the trees of the forest?"

"Show me then." I lifted the tent flaps; outside, the two guards lay bound and gagged. The moon was full, and a fire was roaring at the crossroads of the *via principalis* and the *via praetoria*. I saw them in the half-light, a comical procession such as you might see in one of Plautus's farces.

Some of the men were mounted; their horses were painted as bizarrely as they were themselves. Some wore their hair braided in the Gaulish manner, but unlike the Gauls' it was well-oiled and sleek. Feathers adorned their heads. They had little armor, although a few had borrowed cuirasses and one or two sported ill-fitting helmets. Some were bare-chested; others had bewildering neckpieces hung with beads, animal claws, seashells, and silver denarii. All the way down the *via principalis* they came. It was amazing that they had made no noise. Their women followed, carrying burdens, or leading dogs with packs tied behind them.

"Are these," I asked Aquila, "my reinforcements? Can they take orders?"

"I don't know," Aquila said. "Is there good fighting to be had here?"

"Well, there are twenty thousand Parthians back there," I said, jerking my thumb eastward.

"And who might the Parthians be?"

"Parthians," I said (slowly, in the legionaries' pidgin Latin, so they'd understand every word) "are a race of extremely wicked people from the east, who revile the name of Rome and seek, in their overweening hubris, to rob us of our territory and set up a rival Empire of their own. They have already taken Domitianopolis and are about to ravage all Cappadocia."

"And what about the Cappadocians? Perhaps they would prefer the Parthian masters to the Romans?" he said with a nasty chuckle.

What ignorant idiots! I cursed Domitian for playing this terrible trick on me. "Obviously," I said with painstaking clarity, "it is the destiny of Rome to rule the world; the Emperor, who is a god and bloody well ought to know, is divinely charged with the right to conquer all inferior nations! Everyone knows that. I mean, you Lacotians have been Roman citizens for some time now, haven't you? What a ridiculous thing to be arguing about, with those beastly Parthians beating at the very gates of the Empire...."

"You Romans never listen, do you? By what right, pray, are *you* in Cappadocia, as opposed to the Parthians or indeed, the Cappadocians?"

Casuistry has never been my strong point. Nikias could never get me to understand the simplest Platonic dialogue, so you can imagine my confusion as I faced this foul-stenched savage who was making me defend the obvious. I glared at these Terra Novans, getting very red in the face. "Damn it, we *own* this land here!" I said.

"What a strange philosophy! How can land be owned? You Romans came charging into Lacotia, you gave us horses and pushed us out of the forests into the plains. What we had we shared with you, but you wanted everything. And all you give us is those bloody spectacles. You don't have true wars, wars

that hone a man's spirit and sharpen his senses; you have wasteful wars in which men are like the cogs of your motor-cars and ships. I do not come to fight in your war. The others, of course, may do exactly as they wish."

"You're not going to give them any orders?"

"Why should I? We are all equal; as their chief I shall certainly advise them, but public opinion may gainsay me."

What a way to run an army. "Are you sure you're the great Aquila who vanquished Pomponius Piso?"

"Ah, that funny little Roman who watched from afar and never once got a spot of blood on his toga! That was a wonderful war indeed. Some mercenaries of yours, from Hispania I believe, taught us the art of taking scalps, which we have adopted into our culture." For the first time I noticed the grisly assortment that dangled from his waistband. "But you Romans didn't play by the rules. After you lost the war, you didn't return to your own land. Now that I have seen your land I can understand why, though."

What! This man dared to impugn the sacred name of Rome? I had a mind to have him flogged immediately, white-haired though he was. "How can you possibly say this?"

"Ugh! Your crowds, the noise of your thoroughfares, the ugly monstrosities you call palaces, the stone images that you dote on and pray to... I thought I was in hell itself, General. Where I live the land is green for a thousand miles, and the brooks are clear and men's hearts soar like hawks. Much like this Cappadocia which you are even now despoiling with aqueducts that change the flow of nature, with circuses that exterminate whole species of beasts—"

"That's enough," I said. "We'll fight this war without you! Go home!"

"How can we? We no longer have a home. Our sacred burial grounds were razed to make room for a public baths. An evil spirit has descended upon our tribe, don't you see, and there isn't much we can do about it. We went hungry; we ate even our own dogs, such was our shame. That is why we took Lucretius Lupus up on his offer to come to Rome. We look for an honorable war in which to redeem ourselves—we didn't know that Lucretius Lupus had signed us up to kill Numidian archers in the circus for the general amusement. But the Pater Maximus Candidusque heard our plea with compassion; that is why we're here...."

"I see," I said without conviction. I was resigned to an ignominious defeat. I'd already lost one eagle after all, and in the days of the Republic I would probably already have committed suicide, but such was the decadence to which contemporary society had fallen that I did not even contemplate such a step. I decided to dismiss them for now and get back to serious work. "Go see the quaestor, Quintus Publius Cinna; he'll feed and pay you. You'll have to pitch castra outside, but in the morning I'll assign a detail to help you dig fossae and build vallae."

"Bah!" the old man snorted. "Are we women, that we must hide behind trenches and walls? We will put our tipis at the foot of this hill, in the very sight of the enemy—"

"But their catapultae—their ballistae—"

"What do a few machines matter? Since we have lost our burial grounds we do not care to live." So saying the old savage made a gesture of dismissal at me—*me!* and swept out; the weird parade followed him, silent as shadow. Even the dogs made no noise. When I returned to my tent it was as if the whole thing had been a dream.

CHAPTER IV

AT DAWN, DRIVEN BY CURIOSITY, I RODE OUT OF the camp with Nikias and a couple of tribunes. I was hoping that the Terra Novans would miraculously have vanished, but far from it. An encampment lay at the foot of the hill, just as Aquila had promised. If the enemy wanted to storm our castra it would probably be over the Terra Novans' dead bodies.

What an undisciplined hodgepodge of a castra it was! Their tents, scattered without any pattern or thoroughfare, were shaped like inverted funnels of the type alchemists use for straining their filtrates. Infants squalled; horses were tethered at random; and the tents, which seemed to be of the hides of cows or aurochs stretched over a frame of poles, were decorated with crude likenesses of animals and men. No doubt Domitian found these savages comical; lacking his sense of humor, I found them rather pitiable.

And were they engaged in drill exercises, or marching up and down the hill to keep in shape for the coming conflict? Not a bit? The men, all naked save for scant loincloths, beads, feathers, and soft leather caligae, were lazing about in clumps, muttering in their guttural tongue.

I saw Aquila among them.

"*Ave*, General," he said, looking up. "The Parthians have mobilized a wing of their army; I believe it's young Chosroes leading them. They're on their way."

"How in heaven could you know such a thing?"

Aquila got up and pointed to the east.

"Whatever do you mean?" At the limit of my vision, a hillock much like our own seemed to be emitting little puffs of smoke.

"Ah, some of our braves are restless, General, you see. They decided to go for a closer look. Those are smoke signals."

"Secret codes in smoke? Good heavens, how sophisticated," I said; in truth I could hardly make it out at all, in the dazzling sunlight, and I was certain that Aquila was having me on. "From behind enemy lines, no less! How large was the party you sent out?" I asked sarcastically.

"What party? You know how young men are. I could not restrain them from this display of bravery..."

"Perhaps there is something in your savage tactics, Aquila," I said. "I shall look forward to your fighting by my side—"

"And whyever should I do that?" said the chieftain. His puzzlement seemed genuine.

I threw my hands up in despair. "Oh, Marcellus—"

The tribune by that name rode up to me. "Tell the signifer and the aquiliferi to ready their banners. Let the tubicines stand ready to sound my orders, and let the cornicines be not far behind, to relay the commands to the appropriate maniples."

"Yes, General. Any particular formation?"

I sighed. "Oh, *acies triplex*, I suppose." A doomed general might as well go out in good classical style.

"You haven't much time, General," Aquila said, chuckling. "They're due in about five minutes."

"How do you know?" I said, knowing that he would only come up with some outrageous boast of his men's prowess.

"Oh, I've been putting my ear to the ground—" Suddenly an earsplitting din rent the air. My horse reared up. I waved vaguely to the tribune. Somewhere a bucina wailed, and then I heard the shouts of thousands of men as they fell into the three lines of Julius Caesar's favorite formation. I heard the deep-voiced tuba bray and be echoed by the shrill screech of cornua.

"Have fun," Aquila shouted after me as I spurred my horse down the hill.

CHAPTER V

AT SUNSET WE STRAGGLED BACK TO THE CASTRA, roundly beaten. I didn't even want to reckon the casualties. I found my way to the praetorium and summoned Nikias to me. We had run out of the good Chian wine and were down to cheap Italian wines, but I was past caring. I downed a whole pitcher of it before Nikias arrived.

"Sit at the table, Nikias. There, opposite me, like you used to when you taught me all those contracted verbs. Did you bring your pen and parchment?" He opened his toolbox.

"Letters to write?" he said.

"Yes, I want to dictate a letter to Caesar. But first... write me up a document of manumission."

"You wish to free a slave, Master Titus?" An expression of alarm crossed his face.

"Yes. You." The oil lamp sputtered briefly; the wick was low. The tent dimmed; the shadows deepened.

"You're not planning to—"

"Yes, as a matter of fact I am. You can hold the sword while I run on it. But I want you to be a free man first."

"That's absurd! We Greeks have always considered the Roman predilection for suicide to be wasteful and unaesthetic, and—" He was in tears suddenly.

We were both sobbing our guts out, recalling the happy days of the estate with the olive orchard and the motor-car, wallowing in paroxysms of grief, when—

Behind me, in the tent, someone cleared his throat. I nearly fell out of the chair. "Am I interrupting something?"

"Aquila!" I was almost incoherent. "How dare you interrupt this most private moment, you impudent savage—"

"There now, there now. I have no wish to see you suffer so. I come to offer help."

"Help?"

As I looked around my tent, other savages resolved out of the shadows. Far from having an intimate tête-a-tête with my tutor and friend of thirty-five years, I might as well have been a clown in a Plautus comedy, waving my leather phallus at the hooting masses.

"These are," said Aquila, "some of the young braves of my tribe. Here is Ursus Erectus... Nimbus Rufus..." The names were, of course, in his savage speech; I have translated them into a humanly comprehensible tongue. "... Alces Nigra... Lupus Solitarius..."

"I am beyond your help," I said. "I'm weary. Domitian surely intends me to die here, and he shall be satisfied. I don't know what I've done to offend Caesar, but it appears to be the will of the gods—at

least the will of one rather insistent one—"

"There now, don't kill yourself," Aquila said. "These four braves are bored. They've decided to invade the enemy camp, and they won't rest unless they penetrate to the tent of their very leader."

"What rubbish! Four people against ten, twenty thousand? Your boasts have been plentiful, but this one —"

"The Lacota do not boast," the chief said matter-of-factly. "You may have noticed that we sneaked up to your tent and were able to watch your entire little scene with Nikias unobserved. Rather maudlin, I may add."

I could not deny that. "Since you insist—"

"Oh, they certainly do. They haven't had a good raid since they crossed the Big Water."

"Very well then," I said, trying to gather up what shreds of dignity I yet possessed. "You shall each have a standard issue of weaponry: pilum, gladius, and scutum. Nikias, see to that. You will depart immediately."

"Thanks for the weapons, but our own will do very nicely," Aquila said. "As for leaving immediately, though—"

"Well?"

"They can't leave for at least two hours. A man's got to look his best for a sacred thing like war. It'll take them that long to get their warpaint on."

"What? What kind of fighting is this, where you stop to adjust your makeup and your hair? Is this a war or is it a Corinthian brothel?"

"Relax, General!" Aquila said jovially. "Honor and glory will soon be ours." I blinked and they were gone.

For the next five or six hours I sat twiddling my thumbs. Even if they didn't come back, I reflected, they might be able to slip into Chosroes's tent and assassinate him. A dirty trick, and hardly the Roman way to do business—my father would turn over in his grave!—but I could salvage my conscience by noting that savages could hardly be expected to know about the refinements of civilized warfare.

I pulled out my military texts and studied them. But I was too nervous to concentrate. I pulled out some light reading, a scroll of scientifictions.

I was a little way into the epic poem *Fundatio: Fundatio et Imperium: Fundatio Secunda*—which predicts, amusingly, that Rome will collapse and we will enter an age of barbarity—when...

"What's that noise?" I shouted. Nikias was awake too, and hollering for the tribunes. "It's an ambush!" I staggered outside.

Coming up the via principals of the castra, the four Lacotians were dancing up a storm, screaming incantations in their language, and hitting their lances on shields. Alarums were sounding around the camp. Centurions rushed hither and thither, bumping into each other and tripping.

The Lacotians were cavorting around in a bacchanalian frenzy, and I saw that fresh scalps dangled from their spears and their face paint was streaked with blood.

When they saw me they calmed down a little. "What on earth—" I said. They began clamoring in their tongue all at once. I finally saw Aquila, shuffling up the via principalis.

"Victory!" he said. The braves began to throw assorted spoils at my feet. Chests of precious metals. An

aurochs hide. Parchments written in the Parthian language. Aquila came forward and embraced me, beaming and smelling like a he-goat.

"They reached the tent of Chosroes?" I stared dumbly as one of the braves hurled what was unmistakably Chosroes's armor at my feet. I could hardly believe my luck. Surely the Parthians (whose military organization was far less disciplined than ours, and who would be thrown into utter chaos by the death of a leader) would be confused enough to return whence they came.

"You have evidence of Chosroes's death?" I said excitedly. "His head, perhaps, or some other such trinket I can send to Domitian?"

A pause. Aquila spoke to his four savages while I stood nervously.

Finally he said, "I have the honor to report that all four of my braves have counted coup on the Parthian leader."

I smelled a rat. "Counted coup? What does that mean?"

"Among my people it is considered the mark of highest bravery to touch the enemy with one of these"—he held up a short, cudgel-like baton—"and return alive. *Killing* the man hardly seemed necessary."

"You took these spoils and you didn't... even... harm...."

"Oh, he was harmed all right. Nasty bruise on his forehead, given by Ursus Erectus, here. And Nimbus Rufus fetched him a smart one on the posterior—he won't be able to sit down for a week."

"I want him killed! I want him killed!"

There was a terse discussion amongst them; then Aquila turned gravely to me. "Alas, General, they've decided they don't want to kill him. Seems that he fought so gallantly that he's won their respect, or something."

"But I command it!"

"We've been through all this before."

I stalked into my tent. "Nikias! The sword!" I shouted. "It's now or never!" Nikias followed me, shaking all over; poor soul, I'd never dictated his certificate of manumission, and I was too distraught to think of it now.

Aquila—of all the impudence—followed me in. "Come now, General!" he said. "I'll never understand you palefaces. Here we come from over the Big Water to inspire you with noble deeds and courageous acts, and what do you do? You decide to kill yourself! It's cowardice pure and simple. All you Romans are cowards! When you fight you put up barriers of metal so you can jab safely at the enemy. You throw great balls of flame with your thunder-machines and watch from a distance. You are no true men, but a gaggle of women. Or if you are men then you are hawks whose wings Wakantanka, the Great Mystery, has clipped. You are devils who have taken paradise from us. It grieves me to see such cowardice, for it declares your subhumanity to all men." He paused for breath.

"Are you calling me a coward? Me, Titus Papinianus, son of Caius Papinianus, nicknamed The Stalwart, equestrian by birth, dux by the Emperor's decree, scourge of the Dacians, a coward?"

"The same."

I leaped for the man's throat. Deftly he stepped aside and, I went crashing into the wall, ripping a hole in the fabric. "You see what I mean?" he said calmly. "Only a coward would attack a man old enough to be his father."

I lunged again; this time I knocked my head on a tent pole. "I'll prove it to you," I said. "Send me your strongest brave and I'll—"

"Brute force won't show anything," Aquila said. "However, if you wish to convince me of your bravery. ..."

I waited, glaring at him.

"Tomorrow," he said, "I have a mind to ride far to the east, behind the enemy lines; to see the limits of your Roman Empire. And while I have no enmity for your Parthians, yet I will ride into their very maw and taunt them, so you will see that Aquila is no woman. You see me here, a man past eighty; yet I will do this thing. Do you dare come with me?"

A general doesn't permit himself to indulge in personal challenges, I told myself brutally. My father had beaten good Roman ethics into me often enough. But when I looked at this old savage something in me cracked. Here they were, these people who had stolen straight into the enemy camp and yet had scorned the easy victory of dispatching the enemy leader. What was it about Aquila and the Lacotians? After all, they *had* defeated Pomponius Piso himself. Perhaps they were sorcerers; perhaps they had some cloak of invisibility or potion of invincibility. I had to know. I no longer cared about Domitian, or his purge, or his precious aurochs herds for which we had wasted the lives of thousands of good legionaries. All I wanted to do was teach this insolent, supercilious savage a lesson he would never forget.

CHAPTER VI

THE SUN HAD NOT RISEN WHEN WE SET OFF DOWN the hill. There were four of us: Nikias and I came in simple tunicae, although it galled me to be so disguised; Ursus Erectus, the young brawny one I had met the previous evening; and Aquila himself, who came clothed in a painted aurochs hide and wearing a bundle around his neck which he called his *fastis medicinae*.

Exchanging not a word, we rode towards the east, the sky gray-purpled by impending dawn. At the horizon was a line of low hills, at the foot of which the Parthians lay encamped; beyond them, I knew, was Domitianopolis.

"To the north," said Aquila, bringing his roan abreast of me, "there is a way around the hill. My braves found it yesterday. The Parthians, being the invaders, are unfamiliar with the country, yet they have not the Lacotian knack for sizing up the terrain; this is to our advantage." His smugness was annoying me; and also the fact that he was easing himself into the position of leader. I thanked the gods that my cohorts were not here to see me made a fool of.

"Shall I believe this braggart?" I asked Nikias in Greek.

"Watch it!" Aquila said in the same tongue. "There are Greeks in every village in Lacotia, for we find the tales of their Homer far nobler than your superficial love poems and the boasts of your historians."

"Is there no way we can speak privately?" I said, frustrated. Nikias and I lashed our mounts on ahead; but I confess I did not know which way to go next, and had to allow the Lacotians to slip into the lead again.

Presently we tethered our horses in a copse at the foot of the hill and Aquila began picking his way through a rocky trail that led upwards. He moved swiftly, gracefully, like a wild animal. Ha! I thought, remembering one of the popular theories about the Terra Novans, which averred that they were indeed

part animal, thus lacking souls and being oblivious to pain.

"I see you've snooped around here before," I said.

"No," said Aquila, "I'm just following the signs left by last night's raiding party."

"What signs?"

Quickly he pointed around us. Here an arrangement of leaves and twigs, there a few rocks heaped in a natural-seeming pattern. These he claimed to be sophisticated messages that warned of pitfalls, unsteady footholds, and the like. For a moment, I almost believed him. Then I realized that reading the signs of nature was a special ability of such primitive sorcerers, and that he was just having a little fun with me. I laughed at myself for being so gullible.

In a few hours we were overlooking the Parthian host from behind.

It took my breath away. Their tents were gaudy—brash reds, vibrant oranges, vivid against the green. They stretched far into the hill's shadow. There were chariots, points of fire in the carpet of grass. There were alien standards. There were soldiers crawling like ants: I couldn't begin to recognize all the types of costumes. And in the center of it all, an oriental palace in fabric, was the tent of their leader. How unlike my sparse, classical praetorium, or the rough hides of the Lacotians' tipis!

"There are many," I whispered. It wasn't like the Dacians, who were, after all, barbarians not much more advanced than the Lacotians.

"Bah! Old women, the lot of them. They are river reeds that sway when a child blows on them. They are even less courageous than the Romans, whom I once subdued."

"Will you taunt them now?"

"No," Aquila said. "First I've a mind to see your precious Cappadocia. Let's go east."

"Very well," I said grimly, ready for anything. Now that I had seen the extent of the Parthian host I knew that death would not be far. I felt a reckless exhilaration, as though I were a child again.

We scrambled down cautiously, fetched our horses, and rounded the hill. A little forest hugged the eastern slope of it; and then we were on a plain. Lush grass thinned in the distance as the hills rose.

Suddenly there was a burst of gibberish from the lips of Ursus Erectus, who had been silent all day. He was pointing wildly at the far hills. I squinted.

At first it seemed like a scar, a brown patch on the hillside; and then I saw it move.

"The *pta!* Our sacred *pta!*" Aquila cried. He sounded younger. "At last our tribe may be freed of its curse, may find new hunting grounds! Would that I were a young brave, to find such *pta* and *pte*...."

Without waiting, reckless, the two Lacotians spurred their horses into a gallop. Nikias and I caught up with them, and soon I saw the brown patch resolve into little brown patches; my vision blurred from the horseback riding—

"The Imperial aurochs herd!" Nikias shouted.

I knew that such creatures existed in the new world, but I had not known that they would exert such power over the savages.

The Lacotians were laughing now, whooping with glee, throwing their lances and catching them as they raced forward.

They were grazing. Thousands of them. Majestic creatures, bearded and sleek-furred.

And then, as we passed a rock mound, Aquila's steed stopped and whinnied.

I slowed to a trot behind him. A sickening sight greeted me.

They were lying in the grass, one or two of them, rotting. Carrion birds had settled on them, and when I looked up I saw more vultures wheeling.

The bison had been completely flayed.

"Why?" Aquila screamed at the sky, raging. I saw him weep copiously, without shame, like a woman. We rode on, but now their demeanor was grim.

As we neared the herd we found more carcasses. Always the skin would be stripped from them and their flesh remain moldering in the heat. Aquila's weeping did not cease.

And then, peering from behind a boulder, we saw mounds of piled pelts. And armed guards watching over them.

"Poaching," I said, "on a grand scale. At this rate they'll have killed and skinned the entire herd by year's end."

Aquila said, "Can this be true? Can they really take the skins and leave the flesh to rot, disrupt man's balance with nature?"

"Probably they plan to trade them further east. To the people of India, or those folk with skins of gold who inhabit the lands beyond, these pelts may be worth more than silks and spices."

"We have rediscovered paradise," said Aquila, "only to lose it a second time."

The Lacotians exchanged words rapidly in their tongue. I caught the words *pta* and *pte*, which seemed to be the male and female aurochs. Then Aquila turned to me and said, his voice quavering with emotion, "My heart is like a stone, General. I can no longer even weep. When your people drove us into the great plains and gave us horses, we hunted the aurochs and our bellies were full. We took no more than what would fill us, and the hide and the bones we made good use of. When we were full we made war: holy war, not a war of senseless killing, but war to strengthen a man's heart and give him honor. Now when I look upon this land I see what could be another paradise. We could be happy here, for when we hunt we are part of nature's harmony. But these Parthians hunt wantonly, they take only the skins and discard the meat. They must truly be cursed. I cannot bear to look upon this—" He faltered. "I have seen too much. I am too old. It is a good day to die. I shall lie here on the grass until death comes for me."

I was moved by his words. The savage spoke of strange ways and customs; but when I thought more deeply I saw that we were kin. For my father had had much the same thought, the day he learned of the Emperor's disfavor and took it upon himself to execute sentence. But I didn't want Aquila to die. I said, "Old man, last night you forced me to live. You called me a coward. Must I remind you?"

Aquila seemed puzzled for a moment. Then he chuckled and said, "Of course, you're right. That isn't the answer at all, is it? Obviously we shouldn't take this lying down. Instead, we'll take on the whole bloody pack of them."

"You'll fight beside us?"

"What do you think?"

"So finally I'll get to see the fabled Lacotian art warfare.. the unorthodox tactics so elliptically alluded to by Pomponius Piso in his *Memoir of the Lacotian Wars*?"

"*Huka hey! Aleajacta est!*"

CHAPTER VII

LATER I SQUATTED UNCOMFORTABLY IN AQUILA'S tent. There were four or five of them, the quaestor, one or two of my tribunes, sweating in their full regalia, Nikias taking notes, and me. Aquila pulled out a pipe, filled it with herbs from his *fascis medicinae*, and lit it, whereupon a foul stench filled the tent and I could hardly see for the smoke; this he puffed on, and then insisted I do the same. On complying I seemed to fall into a shadow world; everything felt hazy, unreal. So this was one of their secrets... a magic drug that no doubt rendered them invulnerable.

"Does the nearby town have a public baths?" said Aquila.

"Of course," I said hazily. "How could a Roman town not have any?"

"I want exclusive use of them for my braves for a day."

"Righty-ho." Perhaps they *were* getting civilized.

"I want some trees, felled in a ritual way which I shall prescribe, set up at the foot of this hill—"

"Aha! A Lacotian war machine!" I knew they'd have something up their sleeve; for magic, in itself, is rarely effective unless blended with careful planning, as I had myself learned in my dealings with the Dacians and Picts.

"You might call it that," Aquila said, and he started to giggle ferociously.

A few more puffs, and it was as if I was seeing the world from underwater. The Lacotians rippled. In the distance, Father drove up in his motorcar, scolding me, and off in a corner Domitian was shooting some chimera full of arrows, and I was laughing helplessly...

There was a great deal of grumbling from the townspeople when I requisitioned the public baths. But eventually we barricaded them off and the Lacotians— perhaps two hundred strong—trooped inside. A maniple was dispatched to a nearby forest to fell the trees Aquila had requested, accompanied by one of their priests or *homines medicinae* who would perform the appropriate ritual.

After a while I wearied of pacing the colonade outside the baths; I decided that I might as well join them. It's good to get the kinks out of your body before a major battle, even one you've little chance of surviving.

I went inside. Signs led to the tepidarium, caldarium and frigidarium. The place was unusually quiet. Normally the buzz of social banter never ceases at a bath. I disrobed in the vestiarius, which was piled high with the animal skins and feathers the savages wore, and then tried the caldarium.

I rubbed my eyes. At first you couldn't see for the steam and then—

The pool proper had been drained, Lacotians squatted in ranks inside. Steam poured out from the heating vents; the slaves must be working overtime underneath. Steam tendrilled out then as they sat, unspeaking, each of them apparently lost in some private vision. Fetishes, the skulls of aurochs, ritual pipes littered the tile floor, which was a mosaic depicting the rape of the Sabine women. I made out Aquila, a shrunken man with age-blotched skin, kneeling in the center of the throng.

I descended into the empty pool, my feet smarting against the hot tiles.

"Ah, there you are, Aquila old chap!" I said. "Thought we ought to discuss a little strategy, eh, before tomorrow?"

Silence. The man's eyes stared ahead far away. He didn't move.

"Hello? Hello?" I said.

He snapped to. "Oh, General Titus. Sshhh"—his voice dropped—"wouldn't want to disturb these fellows, would you?"

"What's going on?"

"Lacotian custom. Sweat bath, you know. Some of the men are, oh, far away, on spirit journeys. Usually we have special tents for this purpose, but it seemed a good idea to take advantage of your modern Roman technology...." He fell into a trance again, and I couldn't rouse him.

I bathed alone in the tepidarium for a while and returned to the castra, where an even more incredible sight awaited me.

At the foot of the hill, some distance eastward from the camp, several circles had been marked off with stones, aurochs skulls, pipes, and fetishes. At their centers stood the tree trunks that my soldiers had felled, and from them radiated hundreds of strings.

"Ho, there!" I called out, dismounting. "What's the meaning of this?"

A tribune came puffing up. "General, these savages have gone out of their minds!"

"Is this some kind of war engine?"

Distant hoofbeats. The Lacotians were returning from the city. In a moment they had all split into groups and were lined up naked in the circles.

"I don't rightly know, General, just *what* the blighters are up to. It could be some kind of rapid-firing slingshot, I suppose."

"No," I said, "those strings are strips of hide; anything for firing ammunition would require tormenta, twisted ropes with a spring action as in the catapultae. I can't see any possible use for them."

"Perhaps they mean to swing down on the strings, as apes with vines in Africa."

"Then surely they would camouflage the engines so that their swoopings might contain some element of surprise."

"Good heavens, sir, what are they doing now?"

One of the *homines medicinae* was solemnly mutilating the young men one after another, cutting slits under the skin of their chests, sliding in little sticks, and then attaching them to the poles by means of the strings. Another *homo medicinae* distributed rattles to them and placed little wooden flutes in their mouths. The braves gave no show of pain at all, but walked out to the edge of the circle, facing the center, stretching the strings to their limits.

"It seems awfully gruesome," Nikias said, approaching from the castra with welcome bowls of Lesbian wine, just purchased in the town.

All at once came the pounding of drums and a most monstrous caterwauling from a group of old men, chanting a wavering, out-of-tune melody whose long notes were punctuated by peculiar rhythmic gurgling sounds. At this the braves began to dance and blow on their flutes, staring steadfastly at the sun, which was shining fiercely. As the men danced they tugged at the strings, trying it seemed to yank themselves free; blood spurted from their chests. The din was astonishing. Presently a crowd of legionaries had gathered, and were staring at this display, cheering and jeering with the typical Romans' love of spectacle; one might as well have been at the bloody circus. Even *I*, professional butcher as I am, felt queasy at this eerie exhibition.

I finally caught sight of Aquila, moving unconcernedly through the crowd.

"What the hell is going on?" I yelled above the cacophony.

"Oh, nothing," he said. "They are merely offering up their pain. It is the sundance, you know. You do want to win the battle, don't you?"

"Yes, but—"

"They must dance," he said, "until the skin tears and they break free. After that they will dress in all their finery and go to war."

Children were running amok, poking at the men with grass blades. Women sang, their voices blending with the grunting hey-hey-hey of the old men.

"Do you mean to say," I began indignantly, "that you have made me go to all this trouble, just so you could have some horrid rite?" Never had these people seemed more alien to me. I had been wrong even to attempt to gain their co-operation. We were doomed, and I had only been stalling for time. The best thing would be to fling ourselves on the Parthians and die with a good grace.

Well, as if in answer to my sentiments, bucinae and cornua began to bray above the din. I looked to the east. A line of glitter was rolling slowly across the plain, like a monstrous worm of gold.

"The Parthians!" I cried. Instantly the tribunes were by my side. "Aquila, enough of this rubbish!" I said. "We're in real trouble now, and we need all the men we've got! Let everyone grab a weapon!"

Aquila just laughed at me. "What?" he said. "This is a sacred thing the men do. We cannot interrupt it. When they are ready, they will come."

It was useless. I should have known better than to attempt to deal rationally with savages. Superstitious primitives. It was our job to civilize these people—with fire and sword if necessary—not reason with them. With a final shrug of exasperation, I mounted, barked some orders to the tribune, which were presently relayed by tubae all over the castra above. Legionaries rushed for their shields and weapons, and the audience for the Lacotians' curious ritual of self-mutilation wilted away in an instant.

CHAPTER VIII

I HAD BARELY TWO SQUADRONS OF CAVALRY, AND ALL save one of my praefecti equitum had perished. These I held in reserve, placing them on the hillside under my own command. I had five cohorts of infantry and a scattering of auxiliaries: a few slingers, perhaps a hundred of the Cretan sagitarii, and so on. These, under the command of the quaestor Quintus Publius Cinna, I deployed, again in Julius Caesar's favorite acies triplex formation, in three lines directly facing the onslaught, the troops in front forming an iron barrier with their shields. The artillery I scattered at intervals throughout the lines.

As I shouted my commands and the tribunes hastened to obey, the Lacotians continued their frenzied dancing, jerking at the rawhide strings and wildly piping on their flutes, so that it was almost impossible to make myself heard. The tramp-tramp of the distant enemy was something you felt more than heard, like a heartbeat, an impalpable dread. It had oozed halfway across the plain now, that multicolored worm of an army, and there was no time to lose. I chose a little cliff from which to watch the fray, as far as possible from the distracting noise of the Lacotians' rite. Nikias was there; this time I remembered the certificate of manumission, and he was at my side a freeman and my hired scribe. Behind me I concealed the cavalry as best I could.

I gazed over the plain.

It seemed infinitely slow, the crawling forward of the enemy, from my lofty vantage point. But I knew there was little time. I saw Cinna ride back and forth behind the lines, haranguing the pedites.

The enemy stopped.

I looked them over. They were neat squares of color, each square perhaps a thousand men. We were strung out a long way, but not very deeply; it was only a matter of time before they broke through. I saw, in the distance, the range of foothills in which their camp nestled; behind them were the cursed aurochs herds which Domitian was about to make me die for.

I heard their trumpets sound. They charged in one chaotic melee: chariots, infantry, cavalry all jumbled together. It was their numbers that had been our bane, not their brilliant organization. The first wave crashed into our shield wall; the shields clanged open at a single command and a volley of fire-arrows burst forth. Horses whinnied and perished. Chariots overturned and upset other chariots. But they kept coming.

And lo! Our wall of scuta was breached by a suicidal charioteer, and hundreds of the Parthians were streaming through the gap, swords waving! Even from on high I smelled the blood, and the dust clouds were dyed scarlet, obscuring the view. I averted my eyes; the sight of hacking and bloodletting was not new to me, and held no interest. It was now up to me to decide whether to condemn the cavalry too, or to sound the retreat and commit suicide. It had been hardly an hour, and the outcome was already clear.

"Nikias," I said, adopting a brusque tone to hide my sorrow, "bring the sword at once."

"Yes... master." His eyes were red. I did not weep—we had been through all that before, in the tent, when Aquila and his braves had so callously spied on us.

Suddenly—

An earsplitting screeching assailed my ears! Down below the fighting froze for a moment, the dust started to settle, everyone turned and stared to the east.

Demons on horseback were charging from behind the enemy lines, firing streams of fire-arrows into the dumbfounded Parthian ranks. The figures were painted in dazzling colors, the horses' legs were decorated with bright lightning streaks, and they wore bonnets of feathers that trailed behind, and they were uttering such piercing screams as would make the very mummies burst forth from their pyramids. In the hills, I saw pillars of flame and smoke, and my spirits lifted. I knew the enemy camp was on fire. The Lacotians must have ridden as fast as the wind, and as silently, to have been able to accomplish all this.

Now the Parthians were scattering randomly, and my infantry were having an easy time of it as they rushed, crazed with fear, into their arms. I gave the order to give chase. The Lacotians had formed a circle of horsemen that surrounded the enemy host, and were riding around and around and firing.

"Quite a spectacle, eh, general?" I started. It was Aquila. He was mounted on a white horse, decorated with crimson lightning-stripes; his face was painted in red and white, and on his wrinkled brow sat a crown of feathers; behind him more feathers streamed. In his right hand he held high a feathered lance. He was magnificent. Although he wore no golden cuirass, his horse carried no gilt caparison, no cloak of purple flapped behind him... yet he looked like a god, his demeanor stern and implacable. The Parthians, who had never seen a Lacotian decked in his war regalia, must surely have thought them devils, for they are a superstitious folk, without the benefit of the Empire's enlightenment.

"Aquila!" I said. "You've saved us! I've a mind to make all the legionaries perform your sundance from now on—"

"You are far from saved," he said. "Quickly. Bring your cavalry. Your men on the plain will pursue them; my men there will lure them. Meanwhile your cavalry and what remains of mine will round the hills, swifter than thought itself. If we become one with the wind, and soar like eagles, we may be able to head them off at yonder pass." He pointed to a crack, far off behind the enemy camp, which I could barely distinguish. But I wasn't going to argue now. I sent the herald with the summons and we were off.

The war-fever was in me now. We hurtled over the other side of the hill, Lacotians and Romans together, following Aquila's white steed. When we reached the pass I saw that Aquila's men had been busy indeed. For, as the Parthians fought their way through the bottleneck, pushed by our men and terrified out of their wits by the screeching of the Lacotians, other Lacotians had been at work rousing the herds of aurochs. Hither and thither they galloped, in and out of the herd, prodding, poking, luring.

A few at a time, the Parthians broke through the pass—to run head-on into a stampeding herd of aurochs.

"*Huka hey!*" the Lacotians shouted in thunderous unison. Then they broke into a babble of war cries and shrill ululations, and charged frantically into the fray. Aquila turned to me and winked; then he too charged.

"*Huka hey!*" I yelled madly, wondering what it meant, as it finally dawned on me that a handful of eccentric savages had rescued the honor of Rome.

CHAPTER IX

IN THE EVENING THE WOMEN DANCED THE SCALPS OF the slain around a roaring fire, and the Lacotians feasted on fresh meat from the humps of aurochs. We Romans were all invited. In the midst of the festivities we had a surprise visitor—Domitian himself.

He came up the hill in a palanquin borne by eight burly slaves. Couches had been set up for the Romans, a little way off from the dancing; Aquila and I were quaffing Samian wine from the same goblet as though we'd known each other for ages. When Domitian stepped off the litter I gaped and dropped my goblet.

"No ceremony, Titus old boy," the emperor said. "I told you, didn't I, that I'd half a mind to come along and observe the spectacle? And you didn't disappoint me. Ah, if only I could recreate this battle on the Campus Martius outside Rome... set up bleachers for the populace, with vending stands for cold drinks and sausages ...how the people would love me! I imagine I could stave off assassination for quite a while with a show like that."

"Caesar—"

"Imagine it! This Sundance they've described to me— could it be done in the arena, do you think?"

"Certainly not," Aquila said. "It is a sacred thing."

"Oh, don't worry, old chap, I'm only joking. That's what I like about savages though—you dare to contradict me, unlike these spineless Romans." I started to say something, but checked myself. "What's this you're eating, barbarian victuals? Let's try some." He stuffed a piece of roast aurochs haunch into his mouth. "You shall have a triumph, Titus! And a new title. And I shall make you a procurator."

"I'm deeply flattered, Caesar," I said, hoping I would not be packed off to some rebellious wasteland

like Judaea.

"Though, frankly, things haven't gone according to plan. I was rather hoping you'd be out of my hair by now."

"Caesar is merciful."

"And as for you, Aquila—"

"O Pater Maximus Candidusque," Aquila said softly, "I have seen the land of my dreams. When I was a young brave I came to this land in a spirit journey. I knew that the old ways were dying in Lacotia, but still I hoped—"

"Very well, old man," said Domitian. "You and your people shall stay here in Cappadocia. I only ask that you defend my herds. Take what you need for sustenance, and cull the best each year for my games, but protect them and see that they multiply."

When Aquila had translated these words to the Lacotians, they cheered the Emperor loud and long. Domitian beamed. He was like a child, really, and liked to do the right thing, when it didn't involve too much work.

"As for you, Titus, what do you want?"

What did I want? I turned it over in my mind. I wanted to retire from fighting. I wanted a comfortable house in the country. Simple things. I didn't think the Emperor would understand, so I said, "I want whatever you want, my lord."

"Yes, yes, old chap. You're rather lucky in a way, you know, being an incompetent idiot and all that. No one of any competence has been permitted to rise in power ever since my father Vespasian became Emperor. Your well-meaning stupidity has served you well...and you're damned lucky besides! After your victories in Dacia you were on the short list for purging, you know... so what do you think of these barbarians, eh? Do you think you could whip them into shape, lead them down the golden path to Roman citizenship, and all that?"

"Well—er—" Frankly, I don't think I ever wanted to set eyes on another Lacotian again.

"How succinct of you. Well, you're leaving for Lacotia right after the triumph—as my new governor."

I looked wildly about me. Was I seeing things, or had Aquila and Domitian just exchanged a sly wink? Mustering all my confidence, I said, my face getting redder by the second, "You can rely on me, Caesar. By next year, these barbarians will bloody well enjoy taking baths and going to spectacles. They'll read Virgil every morning before breakfast, and they'll all wear togas and speak Latin and they'll worship Venus and Mars and Jupiter and Minerva instead of their heathen idols, even if it kills me!"

I turned and saw Aquila guffawing uproariously. Then I took another swig of wine and laughed myself into a stupor.

CHAPTER X

OF THE TRIUMPH, THE CEREMONIES, AND THE orgies I shall say little; there was all the usual sort of thing. Marching through Rome, you know, with the throng cheering and old Nikias whispering in my ear the traditional words, "Remember, thou art mortal..."

Eventually I found it irritating beyond all measure. "Look here, you old fart," I said fondly, "just because I've given you your freedom—"

The crowd roared. My white stallions reared up and whinnied in tune with the braying of bucinæ.

"It happens to be traditional, my Lord," Nikias said. "Remember, thou art mortal...."

"I know, Nikias, I know. And I'm just dying to find out how Domitian means to test my mortality next."

"You soon will, I'm sure. Fact of the matter is, Master Titus, you're better off in Terra Nova; if he should decide to execute you or something of the sort, it'll take *months* for the command even to reach you, and the Empire is far less under His Magnitude's control than he'd like to think."

"Look, Nikias! They're throwing flowers." Blooms of every color and scent were flooding into the chariot now, and the steps of the Temple of Capitoline Jove, at the summit of which I would accept a laurel wreath from Caesar, loomed ahead. Of course, I kept my demeanor stern as befitted a general of my importance—wouldn't want the peasants to laugh at one, you know—but secretly I was actually somewhat elated. By the time I reached the top of the steps, though, my legs were aching terribly, and my expression of languid composure, which I had been practicing all day in front of a polished shield, had petrified into a grimace of anguish.

"Ah, there you are, Titus, old chap!" the Emperor said. I noted that he had no trouble at all with the decadent facial expression that had given me so much grief. But then, he'd been carried up the steps on a litter. "Pleasant view here, eh? Look at the throng... they're here to see *you*, my goodness, you bumbling bulbosity! They're not even paying any attention to *me*. Despite the fact that I happen to be their god, eh, what? I've half a mind to have you executed for casting your perfidious little shadow on my limelight."

"But Caesar,.. wasn't this little spectacle your idea?"

"And I'm already bored silly with it!" He summoned his dome-headed favorite, who had the laurel wreath all ready on a little platter. "Here, I suppose I shall have to give you this now." As I knelt humbly, the Emperor plonked the thing hard on my head, shoving it down my brow askew so that I could not see out of one eye... my eye watered horribly. My head itched. I had to scratch it, but protocol demanded that—

Meanwhile, the Emperor had begun his little speech, each little phrase of which was punctuated by a pompous sennet of brasses, thus:

"I, Titus Flavius Domitianus—"

Tat-ta-rat-at-tat-tat-ta-ra-ta-rah!

"Caesar—"

Tan-ta-ran-tan-tan-tan-ta-rah!

"Augustus—"

Tara-tara-tarah!

"Imperator—"

I was itching all over now. The trumpets shrilled in my ears, making me even redder. What was I to do? I took off the wreath and began scratching furiously—

The music died down to a gurgle.

"Good heavens, man, what's the matter?"

"Caesar, I appear to—" I looked at the wreath. "This laurel wreath appears to be laced with poison ivy, my Lord—"

His Imperial Majesty began to giggle wildly. I realized that once again I was the butt of an Imperial prank. "Ha! Don't you realize, old chap, that if a *single* thing goes wrong with any official ceremony, it must be repeated all the way through from the beginning? Hee! You didn't think I'd let you get out of my clutches lightly, did you, you naughty general? That I'd give you the procuratorship of my newest and vastest province without at least a teeny-weeny little joke? Put the wreath back on at once!"

I obeyed.

"I, Titus Flavius Domitianus—"

"The itching began again, relentless. I gritted my teeth and forced my face back into the expression of elegant composure.

By all the gods! I have seen the walls of cities crumble under the onslaught of our Roman testudos. I have seen battlements battered. I have suffered savage defeats. I have flown for my life over the harsh terrains of Thrace and Caledonia. But never in my life had I known such indignity as on the day of my investiture as Caesar's representative in his most distant realm. It was bad enough that I would lose the comforts of civilization—the baths, the afternoon spectacles in the arena, and so on—to rule over a collection of savages all as eccentric as this Aquila I had encountered. But to begin my reign with an itchy head! I think it can safely be said that no procurator of the Roman Empire ever took office in so ignominious a manner.

Just you wait! I thought bitterly. I'll be revenged on you! I'll outlast the pack of you Flavian Emperors! Then burning pain consumed my scalp. I closed my eyes and thought of wine: snow-chilled Chian wine, a nice capacious wooden vat of it! How I longed to dunk my head in it, to drown my sorrows and my soreness in the oblivion of inebriate excess! Already my pain seemed to take flight.

The End