

L E G I O N

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EXT; ROME: TRAJAN'S COLUMN; DAY

An immense monument is in the progress of completion - wooden scaffolding encircles a carved stone column.

A line of carvers work on bas-relief panels depicting feats of valour on the battlefield. Ranks of legionnaires face pagan hordes.

Title: Rome, AD 107.

Chisels rasp on stone as each image is engraved, each craftsman concentrating avidly.

One sculptor, a hunchbacked ARABIAN, has dramatic diagonal scars across his face. His eyes reveal a kind of mania. He whispers to himself.

A murmur rises from the crowd below - then a hush falls. The crowds part to allow a sedan chair to pass.

At the foot of the column the chair comes to a halt.

From it steps the Emperor TRAJAN, imperious, proud and charismatic.

The tall, angular architect APOLLODORUS and sturdy foreman DIOCLETIUS hurry to meet TRAJAN.

After brief greetings, TRAJAN and company begin their ascent. The carvers kneel, heads bowed.

TRAJAN

(inspecting a carving)

Wonderful. I can see the tendons beneath the skin. Excellent work.

TRAJAN even pats the CARVER on the shoulder.

The emperor reaches the ARABIAN, who is still carving, his fellows ignoring him.

DIOCLETIUS

Kneel in the presence of your emperor!

DIOCLETIUS forces the ARABIAN to his knees.

TRAJAN inspects the ARABIAN's carving. The muscles of his neck tighten with controlled rage.

The panel shows Roman legionnaires running away from fanged creatures in a tangled forest.

TRAJAN turns with a grim expression.

APOLLODORUS and the FOREMAN blanch.

TRAJAN

(quietly, without turning)

Apollodorus. I trust you did not approve this panel?

APOLLODORUS

Certainly not.

(to Foreman)

Diocletius, did you know of this?

DIOCLETIUS

No sir, I...

TRAJAN whispers something to the guard.

GUARD

Sorry, your Excellency?

TRAJAN

(whispering)

Make it an accident.

TRAJAN and his men continue up the column.

TRAJAN

(to Apollodorus)

Have *that* removed immediately. Let none speak of it, on pain of death.

APOLLODORUS bows as TRAJAN's attention falls elsewhere.

The body of the ARABIAN plunges from the column. People scream and run as it thuds to the ground.

EXT; ROMAN ENCAMPMENT; SUNSET

Title: One Year Earlier, Moesian-Dacian border.

An encampment sits at the edge of a large plain bordered on two sides by forest. A crimson sunset illuminates many tents, flags fluttering from the grandest.

INT; TRAJAN'S TENT; SUNSET

TRAJAN is finishing a light meal, served by two SLAVES.

In a gauze-curtained bed to the other side of the tent, a CONCUBINE awaits her Emperor's pleasure.

TITUS, a senior officer, steps into the tent, bowing.

TITUS

Emperor, my men are ready for battle and eager for their orders.

TRAJAN puts down his food, dips his fingers in a bowl of water and wipes them on a cloth.

TITUS is a larger, broader man than his emperor but seems to diminish beside TRAJAN's grandeur.

The emperor stops briefly to look at his CONCUBINE. He turns the woman's head to inspect something at the back of her neck. It is a birthmark about the size of a coin.

TRAJAN

You see this. This is what they send me. *(to a nearby slave)* Have her replaced.

The SLAVE ushers the distressed CONCUBINE out.

TRAJAN and TITUS men walk over to a table upon which lies a map and various instruments and writing slates.

TRAJAN

Decebalus knows the Legion's capabilities. He'll have ambushes laid along the road, hoping to diminish and disorganise us before we reach the city.

TRAJAN's finger traces the route of a Roman road through an immense forest, ending at a city called Saramegethuza.

TITUS

Why don't we take the old trade route the Dacians abandoned?

TRAJAN shakes his head.

TRAJAN

It may also be watched. We need routes through the forest. We must be covert this time.

TITUS

Not my kind of war, skulking like animals among the trees.

TRAJAN

The Dacians hugely outnumber us and are fighting for their homeland.

TITUS smiles, gesturing at the three sections of forest divided by the two possible routes.

TITUS

Let's divide and strike between the roads. Cut at the flesh between the arteries.

TRAJAN claps his friend on the shoulder.

TRAJAN

Very good Titus. An operation like that requires a delicate knife..

TRAJAN throws a handful of nuts onto the map, begins dividing them into groups in the forested regions.

TRAJAN

We'll use three scouting parties to plot the best routes and report back. We have two weeks' preparation and our Gaul and Gallician auxiliaries have yet to reach us.

TRAJAN rolls up the map and ties it with a ribbon.

TRAJAN

Titus, assemble my generals.

TITUS bows smartly and leaves.

TRAJAN tosses a grape into a goblet, where it clangs satisfyingly.

EXT; ENCAMPMENT; EVENING

The troops huddle in groups of ten to twenty around fires, eating from earthenware plates, chatting and joking.

A youngster, TACITUS examines his sword edge by firelight.

TACITUS
It's an honour to be first into enemy
territory.

An older man, LUCIAN, attends to a couple of horses.

LUCIAN
More like a punishment.

TACITUS nudges his portly companion, AUGUSTUS, who is sopping up the dregs of his soup with a piece of bread.

TACITUS
We've been chosen by Titus himself.
Don't that make us special?

Nearby, a medic, SCIPIO practices stitches in two pieces of leather.

SCIPIO
No. Just the most expendable.

AUGUSTUS laughs loudly but his laughter dies when he considers the implications of this

TACITUS
Scouting's a real skill. There's
more to war than hacking off limbs...

AUGUSTUS
If you say so Tacitus.

A hand grasps TACITUS' shoulder. The newcomer, COMMODUS, is in his thirties, battle-weary but jovial.

COMMODUS
If you are looking for a discussion
of military strategy, you are asking
the wrong man. Augustus isn't a
soldier - he's a weapon! We
justroll him downhill and the enemy
leaps out of the way.

AUGUSTUS
Very funny.

AUGUSTUS snatches a chunk of bread from COMMODUS' hand and forces it into his mouth.

COMMODUS yells out and chases AUGUSTUS round the fire.

The men stop abruptly when AUGUSTUS almost slams into a tall, broad-shouldered centurion in his mid-forties.

Once handsome, the centurion's features are clouded by a terrible burden. Still, he carries himself with dignity and command. His name is GAIUS.

From out of the shadows behind GAIUS steps MARCUS, a young man with black hair and a sharp, feral face. His eyes are steely and intensely blue.

GAIUS
This is Marcus. Your new second in
command, my lieutenant.

The men exchange wary glances and raised eyebrows, except TACITUS, who is dutifully attentive.

AUGUSTUS

(to Marcus)

Welcome sir.

(under his breath)

God help you.

MARCUS

I look forward to serving with you.

He bows lightly. The LEGIONNAIRES nod or salute back.

MARCUS surveys his men without betraying any emotion.

COMMODUS whispers something to AUGUSTUS, making him laugh.

GAIUS turns as if about to walk away from the group. Then stops and turns to face them again.

GAIUS

Do you want your orders now, or will you finish your gossiping first?

The men are silent, chastened.

GAIUS

Marcus and I will be taking thirteen men. Claudius, Julius, Antonious, Appianus, Commodus, Lucian...

LUCIAN looks surprised to have been chosen.

GAIUS

...Brutus, Scorpis, Augustus, Appianus, Selurus...

SELURUS is a black freed slave, an auxiliary. His selection provokes surprise from some of the men.

GAIUS

...and young Tacitus, who has proven himself in Gallicia recently...

TACITUS is the only one who appears to relish the task.

GAIUS

...and finally Scipio, our surgeon. We leave at first light, to find a path to the temple of Barbaros. It marks the start of a disused trade route. The Dacians are superstitious about the forest. Won't enter beyond its fringes. Their fear is our advantage. We find the temple, mark the route and return without the Dacians knowing. Is this clear?

There's a general nod and murmur of agreement.

MARCUS looks on with concealed dismay, hearing the plan.

GAIUS

Claudius, come with me. Bring your maps.

CLAUDIUS, a thin-faced scholarly man, nods.

GAIUS

(softly to Marcus)

Get to know the men. They're good sorts. Come and join us after.

(to men)

Rest now and make that cup of wine your last.

GAIUS gestures at AUGUSTUS, who has just been served by SELURUS.

MARCUS bows as GAIUS exits, pursued by CLAUDIUS, dropping rolls of paper as he goes.

INT; GAIUS'S TENT; NIGHT

CLAUDIUS and GAIUS complete their business. CLAUDIUS bows and takes his leave.

By guttering lamplight GAIUS is still poring over the map and densely lettered scrolls.

He rubs his eyes as the map of Saramegethusza blurs.

GAIUS hears footsteps behind him but doesn't stir as the tent flaps open. Someone clears his throat.

Two burly MESSENGERS have entered the tent, behind them, the hair of a third, much shorter person can just be seen.

MESSENGER

Sir, a gift from General Titus.

GAIUS sighs but does not turn round.

GAIUS

Put it down and leave me in peace.

He gestures vaguely behind him, not turning around. The men make to leave.

GAIUS

Oh, and thank Titus for his thoughtfulness.

The men exchange a conniving look and leave. In the silence that remains, there's a small cough.

GAIUS turns, dagger drawn. On a chair sits the CONCUBINE.

GAIUS

What do you know of cartography?

CONCUBINE

(bemused)

Nothing. My name is Portia.

GAIUS

You can stay by the fire for a while - it's a cold night.

He turns back to his work. Summoning courage, PORTIA stands up and warms her hands by the fire.

She then walks over behind GAIUS and gently places her warm hands upon his shoulder blades.

GAIUS closes his eyes briefly and then, opening them, turns and gently takes PORTIA's wrists.

PORTIA

Don't you find me appealing?

PORTIA turns away as if hurt.

GAIUS

I have work...

PORTIA laughs lightly.

PORTIA

A man who can't be tempted is a rare thing. Your wife must be proud.

GAIUS

If she were with us, I doubt she'd agree. A fever took her.

PORTIA

I'm sorry.

GAIUS walks over to the fire and looks into the flames.

GAIUS

Duty kept me from her.

PORTIA

We must all do our duty. I'd better stay the night at least or Titus'll punish me. Besides, it's raining.

GAIUS

Take the bed - I won't sleep tonight.

With a thin smile he takes the map from the bed and spreads it on the floor by the fire.

PORTIA climbs in under the covers. She lies watching GAIUS for a while, then her eyelids droop and she sleeps.

Just for a moment, GAIUS turns to look at the sleeping girl, the shadow of a smile forming on his face.

A different female hand caresses his face.

FEMALE VOICE

She's prettier than I was.

GAIUS

Nonsense.

GAIUS closes his eyes. There's no-one there with him.

EXT; CAMP; DAY

The SCOUTING PARTIES ride out, splitting into three and heading towards a dense thicket of trees.

The sun burns weakly through misty clouds.

GAIUS' party enters the forest fringe.

Between the Roman road and the abandoned trade route lies a wedge of dense forest which reaches the horizon.

INT; THICK FOREST; AFTERNOON

The light is fading.

The horses pick their way alongside the stream through thick undergrowth and stony ground. There are no paths.

The wind makes eerie sounds. Some of the men touch or rub lucky trinkets - a hare's foot or a sprig of herb.

AUGUSTUS is eating something surreptitiously.

COMMODUS

...The pure northern air makes Dacian men huge. One of them's worth two of your African warriors.

He eyes the freed slave SELURUS, who returns a cold stare.

TACITUS

I've heard they're giants, size of oak trees.

APPIANUS

Hearsay and superstition. Their bodies are the same as ours

TACITUS

I've heard that they smoke strange herbs. Give them waking dreams and strengthen them for battle.

SCIPIO snorts.

SCIPIO

If I had a medicine like that I'd make a soldier of even you, Tacitus.

TACITUS

Ha! You'll see what I'm made of.

SELURUS is murmuring in a foreign language, touching a necklace made from human teeth.

COMMODUS

Our dark friend here is more like a Dacian than a Roman. You worship Gods of the dirt, eh Selurus?

SELURUS turns to face his tormentor.

SELURUS

Your know nothing about my gods, old man. But they know you. Your time will come.

Enraged, COMMODUS draws his dagger and spurs his horse towards SELURUS.

- SELURUS draws an axe -

GAIUS turns his horse and rides down the rank.

SELURUS and COMMODUS face one another, weapons drawn.

GAIUS rides between them.

GAIUS

Two miles in and you're squabbling like children. You're both Romans, regardless of how you worship or the skin you worship in. I've fought with this man in five hard campaigns. He's earned his freedom.

GAIUS slaps SELURUS on the shoulder and faces COMMODUS, who seems chastened.

GAIUS

We've twenty miles to cover before nightfall.

AUGUSTUS bends to whisper in COMMODUS' ear.

AUGUSTUS

Narrow escape there. Selurus took those teeth he wears from the mouth of the last man who crossed him.

COMMODUS gulps and allows his horse to slip a little way down the line, further from the still-seething SELURUS.

EXT; FOREST CLEARING; DAY

Twilight as the SCOUTS make camp beside a cliff-face.

LUCIAN and SELURUS tend to the horses. GAIUS, MARCUS and COMMODUS pore over the maps once more. The others raise tents, tend the fire or polish weapons.

CLAUDIUS squints up at the sky.

CLAUDIUS

I thought we'd follow the sun.

The sun can't be seen above the dense treetop foliage.

MARCUS

Sound thinking.

GAIUS

If we had a higher vantage point...

CLAUDIUS is eyeing up the cliff-face, from which a tall tree sprouts.

GAIUS

(to Claudius)

You're our navigator. Navigate.

CLAUDIUS looks apprehensive.

EXT; FOREST CLEARING; DAY

In the dim light, CLAUDIUS clings to the cliff-face whilst the rest of the men shout encouragement from below.

COMMODUS

Afraid of falling, Claudius?

CLAUDIUS inches higher towards the roots of the tree growing from the cliff. He has a rope at his hip.

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CLAUDIUS stretches for the nearest tree-root, stepping onto a thin ledge of rock.

He stumbles, regains his balance and leaps, grabbing the root and dangling from it.

GAIUS

(shouting)

Come on man, the hardest part is behind you.

With a grunt CLAUDIUS pulls himself over the branch.

The ground below is lost in darkness.

Disturbed ravens flap around him with a startling sound, causing him to slip.

This time, a lucky branch snags the neck of his tunic and he hangs suspended.

CLAUDIUS

(muffled prayer)

Oh Zeus, most powerful, most merciful...

With a final struggle, CLAUDIUS pulls himself to safety.

Treetops fill the view, draped with wispy cloud. There is just the hint of a horizontal break in the trees some miles away.

GAIUS

What can you see?

CLAUDIUS

(to himself)

Trees.

(shouting in reply)

Take the rope!

He uncoils the thin cord at his waist and drops the end down to the clearing below.

GAIUS holds the rope to touch the ground. The marks upon it come with numerals.

CLAUDIUS reads the numeral nearest him and begins triangulating the distance to the gap in the trees using a protractor, a plumb-line and a table of sines.

He pauses to savour the final moments of sunset. Then he looks down into near-total darkness.

CLAUDIUS

Gods spare me.

EXT; CLEARING; NIGHT

All but MARCUS sit by the fire, telling bawdy stories, eating and drinking. JULIUS and APPIANUS are playing a board game.

MARCUS is re-packing his equipment. He watches COMMODUS regaling the men with the end of a story.

GAIUS stands a little apart, ever watchful.

COMMODUS
 ...so we piled him into a handcart,
 wheeled him to his wife's door and
 left him there 'til morning.

The men laugh uproariously.

CLAUDIUS
 Many a man has gone to ruin from a
 love of the grape. Pass us that
 wineskin, will you, Scorpus? Give us
 a tune while you're at it.

GAIUS nods to SCORPUS, who does as asked.

COMMODUS
 (to MARCUS)
 Not joining us in a singsong?

MARCUS shakes his head and wanders off.

The men fall silent to listen to SCORPUS' music.

After while the flute is competing with an eerie whistling and the rustle of leaves - a storm is brewing.

Soon a pattering of rain joins the squall of wind and the men retreat further under their garments.

EXT; CLEARING; NIGHT (LATER)

The rain is lashing down heavily. The fire smoulders, extinguished by the water.

The men are making their tents fast with stones and supporting branches sharpened into staves.

- The storm swells -

Rain pounds down through a swirl of windblown foliage.

GAIUS and two others struggle with a tent that has torn free. Shields and cooking pots are blown clanging across the clearing like leaves.

Miserable, the men cower under dripping fabric.

Horses snort and stamp, shaking off swathes of moisture as LUCIAN struggles to throw weighted blankets over them.

INT; TENT; NIGHT

The SCOUTS shiver in the darkness, a lone lantern flickering. Breath coils in the confined space.

SELURUS
 This does not augur well. Mark this,
 friends, we're being warned.

COMMODUS

Shhh... Listen.

The men listen. For a moment the dark swirl of rain and wind resembles howling. Fear clouds the men's faces.

GAIUS' face appears in the opening of the tent.

GAIUS

We're vulnerable in this storm.
Someone must stand watch until the
storm passes.

No one is keen.

SELURUS

There's something evil about.

APPIANUS snorts. GAIUS nods to him.

GAIUS

You go. Julius, help Lucian with the
horses. They're frightened and cold.

APPIANUS does not look pleased, but trudges out.

JULIUS and SELURUS grimly follow GAIS into the night.

EXT; CLEARING; NIGHT

APPIANUS huddles under an overhang of rock by the cliffside, swathed in thick cloth, save his eyes.

By the horses, LUCIAN and JULIUS struggle to sleep under a shallow bivouac strung between trees.

The animals shiver under a huge oak and their blankets.

INT; GAIUS'S TENT; NIGHT

GAIUS tosses and turns in his sleep.

He's sleeping curled behind a pretty blonde WOMAN.

GAIUS, half-asleep, reaches a hand over her pregnant stomach.

- A horse neighs in terror outside -

GAIUS eyes flicker awake. His hand is resting on the taut curved surface of a water-skin.

EXT; CLEARING; NIGHT

APPIANUS sees the horses rearing and snorting.

As he pushes out into the lashing rain, one of the horses slips from its tether and gallops off through the trees.

JULIUS and LUCIAN struggle to control the other steeds.

APPIANUS races over to help the others.

EXT; CLEARING; EARLY MORNING

The storm has blown itself out. Weak blue light filters through the treetops.

There is no birdsong.

GAIUS is the only one awake. He rounds the rock where APPIANUS huddled.

GAIUS
Appianus! Did you hear...?

But Appianus is not there.

GAIUS notices that three of the horses are missing. LUCIAN and JULIUS have also vanished.

GAIUS runs over to find trampled earth and shivering animals. The sun is rising.

GAIUS runs to the nearest tent.

GAIUS
Get up! Now, all of you!

He runs to the second tent. MARCUS emerges followed by the others.

MARCUS
Appianus has deserted?

GAIUS
Not if I know him.

SELURUS is over with the horses. GAIUS is tracing the missing horses' tracks.

MARCUS
This is desertion. Three men missing, three horses...

GAIUS finds a frayed end of rope.

GAIUS
They were terrified... but not by the storm. Let's follow the tracks.

The men mount the remaining horses.

EXT; ROCKY HOLLOW; DAY

Horses trot cautiously through the forest.

After a while, AUGUSTUS pulls his horse up short. He jumps from his mount and stoops. The others ride over.

AUGUSTUS lifts a necklace soaked with fresh blood.

- A shriek rings out -

ANTONIUS stares at something at the far end of the gully. He is petrified. The others ride on, GAIUS ahead of them.

GAIUS
What is it?

ANTONIUS turns to face the others. He cannot speak.

Behind him swing two corpses, heads down, suspended from the trees on blood-caked ropes - LUCIAN and JULIUS.

SCIPIO examines the bodies, which are mutilated, their eyes missing, necks and stomachs torn fully open.

SCIPIO prods the ropes that the men are hanging from.

SCIPIO

Intestines...

There is surprisingly little blood.

GAIUS

Scipio. What do you make of this?

SCIPIO

I know a bit about Dacian habits of killing. This is unusual. The blood has been drained for - ah - ritual purposes.

AUGUSTUS visibly winces.

AUGUSTUS

Men couldn't have done this. Perhaps bears...

The others look scathingly at AUGUSTUS.

GAIUS

Maybe Appianus survived..

SELURUS

He may have the horses.

Stiffly, silently, the men spur their horses and follow further hoofprints out of the far end of the gully.

COMMODUS breaks the silence.

COMMODUS

(looking behind him towards AUGUSTUS)
I never took Appianus for a traitor
but perhaps Marcus..

AUGUSTUS taps COMMODUS on the shoulder. COMMODUS turns.

APPIANUS stands atop a small rise, leaning into a staff made from a tree branch.

His left foot has been torn off below the knee.

He is grinning insanely, blood running from his mouth and his body covered in long jagged wounds.

EXT; CLIFFSIDE; DAY

SCIPIO tends a delirious and feverish APPIANUS, who lies sheltered under the cliff-side.

GAIUS walks over.

GAIUS

How is he?

SCIPIO moves aside a blanket so GAIUS can see. Splints are tied to APPIANUS' leg, replacing the missing foot.

SCIPIO
He may be able to walk on this.

GAIUS
Can he ride?

SCIPIO
We'll have to tie him to the horse.
We can't leave him here.

GAIUS nods.

GAIUS
Make him ready. Selurus will help.
GAIUS is about to walk away when SCIPIO stops him.

SCIPIO
He's been speaking.
GAIUS is surprised. He looks at APPIANUS, whose lips now move silently.

SCIPIO
He said "They want blood."

EXT; WOOD; DAY

The SCOUTS ride on through tall pine trees. Ravens watch their progress from high branches.

MARCUS rides alongside GAIUS.

MARCUS
We should return to the legions and describe what we've seen.

GAIUS
We've seen nothing. Learnt nothing.

MARCUS
Including their numbers. What if there are hundreds...?

GAIUS interrupts impatiently.

GAIUS
A scout who brings back half-truths and suppositions isn't worthy of the name. We're not here to engage but to observe in secret.

MARCUS
And who's observing *us* in secret?
Who has the advantage?

GAIUS
We have other advantages. We'll press on.

MARCUS
Until we're all slaughtered in our sleep?

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GAIUS

Until they reveal themselves. And
you had best remember your place,
soldier.

GAIUS' eyes remain fixed on the trees all around.

MARCUS drops back down the line and rolls his eyes at
AUGUSTUS, who shrugs philosophically back.

EXT; WOOD; NIGHT

The SCOUTS cross a clearing and a black cloud of bats
appears, screeching and flapping up into the air.

COMMODUS' horse bucks and kicks and he struggles to soothe
it. The bats circle and then vanish into the treetops.

COMMODUS

Filthy things. Ignore them, lass.

He pats his steed, which quietens.

APPIANUS' body rocks along on a makeshift bier on the back
of his horse. He cackles and mumbles feverishly.

EXT; CHASM'S EDGE; DAY

The forest thins in front of a chasm forty feet wide and
hundreds deep. It stretches miles in either direction.

The SCOUTS stand in awe of the huge drop and the river
gliding darkly below.

Stretched from cliff to cliff is an ancient rope bridge
entangled by creepers. Many of the logs are missing.

A few birds perch on the gently swaying ropes.

AUGUSTUS

If my horse had Pegasus' wings he
wouldn't cross this.

MARCUS

A frightened rider blames his steed.

AUGUSTUS throws an angry glance at MARCUS.

AUGUSTUS

You want to go first?

MARCUS

I'm not afraid.

MARCUS spurs his horse towards the precipice. Nearing the
edge, the animal snorts in fear and rears up.

GAIUS rides up alongside MARCUS' horse and walks it back
from the bridge, calming it.

GAIUS

Let's think this through.

TACITUS

I wish Lucian was here.

SELURUS

The animals won't cross if they can see the drop.

GAIUS smiles, having an idea.

GAIUS

Then don't let them see it.

A little later, GAIUS is walking his horse in a tight circle, the animal blindfolded.

When the animal is disorientated, GAIUS turns to his men.

GAIUS

We cross one by one.

GAIUS leads the horse towards the bridge, making comforting sounds.

The horse steps onto the bridge, hesitating as the wood sways in response.

GAIUS encourages the animal forward.

- Logs creak as ropes rub against the cliff-face -
- Vegetation breaks free and falls towards the stream -

GAIUS reaches the far side and waves to the next man.

SCIPIO crosses with APPIANUS tied to his horse. APPIANUS drools on the horse's flank.

Unseen, one of the ropes on the near cliff is rubbing against the rock, fraying dangerously -

Nevertheless, SCIPIO and APPIANUS make it across.

Those on the far side watch keenly as SELURUS nudges his horse over the lowest point of the bridge.

- Ropes creak and fray -

TACITUS, the last to cross, turns his horse, keeping one eye on SELURUS' progress.

- A breeze lifts the hood on SELURUS' horse's head -

The animal spies the chasm beneath it. Fear takes effect and the horse snorts and backs away.

SELURUS

This way, this way.

SELURUS struggles to control his horse, whose hooves pound the ancient logs.

- A log cracks and gives way -
- The horse tears out of SELURUS' grip -

The animal leaps forward as more logs follow, tumbling into the void. A ten-foot gap has appeared.

SELURUS watches his horse gallop to the other side, stopped by GAIUS and AUGUSTUS.

SELURUS stands on the swaying bridge. Fearful, using only the ropes, he crosses the gap.

- Ravens caw and flutter from their perches -
 SELURUS sighs in relief as he reaches the other side.
 TACITUS is alone at the edge of the cliff.

GAIUS

(shouting)

Leave the horse! The gap's too big.
 He can't leap it blindfold and won't
 cross without.

TACITUS can't bear to leave the animal but begins to
 unload luggage from its back.

Decisively, he stops and replaces the panniers on the
 horse's back, strokes the animal's flank and mounts it.

TACITUS nervously fingers a silver chain around his neck.

He whispers in his horse's ear. He spurs it onward,
 steering it cleverly onto the first few logs.

The men watch in disbelief.

- The rope frays further against the rock -
 - TACITUS' urges the horse into a trot -

AUGUSTUS

The boy is either brave or insane.

- Two inches of rope remain -

TACITUS crosses the halfway point then spurs the horse
 into a canter and finally a gallop.

- The gap approaches -

- The fraying rope is as thin as a finger now -

TACITUS roars, tears the hood from the animal's head,
 allowing it to see the gap ahead, the void on either side.

The horse, having no time to react, leaps the gap.

- The SCOUTS' hearts are in their mouths -

The horse crashes to earth, sending a ripple out along the
 bridge, which snaps one rope completely.

As TACITUS and horse scramble onto the clifftop, one side
 of the bridge topples sideways.

- vegetation, logs and ravens are hurled into the void -

The men collectively exhale, cheering and clapping their
 compatriot. GAIUS slaps TACITUS' shoulder.

GAIUS

Do anything like that again and I'll
 toss you over the edge myself.

The men look at what's left of the bridge. One rope
 remains.

GAIUS

I suppose we're walking back across...

- The last rope gives way -

The bridge crashes down out of site, destroying itself.

GAIUS (CONT.)

...or not.

Following GAIUS' lead the men mount their horses and ride into the trees after him.

EXT; CLEARING; DAY

The SCOUTING PARTY break into an unexpected clearing.

The trees have been sawn or toppled to create a circular space. A ring of blackened charcoal fills it. In the centre is a grisly monument.

The SCOUTS stop stock-still in the clearing, looking at a pile of helmets, armour and torn-off body parts.

Feet... Hands... Leavings.

MARCUS

Gods save us. This is...

GAIUS dismounts and walks into the clearing's centre.

GAIUS

One of the other scouting parties.

TACITUS rides over and, lifts a helmet on the end of his sword. Inside are fragments of hair and scalp.

He drops it in disgust.

GAIUS lifts a Roman standard - an eagle above a decorative crest.

TACITUS

Artemius of Gaul.

GAIUS

Our enemy is close.

SCIPIO

(touching the ashes)

Still warm. A day or two old at most.

GAIUS takes a sword from the centre of the pile. On it are skewered several human ears.

AUGUSTUS roars in frustration and slashes at a tree branch with his sword.

GAIUS scrapes the sword clean and slides it into his pack.

EXT; WOODED HILLTOP; NIGHT

The encampment is quiet, GAIUS himself keeping watch.

A cloud of bats swoops and squeals overhead.

EXT; WOODED HILLTOP; DAY

The men stand around the bodies of two horses, flies feasting in swarms.

SCIPIO bends to examine puncture marks in the side of one animal. Blood crusts each wound.

SCIPIO

Bats. They drink blood.

There are similar marks on the other exhausted horses.

TACITUS appears with water-skins for the animals.

GAIUS

We guard the horses too. Tacitus, mix some feed. How much rest will they need?

SCIPIO

Two days, maybe more. They've lost a lot of blood.

GAIUS

We can't wait that long.

SCIPIO

(irritated)

We won't get far on dead horses.

MARCUS and AUGUSTUS exchange a look.

EXT; WOODED HILLTOP; DAY

The men are engaged, without much energy or hope, in mundane tasks.

SELURUS plucks wood pigeons feathers and passes them to AUGUSTUS who guts and beheads them.

AUGUSTUS

Never seen so little game in a forest. If I have to eat another scrawny bird..

CLAUDIUS and GAIUS again pore over maps.

MARCUS and BRUTUS are hunting with bows. AUGUSTUS darns a hole in a shirt.

SCORPUS plays his flute, but the tune is strange and melancholy. A look from GAIUS silences him.

TACITUS is reading a little way off from the others. He looks up at the pale light filtering through the treetops.

An agonised cry breaks the air.

TACITUS turns to see APPIANUS attempting to sit upright.

COMMODUS mutters soothing words and tries to make APPIANUS lie back down as SCIPIO changes the dressing on his foot.

MARCUS and BRUTUS enter the camp with a few more birds and squirrel their only catch. MARCUS stops by APPIANUS.

MARCUS

We should put him out of his torment.

He touches the dagger at his side.

COMMODUS

He's fighting a battle we can't
imagine. We should give him a chance
to win it.

GAIUS walks over to the group.

GAIUS

How is he?

SCIPIO

I doubt he'll last the night. There
is no infection but his temperature
rises and his madness grows.

GAIUS touches APPIANUS brow and the sick man seems to
recognise something in his leader's eyes.

APPIANUS

Blood will flow.

His eyes roll over into delirium.

INT; GAIUS' TENT; NIGHT

GAIUS is examining his maps. He is about to blow out his
lamp when he sees a shadow loitering outside the tent.

GAIUS

Who's there?

MARCUS enters.

MARCUS

The battle is being fought elsewhere
while we hide in the woods.

GAIUS

A chasm now lies between us and the
Legions. We'll find the temple and
then plot a new course back.

The younger man shrugs.

MARCUS

If we ride due east to our road we
might find the Roman road and ride
back in a couple of days...

GAIUS

And give away our position to the
Dacians.

MARCUS

The Dacians *know* we are here. Who
else has been attacking us?

GAIUS

Enemies of Rome. That's all I need
to know.

GAIUS makes to blow out the lantern. MARCUS is slow to
pick up the cue but then nods stiffly and leaves.

EXT; OUTSIDE GAIUS' TENT; NIGHT

Lighting two lanterns from the embers of the campfire, COMMODUS sees MARCUS leave GAIUS' tent and tear at a branch in front of his face in frustration.

EXT; WOODED HILLTOP; NIGHT

COMMODUS joins BRUTUS to walk the perimeter of the camp. He passes BRUTUS a lantern. Nothing stirs.

COMMODUS
Gaius will kill the boy before he
lets a rebellion breed.

They pass the tents in which the men are sleeping and pass by quietly towards the horses.

BRUTUS
Why do you say rebellion? To even
think it is treason.

The men round the corner of the cliff-side and reach APPIANUS' bivouac. He is not there.

BRUTUS
He was at death's door.

COMMODUS
Then Death was not at home. Look.
COMMODUS crouches, finding droplets of blood.
They spot a bloody partial handprint stains a tree trunk.

COMMODUS
Come on, he can't be far.

ANTONIUS joins them.

ANTONIUS
I can't sleep.

ANTONIUS sees his fellow scouts' expressions.

COMMODUS
Good. We need another pair of eyes.
They head off, following the blood trail.

EXT; DENSE FOREST; NIGHT

COMMODUS, ANTONIUS and BRUTUS quickly lose the trail. They split up.

BRUTUS scans the ground, looking for broken foliage.

ANTONIUS listens to the sound of the wind in the leaves.

COMMODUS lifts his lantern high and swings it round. He finds APPIANUS perched in the middle branches of a tree.

COMMODUS
Appianus! How'd you get up there?

APPIANUS grins maniacally. There is a faraway look in his eyes and he seems to be scanning the forest around him.

Instinctively, COMMODUS turns to see where he is looking. When he turns back, APPIANUS is sobbing uncontrollably.

COMMODUS

Let's get you down.

COMMODUS walks over and beckons with open arms.

APPIANUS changes his position, possessed by something.

- He snarls and leaps from the tree onto COMMODUS -

APPIANUS' teeth rip deep into COMMODUS' neck, tearing out the sinews and jugular.

- Blood spurts, black in the moonlight -

BRUTUS hears gurgling screams and races through the trees. He sees APPIANUS kneeling at the body of his victim.

BRUTUS draws his sword and stabs APPIANUS twice in the chest and shoulder.

- ANTONIUS runs through the trees -

APPIANUS flings BRUTUS off. BRUTUS' head connects with a tree and he staggers to the ground half-dazed.

- ANTONIUS charges from the trees into the fray -

- APPIANUS spins and ducks, severing ANTONIUS' Achilles tendons -

- ANTONIUS drops, squirming in agony -

APPIANUS grabs BRUTUS from behind, digs two fingers of one hand into the bigger man's eyes.

He is about to open his throat with a knife. But then APPIANUS seems to pause, sniffs the air and cower.

ANTONIUS looks panic-stricken as shadows fall across him.

They are surrounded by unnaturally tall beings wearing charcoal-black, ragged cloaks. They stand as featureless in the dim light as SHADOWS.

The SHADOWS' faces are concealed beneath heavy cowls. What flesh can be glimpsed is blackened and burnt.

The SHADOWS' hands beckon hungrily as they move in.

APPIANUS releases BRUTUS and backs away. Half blind, BRUTUS staggers off in agony, colliding with a tall, thin figure in a black cloak: The SHADOWS' LEADER.

The LEADER flexes his claws inches from BRUTUS' face, almost caressing him.

- BRUTUS backs away -

- ANTONIUS crawls towards his sword -

APPIANUS stomps down on his back, breaking his spine.

The SHADOW LEADER draws a thin blue blade and attacks BRUTUS. BRUTUS fights bravely but his blows and swipes connect with nothing.

- BRUTUS stabs a tree trunk, cannot free his blade -

- The LEADER'S sword stabs BRUTUS through the neck -

As BRUTUS falls, the rest of the SHADOWS, signalled by their leader, move in to feast.

At first nervous, APPIANUS licks his lips and creeps like a frightened dog to sup with his new brothers.

ANTONIUS can only watch in agony, knowing he is next.

EXT; DENSE FOREST; DAY

The sun rises on two pale corpses.

Blurred figures approach, running up to where the bodies lie and stopping short.

The SCOUTS gather round the bodies of the two men. SCIPIO and GAIUS are the only ones who dare crouch down.

SCIPIO

Drained of blood like the others.

AUGUSTUS

Oh Commodus, what is this?
Witchcraft? And where's Antonius?

MARCUS

It's the same as before. A blood sacrifice has been taken. They're saving him for something. Appianus is behind this.

GAIUS

You jump to conclusions...

MARCUS

We should have finished him when we had the chance.

AUGUSTUS

He must be possessed.

MARCUS

This is the Dacians' doing. Appianus is one of them now. Else they would have killed him here.

GAIUS rounds on MARCUS.

GAIUS

Speculation. We know nothing yet.

SELURUS

They'll torture him. They'll discover our mission.

GAIUS

If our attackers were Dacians, why didn't they kill us in our sleep? They had the advantage.

There is a fearful, thoughtful silence.

MARCUS

They're playing games with us. This is a battle we can't win. We need the Legions.

GAIUS ignores this provocation.

GAIUS
We'll find Antonius.

He closes the open eyes of COMMODUS.

The others look on, unable to speak, eyes brimful of vengeful anger.

EXT; FORESTED SLOPE; DAY

The SCOUTS ride in silence. The going is difficult as the forest grows thicker, the light dimmer.

GAIUS finds a piece of torn cloth on a tree branch. The men turn to follow him, MARCUS at their head.

Eventually, the ground is too heavily wooded with thin and the horses can't get through.

GAIUS
Augustus, Scipio. Stay with the horses.

The men begin to tie the animals up.

Seeing the sun low above the horizon, GAIUS tucks an unlit torch from a saddlebag into his waistband.

EXT; GULLY WITH STREAM; DAY

The stream deepens into a rocky gully. The SCOUTS stop.

GAIUS
I don't like this. We could be ambushed. Not this way.

He turns his horse and is about to lead them away.

- Something drops into the gully behind him -

A body swings from a rope, moving feebly. Still alive but dripping blood.

It is ANTONIOUS. GAIUS raises a hand.

GAIUS
It's a trap.

MARCUS
He's still alive. We can cut him down.

GAIUS
Leave him.

MARCUS hesitates. Then draws his sword and wades upstream.

GAIUS
Marcus!

GAIUS follows, and the other men draw their swords and advance too. SELURUS has his bow in hand.

Rocky cliffs enclose the men on two sides, the noise of the stream blanketing out all other sounds.

GAIUS

Stay close. Keep an eye behind us.

TACITUS turns and sees a chilling sight.

- Three shadows, in the gloom -

TACITUS turns back to look ahead.

- Another five SHADOWS with their LEADER -

With the gully walls on both sides the scouts are surrounded.

THE SHADOW LEADER approaches ANTONIUS' squirming body. He draws a thin, steely blue blade and drags it sharply down ANTONIUS from bowel to sternum.

- The victim's guts spill out into the river -

The LEGIONNAIRES roar for vengeance, running into battle.

SHADOWS close in, keeping to the shaded side of the gully.

- SELURUS fires an arrow into a SHADOW's chest -

The SHADOW falls but gets up and keeps coming. A second arrow has even less effect.

The creatures pause twenty yards from the LEGIONNAIRES. Their LEADER turns to look behind him and up at the cliff.

GAIUS

Come on then. Why won't you fight?
Are we too much for you?

The sun is setting. Moments later the whole of the rocky gully falls into shadow.

The SHADOW LEADER raises his head, the cowl falls away and a brutally burnt, blackened and aged visage is revealed.

The LEADER's skull is devoid of hair but capped with two inch-high grooved and pitted horns. He howls in rage.

- The SHADOWS attack -

TACITUS and CLAUDIUS tackle the three behind them. The others fight those upsteam.

- SCORPUS takes a stab to his side -

CLAUDIUS gets caught between two SHADOWS. One rips his shield off him as the other slashes his sword arm.

- CLAUDIUS takes a fatal wound to the chest -

GAIUS sees this and attacks His own SHADOWS with vigour.

MARCUS topples a SHADOW and stabs him repeatedly. The creature staggers back up and attacks again.

- MARCUS lops off its sword arm -

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Another SHADOW slashes at MARCUS whilst the armless SHADOW takes up its blade in the remaining hand.

GAIUS makes a run at the LEADER. TACITUS and SELURUS take on two SHADOWS on either side.

GAIUS backs through a beam of evening sunlight.

- The SHADOW he is fighting stops still -

It is unable to pass through the light. GAIUS sees sunlight breaking through a fissure in the rock.

GAIUS lights his torch.

- He runs towards the SHADOW and it recoils -

- GAIUS' SHADOW's robe ignites -

The flaming body falls into the arms of another SHADOW, which screeches and attacks its dying brother.

MARCUS is wounded. Beside him, SCORPUS misjudges a step and trips at the foot of his attacker.

- The SHADOW spins SCORPUS round -

SCORPUS attacker is APPIANUS. SCORPUS hesitates a little too long.

- APPIANUS grins and cleaves SCORPUS' head off -

TACITUS is isolated from the others by one huge SHADOW.

MARCUS is held back against a tree, fighting with a wounded wrist.

- A SHADOW slices MARCUS' sword from his grip -

- MARCUS grabs a dead tree branch nearby -

- He stabs it through his attacker's throat -

The creature wails and shrinks back, in agony. It chars and dries as if fossilised.

MARCUS kicks the corpse and it falls into dusty fragments.

Seeing this, the SHADOW LEADER emits a terrifying wail as GAIUS engages him singly.

EXT; HORSES; NIGHT

The SHADOW LEADER's cry reaches AUGUSTUS and SCIPIO, who are watering their horses.

They tear off towards the direction of the sound. They are carrying flaming torches.

EXT; GULLY WITH STREAM; NIGHT

Six remaining SHADOWS circle the three LEGIONNAIRES, who are losing ground.

GAIUS swings his torch, keeping the SHADOWS at bay. But he can't do this in all directions at once.

GAIUS glances up to see AUGUSTUS and SCIPIO picking their way down the cliff face.

GAIUS

Use your torches! They're frightened
of fire.

SCIPIO leaps from the rock and slides down the rope from
which ANTONIUS' body hangs.

- AUGUSTUS hurls him a lit torch -

SCIPIO catches it and leaps onto the shoulders of one of
the SHADOWS, swinging his torch into the creature's face.

TACITUS is weakening.

- His SHADOW grabs TACITUS' blade in one hand -

- Black blood flows along the blade -

The SHADOW does not let go. Grinning evilly it uses
TACITUS' blade as a handle, clubbing him with the pommel.

- TACITUS falls into the water, scrambles to get up -

He turns. The SHADOW is now armed with two blades.

- TACITUS turns and flees into the deep forest -

- The SHADOW pursues him -

AUGUSTUS looks at the rope, ten feet away, murmurs a
prayer to the gods and leaps.

Clumsily he slides down its length, plunging into the gory
body of ANTONIUS and falling into the river.

- AUGUSTUS evades a lethal blow from a SHADOW's blade -

- SCIPIO throws him back his torch -

GAIUS still fights the SHADOW LEADER as the other SHADOWS
begin to shrink away.

- Another catches fire, plunging into a pool downstream -

The SHADOW LEADER gives a warning shriek. He stops
fighting GAIUS and walks away. Two of SELURUS' arrows
pierce his back, to no effect.

The other SHADOWS fall back to follow their LEADER.

MARCUS, nursing his torn wrist, is about to run after them
when GAIUS stops him.

GAIUS

Let them go. We'll regroup and hunt
them down on horseback.

He looks around at his exhausted men. Six remain.

GAIUS

Tacitus?

SELURUS

I did not see him. Scopus is dead.

MARCUS

Claudius too.

AUGUSTUS

Perhaps the creatures took Tacitus.

GAIUS

I don't think so.

SELURUS runs to the opposite bank. There are footprints leading into the deep forest interior.

SELURUS

He ran.

The men follow the trail.

EXT; DEEP FOREST; NIGHT

TACITUS runs for his life, without sword, through darkness only broken by the odd glimmer of moonlight.

- Tree branches tear at his face and trip his feet -
- His enemy crashes through the foliage behind him -
- TACITUS stumbles over a log, manages to continue -
- The SHADOW swings twin blades at his heels -

It is very near, salivating. TACITUS skids to a halt. He almost plunges off the lip of a cliff.

TACITUS is at the edge of a wedge-like outcrop. There is nowhere to go but down.

The SHADOW emerges into the moonlight, swords raised, taking its time.

TACITUS takes out the charm he's been hiding from his compatriots all along. He rubs the tiny silver cross and murmurs.

- Silver glints in the moonlight -

TACITUS closes his eyes.

TACITUS

Lord Jesu, make my death merciful and quick.

The creature stops stock still.

TACITUS opens his eyes to see the creature quailing from the reflections the cross throws as he moves it.

TACITUS raises the cross high.

TACITUS

Bow down before the power of God.

Feeling braver, TACITUS walks towards the SHADOW and away from the cliff. The creature backs away.

The SHADOW falls backwards, hits the ground. TACITUS stamps down across its neck and brings the cross down low.

The SHADOW screams horribly but is powerless.

Led by GAIUS, the other SCOUTS appear. They freeze at the sight of TACITUS subjugating the creature.

TACITUS dares a shrug of modest pride.

SELERUS rushes forward with sword drawn. GAIUS stops him.

GAIUS

Ride to the camp, bring ropes and
torches. We'll take it alive.