

The Last Legion

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Extract

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PROLOGUE

These are the memories of Myrdin Emreis, Druid of the sacred wood of Gleva, who the Romans called Meridius Ambrosinus. I have taken upon myself the task of writing them down so that those who shall come after me will not forget the events which I have been the last to witness.

I have long crossed the threshold of extreme age and I cannot explain why my life continues to go on, so far beyond the limits which nature usually assigns humankind. Perhaps the angel of death has forgotten about me, or perhaps he wants to leave me this last bit of time so that I may repent of my many sins, of no small consequence. Presumption, foremost. I have been guilty of great pride in the intelligence gifted me by God, and I have allowed, out of pure vanity, legends about my clairvoyance – even about supposed powers that can only be attributed to our Supreme Creator and the intercession of His saints! – to take root amongst the people. Oh, yes, I have even devoted myself to the forbidden arts, to the writings of the ancient pagan priests of these lands on the trunks of trees. Yet I believe I have done no evil. What evil can come of listening to the voices of our Ancient Mother, of Sovereign Nature, the voices of the wind amidst the leafy boughs, the song of the nightingales to the moon, the gurgling of the spring waters and the rustling of the dry leaves, when the hills and the plains are cloaked with the gleaming colours of autumn in those quiet sunsets that hint at the winter.

It is snowing. Big white flakes dance in the still air and a candid mantle covers the hills that crown this silent valley, this lonely tower. Will the land of Eternal Peace be like this? Is this the image that we shall see forever with the eyes of our souls? If it were such, death would be sweet, soft the passage to our final rest.

How much time has passed! How long since those bloody, tumultuous days of hate and war, of the convulsions of a dying world which I had believed immortal and eternal, and which I saw collapse. Now, as I prepare myself to take my last step, I feel the need to hand down the story of that failing world, and to tell how the last bloom of that parched tree was carried by fate to this remote land, where it took root and gave origin to a new era.

I don't know whether the angel of death will leave me the time, nor whether this old heart will hold up to reliving the emotions that nearly broke it asunder when I was so much younger, but I will not let the immensity of my endeavour discourage me. I feel the wave of memories rising like the tide among the cliffs of Carvetia. I have once more seen distant visions that I had thought forever vanished, like an ancient fresco faded by time.

I had thought that taking up my quill and touching it to this fresh parchment would have been sufficient to recreate the story, setting it free to flow like a river through a field when the snow melts in the spring, but I was wrong. Memories throng and press, a knot fills my throat and my hand falls impotent on the white page. I must first evoke the images, restore the strength of those colours, of the lives and the voices enfeebled by the years and the distance. I must even recreate what I have not seen with my own eyes, as the dramatist plays out scenes on his stage which he has never experienced.

It is snowing on the hills of Carvetia. All is white and silent as the last light of the day is slowly extinguished.

From nations far apart you have made a single fatherland

- Rutilius Namatianus, De Reditu suo, 63

PART ONE

1

*Dertona, fieldcamp of the Nova Invicta Legion,
Anno Domini 476, 1229 years after the foundation of Rome*

THE LIGHT PIERCED through the clouds covering the valley, and the cypresses straightened up suddenly like guards, alert on the ridge of the hills. A shadow bending over a bundle of twigs appeared at the edge of a stubble field and vanished at once, as if in a dream. A cock's crow rose from a distant farmhouse, announcing another grey, leaden day, only to be swallowed up instantly by the fog. Nothing penetrated the mist, save the voices of the men.

'Blasted cold.'

'It's this damp that gets into your bones.'

'It's the fog. I've never seen such thick fog in all my life.'

'Nor have I. And not a sign of our rations.'

'Perhaps there's nothing left to eat.'

'Not even a little wine to warm us up.'

'And we haven't been paid for three months.'

I can't take it any longer, I've had it with this whole thing. A new emperor practically every year, barbarians controlling all the main posts, and now, to top it all off: a snotty-nosed kid on the throne of the Caesars! A thirteen-year-old brat who hasn't even got the strength to hold up the sceptre is supposed to be running the world – the West, at least. No, this is it for me, I'm getting out. As soon as I can I'm leaving the army and going my own way. I'll find myself a little island where I can put goats out to

pasture and make cheese. I don't know about the rest of you, but my mind is made up.'

A light breeze opened a breach in the mist and revealed a group of soldiers huddled around a brazier. They were waiting to go off the last shift of guard duty. Rufius Vatrenus, a Spaniard from Saguntum and a veteran of many battles, commander of the guard corps, turned to his comrade, the only one who hadn't yet said a word or sounded a complaint: 'What do you say, Aurelius, are you with me?'

Aurelius poked the tip of his sword into the brazier, rekindling a flame that crackled into life and set a swirl of sparks dancing in the milky mist.

'I've always served Rome. What else could I do?'

A long silence fell. The men looked at each other, gripped by a feeling of dismay and restless unease.

'He'll never hang up his sword,' said Antoninus, a senior officer. 'He's always been in the army. He doesn't even remember what he used to do before he joined up. He simply doesn't remember ever being anywhere else. Isn't that true, Aurelius?'

He got no answer, but the reflection of the nearly burnt-out embers revealed Aurelius's melancholy look.

'He's thinking of what's ahead,' observed Vatrenus. 'The situation is out of control again. If the reports I've heard can be believed, Odoacer's troops have rebelled and attacked Ticinum, where the emperor's father Orestes had taken refuge. They say that he's heading for Placentia, and that he's counting on us to knock some sense into these barbarians and buttress the tottering throne of his young Romulus Augustus. You know, I'm not sure we can do it this time. If you want to know what I think, I really doubt it. There's three times as many of them as of us and—'

'Wait - did you all hear that?' asked one of the soldiers, the one closest to the palisade.

'It's coming from the field,' replied Vatrenus, his gaze searching the semi-deserted camp, its frost-covered tents. 'It's the end of the night shift; it must be the daytime picket coming on duty.'

'No!' said Aurelius. 'It's coming from outside. Sounds like—'

'Horsemen,' nodded Canidius, a legionary from Arelate.

'Barbarians,' concluded Antoninus. 'I don't like it.'

The horsemen appeared all at once out of the fog along the narrow white road that led from the hills to the camp. Imposing, on their massive Sarmatian steeds covered with metallic scales, they wore studded iron helmets, conical in shape and bristling with crests. Long swords hung at their sides, and their blond or reddish locks fluttered in the misty air. Their black cloaks were worn over trousers made of the same coarse, dark wool. The fog and the distance made them look like demons out of hell.

Aurelius leaned over the paling to observe the band drawing closer and closer. The horses plodded through the puddles that had formed on the road after the rain of the night before had melted the snow, raising muddy splashes. 'They're Heruli and Skyrians from the Imperial Army, Odoacer's men probably. Looks bad to me. What are they doing here at this hour, and why weren't we notified? I'm going to report to the commander.'

He clambered down the stairs and ran across the camp towards the praetorium. The camp commander, Manilius Claudianus, a veteran nearly sixty years old who had fought as a young man with Aetius against Attila, was already on his feet, and as Aurelius entered his tent he was hooking his scabbard to his belt.

'General, a squad of Herulian and Skyrian auxiliary troops are approaching. No one said anything about them coming, and I don't like it.'

'Neither do I,' answered the officer in a worried tone. 'Deploy the guard and open the gates. Let's hear what they want.'

Aurelius ran to the palisade and instructed Vatrenus to have the archers take position. He then went down to the guard post, drew up the available forces, had the praetorian gate opened and walked out with the commander. In the meantime, Vatrenus woke the troops with a whispered alarm, one man to the next, almost in silence and without sounding the trumpets.

The commander was completely armed and wore his helmet, a manifest sign that he considered this a war zone. His guard flanked him on both sides. One man towered head and shoulders

above all the rest: Cornelius Batiatus was a gigantic Ethiopian, black as coal, who never abandoned the general's side. He carried an oval shield built to measure by an armourer to cover his huge body. A Roman sword hung from his left shoulder, while a barbarian double-edged axe hung from the right.

The band of barbarians on horseback were just paces away by now, and the man at their head raised his arm as a signal to stop. He had a thick head of red hair which fell at the sides in two long braids. His shoulders were covered by a cloak trimmed with fox fur and his helmet was decorated by a crown of tiny silver skulls. His bearing denoted his importance. He turned to Commander Claudianus without getting off his horse, speaking in a rough, guttural Latin:

'Noble Odoacer, head of the Imperial Army, orders you to deliver your charge over to me. As of today, I shall assume command of this legion.' He threw a roll of parchment tied with a leather cord at his feet, adding: 'Your certificate of discharge and retirement orders.'

Aurelius stooped to pick it up but the commander stopped him with a peremptory gesture. Claudianus was from an ancient aristocratic family proud of their direct descent from a hero of the Republican Age, and the barbarian's gesture stung him as an intolerable insult. He replied without losing his composure: 'I don't know who you are and I'm not interested in finding out. I take orders only from noble Flavius Orestes, the supreme commander of the Imperial Army.'

The barbarian turned towards his men and shouted: 'Arrest him!' They spurred on their horses and surged forwards with their swords unsheathed: it was evident that they had been ordered to kill them all. The guards retaliated in kind, as a unit of archers simultaneously appeared at the bastions of the camp, their arrows already nocked to the bowstrings. They let fly, at Varenus's order, with deadly precision. Nearly all of the horsemen in the front line were hit, as were many of their horses. Wounded or lamed, they pulled their riders down with them in calamitous falls.

This did not stop the others, however, who jumped to the ground so they wouldn't be so easy to hit and rushed headlong at Claudianus's guards. Batiatus hurled himself into the fray, charging like a bull and delivering blows of unstoppable power. Many of the barbarians had never seen a black man, and they backed up, terrorized at the sight of him. The Ethiopian giant sheared off their swords and smashed their shields, chopping off their heads and their arms, whirling his axe and yelling: 'Behold the Black Man! I hate you freckled pigs!' In the fury of his assault, however, he had come too far forward and Commander Claudianus's left flank was left unguarded. Aurelius had just rid himself of an adversary when he saw, out of the corner of his eye, an enemy warrior lunging at the general, but his shield arrived too late to stop the barbarian's pike from sinking into Claudianus's shoulder. Aurelius shouted: 'The commander! The commander is wounded!'

Meanwhile the gates to the camp had been thrown open and the heavy line infantry was charging forward full force, in complete battle gear. The barbarians were driven off, and the few survivors leapt on to their horses and fled with their chief.

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Shortly thereafter, on the other side of the hills, they reported to their commander, a Skyrian named Mledo who regarded them with scorn and contempt. They looked pitiful: weapons dented, clothing ripped, filthy with blood and slime. Their chief muttered, head low: 'They . . . refused. They said no.'

Mledo spat on the ground, then called his attendant and ordered him to sound the falling-in. The deep bellow of the horns rent the cloak of fog that still covered the countryside like a shroud.

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Commander Claudianus was eased gently on to the plank bed in the infirmary and a surgeon prepared to remove the pike still stuck in his shoulder. The shaft had been sawn off to contain the

damage caused by its swaying back and forth, but the tip had penetrated just below the collar bone and there was the risk of its perforating the lung as well. An assistant brought an iron to a red heat over coals, readying it for cauterizing the wound.

Trumpet blasts and cries sounded a new alarm from the bastions. Aurelius left the infirmary and ran up the stairs until he found himself beside Vatreus who was staring at the horizon. The entire line of the hills was black with warriors.

'Great gods,' murmured Aurelius, 'there are thousands of them.'

'Go back to the commander and tell him what's happening. I can't see that we've got much choice here, but tell him we're awaiting his orders.'

Aurelius reached the infirmary just as the surgeon was wrenching the tip of the pike from the shoulder of their wounded leader, and he saw the noble patrician's face twist in a grimace of pain. Aurelius moved closer: 'General, the barbarians are attacking. There are thousands and thousands of them, and they are completely encircling our camp. What are your orders?'

Blood spurted copiously from the wound on to the hands and face of the surgeon and his assistants who were doing their utmost to staunch it while another approached with the red hot iron. The surgeon plunged it into the hole and Commander Claudianus moaned, gritting his teeth so as not to cry out. The acrid odour of burnt flesh saturated the little room and a dense smoke arose from the scorching iron which continued to sizzle in the wound.

Aurelius said again, 'General . . .'

Claudianus stretched out his free hand towards Aurelius: 'Listen . . . Odoacer wants to exterminate us, because we represent an insurmountable obstacle for him. The Nova Invicta is a relict from the past but we still frighten them. All Romans, from Italy and the provinces; he knows we'll never obey him. That's why he wants us all dead. Go at once to Orestes, he must be told what's happening here. Tell him that we're surrounded . . . that we desperately need his help . . .'

'Send someone else,' answered Aurelius, 'I beg of you. I want to stay. All my friends are here.'

'No. You must obey my orders. Only you can succeed. We still have control over the bridge on the Olubria; it will certainly be their first objective in cutting us off from Placentia. Go, now, before the circle closes in, hie to it and never stop. Orestes is at his villa outside the city with the emperor. We'll manage to hold out here.'

Aurelius lowered his head: 'I'll be back. Fight them off for as long as you can.' He turned. Behind him, Batiatus stared mutely at his commander, wounded and deathly pale, stretched out on the planks soaked with his blood. Aurelius didn't have the courage to say a word. He ran out and reached Vatrenus on the sentry walk: 'He has ordered me to go and seek reinforcements: I'll be back as soon as I can. Hold them off; I know we can do it!' Vatrenus nodded without speaking. There was no hope in his gaze, just the determination to die like a soldier.

Aurelius couldn't bring himself to speak. He stuck two fingers in his mouth and whistled. A whinny could be heard in reply, and a bay stallion trotted towards the bastions. Aurelius sprang into the saddle, spurring him towards the rear gate. Vatrenus ordered the doors to be unbolted for just long enough to let out the galloping horse and his rider, then had them closed again immediately.

Vatrenus watched as he rode off into the distance, heading towards the bridge on the Olubria. The squad guarding the bridgehead realized immediately what was happening, as a large group of barbarian horsemen detached from the bulk of the army and raced directly towards them.

'Will he make it?' asked Canidius at his side.

'You mean will he make it back? Yes. Perhaps,' replied Vatrenus. 'Aurelius is the best we've got.' The tone of his voice and his expression told a different story.

He turned back again, observing Aurelius as he raced to cover the open ground between the camp and the bridge. He soon saw another squad of barbarian cavalry emerging suddenly on the left

and joining up with the squad arriving from the right, closing in like a pair of pincers to cut short his flight, but Aurelius was as fast as the wind, and his horse devoured the flat terrain between the camp and the river. Aurelius was stretched out nearly flat on the horse's back so as to offer less resistance and less of a mark for the arrows which were bound to start raining upon him.

'Run, run,' growled Vatrenus between his teeth, 'That's the way to do it, boy . . .'

He realized almost instantly that the assailants were too numerous and that they would soon overwhelm the soldiers at the bridgehead. Aurelius needed a greater lead. 'Catapults!' he shouted. The men arming the catapults were ready, and aimed their missiles at the barbarian cavalry converging on the bridge.

'Fire!' shouted Vatrenus again, and sixteen catapults discharged their arrows towards the heads of the two squads, hitting their mark. Those in the lead keeled over while those just behind them tumbled headlong over their fallen comrades. Others were crushed by the weight of their horses, while the archers stationed at the bridge picked off a number of those on the sides. First they sent a swarm of arrows horizontally into the crowd, then flung their javelins high to swoop down in the centre. Many barbarians fell, run through, as more horses stumbled and rolled over, dragging and burying their horsemen beneath them. The remaining comrades continued their charge, fanning out, yelling in fury at this reverse.

Aurelius was close enough so that his companions drawn up on the bridge could hear his voice. He recognized Vibius Quadratus, a tent mate, and shouted: 'I'm going for help! Cover me! I'll be back!'

'I know!' shouted Quadratus and raised his arm to signal the others to open a passage for Aurelius. He shot through the line of comrades like a lightning bolt and the bridge thundered under the hooves of his powerful steed. The garrison closed up compactly behind him, shields clanging tight against shields. The front line knelt while the second stood, only the tips of their spears protruding, shafts planted firmly in the ground.

The barbarian horsemen flung themselves at that little garrison in a blind frenzy, submerging that last bulwark of Roman discipline like a tidal wave. The bridge was so narrow that some of the assailants crashed into each other and were flung to the ground. Others made their way to the centre where they furiously attacked the small contingent. The Romans were pushed back, but held their line. Many of the barbarians' horses were wounded by spears, while others reared up and threw their horsemen, who ended up on the iron spikes. The combat was fierce, man against man, sword against sword. The defenders knew that every instant gained meant ground gained for Aurelius, and this could mean the salvation of the entire legion. They knew what horrible torture awaited them if they were taken alive, so they fought with utter disregard for their fate, loudly urging each other on.

Aurelius had reached the far end of the plain and turned around before bounding into the forest of oak trees before him. The last thing he saw was his comrades being overrun by the relentless vehemence of the enemy.

'He's made it!' exulted Antoninus from the camp's sentry walk. 'He's in the forest, they'll never get him now. Now we have a chance.'

'You're right,' replied Vatrenus. 'Our comrades on the bridge let themselves be slaughtered so they could cover his retreat.'

Batiatus arrived then from the infirmary.

'How's the commander?' asked Vatrenus.

'The surgeon has cauterized the wound, but he says the pike has punctured a lung. He's coughing up blood and his fever is rising.' He clenched his cyclopean fists and tightened his jaw. 'The first one of them I see I swear I'll butcher him, I'll demolish him, I'll smash him into pieces. I'll eat his liver . . .'

His comrades looked at him in a sort of admiring shock: they knew quite well that his weren't mere words.

Vatrenus changed the subject: 'What day is it today?'

'The nones of November,' replied Canidius. 'What difference does it make?'

Vatrenus shook his head: 'Just three months ago Orestes was

presenting his son to the Senate, and now he already has to defend the boy from Odoacer's fury. If Aurelius is lucky he'll get there sometime in the middle of the night. The reinforcements could leave at dawn and be here in two days' time. If Odoacer hasn't occupied all the passes and bridges, if Orestes has loyal troops he can set to march right away, if . . .'

His words were interrupted by blasts of alarm coming from the guard towers. The sentries shouted: 'They're attacking!'

Vatrenus reacted as if lashed by a whip. He called the standard bearer: 'Raise the ensign! All men at their battle posts! Machines in firing position! Archers to the palisade! Men of the Nova Invicta Legion, this camp is the last outpost of Rome, the sacred land of our ancestors! We shall defend it at all costs! Show these beasts that the honour of Rome is not dead!'

He grabbed a javelin and ran to his place on the bastions. At that very same instant from the hills exploded the howl of barbarian fury, and thousands upon thousands of horsemen made the earth tremble with their wrathful charge. They dragged chariots and wheeled carriages loaded with sharpened poles to hurl against the fortifications of the Roman camp. The defenders thronged the palisade, drawing the strings of their bows, spasmodically clutching at the javelins in their fists, pale with tension, their foreheads drenched with cold sweat.