

The Decline, the Fall

A blistering wind rushes out from between the trees, across the low scrub and up over the palisade. There, the legionary runs a grubby forearm over his brow and looks up at a cloud-torn moon. It is the night-watch, and yet he sweats and blinks in the heat. Unnatural.

He peers down along the line to the next sentry post. What are we doing here? Here, the Germanic frontier, the Empire's power has begun to fade into suggestion. The engine-like impulse of its restless heart, the Capitoline hill, leagues away, has propelled thousands of men to the edge of civilisation, to safeguard it, to drive it forward. It has meant stability, order, dominion, for the world.

The legionary ponders this. The official narrative. The tales of his grandfather. The echoes of monuments. He stares out into the vacuous night, the silent source of this oncoming gale.

What has changed? Up in his watchtower he stands on what used to be the tip of a mighty spear that kept the demons out; kept hungry chaos at bay. The *limes*, the boundary, the edge. Strangely, he thinks back to his childhood, and running along the beach, feet treading another borderline, one where salt water and white sand meet. A forever-shifting frontier, and within it an infinite kingdom containing all of time.

He recalls an afternoon he and his friends had come across the wreck of a galley, a quinquireme, broken by Galician gales and Galician breakers. Rough surf had carried it to shore and it had already been picked clean by other strandlopers and scavengers. The ship lay broken in two. The worn banked seats where the slaves would have pulled at their oars and suffered for the sake of the ship lay exposed to the day, like a forest stone turned over after too long in the shade. There was something intestinal about it, though the chains and the oars were long gone. Stained, scarred wood, now beginning to rot; the sense of a dark desperation within. He thinks of how disturbed he had felt by the unnatural revelation.

The galley's prow, paint picked clean, pointed skyward, the ram still intact though someone had gone through the effort of climbing up to remove the bronze sheath at its tip. No sails, no

barrels, no weapons or devices. Just a hulking, empty colossus on the beach. Impressive and forsaken.

The boys had played about the lifeless shell until the tide had come in and begun to rock the old beast, first tentatively, then more perilously. They escaped to a nearby dune on some high ground as the wreck received another beating from advancing waves, and watched as the cold water encircled, then passed it by.

The legionary brings his cloak back around over his shoulders.

The day had been hard and the heat intolerable. Digging. Always digging. Drill. Seeing to the horses and bringing in supplies. All of this under a white-scorched sky. Even here, in green Germania, the dust was rising and had been for days. Sounds around camp seemed muted, as if afflicted by the same lethargy as the men. Only the noise of crickets struck the ear with any immediacy, stultifying and mesmeric.

A patrol had been sent out. Before the heat of the day was established, they headed for the tree-line. The legionary had watched them disappear into the forest's shade one by one and had envied them. But when they had returned, just before sunset, they wore the same jaded expressions of those who had remained behind. The forest was empty, they said. Not a creature nor a sound. Nettles and dust. And even in amongst the trees, the heat. Nowhere, and no way, to find comfort.

The legionary suspects they had slept. There is a brook that cuts across the track not more than a mile or two into the forest. Its water is cold and pure. A gift from Triton. It had quenched his thirst on many an occasion and the soft mosses around it make for an inviting resting place. What he wouldn't do to lay his head down there now. A balm. Sleep, and no thought or need of waking. The hardness, the dullness of this legionary life, abandoned. He would be enveloped by the forest-nymphs of another nation and the unwavering trajectory of his days would finally make sense.

Vah! But what are these thoughts? Treachery and weakness. Where the resolve that brings glory to the Eagle and has kept me alive?

We are the last bastion, he thinks. The emperor, the people depend on us...

All is conspiracy and doubt, gossip and rumour. Erratic decision and misthought. Lies of the tribunes and self-worshipping legates. And everywhere this sense not of panic, but of an inebriated sleep, an idea run aground and deserted.

Beyond this wooden wall, in all directions, the world is changing.

Restless with these thoughts, the legionary steps out along the palisade walkway. Below, in shadows by the stables, two centurions mutter grimly. What do they know? No other movement in the camp, while the outline of the next watchmen can only just be made out. The legionary looks out again at the forest and notes how, in the gloom, it resembles a rising wave, full of shadows and massive. The wind is rising now and it shakes the pines. Again, the noise of the deep.

The quinquireme. Was. It a memory or premonition?

Slowly, out from between the trees, lights begin to appear, torches moving forwards in vast number; a tide to encircle the wreck. And now the legionary knows the answer.

They will advance over the low scrub and scale the palisade wall. A wave of metal and screaming will rock this old camp, drunken and disused as it now seems. It will be picked clean and the storm surge will move on.

There is no high ground to retreat to now. The legionary thinks of those slaves on their rowing benches, chained in and sinking, yelling in terror, fighting for life, not for their ship. As the torches approach and the camp alarm is sounded, he cannot help but think, This then is how an Empire expires.

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