

A Dragon among the Eagles (Eagles and Dragons Prequel)

I

Martis Populus

‘The People of Mars’

A.D. 197

They came from all over Italy to join Rome's legions. War was in the air again, and so was opportunity for every young man willing to wear the red cloak of Mars. The hopeful, the bankrupt, the disinherited and destitute - all of them wanted the opportunity to make something of themselves.

When the call went out that Emperor Septimius Severus, fresh from his victories in the recent civil war, was heading east to take on the Parthian Empire, young men began to flow down the roads leading to Rome like spring runoff out of the mountains.

All of these now stood in clusters on the sands of the Stadium of Domitian on the Campus Martius, watching, taking the measure of the men around them as they added their name to the rolls and took up wooden gladii so that the recruiting centurions could judge who was fit for fighting.

Lucius Metellus Anguis, a local nineteen year old, approached the table where a burly centurion and his optio manned one of the many tables.

They eyed him as he approached, the centurion's horizontal crest waving stiffly like an angry boar's bristles.

"Name?" the centurion barked.

"Lucius Metellus Anguis, of Rome."

There was a snigger from somewhere, which stopped when Lucius turned to look at the man who had mocked his name.

"I didn't know anyone from that decrepit old family still lived," the thick muscled, blond northerner said. Some men about him laughed. "Wasn't Caecilia Metella the dictator Sulla's whore hound?"

Lucius turned to stare at the man who stared back without hesitation. Because of his height, handsome profile and size, Lucius was always a target for ruffians who wanted to prove themselves. He was used to it, but still hated it.

"Shut-up back there!" the centurion ordered, standing up.

"Argus, no!" Lucius said to his foster-brother who was in line behind him, and who was about to break the line to take care of the commenter. "Let him be."

Argus returned to the line, the centurion's gaze washing over him in a challenge.

"Sign here!" the optio said, giving Lucius a stylus and indicating the papyrus scroll where he had added Lucius' name.

Lucius bent over the table and signed. *There, it's done.*

Of course, the army would never turn anyone away, especially after so many had died in the

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civil war, but Lucius knew that he had to show what he was made of next. He looked out at the area where pairs of new recruits were thrusting and slashing clumsily at each other like gladiator clowns in a tavern brawl.

"Pick up a rudus and stand over there!" the centurion ordered as Argus came up beside Lucius, having just signed his own name.

The two young men went to a rack and each picked up a heavy practice gladius.

"Remember what we practiced," Lucius said. "Let's give them a good show, but it still has to look real."

"I won't hit you too hard," Argus laughed. "Just enough to bruise your Equestrian pride."

They waited for the current bout to finish, one of the men being picked up off the ground and led to a bench where the losers sat in shame.

"Metellus!" another centurion called out. "Get out here!"

Lucius stepped forward, shrugging his shoulders and twirling the wooden gladius to get a feel for it's weight.

"Argus!" the centurion called out next.

"Wait!" the centurion at the table interrupted. "Not him. That one!" he said, pointing to the big northerner who had made fun of Lucius in the lineup.

The northerner grinned as he stomped over to get his rudus from the rack and strode out to face Lucius. "I'm going to hit you so hard, Metellus, you won't even remember today. You're going to end up in the kitchens."

"Shut up, Bona!" the centurion said. "Show us what each of you have."

Lucius glanced at Argus who nodded, and then turned to face Bona. The man was about the same height as himself, more thickly muscled, perhaps a former smith. He knew that if he got in the way of one of his full-force swings, he would be in trouble. Lucius stepped to one side, then the other, feeling light on his feet, ready to move quickly.

"Begin!" Bona launched himself at Lucius with a roar that was echoed by the men in the lineup. He sped by Lucius with a cutting blow that would have snapped Lucius' neck, but the younger man stepped beneath the blade and behind the larger one, kicking him in the back so that he fell forward into the dirt.

"Don't let him take a breath!" Argus yelled, but Lucius stood still, calming himself, allowing the other man to get up.

"Come on coward! After this, I'm going to fuck your corpse!" Bona hissed, coming at Lucius a second time with a thrust that caught Lucius' ribs. Lucius held his side where he had felt a crack and pain run through him. His short dark hair was now drenched in sweat. Bona laughed and turned to the line to rally his friends into acclamations, then turned back to Lucius for a third attack. However before he got two steps, Lucius' blade had numbed his left forearm, and swept his knee so that he went down. The laughter stopped as Bona stood again.

Lucius focussed on his opponent, struggling to ignore the burning in his side. He fainted a couple times to see how Bona would react. Quickly enough.

"What are you waiting for, puppy? If you want to be a man of the legions, that thin purple stripe on your tunic isn't going to save you!" Even as he finished taunting, he was rushing Lucius, swatting the wooden blade aside with a hammy fist and wrapping his arms around Lucius from

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behind as though he were rustling a bull from his herd.

Lucius felt pain lacerating his side, and smelled the stink of raw garlic from behind his ear. He could hear Argus cursing on the sideline, and feel the mocking expressions of those watching.

Then he went limp for a moment. Bona eased his grip a little, and then Lucius slammed his head backward to crush the man's nose.

Bona howled in pain, and released Lucius. The latter rolled away to grab his rudus and limped back to where the northerner was busy catching blood in his cupped hands.

"Who will be assigned to the kitchens now, pig?" Lucius said as he brought up his rudus to slam into the side of Bona's head.

Dazed, the big man swung his red fist, but Lucius dodged it, then landed his own fist into the man's nose once more, sending him unconscious to the sand of the stadium.

Lucius wavered there for a moment, and stared at the men in the line-up.

"Anyone else want to mock my name?"

No one answered except the centurion who had signed him in.

"Come here, Metellus!" the centurion ordered.

"He didn't do anything the bastard didn't deserve!" Argus protested.

The centurion ignored him and looked Lucius up and down as he approached. His arms were crossed, roped with muscles and painted with scars. On his chest harness were at least a dozen decorations for bravery on campaigns Lucius could only imagine.

The young Roman knew this would not be a man to cross, and from the way he held his vinerod, and the marks along its length, it would not be a good idea.

"Yes, centurion..."

"Never mind my name. What was that?"

"Sir?"

"You let him rile you. You dropped your sword and let him get close enough to pick you up." The centurion shook his head as he glanced at Argus pommelling his opponent into the dirt.

"But I beat him, didn't I?" Lucius protested.

"Yes, but you near became useless yourself. If one of that bastard's fists had connected with you, you'd have been done for."

"Yes, sir." Lucius hated it, the humiliation, the blame, as if he had lost the bout.

"But you handled yourself well enough. You have speed, and patience. That's good." The centurion did not smile, but his voice did change. "I'm going to be wanting you in my century when we march east, Metellus. I don't give a damn about your name, or your Equestrian status. The fact that you're not pulling family strings to get a higher rank tells me enough. I'll take him too." The centurion nodded his head backward as Argus' man fell once more with a thud in the clotted sand.

"Yes, sir." Lucius smiled slightly.

"Don't be smiling yet, boy. You won't thank me for it when we're facing down a Parthian cavalry charge in the desert in high summer. For now, get yourself to the medicus at the other end of the stadium. He'll patch you up and tell you how to care for those ribs. I want you fit for training."

"When do we report, sir?" Lucius asked as Argus joined them, barely breathing heavily.

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"I want you here in two weeks. We'll be drilling, marching, and learning to fight like Romans. So rest up and I'll see you back here, rain or shine."

"Who do we ask for then, sir?" Lucius asked.

"Decimus. That's me. Centurion in the new III Parthica Legion. From this day on, I own you boys." He looked directly at Argus then and said, "I'll be watching you closely, Argus. I see you can fight, but there's more than bloodying your fists on someone's face that makes you a soldier."

"Yes...sir," Argus said slowly. "Got it."

"Good. Now, get out of here before that northerner wakes up."

Decimus turned and walked away without another word, as Lucius and Argus watched Bona being roused on the bench of wounded men.

The northerner's eyes searched for Lucius and when he saw him, he spat in Lucius' direction.

Lucius ignored him, smiled, and walked out of the stadium with Argus, forgetting to visit the medicus on his way.

The two young men were wrapped in cloaks of elation as they walked from the Stadium of Domitian, past the Baths of Nero and Agrippa.

"I think we made an impression," Argus laughed. "Did you see what I did to that other guy? I don't think they'll accept him now."

"I'm not sure crippling the other recruits was what they had in mind," Lucius said a bit sheepishly. He knew what he had done to Bona.

"Don't start feeling guilty for what you did to that bastard! Everytime someone messes with you in the baths or in the ring at the palaestra, you torture yourself over right and wrong." Argus stopped and held Lucius fast. "He deserved it! Get over yourself."

"Did your guy deserve what you gave him?"

"Yes, as a matter of fact. He did. He was Bona's friend from the pig fields up north, and he was muttering curses at you while you were fighting. I showed him the way of it."

Lucius stared at Argus a moment, trying to figure out his foster brother. They had been the best of friends for years, their families close. Ever since Argus' parents had been murdered, he had lived with the Metelli. He and Lucius had done everything together, drinking, gambling, going to the Circus for the chariot races and the Colosseum for the games. They'd even headed to the brothels for the first time together.

The two young men were close, but still there were times when Lucius could not quite understand Argus' reasoning. Still, when he was in the thick of a brawl, he did not want anyone else but Argus at his back.

Lucius smiled broadly and slapped Argus upside the head.

"You're a real bastard, you know that?" Lucius laughed.

Argus did not smile, but pushed Lucius playfully into a fruitseller's stall, making him topple a display of blood oranges before he ran off.

Lucius followed, laughing as he chased Argus down, with the fruitseller's curses echoing in the narrow stone-flagged street. They ran fast, dodging in and out of the milling crowds in the street of the cloth merchants until Argus stopped abruptly in front of The Nymph and Satyr

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taberna.

"Come on, I'll buy you a victory drink." Argus beamed. "We did it, Lucius! We fucking did it! Let's celebrate. I'll buy the drinks, you buy the whores."

Lucius paused a moment, looking into the tavern where several people, including some off-duty Praetorians, were sitting at wooden tables with clay pitchers of watered wine.

"I can't right now," Lucius said.

"Why not? We've been waiting for this day for years, Lucius. If not now, when?" Argus crossed his thick arms, his black hair sticking to his sweaty brow, his dark eyes staring at Lucius. "Your gods can wait for once."

"No, Argus. It's because of them that we have succeeded in this."

"No, it's because of all our hard work and training that we succeeded."

"Listen, I'll see you at home, ok? I'm going to the temple to make an offering and think for a while."

"Fine." Argus turned and went down another street. "I'll be in the Subura drinking shit!" he called over his shoulder.

Lucius sighed and watched Argus go. He knew he would cool off after a few pitchers of the vinegar they served in the seedier taverns of the Subura. Argus would come home after visiting another brothel, vomit, and fall asleep in his cubiculum until midday.

Lucius looked up at the blue sky where the sun shone above Rome. The weather had been mild and bright for days now. His spirits were high. When he spotted a blackbird flying in the direction of the Palatine Hill, he took it as a sign that he had made the right decision.

"I'm coming," he said, and set off around the base of the Capitoline Hill to cut through the Forum Romanum. It always did help him to focus, seeing the monuments that his ancestors had erected at the heart of the Empire. The Metelli had helped to build the Empire, and he longed to put his name alongside theirs in the records of the Roman people.

Lucius had often been told stories of his great ancestors, and all that they had accomplished in the days of the Republic. His father never let him forget those long ago days of Republican honour.

The Metelli were one of the oldest families in Rome. They had lived, not in the neighbourhood where his family lived now, near the stink of the Forum Boarium, but atop the Palatine Hill, where only the greatest of Rome's citizens had kept their households.

Metelli had thrived in the Senate, and on the battlefield. They had been victorious in the wars against mighty Carthage, and subsequently held the post of Pontifex Maximus and Dictator. In fact, many of Lucius' ancestors had been great warriors, and it had fallen to them often to lead Rome in war. There was Dalmaticus who conquered Dalmatia, and Macedonicus who put an end to the rebellion in the former lands of Alexander the Great. Another was Numidicus, a politician and general who waged a successful campaign against Jugurtha of Numidia. And then there was Creticus, a praetor, who had defeated and pacified the pirates plaguing the island of Crete.

The Imagines of so many great men lined the current halls of the Metellus domus that Lucius found it hard to ever forget they were there, watching from the other side of the black river, waiting to see what he would do. Lucius saw the day he had joined the Legions as his first act in showing his ancestors that he was in fact worthy of their name.

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Then there was the other name, Anguis, the cognomen of his branch of the Metelli. It had always been mysterious to him, unnerving. His father hated the name and had abandoned it himself, opting for Caecilius through some thinly veiled connection. It was only because of Lucius' grandfather that he had been given the family name of Anguis, or Dragon. Legend had it that the name had been given to one of the Metelli on the eve before the battle of Zama in which Lucius' ancestor had fought alongside Scipio Africanus against Hannibal.

The reach and expectation of those long-ago ancestors still had a grip on his family, and guided Lucius' decisions, almost as much as the guidance of the Gods.

Lucius' father however, Quintus Caecilius Metellus, had different ideas to Lucius, different wants for his son's future and the path he would take to get there. Lucius knew that he would have to face down his father about what he achieved that day.

As he stepped into the familiar square before the Temple of Palatine Apollo, he set those thoughts aside. This was where his heart truly lay. As he mounted the white marble steps beneath the towering columns and temple pediment, he took a deep breath of the familiar scents of jasmine and orange blossoms. Peacocks wailed in the nearby gardens of the Palace of Augustus, carried on the breeze that wrapped itself about the Palatine.

Lucius stared a moment at the great bronze doors of the temple, through which he had passed many times. Then he went inside, disappearing into the welcoming smoke of incense and offering.

The temple was dark with just a few rays of light angling their way in through the small upper windows of the temple, lighting a path down the aisle to the statue of Apollo surrounded by the Muses. As ever, the statue seemed to beckon to Lucius who walked toward the altar that was flanked by two tall, flaming bronze braziers.

Lucius reached into the small satchel he had over his shoulder and pulled out a fresh branch of rosemary and laurel which he laid on the altar. He felt his ribs pulsing and wished for a moment that he had seen the medicus before leaving the stadium, but he dismissed the thought and raised his palms up to Apollo, the patron god of the Anguis branch of the Metelli.

"Far-shooting Apollo, I thank you for giving me the strength to achieve success today, for lighting the path before me as you always have done." Lucius paused a moment as he heard one of the priests' footsteps come to a halt nearby. The flames of the brazier flickered and smoked as the priest threw three handfuls of incense on them, filling the air with the strong tang of frankincense and cedar. Lucius continued.

"Apollo, now that I have achieved this first step, I feel fear creeping into my veins like a poison. Please continue to watch over me, to guide me. Let me do honour to my family and my ancestors who have worshipped you since the beginning of our line. Help me to serve Rome and the Empire to the best of my ability, to excel above all others in war, and skill, and wisdom, and to be a man of honour, always." Lucius looked up, his eyes burning with the threat of tears, just as if he were a boy once again, scared of the threat of his father's fist for defying him. He took a deep breath and exhaled slowly, calm again.

The god and his muses seemed to stare down at Lucius, encouraging him, sympathetic to him. So many times, Lucius remembered Apollo appearing to him over the years, in omens and apparitions, those things he did not dare speak of in front of any but his sister, Alene.

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"I will not fail you, mighty Apollo. Your favour will not be misplaced as I step into the world beyond the walls of Rome." He raised his palms higher and closed his eyes. "Accept my humble offering..."

When Lucius opened his eyes, the light from the high windows had moved several feet and the priest of Apollo stood nearby, smiling at the young man he had welcomed into the temple for many years.

"You are bleeding, young Metellus," the priest said, pointing at Lucius' side where his tunic was purple and red.

Lucius looked down and felt his ribs. "An injury from the Field of Mars."

"Apollo is also a god of healing. You should heal yourself that you may better fulfill the vows you make." The old man smiled kindly, his white beard waving as the temple doors opened and a cool breeze wafted up the aisle.

"I'll go now," Lucius answered, bowing to the priest. "Before the legions march, I'll be back with a small goat and scented oil in offering."

"Apollo will be pleased," the priest said as he joined Lucius in walking to the main doors and sunlight outside. "I expected to see you today."

"Oh?"

"Your eagles have been circling in the sky above the temple all day, glorying in Apollo's light." The priest stopped at the top of the stairs and pointed into the sky. "See?"

Lucius looked up and saw the two shapes outlined against the sun, their cries falling over the city as though from the heights of Olympus. He smiled and felt for the eagle feather wrapped in linen beneath his tunic. He remembered the day the eagle had landed beside him, early one morning when he had left the domus without permission, drawn to the temple square. The eagle had left the token for him and Lucius had kept it ever since, a reminder of Apollo's favour.

"Today is propitious," the priest said, his hand on Lucius' shoulder. "As your old tutor, Diodorus, would say, 'Be mindful of the world about you, for the Gods speak to the fortunate through the world around them.'"

"Yes," Lucius laughed. "I do believe Diodorus said that. In fact he did, many a time."

"Go now. Get yourself to the baths and a medicus before going home." The priest's face grew serious. "Your father will need to know your plans."

Lucius nodded and descended the steps slowly, making his way back down to the Forum Romanum and the Baths of Agrippa. He needed to think. He needed to plan what he would say to his father before he could return to the Metellus domus.