

Empire of Dragons

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Extract

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THE RAYS OF THE DAWNING SUN bathed the peaks of the Taurus mountains. The snowy pinnacles took on a rosy hue and glittered like gems over the shadowy valley. The mantle of light spread slowly over the ridges and slopes of the great mountain chain, awakening the forests from their slumber.

The stars paled.

The falcon was first to soar up to hail the sun, and his shrill cry echoed amid the rocky cliffs and crags, and down the steep sides of the ravine through which the foaming Korsotes flowed, swollen by the melting snows.

Shapur I of Persia, the King of Kings, of Persians and non-Persians, the lord of the four corners of the earth, was startled by that cry and raised his eyes to behold the wheeling flight of the prince of heights, then turned to the splendidly outfitted Arab thoroughbred his squire had just brought to him. A servant knelt so the king could plant a foot on his bended knee and vault into the saddle. Two more servants held out Shapur's bow and golden-sheathed scimitar, and a standard-bearer took position at his side with the royal ensign: a long flag of red silk bearing the image of Ahura Mazda in gold.

His officers awaited him at the centre of the camp, armed to the hilt, astride horses mantled with precious caparisons, their breasts protected by steel plates. Ardavasd, the supreme commander, greeted him with a deep bow, as did all the others. At a gesture from the king, he touched his horse's belly with his heels and set off. All the other officers fanned out to the right and left of Shapur and together they began to descend the hill.

The sun's light had poured into the valley and touched upon the towers of Edessa, perched high on the barren upland, swept by the winds of the desert.

THE LONG, persistent crowing of a cock greeted the rising sun.

In the courtyard of his house, Marcus Metellus Aquila, legate of the Second Augusta Legion, was already dressed and wearing his armour.

A native of southern Italy, Metellus's bones and muscles had been toughened by long service on all the frontiers of the empire. Years of shouting out orders on the battlefield had made his voice deep and husky and blunted his manner of speaking. His high cheekbones, strong jaw and straight nose gave away his aristocratic lineage, but the simple, unrefined cut of his hair and beard, never completely tamed by a razor, revealed the austerity of a soldier inured to toil and trouble. The amber colour of his eyes and the rapacious intensity of his expression on the eve of a battle made him known to all the divisions south of the Taurus simply as 'Commander Aquila', evoking the proud eagle that his surname signified.

He was just hooking his *gladius* to his belt: obsolete as a weapon, but a legacy from his ancestors that he refused to hang on the wall and replace with a regulation sword. He even kept another hooked to the saddle of his horse, and was famous for saying that with the two of them, he could take out the longest blade.

'A cock's crow in a besieged city is a good sign,' he mused as an attendant fitted the red cloak which denoted his rank around his shoulders. 'If he's survived the hunger we've suffered around here, we'll survive as well.' Metellus approached the shrine of his *lares* and left an offering to the shades of his ancestors, a little one, but even more precious in a period of such penury – a handful of spelt flour – then he prepared to leave.

His wife's voice stopped him: 'Marcus.'

'Clelia. What are you doing up so early?'

'You were going to leave without saying goodbye?'

'I didn't want to wake you. You had such a restless night.'

'I'm worried. Is it true that the emperor wants to meet with the Persian?'

Marcus Metellus broke into a smile. 'It's incredible how women always seem to know the news we try to keep most secret.'

Clelia had to smile as well. 'The emperor has a wife, who has ladies-in-waiting, who have friends . . .'

'Right.'

'Well?'

'I'm afraid so.'

'He'll go, then?'

'It's very probable.'

'But why?'

'He says that peace is well worth risking his life for.'

'What about you? Can't you do anything to dissuade him?'

'I'll speak up if he asks for my opinion, and in that case I'll try to make him change his mind. But once he's decided, my place is at his side.'

Clelia bowed her head.

'Maybe he's just hoping to gain time. Gallienus is in Antioch. In a few days of forced marches he could be here with four legions and lift the siege.' He lifted her chin and saw that her eyes were full of tears. 'Clelia . . . crying as you say goodbye to your husband brings bad luck, you know.'

Clelia tried to dry her eyes. At that very instant they heard the patter of little feet rushing down the stairs and a voice call out, 'Father! Father!'

'Titus! What are you doing here? Go right back to bed!'

'You promised that you'd take me with you to the *palaestra* today.'

Metellus knelt and looked his little boy in the eye. 'The emperor has called me. He's the father of us all, my son, and when he calls we must run to his side. Go back to bed now and try to sleep.'

The child's expression was suddenly serious. 'You'll go away with the emperor and leave me alone.'

Metellus frowned. 'What are you saying? I'll be back, you can be sure of it. I promise I'll be back before nightfall. And you know that a Roman always keeps his word.' He gave his tearful wife a kiss and left the house.

Outside in the street, waiting on either side of the door, were his two adjutants, centurions Aelius Quadratus and Sergius Balbus. The first was Italian, from Privernum. The second Spanish, from Saragoza. Both of their faces were scored by time and the many battles fought in every corner of the empire: rocky faces with thick eyebrows and bristly beards. Quadratus wore his hair very short and was balding at the temples; he was tall and heavily built. Balbus was shorter and darker-skinned, but his eyes were blue and his crushed nose gave away his passion for boxing.

Metellus put on his helmet, tied the laces under his chin, gave them a look and said, 'Let's go.'

They walked down the silent, still-deserted streets of the city with a steady step, each absorbed in his own thoughts, each with a heavy heart.

The cock's crow resounded again and sunlight flooded the street, making the basalt slabs sparkle and lengthening the men's shadows all the way back to the walls of the houses behind them.

At a crossroads they met another small group of officers, who had obviously been summoned by the emperor as well.

Metellus recognized his colleague: '*Salve*, Lucius Domitius.'

'*Salve*, Marcus Metellus,' he was greeted in return.

They continued together to the forum and then walked across to command headquarters. From there they could see the sentry walk up on the battlements. It was time for the changing of the guard: cadenced steps, the metallic clanging of javelins against shields. Salutes given, curt orders barked out.

'The last guards are going off duty,' observed Metellus.

'For today,' Domitius corrected him.

'For today,' amended Metellus, remembering how superstitious his friend could be.

They reached the entrance to the headquarters, where they were met by Cassius Silva, commander of the fortress, mess-mate and companion-in-arms of many years' standing of Gallienus, the emperor's son.

The praetorians on duty presented arms as the three legates passed and accompanied them inside. The centurions and other officers remained outside.

EMPEROR LICINIUS VALERIAN greeted them personally. He was fully armed and got straight to the point. 'I wish to tell you that I've decided to go to the meeting with Shapur. Last night, a squad of about fifty of our men was dispatched to the right bank of the Korsotes in no man's land. A garrison of Persian horsemen is posted on the other side of the river to guard the territory where the meeting is to take place.

'As you can see, nothing has been left to chance. Our plenipotentiaries have already established the points of negotiation in order to simplify matters.

'Shapur seems willing to discuss ending his siege on Edessa, despite the city's importance as a geographical and commercial nexus between Anatolia and Syria. In exchange he wants a general agreement that redefines the relationship between our two empires and establishes lasting peace. He may ask us to give up some territory in Adiabene and Commagene, without precluding anything. He is open to negotiation. The terms seem good, and I'm ready to go.'

'You've made a wise decision, Caesar,' approved Silva.

Lucius Domitius Aurelian had been frowning from the start and squeezing the hilt of his sword. He was a formidable soldier: having fought in numerous campaigns, he had killed nearly nine hundred enemies with his own hand, carving a notch into the shaft of his javelin each time. He was so quick at unsheathing his sword that he had earned the name *manus ad ferrum* among his men: 'Sword-in-Hand'. He asked to speak. 'I've heard that your son Gallienus is in Antioch, and could be here with four legions in five days' time. Why run this risk now?'

'Because we have enough food for two,' retorted Silva.

'We can ration supplies and make them last. A little hunger never killed anybody.'

'It's not just a question of food,' replied the emperor. 'We can't be certain that Gallienus will arrive, or that it will take him only five days. Our informers tell us that there are Persian cavalry units all along the road from Antioch charged with interrupting our lines of communication and cutting off supplies. No. I will go to meet Shapur. To learn his intentions, if nothing else. If we can lay the foundations of a lasting agreement, all the better. But even if I succeed merely in gaining time and avoiding a large-scale attack while we wait for Gallienus to get here, that will be an achievement on its own. And the fact that it was Shapur who requested the meeting bodes well in any case.'

He turned to Metellus. 'Have you nothing to say, Marcus Metellus? What is your opinion?'

'Don't go, Caesar.'

Valerian looked at him more in surprise than concern. 'Why?'

'There's nothing I like about this. Smells like a trap a mile away.'

'I've taken every precaution. We're meeting on neutral ground, on open terrain. Fifty escorts on both sides, already in place. Nothing can happen. I'm going, I've already decided. And I don't want Shapur to think that the emperor of the Romans is afraid of him.'

He strode out, followed by the other officers.

Metellus fell into step beside him. 'Then I'm going with you, Caesar.'

'No,' replied the emperor. 'It's better that you remain here.' He leaned close enough to speak into his ear. 'I want to be sure I'll find the gate open when I come back.'

'Leave Lucius Domitius. He's the most loyal man I know, he enjoys great popularity among the ranks and he's found himself in such situations before. I'll be more useful to you out there.'

The emperor looked at Metellus and then at Domitius, who was a few steps behind them. 'All right, then. You'll come with me and Lucius Domitius will stay here in the city. Would to heaven that I've made the right decision . . .'

Silva smiled. 'It won't make any difference who comes out with you, Caesar. We'll all be back here having a midday meal in no time, unless Shapur wants to invite you for a bite under that fancy pavilion of his.'

A stableman brought the emperor's horse and Metellus had his own brought around as well. As always, the attendant had already secured his second *gladius* to the pommel of his saddle.

Domitius raised his eyes to the bastions. A soldier on the guard tower waved a red flag: once, twice, three times. 'They're signalling that everything is ready . . .'

A white flag waved from the battlements, from right to left and then from left to right.

' . . . and that all is quiet. Nothing suspicious.'

'Very good,' approved Valerian. 'Now let's move.'

CLELIA HAD MANAGED to put Titus back to bed and was heading towards the house's upper terrace, to see if she could catch a glimpse of what was happening outside the walls, when she heard a noise.

She strained her ears but the house seemed silent, and Clelia thought that she must have imagined it. She started up the stairs but then she heard it again: a clear, pronounced sound that seemed to be coming from the cellar.

Clelia took a candle from the shelf, lit it with the lamp flame and started down to the ground floor. She was troubled by the fact that her husband had already gone and that she was practically alone in the house. What could it be?

She listened intently: the noise was certainly coming from the cellar. She opened the door that led downstairs and began to descend the steps, holding the candle high.

'Who's there?' she asked in a loud voice.

She was answered by a kind of moaning.

'Who's there?' she repeated.

Shuffling sounds from behind an iron-clad door. As far as she knew, the door closed off the drainage pipes from an old water heating system that led outside the city, but it had never been opened since they'd lived in the house. She leaned her ear against the door and heard more noises coming from the other side, amplified by the empty chamber beyond. She drew the bolt and pulled hard to open the door, grabbing both sides with her hands. The door creaked, sighed and came loose all at once. Clelia drew back and screamed.

Before her was a man, half naked and covered in blood, who looked at her fleetingly with a distressed expression, then fell back to the ground with an agonized moan.

Clelia realized immediately that the poor wretch was no threat to her; he was dying. She rolled him gently on his side, put her shawl under his head and looked for a glass to give him a little water.

He drank a sip and began to speak. 'We've been betrayed . . . you must tell them . . . warn them . . .'

'Who are you?' asked Clelia. 'Who are you?'

The man was fading fast. 'They took us . . . by surprise and slaughtered us . . . Tell the emperor he must . . . must not go . . . It's a trap . . . It's . . .'

 His head dropped forward as life left him.

Clelia shivered. She understood instantly what must have happened and what was about to happen if she could not stop the deadly machine the enemy had set in motion.

She ran up the stairs, crossed the courtyard and burst out on to the street. The city was still deserted and Clelia never stopped running.

THE GUARDS opened the city gate and the small imperial procession set off towards the designated meeting place. The sun was already well over the horizon and its rays carved up the arid, rocky landscape around them into swathes of dark and light, scattered with amaranth and terebinth bushes. The Korsotes

flowed at their left for a stretch, then curved to the west, intercepting their line of march.

The escort had spent the night securing the ford. They were waiting at a short distance, in no man's land, to escort the procession to the other side of the river, where they would meet Shapur, the Persian king. When they were less than a hundred feet away, a centurion saluted the emperor, and all fifty horsemen moved into position at the ford.

Metellus was struck by something strange and his face darkened. He gestured to Balbus.

'What is it, Commander?' he asked in a low voice.

'White legs.'

'What?'

'Look for yourself. These soldiers were wearing trousers until yesterday. They're Persians, not Romans.'

'Blast it! But where are our men?'

'Probably all dead. You warn the emperor, I'll try to send a signal to Lucius Domitius. We can still get out of this.'

Balbus approached the emperor and whispered into his ear.

Metellus turned his shield towards the sun and began to flash it in the direction of the walls.

Domitius, who was anxiously watching the little group as they made their way to the ford, started as he saw the signals. 'Wh . . . white . . . legs,' he sounded out. 'White legs!' he shouted aloud. 'Persians! It's a trap! The emperor is about to ride into an ambush. Bugler, sound the alarm! Send out the cavalry! Quickly, quickly! Open the gate!'

The legionaries posted at the gate pushed it open again and the bugler sounded the trumpet to muster the cavalry units quartered near the emperor's residence.

In just a few moments, a hundred horsemen had gathered at the open gate, and as many more were preparing to join in as reinforcements, but Cassius Silva, at the head of a squad of praetorians, stopped them. 'Who ordered this sortie? Are you all mad? Halt, halt, I said!'

'I gave the order!' shouted Domitius from the battlements. 'The emperor is in danger. They're about to march into a trap. I'll lead them out myself, immediately!'

'I am in charge of this fortress,' retorted Silva. 'To order a sally now, as negotiations are taking place, is pure folly. The Persians are sure to react violently, and then you'll see our men dead for sure. There is no reason to believe that the emperor is in danger. Close the gate!'

Domitius rushed down. 'What are you saying? This is treason! You will be held accountable for this decision!'

Silva nodded at the praetorians who were with him. 'Legate Lucius Domitius Aurelian is under arrest for insubordination until further orders. Seize him! And you,' he said to the soldiers on guard, 'close that gate.'

The praetorians surrounded Domitius, who was forced to hand over his sword, and they took him away. The soldiers began to pull the heavy gate shut.

Clelia, panting, had just arrived at the guard station and had witnessed the scene. She felt her heart sink. Her husband was out there and knew nothing of what was happening, while in here they were conspiring against him!

She looked around in distress, saw a stableboy leading a horse by the reins and didn't hesitate for an instant. She ripped her gown from the knee down and gave the boy a hard shove. As he fell to the ground, she leapt on to the horse and spurred him towards the gate.

The horse reared up before the closing gate and his front hoofs struck the wood and pushed it back open. Clelia urged him on and he flew off at a gallop.

The emperor and his guard were close to the ford now and the sham escort was waiting at the river bank. No one had made a move, but a plan was ready. 'As soon as all the soldiers are on the other side of the river,' said Metellus, 'we'll turn around and race back towards the city. We'll have enough of an advantage over them to allow us to reach it in safety.'

'As long as they open the gate for us,' said Balbus warily. 'If

they received our message, I don't understand why they haven't come out to help us.'

He had not finished speaking when Quadratus interrupted him. 'Look, they must have got it. There is someone coming from the city. But . . . wait . . . it's a woman!' he exclaimed.

Metellus turned towards the walls and was dumbfounded. 'It's Clelia! It's my wife!' he shouted.

The sham escort had already begun to cross the river.

The emperor signalled to Metellus. 'Go!'

He set off at a gallop; Clelia was hurtling towards him and shouting something. She was nearly halfway between him and the walls of Edessa and was still racing forward. Suddenly Metellus saw something fly up from the walls, in a wide arc: arrows!

Whistling cut through the air. One arrow, then a second, plunged into the ground. The third hit its target and flung Clelia from her horse.

Metellus charged towards her, jumped off his galloping steed and gathered her into his arms. She was still breathing. The arrow had pierced her back and was protruding from her breast. Her dress was soaked with blood.

Metellus clutched her to him, weeping with rage and grief, kissing her wan lips, her forehead, her hair.

'It's a trap,' murmured Clelia. 'The escort was murdered . . . Silva is . . . is . . . Marcus, please, save yourself . . . Go back to our son . . . He's all alone . . .'

'I'll go to him. I promise.'

Clelia's head dropped and darkness veiled her eyes. Metellus felt as if he had died with her.

He looked over at the gate of Edessa, which was still obstinately closed, and made out a red cloak fluttering on top of the walls: Silva. It was surely him. Metellus turned towards the ford and saw that the fight was already raging: the emperor was surrounded!

At that sight, Metellus steeled himself and regained his determination and presence of mind. He scattered a handful of

dirt over his wife's body as a symbolic burial, swallowed his tears and leapt on to his horse, spurring him madly towards the banks of the Korsotes river.

He burst between the ranks of the fraudulent escort brandishing two swords, one for each of two Persian warriors, who keeled over into the river as Metellus descended upon the others with dreadful violence. He struck out in every direction, stabbing, piercing, gouging, mangling, splitting bones and skulls, opening the way towards his encircled emperor.

More Persian warriors were arriving from every direction and Metellus realized that he had no more than a few moments in which to open an escape route for Valerian. But when he turned, he saw the emperor being flung from his horse and landing in the water in the middle of a tangle of enemy soldiers.

Metellus gave a yell – 'Save the emperor!' – and surged forward like a battering ram: he jumped off his horse and hurled himself bodily against the enemy while rallying his men. 'Balbus, Quadratus, to me!'

The two centurions flanked him like a couple of mastiffs. They rose up like towers on either side of him, their shields striking down anyone who dared approach, their swords impaling all assailants. They mowed the enemy down, trampling the fallen or nailing them with the bottom edges of their shields. Valerian defended himself tenaciously, but he had to fight against the swirling river current as he was fending off enemy blows. He lost his balance and was about to be cut down by a Persian who had just lifted his javelin when Metellus appeared behind his attacker and lopped off both his arms with two lightning-fast swipes, then pushed him into the current like an uprooted tree trunk. He moved in at the emperor's side. With Balbus and Quadratus providing cover, he had Valerian mount his horse and then smashed the flat of his sword against the animal's rear. The thoroughbred raced off towards the city.

Valerian rode at breakneck speed, conscious that his men were sacrificing themselves to save his life; he was determined to call out all the forces in Edessa to rush to their aid and make

the Persian pay for his deceitfulness. But a squad of enemy horsemen emerged unexpectedly from the gorge to his right, in which the river flowed, then fanned out to the west, cutting him off from the city.

He wrenched his horse in the opposite direction, thinking that he could reach one of the Roman outposts on the road to Nisibi, but a line of infantry appeared before him all at once, as if vomited up by the earth, and barred his way.

Valerian did not slow down for an instant. He pushed his horse into a formidable leap and flew over the line of foot soldiers. He landed on the other side and spurred his mount on ever faster, convinced that he was safe, imagining how he would avenge the blood of his valorous combatants but his thoughts were suddenly cut short at the sight of an immense array of cavalry and infantry rising from the line of hills in front of him. Shapur himself was at the centre of the fluttering purple standards which unfolded over an enormous front, closing off every passage and every road.

The emperor of the Romans understood that he had no way out and turned back towards the ford to die with his sword in hand beside his men, to end a blameless life with an honourable death. But, just as he was about to throw himself into the battle still raging at the ford, the trumpets blared and the Persian soldiers withdrew, leaving the Romans alone at the centre of a circle of armed men.

Panting with exhaustion and dripping with blood, the soldiers of the little squad prepared to receive their emperor, who had not succeeded in saving himself.

Marcus Metellus Aquila emerged from the river and drew his men up along the bank to face their destiny.