

‘Is she a witch then sir?’

‘Come now, Sextus, surely you don’t believe that? I thought you’d be far too pragmatic to believe in such drivel. She’s certainly different though.’

‘Well, if she’s not a witch then Antony’s no Roman. I’ve heard he anointed her feet, in public. A true Roman wouldn’t do a thing like that.’

‘No indeed, but there’s something about Cleopatra. Even Caesar couldn’t resist her. I wonder what he’d think if he knew Antony’s her lover. Not quite the loyalty he expected I’m sure.’

We stood, side by side, as we had stood many times looking out towards the harbour. Two towers had been strategically constructed on either side of the bay, guarding our prey. We had them trapped, and it looked as if, at last, after so many years there would be a decisive outcome.

‘What are the latest reports, sir?’ Sextus asked. I can still picture the weariness in his face, and his worn breastplate.

‘The news is good,’ I said. ‘The storm last night upset their fleet much more than ours, and they say their troops are suffering from dysentery. The Gods appear to be favouring Octavian.’

‘Rutilius old friend, you don’t seem to believe in any of this, in what we’re doing.’

I knew that a wavering mind in battle was useless, and it was not a good example to my men.

‘Sextus, I want peace as much as anyone. Peace and loyalty. If there were more loyalty in our world then maybe we would not be suffering such strife.’

‘But don’t you hate Antony?’ Sextus asked.

‘Hate is a strong word, Sextus. Of course I disapprove of what he’s doing, of

what he's done. But no one can deny that he's under Cleopatra's spell. Lust does strange things to a man. He was a great Roman. Things could have been very different.'

'But sir, he ponces around the streets like a poxy king. He dresses like an Egyptian.'

'So they say,' I replied.

'And what about his will? You can't ignore that, trying to give Cleopatra the eastern half of the Empire.'

'No, no of course not.'

And there was the power of politics. In Sextus' mind, there was no doubt about the validity of the will which Octavian had read out in Rome. That document gave Octavian his pretext for war, and who would dare to suggest it might have been a forgery?

'If I'm going to risk my life,' Sextus said, 'then it's got to be worth it.'

If I had believed that Octavian was truly going to restore the Republic, then I would not have had my troublesome doubts.

'It is worth it,' I said. 'And with Agrippa in command, we cannot lose. I must check on the men.'

As I paced along the deck, beneath me the rowers sat, layer upon layer, rank after rank. Lives as much as oars lay in their hands. The Oarsmen chief had reported that all were fit and well, but the heat underneath the deck must have been stifling.

When I reached the stern, I nodded at the helmsman, who stood by the rudder. Even that grizzled campaigner looked apprehensive.

'Have no fear. Victory will be ours,' I said.

He stared out at the bay. When would it begin?

I marched along the deck inspecting the marines, their armour, their weaponry, their attitude. All acknowledged my presence. A few were gambling. Most stood or leaned against the side in silence. My confidence grew as I looked in the eyes of each man and knew that they believed in the cause. They were Italian legionaries, the best kind. Their armour gleamed in the bright September sunshine.

I had never been involved in a battle on this scale. Our fleet stretched out as far as I could see, and beyond. All around I could hear the creaking of wood, as we sat, waiting.

I walked to the bow of the ship. It was fully one hundred and twenty feet from bow to stern. Soon the entire deck would be teeming with war. Placed near the front of the ship stood the invention of our admiral Agrippa; his version of the catapult. Locked in position lay the heavy grapnel, laden with the weight of our expectation. The four marines in charge were checking the ropes and lines which were attached to the winch.

‘All ready?’ I asked.

‘Yes sir. The ropes are clear. We’ve sharpened the grapnel.’

‘Good. It’s time to earn our reward. Aim well.’

They continued about their business. I stared at the grapnel above my head, its iron claws reaching out, claspings for prey. I prayed that it would stick hard and true on the enemy’s deck.

As I made my way back towards Sextus, I checked that the catapults were prepared. Boulder upon boulder upon boulder was stacked around them. All was ready.

It was time for a brief speech. I stood in the centre of the deck and turned

slowly so that everyone could hear me.

‘Comrades, the time is near when you will earn yourselves, glory, riches, and renown. Now is the time to earn your rewards. Now is the time to earn with your right hands the honours that you deserve. And by the Gods we deserve it.’

I returned to Sextus’ side, taking my spear from him.

‘A bright dawn, sir’ he said.

‘Indeed, a shame that it is wasted on this wretched war.’

‘Perhaps it’s a sign of a new beginning. Maybe the omens are good.’

I never answered. A horn sounded across the bay. Its call lingered for many seconds, a numinous tone. Immediately my soldiers were on their feet, apprehensive.

‘That is no horn of ours. Comrades, to your posts.’

The *Centaur* sailed passed, its figurehead of a horse leaping over the waves.

‘Captain,’ Paulus called. ‘They are signalling. Put out. Engage the enemy if they do not withdraw.’

I called down to the Oarsmen chief, ‘Put out.’

There was a shout underneath the deck, and with a rumble the great oars of our fleet began to strike the water in unison. Slowly we advanced. The constant rhythm of the rowers was ominous. Soon we were heading briskly towards the enemy. The din of the oars sent a surge of fear through me. I said a short prayer to Fides, my protectress.

As we closed in on the enemy, I fought with my conscience. I had always struggled to come to terms with killing fellow Romans. But whether Egyptian or Roman, I had to be ruthless. They would not hesitate to exult in claiming the life of

an officer and a senator. I steeled myself. Never would I be ruled from Alexandria.

We drew close enough to see that we had the greater numbers, but they loomed over us.

‘Rest your oars,’ I shouted.

‘Rest oars,’ came the muffled command through the deck.

The oars rattled and clattered. And then silence.

There was a pause.

I could feel the wind sweep across my breastplate, tugging gently at my spear. The water lapped against the side of the boat as we slowed to a complete halt. There was still about a mile between the ships. I doubt there had ever been two such mighty fleets drawn up against one another. There we were, the two armies of the Empire, just outside the bay of hitherto insignificant Actium, ready to determine the rule of the world.

The faces of my men showed no fear. They pressed against the side of the ship, straining to catch a glimpse of the enemy. Some checked their armour, and the grip of their shield, others drummed their fingers on the shaft of their spear. Killing fellow Romans had become second nature to them. I envied them. We watched. We waited.

Behind the front line of marines stood our archers. As time passed, and there was still no action, some began to restring their bows.

‘Courage men,’ I called. ‘Victory will be ours. Spoils will be ours.’

The men let out a roar of feral ferocity. The *Centaur*, sailing next to us, took up the call and soon our entire fleet was bellowing a war cry. I felt a prickle down my

spine. I was ready for action. I lusted for it.

I spotted a signal from our flagship, the *Minerva*. Two wings were to encircle Antony's fleet. We formed a crescent of death around Antony to compel him to engage.

'For Rome!' I shouted.

'For Rome!' The whole ocean called.

I turned to Sextus.

'Witness this oath. If we claim victory, I will build a temple for Fides.'

'Fides is no Goddess of mine, sir.' Sextus replied.

If only she had been.

'Why not?' I asked. 'You said that the sun may herald a new dawn, maybe it heralds a new divinity for you too. You say you need a cause to fight for. If money's not enough, then fight for Fides.'

He grinned at me. Gripping his spear he roared, 'Roman Victor!'

Again the cry came back, 'Roman Victor!'

And so it began.

The poets will sing of Actium. It will be immortalised in song as a great battle, worthy of its great contenders. In truth, it was much less than that. The catapults were fired, the sky was filled with stones which smashed into decks or thundered into water. Arrows pierced the air on their deadly flights and many men fell, but Cleopatra's courage failed. She fled, leaving the outcome of the battle certain. We were the victors.

That is not to say that the battle was blood free. It was the most gruesome I have witnessed. Since we had smaller ships compared with the monstrous warships

of Antony's fleet, we used the tactics of cavalry, charging and retreating like waves on a beach. Most evaded capture. Those that were grappled were submerged in rocks and arrows. My *Triton* sank many enemy ships, including the *Neptune*. It felt wrong to be attacking one of my own Gods.

In the midst of the mayhem, a pathetic sight stopped me. In a soldier's arms lay the body of a comrade, riddled with arrows.

He turned his raging eyes on me. 'Roman arrows! These are Roman arrows!'

The full horror of the civil war had dawned on him. I could find no words of comfort. I pulled him to his feet and back into the fray.

It was not long after that, that I made my first mistake. I commanded the helmsman to aim alongside the *Osiris* to snap its oars. This was high risk, sailing right in the range of her missiles, but if we succeeded, the enemy would be stranded.

It looked as if we would make it. The oars were shattered out of their rowers' hands. Many snapped off completely. I remember crouching behind my shield, trying to recover my strength. My age was showing itself, and at a most inopportune moment.

The oarsmen must have been exhausted but fear of death drove them, until the boulders landed. The deck splintered and collapsed, crushing all who were beneath. The *Triton* was floundering.

I raged that I would be slain by a coward at a distance and condemned to a tomb of water, so I called on the men to board our assailant. It was on the decks of the *Osiris* that I suffered my first wound in battle. Too late I saw an axe swing to my left. I spun round and slashed the attacker's arm. My cheek was struck a savage blow. It was agony, but I could see that the attacker's arm was nearly severed. As

my vision turned red with blood I stabbed forward with my sword and skewered him.

Paulus fell on the *Osiris*. The helmsman charged at him with a grappling hook. Paulus never saw the blow. The prongs pierced his helmet and he fell. I thought it was over, that the end had come, but another of Octavian's crews boarded the *Osiris* and we were saved.

We joined the ship whose marines had saved us. My men were few, thirty at the most, but I was relieved to see that Sextus was still alive.

'You could tell they weren't true Romans. No fight in 'em. That's what comes of being slaves to a woman,' he said.

The battle dragged on and on, losing momentum. Antony's larger warships were floating fortresses, unbreakable. We were using pikes to hack at the turrets of an enemy ship when I heard the Captain Duilius call out.

'Rutilius! The first of Cleopatra's ships have hoisted sail. They are fleeing! Look. Not one is engaging.'

I felt a rush of relief rather than joy.

'Curse this wind,' I said. 'It's strong enough for them to escape.'

Duilius saw my cheek was still pouring blood, and summoned the physicians. I waved them away.

'Not until the end.'

News of Cleopatra's flight spread. Everyone wondered what would happen next. The great purple sail of Cleopatra's ship, the *Antonias*, was unfurled.

'Roman Victor! Roman Victor!'

The cry went up. It confused our enemy, and Antony himself. They were given

the signal to retreat. All about us, sails were raised. To gain speed the turrets which we had worked so hard to break, were thrown overboard by their soldiers. Chaos ensued.

‘Duilius,’ I said. ‘Why are you letting Cleopatra escape? Let’s kill her.’

Duilius shook his head. ‘We have no sails, and the oarsmen are exhausted. How do you propose we catch her? Anyway, Octavian’s orders were that we should get them to surrender at the earliest possible opportunity. I think, at last the fighting is over.’

‘But the money Captain,’ I urged. ‘It’s on the *Antonias*. Think of the reward if we were the men to capture her. Look around. The fighting is far from over. We outnumber Antony. Let’s crush their attempts on the Empire once and for all and earn ourselves a life of luxury and peace.’

‘Octavian’s orders were to fight for as little time as possible.’

I watched as the faster of our ships set off to chase Cleopatra.

‘But this is our chance for glory. This is our chance to earn a reward for what we have lived through.’

Despite my protests, Duilius stood firm. We joined a blockade to the north where the fighting continued until dusk.

As the daylight failed, orange light caught my eye. I pointed across to the *Minerva*. Behind it, more warships were arriving from our base on the shore, laden with fire. We fell back to be issued with many arrows. A blaze was lit on board. At the same time, hundreds of javelins with flaming torches attached were handed over.

Now the battle changed in appearance. Flames covered the ocean. The air was filled with jars of pitch and charcoal, fireballs of death. The fire ate through

Antony's fleet. Soldiers desperately threw their drinking water to try to douse the flames, but the fire kept spreading. Men burnt like torches. They tried to use their cloaks to smother the flames, then the bodies of the dead. Smoke rose up and a dreadful smell lingered. The breeze stiffened fatally. It cooled my face, but fanned the flames as the fire licked with tongues of death.

We withdrew to a safe distance from the burning ships and watched our opponents die. Some fell, choking in the smoke; others were incinerated in their armour as it glowed red with heat. I walked down to the archers on the ship.

'Pick them off. They are unprotected.'

With unerring accuracy, they were felled. As they realised that all hope was lost, those with any wits remaining jumped overboard. It was a great fall. Many made no stroke when they landed, but drifted, lifeless.

I crossed to the port side and looked at another floundering vessel. On the deck, in the midst of the flames, I could make out soldiers killing each other, putting an end to their misery. The sight filled me with a sudden dread. How could I be satisfied by what I was witnessing? These men were Roman citizens. They had more than likely fought for the glory of Rome in the past. How had it come to this? That a warship should be their funeral pyre.

'Hold back,' Duilius called at last. 'Victory is assured.'

A mighty cheer went up.

'Let's get the plunder!'

'No,' said Duilius. 'Our instructions are to stay away from the blazing ships.'

There was a clamour of dissent.

'We fight for plunder. Who are you to deny us?'

‘There must be treasure in those ships. It’s ours. We have earned it by our own blood.’

The captain looked unnerved by the mutinous and angry soldiers. I too wanted my reward for having to fight the sickening war. I made my error.

‘They’re right,’ I said. ‘Let’s sail in and put out the flames. Then we can get all the plunder we want.’

I stood close to Duilius and since I was taller, tried to intimidate him. Doubtless my wound had some effect. He struggled to look me in the eye.

‘You were at the meeting. You know the instructions. Any wealth belongs to Octavian. He is the commander,’ he said.

‘Are you denying these men their reward for loyal service?’ I challenged.

The soldiers pressed round in a group. We pressured Duilius into agreeing. And so my fate was sealed.

Every soldier except the captain busied themselves gathering water to try to put out the flames. As we approached we were struck by a wall of heat. My face ached, my wound more so. Water was hurled across from our ship but it made no impact on the flames. Around us, others of Octavian’s fleet followed our lead and moved in on the burning vessels. It should have been obvious that the flames were unquenchable, but the desire for reward urged us to maintain our futile attempts.

Unseen, a single arrow fizzed out of the burning vessel. None of us was guarded. I was fortunate. It struck yards to my right. I heard a stifled moan and a body slump to the deck. We all turned. To my horror I saw that it was Sextus. The arrow had pierced just below his cheekbone. Although he lay motionless and sprawled over the planks, I could see the tension in his contorted face, the agony of

the blow.

Suddenly, a cry went up. Our ship had caught alight. The water was no longer hurled at Antony's ship but our own. It had no effect. In moments we were ablaze.

'Row back. Row back.'

I have never seen anything burn as fast. The flames surrounded us. It was clear that the ship was going to burn out. I could see the first men catch alight. Their cloaks were burning. They struggled to tear them off as fire consumed their flesh. I looked in dismay as the body of Sextus began to smoke. The arrow was still lodged in his face. It is still lodged in my mind. I jumped for my life.