

The Republic

Where they make a desert, they call it peace.

- Tacitus

Prologue

It was mid-morning by the time the boy had crested the hill, and the corpses had already begun to ripen.

From up high, the stench was not so rancid, and the boy could at last breathe without tasting the dead on his tongue. But he could still see them down there, their bodies strewn out like scraps of scythed wheat toward the horizon. Most of those bodies were still now, silent, but a few still shrieked or groaned, or else shivered beneath the swarming flies, clinging to their broken bodies like a tumor.

What a difference a day could make, the boy thought, idly scratching his ankle with one toe as he surveyed the carnage. For just yesterday, had he not stood upon this same hill, only to find the field bleak but empty and a city looming on the horizon. Leviath, he had heard it called: a great spired metropolis, rich enough to rival even the Republic's own Capital.

Except, there was no city now. There were no spires. There was only smoke and fire and the faint screams that mingled with the ashes, gritty as the dregs of some bitter, soldier's wine.

Eventually, the boy's attention was drawn away by the sound of two men fighting. They were not far below him, and for a time, he watched them dispassionately from his hilltop, shielding his eyes against the smog-polluted sunlight. Exhaustion had rendered them inelegant; they stumbled and slid, eventually tumbling to the mud to wrestle like children. They grappled, rolled, then one of them started shrieking *no no no no NO!*

And then there was only silence.

The boy waited for the victor to stagger away before creeping closer. The freshly fallen were always the best targets, he found, for they had not yet been picked clean by the other scavengers. He crouched down to get a better look, and was surprised to see that the dead man was one of his own, a legionnaire, his gold armor now tarnished and blood stained. The

boy cast a furtive look around, then quickly inspected the man's fingers and pockets, but all he found was some lint and a few slinger's stones.

The boy sat back on his haunches, frustratedly swatting at the gathering flies and thinking he would certainly sleep hungry that night, and it was then that he saw the scabbard. It was jeweled with what he guessed were fake stones, but it held a short sword, well made by the look of its pommel. The boy felt a surge of joy as he snatched at the weapon, but the strap caught beneath the dead man's body and would move no further. Pressing his sandal to the man's chest, the boy *heaved*, wrenching until the blade abruptly came free. A cry of surprise escaped his lips as he began to pitch backwards, but before he could sink into the morass of bodies, a hand gripped his shoulder, steadying him.

"Careful, boy." Came the sound of a deep voice.

The boy's eyes fell first upon the man's boots, mud-caked and worn, then slid slowly upward to take in the heavy plate, the frayed, crimson cloak fastened with an ornate golden sun. The man wore no helmet, and his short, graying hair was matted with a poultice of sweat and blood. Behind him, eight guards stood like great golden statues, their spears held upright, shields arrayed into a wall before them.

"A-apologies, Imperial General Titus." The boy stammered when he had finally found his voice. "I didn't see you there - I was just -"

"Scavenging, yes. I can see that myself."

The boy swallowed, lowered his eyes. Scavenging was no crime, but nor was it without risk either. The boy knew that many legionnaires looked upon the practice with revulsion, and would beat or even kill someone for choosing the wrong target.

"I've seen you before, haven't I?" Titus said, lips twitching as if suppressing a smile. "You're the little one forever tempting fate by coming out before the battle is even over."

The boy nodded, surprised and not a little proud that the great man had noticed him. "Yes, Imperial General. There's more to find that way. You know, before the others arrive."

"Either a bold choice or a reckless one. You realize you may soon find yourself among your quarry were you not careful."

"I know, Imperial General."

Titus studied him. "And yet you are not afraid."

The boy shook his head. "No, Imperial General." In truth, it was a suspicion that had been growing in the boy's mind for some time now, one he dared not speak aloud for fear of what it would mean: that death was, for whatever reason, indifferent to him. That he was impervious. Invisible. Exempted.

The boy found himself gazing at the slumped form of a disemboweled Severian as he thought this, so that when he blinked and looked again, Titus was watching him closely once more.

"I suppose it would not have made much difference." The general murmured, turning his attention away. "What is one more dead against all this..." He sighed, clenching his jaw and shaking his head. "There are more than half a million in this field, did you know that? The single greatest loss of life in the Republic's history, or so I am told. And all because one...madman believes himself a god."

The boy looked down at his muddy sandals, fidgeting. He did not know if there was a question folded somewhere in there, but he had long ago learned it was best to answer when a legion officer addressed him. He scrunched up his face. "Haarland says we had to destroy the theists, Imperial General, else they would've destroyed us."

Titus grunted. "That's what Haarland says, is it?"

"Yes, Imperial General."

"And this...Haarland. Does he say why the Severians wished to destroy us?"

At once, the boy regretted speaking so heedlessly. If the fat steward Haarland were to be reprimanded, he would surely take it out on him. He chose his next words carefully. "Haarland says they wanted to make us slaves, Imperial General. You know, for their gods and beds and that. He says they prefer boys like me most of all."

Titus sighed and rubbed his eyes. "What's your name, boy?"

"Illius, Imperial General."

"And how old are you, Illius?"

Illius felt his cheeks redden. "I-I don't rightly know, Imperial General. But Haarland reckons I'm ten or thereabouts."

Titus nodded, then motioned back to the field. "Tell me, Illius. What if I were to say that they weren't just theists? That they were men, just like I am. Just like you, fortune willing, may someday be, too. Men with wives and children who were simply doing as they were commanded. Would you still think we needed to destroy them?"

Illius thought again of everything he had ever heard about the Severians. How each year, thousands of men, women, and children were brutally murdered in the name of their emperor, Ciris Mykur. But no, not murdered. *Sacrificed*. That was the word Haarland had used. Those children made to live for weeks in cramped wicker cages until the day they were finally set aflame had not been murdered. They had been *sacrificed*. It was a word without parallel in the Republic's language, a word that meant nothing to a people without gods of their own, and the scavenger children had looked at the steward with confusion in their large, cataracted eyes.

Haarland sighed as only a man burdened by the presence of an inferior intellect can sigh, and explained that the theists believed their emperor *was* a god, that he needed those charred, roasted children like a normal man needed water, that they kept the emperor young, healthy, vibrant. Queer tales, yes, but, the queerest of all, at least in Illius's mind, surrounded not the god emperor himself, but his brother, Eero, the witch lord of Nebechad. For while he had heard what Ciris supposedly was, they had actually seen what Eero could do, the impossible way he could twist a man's body like hair around his little finger. Warnings. That's what Haarland called the defiled, inhuman things Eero left in his wake. They were warnings.

Titus was still watching him, his gaze curious, patient.

"Yes, Imperial General." Illius said at last, hazarding that confirmation was what Titus wanted. "I reckon we ought to kill every last one of the bastards."

A sad smile seemed to crease the older man's face. He glanced back at the field once more, then squatted and ran his fingers through the soil, sifting out a large, black rock. He brushed off the dirt, and Illius saw that the rock had a purple, crystal core. Nightstone, the men named it. When they had first crossed the mountains into Severia, the legionnaires had scrambled and fought for the first ones, thinking they were as valuable as gold, only to realize they were as common here as clumps of mud back home. Illius considered telling this to Titus so he would not be disappointed, but the general had already pocketed the rock and was rising, unsheathing the stolen sword that Illius had dropped. Titus weighed it in his hand, feigned a figure eight cut. "Tell me, Illius. Do you know what comes next, now that this war is finally over?"

“No, Imperial General.”

Titus cut twice more with the short sword and then, with smooth grace, offered it hilt first back to Illius. “Nor I. So let us find out together. Come.”

Illius opened his mouth to respond, but Titus had already turned away. The boy stood dumbly where he was, glancing between the slowly disappearing general and the field of dead. One of the honor guard, tall and regal in his golden armor, gave a small jerk of his head, indicating that Illius should follow. The boy took a few tentative steps, and the guards parted to let him through, then closed behind him like water round a stone. Illius could hear the clang of their armor as he jogged to keep up with Titus’s longer strides.

Ten minutes went by, twenty, and soon Illius began to see signs of the war camp looming around him. It had been the boy’s home all his life, and yet it looked somehow different now. Diminished. Like wood hollowed out by termites. As they passed, the men who still lived stopped their bleeding and drinking and spitting and gaped at Titus. A few bowed, or raised their spears, or banged bloodied short swords against their shields. TI-TUS, came the call.

TI-TUS.

Titus neither acknowledged these cries nor broke his stride, but he did slow slightly, to Illius’s great relief. A gap had formed in the men; a gauntlet of roaring, battle-crazed legionnaires, screaming and pounding their shields like they were Timish drums of war. Illius could see the various companies arranged in small groups around him. X Moria and X Caligo and X Canis. X Alaude and X Contritus and X Reaper. Haarland was there among this last, webbed eyes wide and filled with a kind of confused horror. *What the fuck are you doing?* The old steward mouthed furiously, but Illius could only keep walking.

TI-TUS. BANG.

TI-TUS. BANG.

Nearby, a cluster of towering, bearded figures stood apart from the others, their axes and bows and black-painted shields resting against their knees. Eldskarn, the boy knew at once, those few barbarians who had been permitted to cross the mountains without their famed Battle King. One grinned through a curtain of greasy hair as they passed, baring a mouthful of broken teeth.

TI-TUS. BANG.

TI-TUS. BANG.

The cries began to fade as they entered a small clearing in front of the officers' pavilion. Men on horseback edged the periphery, breath misting in the cool air, while at the center, three figures stood before a great, peaked tent. They each nodded respectfully at Titus's arrival.

The Imperial General inclined his head at the tent. "Is he in there?"

"He's in there." Replied the closest of them, Lord General Orley, his scarred head gleaming with sweat. "Wasn't easy though. Bastard nearly took down a whole company of spearmen before we got to him."

"*Magic.*" Lord General Sinner smirked, mismatched eyes dancing with mischief. "That is what the men are saying, at least." The young general nodded to the soldiers outside the clearing. "See how they cower away. They fear if they come too near they will catch his sorcery like a sickness, leaving them all spotted and impotent."

"Foolishness." Spat Lord General Caryon, his voice dripping with contempt. Illius noticed that his armor was not dirty or bloodstained like the other two, but perfectly pristine, almost as though he had just put it on a moment before. "There was no more magic to what he did than there is to a puppeteer pulling strings."

"Does it matter?" Orley snapped, turning on the taller Caryon. "Were our men not slaughtered all the same? How many times, Kristop? How many fucking times did I say that it would be an utter waste to try and take him alive-"

"It was my order, Howad, not his." Titus cut in calmly. "Direct your ire at me if you must direct it at anyone. But you should know I stand by what I said. We needed him, and we needed him alive. Had it taken an entire legion to bring him here it would have been worth it."

"Imperial General-" Orley began, but Titus spoke over him.

"We needed him alive, Howad. There was no other way."

"Their army is smashed." Orley continued. "Their emperor dead. Their city in ruins. What difference does one man make?"

"One man -" Titus echoed. - "who our own legionnaires fear so deeply that they dare not come near his tent? And if that is how our men feel, imagine his own. No. They need to see him, Howad, and they need to see that we have him. That is the only way this ends."

Orley only scowled in response.

Titus smiled and walked up to him, placing a hand on Orley's shoulder. "You are a good man, Howad, and an even better commander. But do you know what you lack?"

"Hair?" Offered Sinner. Orley's scowl deepened but Titus laughed and squeezed the general's shoulder affectionately.

"You lack imagination. You do not see the power that faith, that magic, can have on lesser men." He paused and glanced back at the soldiers behind him. "You think we are any different? Tell me. Why did our men follow me over the Ogres when it was said to be impossible?" He did not wait for Orley to answer. "They did it because they had faith, Howad. Because they believed I would lead them here safely. That faith which allows our men to risk certain death in the mountains is the same that drives a million Severians to follow a man into a war they know they cannot win. And sure as we will do it again, so will they if they believe the man in that tent is still alive."

Titus's voice had grown so soft that Illius was sure no one outside their small circle could hear him, and yet the boy glanced around nervously all the same. Illius knew what was whispered around cookfires late at night, those forbidden words murmured to explain what the Imperial General had done. *Magic. Witchcraft. Sorcery.* What other explanation could there be? Everyone knew it was suicide to try and cross the Ogre passes with a full legion, and yet Titus had somehow managed the feat with more than a hundred of them. Nearly half a million men. And so they wondered. Was that why the Senate had called for the Imperial General's arrest? Not because he had disobeyed their orders and left the Capital unprotected, but because he had broken this, their most sacred taboo? Most men had dismissed these rumors outright, refusing to even entertain the notion that magic existed, let alone that Titus would stoop so low as to using it. But this, the Imperial General openly comparing his heroics to Severian sorcery, it was as close to an admission of guilt as Illius had ever heard.

There was silence for a moment, when Caryon cleared his throat. "You should know, Imperial General, that there is another in there with him."

At this, Titus's head snapped up. He turned and looked at Caryon with such ferocity that the other general seemed to wilt beneath his glare. "Another? I thought I made myself clear that he was to be taken alone."

“Yes, Imperial General. Abundantly clear. But we - that is Lord General Orley and myself - we thought you might want to see this.”

Titus looked between the two men as if seeking further explanation, but it was Sinner who spoke. “They were right, Oleryx.” The younger man said in a soft, careful voice. “You will want to see what is in there.”

Titus ground his jaw, glowering at his generals, before jerking his head at the tent. “Come then. Let us not keep our *guests* waiting any longer.”

With that, Titus strode towards the tent, with Caryon, Orley, and Sinner trailing not far behind him. Illius remained awkwardly where he stood, when Titus barked over his shoulder. “You too, boy.”

The three generals, who until that moment had not appeared to even notice Illius, all turned and looked at him.

“Who-“ Began Caryon.

“My aide-de-camp.” Titus cut in.

“Aide-de-“ Orley repeated slowly.

“And a damn fine one he is at that.” Sinner offered Illius his crooked smile and walked up to him. “Just look at him. Wiry, sure, but you can tell he’s strong. Would make a fine addition to my Dogs with that blade he’s carrying. Took it off a Severian you cut down in battle, did you, son?”

The general said all of this without the least hint of mocking, but Illius’s face burned crimson all the same.

“Good lad.” Sinner said, throwing an arm around his shoulder.

“He’s a *scavenger*, Oleryx.” Caryon said with an air of exasperation. “You cannot truly be suggesting that he come in with us.”

“I think that’s precisely what the Imperial General is suggesting.” Said Sinner cheerfully. “And, thing is, we obey his orders, not the other way around. Happy coincidence, that.”

Caryon’s eyes tightened, and he looked as if he was going to argue further, but then he threw up his arms. “Sure. Fine. Bring the scavenger if that is what you desire.”

“Aide-de-camp.” Sinner corrected.

“Go on.” Titus said. “I’ll follow.”

The others disappeared into the tent, but Titus bent down and looked Illius squarely in the face. “There is something I would like you to do for me, Illius. Something I believe may be of great importance for all of us in the near future.”

Illius swallowed and glanced around. “Okay.”

“I would like you to watch, do you understand? Watch and remember what you see. Can you do that?”

Another nod.

Titus straightened. “Good. Then let us go inside. It is time we face our enemy at last.” With that Titus turned and opened the flap, and the two of them stepped into the tent together.

It took Illius’s eyes a moment to adjust to the darkness, and when they did it was the guards he noted first. There were a dozen in all, huddled together near the flap with postures so rigid Illius could not tell if they were even breathing. Indeed, the soldiers barely registered that the four most powerful men in the legion had just entered, for their eyes were so fixed upon what lay in the opposite corner. Something that appeared to so terrify them that they dared not even look away.

Hesitantly, Illius followed their gaze, to where a man was seated behind a table. He was a thin man, almost gaunt, with the sort of hollow, angular face that might have been judged handsome once, had it not been beaten to the point of disfigurement. Now, his lip was swollen and jaw purple, and his hair, long and sable though it remained, was patchy in places, exposing the pink strips of scalp where great fistfuls had been torn out. He wore a faded cloak the color of wheat and no shoes, and between his spindly wrists rusted shackles swung back and forth. But it was his eyes that Illius could not look away from. They were hazel, the boy was sure of that, but of such a peculiar shade that in the dim candlelight they appeared to glow almost yellow.

Those unsettling eyes shifted between the five newcomers in turn, before finally settling on Illius. At once, the boy felt a chill steal over his body, colder than anything he had felt in the mountains. Unwitting, he began to back away, when he felt a hand grasp his shoulder. He looked up to see Lord General Sinner standing beside him, gazing at the Severian with none of his normal, easy grace.

“My Lord Mykur.” Titus nodded in the direction of the prisoner.

The man’s gaze lingered on Illius for a beat longer, before flicking to Titus. “Imperial General.” He had a high, cold voice, and spoke the Republic’s tongue with only the slightest hint of an accent. “I admit I had not thought to find you here. Is it true that your own senate believes you to be a traitor?”

“So they say.”

Eero Mykur clicked his tongue. “How fascinating. It is almost as if they fear you now even more than they do me. Will they make you stand trial, do you think?”

“I suspect so.”

Eero leaned forward, his chains rattling on the table. “But will you let them? *That* is the question I am most interested in.”

Titus said nothing, and after a moment Eero turned to the others. “And you must be Lord General Sinner, famed commander of those wretched Dogs that have caused my army so much trouble.” Sinner gave a small bow. “And these two, of course, I have already become intimately familiar with.” As if on cue, one of Eero’s cuts began to weep, so that a trickle of dark blood ran down his cheek and onto his lip. “How good to see you, again, General Orley. I was hoping we might meet once more before this was all over.”

“As was I, *theist*.” Growled Orley, flexing his hands.

Eero smiled, his fingers drumming a slow, deliberate rhythm on the table: “And where is your boy king of Eldskar?” The Severian made a show of looking around. “I would have thought to see him here as well.”

“I think you know where he is.” Titus said evenly.

Eero’s yellow eyes glittered. “Yes. Another rebellion back home, was it? How unfortunate. I was so looking forward to meeting him, too. I hear they have even given him a new name. *The Battle King*.” Eero pronounced the title with a flourish. “What a lucky man you are, Titus, to have such a fine ally as *the Battle King* on your side. Though I do wonder. What should happen to your friendship after I am gone? They say he is such an ambitious young man, after all, our Battle King. And so very violent. Do you think he will still be content with his bogs and forests when this is all over? Or might he yearn for something...more?”

When Titus did not respond, Eero leaned back in his chair. "And who is the child?"

Eero's gaze never left Titus, and so it took a moment for Illius to realize to whom the Severian was referring. All eyes in the room swiveled to face him. Illius swallowed, and felt Sinner's grip tighten around his shoulder.

"My aide." Answered Titus.

Eero's eyes sparkled with amusement. "A peculiar lie. I wonder why you tell it." He looked at Illius. "What is your name, child?"

Reflexively, Illius opened his mouth to answer, but before he could say a word Sinner squeezed his shoulder. Illius glanced up at him, and the general gave an almost imperceptible shake of his head.

Eero saw all of this, his eyes darting between Sinner and Illius and finally landing on Titus. "He is surrounded by blackness. It all but swallows him. Do you see it, Titus?"

"No." Titus responded flatly.

"Another lie. Though I suspect it is true that you do not see the extent of it, or else you never would have allowed him to remain alive so long. You should know he will bring immeasurable harm to your family should you let him. But I can stop him, if you like. You need only give him to me for an hour or so."

Illius tried to back away, but Sinner held him tight.

"Enough." Said Caryon impatiently. "We did not come here to listen to your lies, Mykur."

Eero tilted his head at him. "Then why did you come here, Lord General Caryon?"

"To prove to our men that they need not be frightened of a charlatan."

"Oh, but they are frightened." Said Eero, his faint smile breaking through once more. "As are you, General Caryon. Your fear practically drips from your skin. I suspect I could taste it were you to come a bit nearer."

As if to disprove this claim, Caryon took a step forward, but Titus stopped him with a shake of his head.

"What big strong men you all are!" Eero said with a laugh that had more than a little madness in it. "Growling and barking at my every command."

“Jest if you like, *theist*, but it is your army that is in ruins, not ours.” Caryon’s hands clenched into fists. “Your empire that burns even as we speak.”

Eero’s laughter ceased so abruptly it was jarring. He sat forward, his chains clattering as he placed his hands on the table. “And how many of your legionnaires had to die to see it burn? Hm? How many did I slay by my own hand while you and General Orley tried so valiantly to keep me alive?”

Illius glanced nervously at Orley, who had stiffened at the madman’s words.

“I never did quite express my gratitude for that, did I, General Orley?” Said Eero, turning as well to face the bald man. “To have sacrificed all those brave legionnaires just for me, I admit I was flattered. Though I do wonder. Have you decided what you will tell their wives and children yet?”

“Shut up.” Orley’s voice was soft, his body as rigid as a board.

Eero looked as though he had an idea. “I know. Perhaps you can comfort them with stories their husbands’ bravery, yes?”

“I said shut *up*.”

“Lord General.” Said Titus warningly.

“Tell them how their husbands pissed themselves and shrieked for mercy as I tore out their throats. Tell them how they wept and sobbed in the end, screaming out names that may have been their lovers’. Perhaps that will ease their suffering, wouldn’t you say?” Eero began to laugh again.

“I said -” Orley suddenly lunged forward and grabbed Eero’s cloak, wrenching him out of the chair. “...shut! Up! Shut! Up! You! Miserable! Fucking! Bastard!” Orley punctuated each insult by punching Eero in the face, before Sinner and Caryon scrambled forward, grabbing him by the arms and dragging him back.

“Lord General!” Titus barked, glaring at him. “You will control yourself or you will leave. Do you understand?”

The bald general was breathing hard, his small eyes fixed on Eero.

“Do you understand?” Titus roared.

Orley gave a curt nod. Titus turned back around, and it was then, in the sudden quiet after the commotion, that Illius heard the sound. A soft, undulating, braying noise, coming from somewhere behind the Severian commander.

Titus must have heard it too, for he raised his chin slightly. "What is—"

"What we wished to show you, Imperial General." Caryon finished.

Titus turned to Mykur, suddenly stiff, and Illius saw that the Severian had an expectant look on his bloodied face, as though this was the surprise he had been waiting to reveal.

"Is that what I think it is?" Titus whispered hoarsely.

It was Caryon who answered. "It is, Imperial General."

"Bring it to me."

Eero's head remained still, yet his eyes followed as Caryon walked around him. What the general emerged with was so strange, so incongruous to that scene that for a moment Illius had trouble comprehending what he was looking at.

"Imperial General Titus," Caryon proffered a small, gray bundle as if afraid it would lash out and bite him. "I present to you the new Emperor of Severia."

Titus only stared, so it was Sinner who moved forward to take the child. He cradled it in his elbow, and Illius saw that it was a boy, purple-faced and screaming. Sinner made a cooing noise, bouncing and rocking the child, until gradually it began to calm.

Titus was gaping at Eero, eyes wide with astonishment. "Is this true?"

Eero only sat back in his chair, watching.

"But... how? Why is he here?" All of Titus's composure seemed to have suddenly abandoned him. "Speak!" he roared.

"Do you know, there are nearly as many tales of you now as there are me." Eero said softly. "The great General Titus. Risen from nothing to become the most powerful man the world has ever known. Selflessly willing to sacrifice everything in pursuit of what is right. Willing even to defy the wishes of your own precious senate if it meant defeating me. And so I began to wonder, how far would a man like that be willing to go? He would sacrifice his reputation, yes, even his life. But what of his soul?" Eero's eyes were feverish in the candlelight. "Would he, say, murder a child if it meant that child could not grow up to become his enemy? Would he trade

one life, even the life of an innocent, in exchange for peace?" Eero's horrible grin returned. "That is the choice I give you, Titus. Call it my final, parting gift. I will make you choose. Your soul, or your Republic?"

The room was silent for a long moment, the only sound the small noises that came from the baby. Titus stared at Eero as if only then seeing him for the first time.

"Leave us." The Imperial General said at last. He looked around at the others. "All of you. Leave us."

"Imperial General-" Caryon began.

"Leave us!"

Caryon took a breath, then bowed and departed, Orley close on his heels. Sinner walked forward and held out the bundle, but Titus gestured that he should set the child on the table. Sinner gave him a searching look, then did as he was bid, placing the squirming boy down. At once the child began to cry softly once more.

Sinner glanced back at it, then seemed to will himself away. "Come, boy." The young general said, holding out his hand to Illius.

"The boy stays." Titus said.

Sinner's crooked face showed his surprise, but he did not argue. Instead, he merely bowed and took his leave. Titus waited for him to go before turning back to face Mykur. He regarded the Severian for a moment before speaking.

"Do you remember that last time we met, Eero?" Titus said at last, fingering one of his golden rings.

Eero nodded. "However could I forget. It was Duke Rizzi's grand banquet in Providence, one final, fruitless attempt at peace. You handed me a glass of wine and told me to stop this folly now before it led to the empire's ruin. And I told you that you were speaking to the wrong man. That this war was never my will, but my brother's, and who was I to defy the wishes of a god."

"Yes." Titus murmured, turning his back on the prisoner. "That is what I remember too." He was silent for a moment, as if thinking. "Do you know what I've always wondered since then? Your emperors. Are they born gods, or is only later that they...ascend?"

Eero's eyes found the child. "Is there an answer you would prefer?"

Titus shifted as if to speak, but just then the baby made a sound. The Imperial General stiffened, then sighed. He turned around, raising himself to his full height.

"You asked why we came here, and I shall tell you now. You, Eero Mykur, Lord of Nebechad and Commander of the Severian armies, are hereby sentenced to death by execution. For the crimes you have committed against the citizens of the Republic, including slavery, rape, murder, torture, theft, and the false practice of witchcraft, your eyes shall be plucked out, your tongue removed, and your body burned. You will perish in front of your men, who will then be executed the same in turn. No quarter shall be given, nor prisoners taken. Not a single Severian fighting man shall be spared. Your capital, Leviath, will be razed to the ground, and all that is of value, be it gold, silver, or jewels will be awarded to my men as recompense for their service. Everything else shall be burned, along with any freemen who still reside within your walls. A summons shall be summarily sent out, commanding that all cities and states within the Severian Empire swear allegiance to the Republic. Those who do so will be permitted no weapons but that which they need to sow and plow their fields. For one hundred years and one hundred years after, half of whatever is tilled, sold, or made will be paid to the Republic as reparation for the wars of their emperor. If they submit willingly to these demands, all citizens save those in Leviath will be spared, and a magistrate will be sent from the Capital for their administration and governance. Those who do not submit, however, will meet the same fate as you and your men. None will be spared. None will be shown mercy."

Titus pronounced this judgement without anger or malice, but with a kind of melancholy, as though he wished it were otherwise.

Eero, for his part, appeared to be expecting nothing less, and his bruised face betrayed no hint of emotion. When Titus had finally finished, Eero merely scratched at his shackled wrist. "And what of the child, Titus? What of my nephew? What will you do?"

"I will take him back to the Capital. His fate to be decided alongside my own, by the Chancellor and the Senate."

Eero's face showed his disgust, but Titus did not see. He had already turned his back and begun to walk away. Illius went to follow when, just as Titus reached the tent flap, a cold voice rose up from behind them.

"Will you permit me one final question, Titus, before you go?"

Titus paused, his jaw a knot of muscle. Illius willed him to keep walking, to leave the hot, stifling tent, for surely no good could come from whatever the Severian would say. But Illius was not truly an aide, no matter what Titus said. He was merely a scavenger, an orphan, and so he kept his mouth shut as Titus, without turning back, said softly. "And what question is that, my Lord Mykur?"

"Why did you lie before? When you said you did not see the shadows that surround the boy?"

When Titus did not answer right away, Illius looked from him to Eero, frowning. The Severian had that small smile on his lips once more. "Is it because you fear him?" His eyes flicked to Illius, who quickly averted his gaze. "No, that's not it, is it? You are intrigued by him, but not afraid. Not yet." Eero bit his lip and gazed at Titus's back for a moment, and then it was as if a light flickered behind his eyes. "It's shame, isn't it?" Eero looked almost shocked by his own revelation. "You believe that if you admit that you can see the boy's darkness then you must also admit to the gift that you possess. But why should that matter? Surely it is not because of *them*? Your senate and their...absurd moral codes. Don't you see, Titus? Don't you see that they've made their rules to *restrain* you. Because they *fear* you. They fear what you can do to them should you wish it."

Still, Titus said nothing, his hand resting on the tent flap, chin dipped slightly as if in prayer. Illius saw that his jaw was grinding once more.

Eero shook his head. "Oh, Titus. My dear, sweet Titus. You must not feel ashamed over what you are. Your gift will make you greater than you can possibly imagine. Greater even than you are now. I have seen it. All that you will do. The order you will bring to this corrupt, chaotic world. And it is marvelous, Titus. It is so, so marvelous. But you should know, too, that it comes with a price. Everything has a cost, after all, and this most of all."

Titus did not turn around, but his hand on the tent flap had become a fist. When he spoke again, his voice was quiet. "What price?"

But Eero did not answer. Instead, he began to laugh once more, a cold, mirthless laugh that made Illius's flesh crawl. Titus abruptly shoved open the flap, and together the general and boy stepped out into the open air, leaving Eero Mykur and all his madness behind them.