

**A SWORD OF WRATH, BOOK I:
BLOOD AND DUST**

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Chapter One

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

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

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

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

The young woman, which the soldier knew as Lady Catherine of Tyre, daughter of Lord Heron of Tyre, member of the Emperor's Court, had fled the kingdom of Lycania hastily and was still dressed in the pink silk *stola*, which betrayed her courtly status.

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

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

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

The woman before him continued to struggle in quiet agony, her eyes closed to the world around her. Inside, her body was stretching, tearing as the bones of her pelvis came

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

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

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

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

"Death or life? Which is easier to watch?"

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

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

With his free hand he smoothed Lady Catherine's hair away from her forehead; it was cold and clammy. His eyebrows knit together, "Yes, and even more afterwards."

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

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

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

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

"Wha... what... does that mean?" she asked, breathlessly.

"She's going die if we don't do something."

"Then do something... *woman!*"

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

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

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

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

This baby, Agatha thought, would be no different - except that her life would be harder than most. But, she resigned herself, half of the baby's blood was from her own people and because of that, she would see to it that the child survived. She wiped her hands again on her increasingly stained apron and turned to the soldier, "I need your dagger."

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

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

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

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

She nodded.

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

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

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

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

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

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

Agatha tossed the dagger to the ground, its metal striking the dirt floor with a dull *thump*. She reached into the flesh that she had just cut open and pulled with all her might.

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

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

But the Lady's chest neither rose nor fell anymore and her hand no longer grasped the soldier's. He set her arm gently back down onto the table and looked at the dead Lady's

face. It was free from pain; free from the burdens of the world and to him it was the most beautiful face he'd ever looked upon. He quietly and softly closed her eyes.

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

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

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

"Didn't you do that?"

His expression grew stern, "I see no criminals here."

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

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

"We burn our warriors."

"Won't the fire cause suspicion in your neighbors?"

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

He nodded solemnly, "Alright then, I'll go find some wood."

It didn't take long to gather enough to build a funeral pyre for the Lady Catherine in the clearing near Agatha's home and when the last of the wood was placed upon the pile, the soldier returned to the cottage to collect Catherine. The old woman looked on sadly as he rejoined her, carrying the limp blood and silk covered body in his arms. He then placed it gently upon the pyre.

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

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

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

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

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

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

"No," Agatha shook her head firmly, "she needs no trinkets, nor amulets or other ridiculous things because she must *never* know where she comes from or her life will be full of strife."

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

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

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

"But," the soldier looked upon the sleeping babe, "shouldn't she have a name of some kind?"

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

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

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

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

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

The soldier's eyes fell to the ground while his insides churned from the memory, "Her father died more of a warrior than I could ever be. He fought us all and in the end, it

was only through the treachery of the Decanus that he was killed." He paused, then looked at Agatha, "I only wish I had known then..."

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

* * *

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

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

Historically speaking, the most active threats to Lycania had often come from the tribes *outside* of her borders, which consisted of supposed savages, or 'Bestials' as they were referred to in the elevated social circles of the Empire's elite. Thankfully, their attacks had been greatly reduced amid the last half of the century. For, during his reign, Gaius Quintus, the previous emperor known as the 'Peacebringer,' had forged a relative peace with most of his Bestial neighbors. While not entirely welcomed, there were now several thriving communities of Bestials within Lycania - though most had arrived by either being sold into slavery by rival tribes or, very rarely, hired on as hard laborers by the extremely wealthy; the only exception being the N'bari Moon People, the fearsome gladiatorial fighters who had arrived via the *Pax Lunas* trade agreement.

Odalia, the capital of Lycania and where the White Palace stood, was built with a large rectangular wall made of stunning white limestone that ran around the entire city.

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

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

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

His main desire, a trait he *had* shared with his father, was for power and the insatiable need to show it off and he exercised such displays of power by passing highly restrictive laws whenever the mood took him. Anyone who broke said laws, no matter how absurd they may have been, was found to be a traitor to the Empire and usually executed quickly without trial. After the alleged traitor's death, he would then confiscate their lands and other assets for the Empire, which often times left the lawbreaker's family destitute, forcing them to become beggars on Odalia's streets.

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

claiming that the success of Lycania depended on the purity of the bloodline of its people, as the gods themselves had intended from the beginning.

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

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

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

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

Beside the Emperor stood his legate, Timonus, the general of the Lycanian forces.

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

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

"I sincerely hope your man has not betrayed me."

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

Tiberius eyed him suspiciously, "I should hope not."

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

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

The boy scowled but did as his father requested.

The Emperor then motioned for one of the stewards that was carrying a copper pitcher of steaming hot water wrapped in cloth and asked, "Freshly boiled?"

The servant nodded.

"Good. Keep it that way."

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

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

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

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

Timonus remained silent at Tiberius' words to him but could not stop the thoughts that ran through his mind, shouting at him that the Emperor deserved whatever should happen to him in the future.

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

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

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

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

"Of course, Legate, you are dismissed."

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

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

"Sir, my liege," the man's voice shook, "has there been any word?"

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

"You are very kind, sire, but no, thank you," he bowed his head. "Again, I want to thank you for showing mercy on her. She's young and-"

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

"Anything, sire."

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

"Do you know what that is?"

"I fear my answer will sound as if I'm taking you for a fool."

"No, no," he smiled, "go ahead. You're free to speak as you please."

"It... it's a rock, Your Highness."

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

"Absolutely, my liege."

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

"No, sir, I'm afraid such matters... are rarely on my mind."

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

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

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

"No, sir-"

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

"First, they *boil* them." Tiberius walked behind the writhing, wailing Lord Heron, then bent down and spoke into his ear, "Then, once dried, they *crush* them." He brought the limestone rock down upon the hand of old man that was resting on top of the table, breaking his fingers and bringing forth more howls of pain as he tried to vainly pull his mangled and crushed digits away in disbelief.

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

"Now, *why* do I ask such things?" Tiberius said again in Heron's ear.

"I... I'm afraid I do not know, my lord," he wept with disbelief.

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

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

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

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

"Thera? *Thera?* You really do take me for a fool!" Then, without a moment's hesitation, Tiberius slit Lord Heron's throat. The stunned body of the former lord sat for a moment, sputtering, before falling forward lifelessly onto one of the breakfast plates.

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

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

"Thera is a fairy story, told to the children of the lower classes in order to convince them that they can somehow be better than the worthless rubbish they were born to be." He laughed derisively, "It *was* once a true land of riches but the gods wiped it clean from this world - and I have the sword that proves it! I don't know where this man is from but it is *not* Thera." He took a mouthful of bread and as he chewed, spoke to one of his servants, "Have

the legion round up his family. See what you can get out of them but if they tell you the same, then kill them. In fact, kill them anyway. I have no room for liars and traitors in my court."

* * *

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

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

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

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

"Same as you, Vibius." Tacitus didn't to look up as his gaze remained locked onto the moss-covered statue.

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

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

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

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

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

"We are both Cavalli, Vibius," Tacitus stood again, "therefore we are brothers in the eyes of the gods but," he shook his head, "I should have never allowed her to marry you." He cast a stern but silent glance at the other man, "*That* is my regret." He then began to walk away but before he left the clearing entirely, he stopped and turned, "You were no better at protecting her than I was." His eyes fell on the white stone, "Goodbye, my daughter. Until another year has passed."

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

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

The Desolate Wars had been a pointless endeavor brought about by Lycanian empirical greed. They had claimed that the Cavalli were Lycanians by birth and blood and therefore the Lower Plains, and everything beneath it, rightfully belonged to the Empire. Meanwhile, the Cavalli, who believed they were descended from only *one* of the Two Brothers, disputed their claim. In the end, the Desolate Wars had brought about no true victors and was never officially resolved, though it did mar the once beautiful landscape forever.

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

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

The Unclaimed Desert had come to serve as an unofficial armistice for the Lycanian side, since no man that had attempted to cross it had ever come back alive. The Cavalli, on the other hand, already well versed with living in harmony with their environment, soon learned the secrets of the desert and occasionally ventured as far as the White Palace, either to scout or to pull childish pranks meant to keep the guards on their toes. This didn't happen very often, though, as the Cavalli superstitions made them terrified of the Desert's "bad medicine."

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

It was in that war that Tacitus lost his wife, Valeria, and daughter, Tacita Valeriani, whom they called Valeri. Valeri was only a young girl of sixteen when he'd arranged for her to marry Vibius, an older son of the neighboring Little Fish's village elder, hoping it would bring her a comfortable life and peace between the two peoples. Initially, she was angry with him when he told her of his decision but, being a good and dutiful daughter, she went ahead with the nuptials. Because of the status of her new husband, which, to her relief, kept him busy and away from home, she was frequently allowed to visit her mother back in Two-Crows, which is where she found herself when the village was invaded.

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

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