

Prologus

A.D. 208

In the dawn mist, at the edge of a far, northern wood, a white stallion caroused, revelling in life, in the moment. His neighing and the sound of his hooves cut through the air to penetrate the ancient forest, heralding the day to the darkness within. He cut right and left and jumped and leaned to full gallop, his footing always sure. Power surged in the muscles beneath his shimmery coat, his mane silver and wild, untamed.

Then there was laughter, laughter to lighten the heart of the darkest recesses of the world. A ringing voice of spring rain and sunlight both. The stallion stopped, ears forward, eyes turned to the wood and the growing light that approached.

As dawn's pink light finally laced the mist, She came: the mistress of horses, a goddess in shining robes of white and gold. She was tall and slender with red-gold hair, her eyes alight with life from beyond the veil of worlds.

The stallion approached and kneeled, his magnificent head bowed to her.

She sang to him, and he rose to meet her loving hand which caressed his muzzle and neck. On the branches above her were perched three white birds, and about her feet were three white hounds with red-tipped ears, her loyal sentries of earth and air.

Her presence was music, but in a moment the music changed, her demeanour darkened. Her eyes narrowed to dark tidal pools, and the stallion reared in front of her toward the field and down the valley. Calming him with a word of the otherworld, she waited as a wind was born in the West and clouds descended. She smiled, terrible and beautiful at once.

They are here...

The stallion entered the wood at her side as they came, horses and men clad in iron and bronze, clenching sword and spear and shield for war, for the kill. Above these riders soared the dragons, their howls ushering in the battle to come.

She watched the leader, and his head turned quickly to her as he flew past, his war mask brilliant across the green field. At his signal, the riders split into three columns, their mounts beautifully disciplined.

At a word from the goddess, the three birds followed, shot from tree to sky as arrows on the wind. She sighed, her lithe hand outstretched, fingers wrapped about a swaying branch of rowan as though clasping the hand of an old friend.

A moment later, the light of dawn returned and she sat atop the stallion to gallop soundlessly back into the wood, trailed by her running hounds whose ears swayed like field poppies in a spring breeze.

I

Anguis et Aper



‘The Dragon and the Boar’

The chieftain was waiting around the last embers of his night fire when the voice echoed down the glen. He rose slowly when the others jumped. The swirling designs that covered his body came to life with his movement, and the blue boar across his massive chest bristled in anticipation. He had dreamt last night that this was the day on which he would etch his name on the stone of time. His ancestors would not let him down, they demanded he fight.

“Lord!” screamed the chieftain’s scout as he flung himself onto his knees from his pony’s back, lungs heaving. “It is the Dragon, my lord. He is coming in at the western end of the glen!”

The chieftain looked at the ground beneath his feet, the sky above. He could feel his warriors’ eyes upon him, expectant and itching for battle. They were the mightiest of his clan, nine hundred strong, their ponies sturdy and swift.

“How many?” He allowed himself a smile.

“Eight dragons, lord. About two-hundred and fifty riders in all.”

“Against our nine hundred?” the chieftain’s voice erupted and he pumped his powerful arms to the sky. “Today we finish this, and I will kill the Dragon with these bare hands!” His warriors roared their approval and adulation. “Mount up! We go now to the kill!”

With that, nine hundred fighting men bounded onto their mounts, the chieftain in his war chariot, and thundered westward down the glen, eating up the earth before them.

Mist hung loosely in the valley, forced back by the growing light of day and more than two hundred and fifty horses and riders of the Ala III Britannorum who trounced the muddy green of the land as they rode to meet their quarry, the Boar of the Selgovae. Each man knew his role and that of his comrade so that they moved as one, a force of nature rushing to battle as a wave to the shore.

Above the riders, the draconaria howled terribly, their long tails fluting back over their ranks when they were hoisted and the force split into three as they entered the valley, one down the centre and two smaller ones on either of the flanking hillsides among the trees. At the crest of this wave of howling scales and teeth rode their praefectus, the ‘Dragon’, his long, crimson cloak flowing behind him like a river of blood. His face was masked by his crested war helm with the mark of the dragon, rampant also upon his black armour and his red and gold vexillum standard mounted on a spear carried by one of his men.

The praefectus picked up the pace of the charge when he spotted the sacred birds above his three columns, guiding them to battle. He hefted his twelve-foot kontos lance and a rush of warm wind seemed to push them on from behind to meet the dark wave of the enemy as it appeared in the distance, small at first, but the size of the force coming at them quickly became more

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apparent. Beneath the deathly cold demeanour of his war mask the praefectus smiled as he noticed the disarray of the enemy forces coming toward them, each individual hero of the Selgovae fighting for his own glory. In their centre, churning up the earth, came an ancient war chariot skillfully-driven. On the small fighting platform stood a giant of a man gripping three ash spears, a golden torc about his brawny neck.

The praefectus now knew his target and focussed on it, his every limb tingling, pulsing with the fight to come and he pushed straight at the warrior chieftain who was pulling back an arm to launch a spear. The praefectus did not need to look to know his men where exactly where they should be; he could feel them. As the two waves approached in a body of screams and battle cries, the praefectus transferred his lance to his other hand and unslung the golden-hilted sword at his back.

“Anguis!” roared the riders behind him.

The Boar of the Selgovae let fly his spear at the winging Dragon’s heart only to be hacked away in the air before it struck home. A second spear flew on, farther than most men could throw, and was parried to land harmlessly on the ground amidst the riders behind. The chieftain roared and his warriors surged at the smaller force, covering the entire valley. Before he realized it, the chariot was swerving, its driver at his feet, impaled on the Dragon’s tooth. The chieftain grabbed for the reins with his free hand and braced himself defiantly on the prow of his ancestors’ chariot. In a moment he was swept away through the red air as the Dragon leapt from his horse amidst the crashing armies and chaos.

The Dragon and the Boar soared out the back of the chariot to land heavily on the already bloodied earth.

“Ahh!” the chieftain raged as he felt the blood leaking from his side where the Dragon had already sunk his tooth into his flesh. He regained his feet only to find his bodyguards writhing on the ground about him, daggers protruding from their guts. In front of him stood the Dragon, his bloody cloak blowing in the rushing wind, his steel face cold and blank, the only trace of emotion the golden sword that was pointed at him, dripping with the blood of his people.

The Boar rushed at his enemy with his long hacking sword but the Dragon moved with ethereal speed, behind him when he should have been in front of him, cutting at his back, inflicting weakening wounds about his body. The boar writhed, but would not abate his attacks, and the two fought on.

The praefectus moved instinctively, as though with foresight, unaware of the ring of fighting warriors that had formed about him and the chieftain. About the circle swirled his riders, in a maelstrom of death as they hacked away at the enemy forces, on the killing field and on the hillsides where the other columns had engaged. At the back of his mind, he was only vaguely aware of the thunder further down the valley. His other eight dragons had come to join the battle at the rear of the enemy.

The Dragon and the Boar fought on, circling, swirling and biting. They slashed at each other remorselessly, the voices of their gods ringing in their ears.

“Morrigan!” the Boar screamed the name of the war goddess as he leapt and rolled to slam into the Dragon’s guts and lift him into the air to the delight of his warriors. His prey would not be held long, having climbed over him in the rush of his attack to land on his feet behind the

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chieftain.

The Dragon roared like one of his draconaria when he felt hot blood pouring from a gash in his thigh inflicted by the Boar in his attack.

“The Dragon is bloodied!” the chieftain goaded, but before he knew it his enemy was upon him, and he felt one of the Dragon’s teeth sink into the muscle of his leg, lancing with pain. His massive arms reached out to grab but met only air as the Dragon wrapped an iron arm about his neck from behind and began to squeeze.

Immediately the Boar’s vision failed as he began to succumb to the death grip, his tired, wounded arms flailing backward helplessly. Now the remainder of his bodyguards moved in to help, but as quickly as they neared, just as quickly were they swept away, impaled on the lances of the unseen second wave of dragons that was finishing off the desperate remnants of his warriors.

Wanting nothing but death now, the Boar heaved with a last effort so that the Dragon was thrown over his head, the death grip broken. The Dragon swirled in a flurry of red before him and the Boar charged to skewer him on his long sword as he came down. The Dragon landed on his feet and immediately lowered and spun, his armoured leg crashing into the Boar’s knee, the golden sword flashing up to slice through and shatter the Boar’s ancestral blade.

The Boar tried to raise himself on the corpses of his clansmen where they lay about him, to meet his death on his feet, but he felt burning fire in his leg and fell back down again, agony ripping at his throat. His arms shaking he looked up to see the Dragon staring down at him, his expressionless mask cold, a god of death whose glowing sword now extended to his throat.

“Kill me!” the Boar raged at his enemy. “I am not afraid of death. Kill me!” The Dragon’s arm steadied for a moment and the fallen chieftain readied himself for the blow that would send him to his ancestors, but it was not meant to be. The Dragon shook his armoured head once, turned and walked away. “Kill me, you demon! Coward!” the chieftain roared, disappointed and bereft. “Why won’t you kill me?” he asked, but all that met him was the billowing crimson cloak amidst the carnage.

The chieftain made to grab a nearby dagger to do it himself, but strong, scaled arms grabbed him and the world went black.