

Killing the Hydra (Eagles and Dragons – Book II)

Prologus

*Beloved of Apollo...
Love! Blood! A sea of plots!
He bites at your heels...ravenous!
The Avenger is a harsh judge.
Keep her close. Empress. Your Empress!*

*Sands and forests.
South and North.
Where does your home lie?
Where does your heart lie?
Where does your sword lie?
Loyalty! Listen to the immortal!*

*Bravery and wisdom.
Eagles and Dragons.
Horses beneath.
They will come to you as thunder.
All scales...and death.
Use them...know them.
Upon the grassy mound...*

Metellussssssss...

A chilling voice rang out in the cavern, over and over and over, more insistent and violent with every utterance. The young warrior's arms shook as he fought back his fear, sword handle sweaty in his white-knuckled grip.

He struggled to keep his footing on the rocky steps that led further into darkness. A rank odour of salt and iron permeated the thick air through which the dreaded voice travelled.

"What do you want from me?" His hollow speech was swallowed by the shadows. Then, the rocky earth trembled and he pressed on, taunted by the same voice, the same words. He fell to his knees, panting and exhausted, darting eyes scanning the black walls. There was movement, sudden and swift from every direction.

The warrior ran, parrying ghostly blows. There were too many and he felt his flesh split and trickle. His body was thrown through the air to sprawl on jagged rocks like a helpless hatchling cast from a mountain peak. Mouth quivering with the taste of his own blood, he reached for a hopeful speck of light with one tremulous hand.

"Adara?" he sputtered. The walls began to crumble and he felt blood and heat wash over him. "Adara!" The light vanished and the warrior gagged and was swept away on the gory tide.

"Oi! Wake up, man! Tribune!" Rough hands were shaking Lucius where he sat on the trireme's deck, wrapped in his crimson cloak, leaning against barrels of fresh water. He started at the guttural, booming voice and looked up to see a grey-haired man in a brown tunic, old soldier's boots and a well-used military cloak.

"What?"

"Best stop that yelling, Tribune. People are starting to stare." Several disdainful heads were turned in their direction.

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“Sorry. I was...having a nightmare.”

“I don’t want to know! Bad luck to speak of nightmares at sea. Here, let me help you up.” He hefted Lucius with a grunt. “Name’s Gaius. Used to be a centurion. Retired now.”

“Lucius Metellus Anguis. Tribune, III Augustan Legion. Not retired.”

“Ha! Humour! Good. It’s a long journey.” He slapped Lucius good-heartedly on the shoulder. “Aren’t you a bit young to be an officer in that legion of veteran whoresons?”

“I suppose I am.” Lucius’ ego had long ago become acclimatized to remarks about his age and rank.

“Hm. No matter. You look like you could rip the head off a jackal.” The old man looked Lucius up and down. Then his eyes fell on the blue bundle Lucius held. “Say, what’s that you’ve got there?”

“A sword. My wife Adara had it made for me as a wedding gift,” he said with fondness.

“Adara? That’s the name you were calling out.”

“I was?”

“Only the whole ship heard ya. Anyway, that’s quite a gift your woman gave you.” Gaius marked the gold pommel and dragon-headed hilt. “All my wife ever gives me are breeches! I should have your wife talk to mine. Is she aboard?”

“No. She isn’t.” Lucius felt a pang of hurt, regret, as he imagined his new wife far away, boarding ship in Brundisium, setting sail for Greece with her parents, Publius and Delphina, her sisters and his own sister, Alene. The length of their unwilling separation was undetermined. He could not bring her to Africa until he was sure it was safe.

“Pity,” Gaius broke Lucius’ thoughts. “My wife’s lounging on couches mid-deck with all the other hens. Glad you’re here though; I needed to get away. Garlic?” He held out several cloves of raw garlic which he had poured from a leather pouch.

“No. No thank you, Gaius.” Lucius wrinkled his nose as the veteran popped a few into his mouth. He hoped he would keep it shut after that but it was a fool’s hope.

“Suit yourself,” Gaius replied, chewing. “Best thing a legionary can do is eat raw garlic every day! Always made sure my men had raw garlic, especially on the bloody northern frontier. Damn cold up there!”

It had only been a day since the fleet, led by the Imperial and Praetorian ships, had left Ostia. Leptis Magna, Emperor Severus’ home as well as that of Plautianus, Praetorian Prefect and imperial kinsman, was to be the site of tremendous celebration. Emperor Severus had ordered all high-ranking military officers who had been in Rome for his Triumph to accompany him to the prosperous African city.

Drusus, the Empress Julia Domna’s man who had made sure Lucius was on the correct ship in Ostia, had teased the young tribune that he would get an earful of old war stories on the veterans’ trireme. So far, Gaius had proved not to be a storyteller. Lucius was lost in thought. Septimius Severus always strove to keep his military happy, and close. The entire Praetorian Guard seemed to be going to Africa, leaving Rome to the Senate for a time. That said, the Emperor had stationed a legion not twenty miles from Rome in Albanum, just in case any die-hard Republicans got the wrong idea. Severus made sure the Senate knew its place.

Lucius wondered how angry the Emperor’s actions had made his own, hateful father, Quintus Caecilius Metellus. He did not care in the end, about his father or his boyhood friend, Argus; as far as he was concerned, he never wanted to see either of them again. *They’re cowards*, Lucius thought. He hoped that his mother, Antonia, and his younger siblings, Quintus and Clarinda, would be all right.

His thoughts pulled once more to his cohort at their Numidian base in Lambaesis and the true duty ahead of him: to punish the traitors in his cohort and discover the truth behind the death of his dear friend and centurion, Antanelis. When the celebrations in Leptis Magna were at an end, Lucius would return to Lambaesis; he could not bring Adara to join him until it was safe.

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The Praetorians were watching him.

Gaius began to fidget where he leaned against the trireme's railing next to Lucius.

"Well, Tribune, we'd better sit down. It's still a long way to Africa."

"I'm sure it is." Lucius had made a friend from whom he could not detach himself. The animated veteran leaned back, hands clasped behind his head.

"You know," Gaius began, "this reminds me of the time I sailed up the Rhene with my men..."

Lucius Metellus Anguis leaned back against his water barrel to settle in for the rest of the journey. While his friend spoke, Lucius opened the wax tablet on which he had scribbled the Sybil's prophetic words. Cumae seemed like a dream, long ago. And yet, the words given to him in that dark cave lingered, had seeped into his nightmares.