

COLLEGIUM

ALMOST RIVER, MOESIA, NOVEMBER

Sabinus had forgotten how harsh Moesian winters could be, a thick freezing fog had drifted in from the north, veiling everything in impenetrable grey.

Up on the ridge, an Optio Ballistarius walked along inspecting the batteries under his supervision. The fires keeping the cauldrons of pitch and resin bubbling for the incendiaries infused the fog around them. The huge ballistae now assembled and in place along the ridge made a ghostly sight shrouded in the fog. He watched his ballistarii busy stacking the empty terracotta fire pots near the cauldrons, ready to be filled with the boiling pitch, his eye drawn to a youngster who dropped a pot and it smashed. The kid looked scared. 'Easy, lad,' he said as he approached the wagon carrying the pots.

The young ballistarius looked at him. 'Sorry, Optio. It slipped out of my hands.'

'Just take your time, lad. It'll be hours before we need 'em.'

'Yes, Optio.'

'You just concentrate on what you have to do, lad, everything's going to be just fine that way.'

'Yes, Optio.'

The optio approached a giant onager catapult and checked the ropes, missile baskets, torsion wheels and ratchets, and swinging arm, his ballistarii watching him anxiously, expecting him to find a problem, as optio's invariably do, but he seemed satisfied and moves on to the next engine of war without moment.

Below the ridge, the cohorts, centuries and contubernales marched quietly through the frigid fog in their serried and disciplined details to their battle lines, where optios dressed the lines and spoke encouraging words.

The day broke gradually, filling the for with a colourless incandescence over the cold battlefield upon which many there today were going to die.

Eventually, as the sun grew higher, the fog thinned to a mist and the long valley was revealed.

Hell had sent forth its blood-gorging harpies, all knowing in the mysteries of death, cawing and rasping from their perches in the bare trees like spectators at an arena, their strangled voices auguring the carnage to come. One took to flight, the beat of its wings so loud in the immensity of the silence, it made some men look round startled.

'The ravens are gathering,' said Sabinus as he followed the harpy's course across the valley, watching it glide effortlessly to the far side, its black glossy body accentuated in the pale grey mist, its wings outstretched as it swooped down in a broad graceful arc to the distant treetops.

Polybius barely looked at him and said, 'Death does not travel without his companions.'

Sabinus watched the mist drifting across the valley like a miasmic mortcloth ready to cover the dead. His horse nickered restlessly, stamping its hoof on the sod as if testing its firmness.

The dogs of fear were at Sabinus' heels and the touch of terror's cold hand on his brow, turning his sweat to ice. This wasn't his first battle, but by the gods, it was going to be his toughest and bloodiest, of that he had no doubt as he saw the dark mass of Budorix's barbarian army at the far end of the valley. His breath trembled from his throat, hot as fire, pluming steam, while his guts shifted and rived like snakes in his body, his heart pounding like Vulcan's hammer, almost bursting from his chest as he felt himself discomposing. This could be his last day on earth and he felt his own mortality keener than ever before.

He was fielded on the extreme left near the river, two stades in front of the bridge with his cohort from the Fifth Alaudae and the Norici auxiliaries. Faustus also fielded fifty cavalry with him, and his father sent the Rogues into the woods south of the river with sixty sagittarii to pick off any skirmishers who might try getting in behind them to open a way to the bridgehead.

At the bridge were two centuries from the Twelfth Victrix.

On the eastern edge of the forest, the remaining divisions of the Twelfth Victrix and the Fourth and Fifth Macedonica stretched for near fifteen hundred yards across the valley in the eastern heights where the ground rose above the mist, neat in their formations, blocked in cohorts and centuries, each man three feet from the next, each rank six feet apart, standing as still and as silent as corpses interred in the misty gloom, the only sign of life being the fog of their exhaled breaths pluming in front of their faces.

Faustus surveyed the valley with icy calm. He had come here four days ago with Drusus, Macer and Nepos. Budorix was aiming to march his army over the bridge and on to Ratiaria. Budorix knew it was going to be a fight, and confident with his army, he came willing to give one.

The ground was favourable, not too rough and reasonably flat. The Almus flowed through the valley from the southwest to northeast, snaking around the contours of valley wall rising sharply to a line of precipitous cliffs overhanging Faustus' left flank, where he had set several batteries of onagers and other heavy ballistae and scorpions.

They had fought like demons for every foot of ground they had taken, turning rivers red with Celtic blood, all through the scorching heat of the summer, into the slimy mud of the rainy autumn, and now they were into the beginnings of winter, and the Celts were just as determined to fight as the Romans just as fiercely for every other foot.

He gazed upon his mechanical dragons, their long pendulous hurling arms drawn back ready for the pots of boiling pitch and resin. The ballistarii stood at the ready next to their colossal wooden beasts.

A signaller's shout echoed: 'All lines report ready!'

Looking forward, his heavy infantry took the centre field, stretching diagonally along the slope about three quarters of the way up the hill. Behind them, two full cavalry divisions from the Fifth and Fourth Macedonica, a thousand disciplined horses and men, with five hundred more from the Thirteenth Gemina behind his right flank, their lances stabbing the dreary sky. Then the legionary reserves occupied the rear centre, ready to reinforce the front centre or flanks as the battle might require.

‘God, I hate this fucking country.’

Nepos’ face looked like a map, the lines and ridges deep and sharp like valleys of granite, expressionless as he surveyed the enemy. As fearsome a mob of savages as he could hope to do battle with, their long hair spiked and stippled with animal fat and bleached with lime and chalk, as is their custom in war. ‘Marvellous,’ he mumbled to himself, ‘just fucking marvellous!’ He cocked his head back. ‘The gods are watching us, lads!!!’ he called to the men of the First cohort, keeping his eyes front. ‘But I’m watching you closer!’ he added in a low resonant tone.

The Celts began to chant and sing, and calling upon their war gods, banging their spears against their flimsy wooden round shields. The noise carried like thunder along the valley.

Nepos knew this was how the barbarians built themselves up for battle, trying to instil fear into their enemy and working themselves up into a frenzied state.

Faustus’ horse twitched uneasily beneath him when the roaring war chants began. He steadied the beast. ‘Eager to get into it, eh,’ he said patting the horse’s neck to calm it.

‘It’s a good day to die,’ said Macer.

Faustus looked at him. ‘*No it’s not! It’s a fucking awful day to die!* That’s why we’re going to win this battle. I’ll tell you when it’s a good day to die, until then you stay on your horse, and remember that you’re first Tribune of the Fifth!’

Macer smiled. ‘I was referring to the enemy.’

‘Ah! For them it’s the best day of their accursed lives to die, Macer!’ Faustus bantered back. He looked at a signaller. ‘Pass it on! Today is the best day for the enemy to die!’

‘Sir?’

‘You heard.’

The signaller nodded and spelt out a semaphore message.

Icy sleet spattered Nepos like bird shit, sliding down his face. He swiped it away with his hand. Looked over the far left of field, where he saw Sabinus on his horse with Polybius and Teutonium flanking him, his cohorts of Crested Larks and Norici right behind him.

The roar of the Celts grew louder, more menacing, shaking their spears, swords and axes in the air over their heads, calling upon their war gods to fill them with their power and wrath.

Nepos could sense the trepidation in the ranks. 'Easy boys, they might scream like your mothers, but they fight like your sisters!'

The men laughed.

'That's what scares me, First!' someone shouted.

More nervous chuckles belched from the ranks.

Nepos laughed. 'Then you know what you're up against. But we're the First of the First. We're the Fifth fucking Macedonica! Who are we, lads?'

'The First of the First!!!' they hollered at the tops of their voices. 'We're the Fifth fucking Macedonica!!!'

'And who am I, boys!?'

'Nepos Maximo, The Bastard of the Aventine!!!' they sang out.

Nepos beamed.

Behind in the command square, the officers sat on their horses, the cheers and shouts from the First Century boomed over the legion. That was Nepos' magic, his men loved him, they'd follow him into hell itself, and fight anyone for him. Faustus envied him that – they all did.

'*Insolent bastard,*' a tribune murmured spitefully, the bridge of his nose creasing with contempt. He looked at Tribune Septimus, mounted beside him on a smoky grey horse with an almost pure white mane. 'Who the hell does he think he is?'

Septimus looked back at him, his face flushed with the cold, his nose running. 'If you need to ask that, then you will never understand.' He sniffed.

The tribune glared at him.

'A word of warning, Gnaeus,' Septimus went on at the tribune, 'You speak ill of a respected man to those who respect him most. His men will fight like Hades's hounds today, and they will endure the worse of this battle, and upon them the day will be decided for us or against us, so he can be as insolent as he wants, and you will thank him for it.'

Gnaeus looked crestfallen under Septimus' reprimanding stare. Nepos could have been firing lightning bolts out of his arse, it could not have made him any more revered.

'The gods are with us!' Nepos called. 'And the might of Rome is behind us!'

On the other side of the valley, the barbarians were still chanted their blood-curdling war songs, and screamed their curses and insults at the Romans. They surged forwards fifty yards, trying to entice the legions into battle, but the Roman lines remained rigid.

Faustus had to steady his spirited horse again.

'Listen to them,' said Gnaeus. 'Savages.'

'This is how they mine their courage,' said Macer, 'calling upon their war gods to fill their hearts with fire before the furor Celtica, the Celtic fury.' He looked at Gnaeus. 'Have you ever seen the furor Celtica, Gnaeus?'

Gnaeus shook his head.

Macer grinned at him. 'Then you're in for a treat.'

The barbarians finally charged, their battle cries thundering like the inhuman cry of a monster with one terrifying voice, and Hell's startled harpies took to their wings, flapping above their perches before settling again, in wait of violence and death.

'Not yet ... not yet...' Faustus watched the barbarians stampeding along the valley, waving their swords, spears and battle-axes in the air, screaming out their war cries ... exhausting themselves charging towards the Romans – uphill all the way...

Not yet ... not yet.

He raised his sword up at arm's length and looked back at his fire-dragons and ballistarii started filling their pots with pitch and resin, loading them into the catapult slings...

Not yet, not yet.

The roar of the barbarians grew louder, and the earth thundered beneath their stampeding feet through swirling the mist.

Not yet ... not yet.

The tribunes watched Faustus, straining with anxious anticipation, barely able to hold their nerve as the barbarian horde swelled into an storm of death...

Not yet, not yet.

The roar of the Budorix's army grew louder, the sinuous storm getting closer and closer, but still the Romans remained steady in their silent ranks...

Not yet ... not yet.

Macer watched Faustus like a hawk, waiting for exactly the right moment to maximize the effectiveness of the onagers and scorpions to unleash death and destruction upon the enemy.

Finally, Faustus pointed his sword up to the ballistae and dipped the blade and the artillery commanders gave the order for the batteries to unleash their missiles.

The fire dragons roared into life, their huge arms lurched through the air with a loud whirring clatter – the engines recoiled back on their wheels as the arms shot forwards with vroom, unleashing incredible force as the torsion ropes and counterweights released their energy, they unleashed their fiery ordnance from their slings, and the glowing balls of fire arced through the sky like comets, hurtling unstoppably towards the charging enemy. Inky fingers of smoke trailed in their wakes. The missiles swooped down with a roaring WHOOSH as the fire pots tore through the air and exploded indiscriminately into the furor Celtica. The burning pitch and resin exploded out. Scorching hot inextinguishable pitch and resin flew out in every direction, sticking to flesh in burning clumps that stuck fast to their skin and robes catching them alight.

Dozens of Celts ran screaming in panic and pain, trying to extinguish the fire burning into their flesh. Terrible screams filled the air – their bodies consumed by living fire.

Columns of acrid smoke swirled up into the atmosphere from the shapeless heaps of dead and dying Celts lying across the valley. Faustus and his army watched with calm, still and silent – biding their time-

Another whirring clank and vroom of the onagers as a second volley of incendiaries streaked across the sky.

Men on fire ran screaming towards the river, but most fell dead long before they reached it. One man's entire head and face was ablaze in flames, and he ran about screaming for over a minute before he finally succumbed to merciful death.

The incendiaries rained more death and pain down on the charging barbarians.

Faustus raised and dipped his sword again and the Scorpions, oxybeles and other small catapults opened fire, bombarding the Celts with boulders and spear sized arrows that ripped through the barbarians with devastating effect, killing and maiming dozens of them, drastically weakening their centre and thinning their flanks, and slowing their charge but still the enemy ran screaming across the valley, reinforcements charged out from Budorix's lines, stampeding towards them.

In the centre, Nepos could see the hideously snarling faces of thousands of barbarians getting closer, their battle cries getting ever louder. 'The First Cohort will advance on my command!!! Ready spears!!!'

A quartet of cornu blasted out...

Nepos' voice boomed: 'The First will advance!!!'

Suddenly the legions' forward divisions advanced at a march towards the charging enemy.

'Wedge!!!' Nepos hollered at the top of his voice, and suddenly the entire First cohort metamorphosed at the march from vertical lines into a giant of eight hundred man strong triangle in a series of sharp, and impressively synchronized movements. Their spears ready for the advance behind their Primus Pilus, marching at the double into the furor Celtica.

The armies crashed together with a shuddering clatter of shields and battle cries, swords and spears jabbing and hacking, men pushing against one another, the First century's wedge cutting deep into the Celts' centre, breaking the force of their charge and driving a hole through them. The wedge grew ever wider as the second and third cohorts joined the flexuous mass of muscle and steel.

'Grrraaarr!!!' Nepos growled as he shoved his sword into a Celt's guts and gave it a good hard twist before yanking it out.

Faustus, observing and directing the battle from the hill, summoned a signaller. 'Signal to Germanicus, attack the enemy's right with his cavalry to cover our left flank,' he commanded, noting the auxiliaries' there were sustaining heavy losses from barbarian cavalry and mounted archers sweeping in from the forests behind the Celtic lines, and from the river.

Another volley of incendiaries was fired, aimed at the Celts' rear lines, the explosions of fire spooking the barbarians' horses as they wheeled to the rear flanks of their army before galloping into open ground.

The plain was littered with corpses, and columns of acrid smoke rose up from the scorched earth and burning Celts.

Calm as a praetor must be, Faustus' eyes roved the battle with exemplary self-control, directing archers to the river to stem the flow of barbarian cavalry.

The praefectus alae – prefect of the wing, Sempronius Regillensis ordered a hundred of his cavalry from the wing out to cover the left flank. The hundred horse pounding the earth as it wheeled from the wing and charged into the disarray of the Triballic cavalry.

At the same time, on the right flank, the auxiliary line opened and Regillensis drew his spatha and cried out: 'CHARGE!!!' and he with another two hundred cavalry thundered out through the opening with a pounding drum of hooves, hurtling into the melee. 'GIVE THEM DEATH!!!'

Sabinus was off his horse, leading his men from the ground towards the enemy's right flank.

Suddenly the air whistled, and a dark cloud of arrows zipped through the sky towards Sabinus' advancing cohort. 'Testudo!!! Testudo!!!' he yelled and dropped to a knee behind his shield. His men suddenly surged around him and quickly overlapped their shields on all four sides, and the inner ranks raised their shields to form an armoured roof as the torrent of arrows rained down on them with a terrible clatter, impaling their shields' outer composite layers, but none got through to flesh – most bounced off the hard curved surfaces like hailstones.

The significance of their action in surrounding their tribune was not lost on Sabinus, who understood the warrior code from the ground up. It was more than the act of the dutiful, it was an act of respect. He led from the front, took the same risks – more some might say. His youth was no longer a tarnish, here at least, he had proved himself worthy of his rank and worthy to command.

As soon as the barrage was over, Sabinus shouted: 'Advance!!! Advance!!!'

A wave of Celts surged towards them.

Budorix watched the carnage from his position right of the field, his nobles sitting wordlessly on their horses around him. They knew who this day belonged to and it wasn't King Budorix.

The Celts ran headlong onto the Romans' spears, impaling themselves mindlessly. The Romans, more machine than men, advanced steadily over their crumpled corpses, ramming Roman steel into Celtic flesh.

And so it continued, the momentum established, advancing with fast thrusting spears and hacking swords, blood and flesh flying through the air, consumed in the cacophonous din of clashing metal and screams of pain and battle, the stench of blood, smoke and scorching flesh poisoning the air.

Flushed with the funk of battle, Sabinus and the first century of his cohort pushed into the deafening crush ahead of the rest, lunging and hacking into the heaving mass of bearded Celts, possessed by the spirit of Mars, who filled his heart with a warrior's merciless rage. Shield to shield, man to man and sword to guts. There was barely room in the chaotic press of men for the chest to expand enough to fill the lungs with a breath.

They were cut off, surrounded by Celts, deep in the melee. Several of his men fell, one right beside him.

Praxus, filled the space, lunging his gladius forwards, ramming it deep and another Celt fell. 'Hold together!' he shouted back, his face twisted with strains as they pushed their shields into a wall of unyielding brawn.

Suddenly an axe crashed into Praxus head, cutting through his helmets as though it were an egg shell. Praxus exchanged a startled look with Sabinus. Blood started pouring down his face. He looked into Sabinus' eyes before the glimmer of life waned into the blackness of death his pupils expanding like ink in water. He was dead, but still upright, propped up by the crush of men around them, slowly sinking away beneath the storm.

Sabinus came to his senses, and with renewed energy, spurred on by vengeance and the instinct to survive, he thrust his spatha into the red bearded axeman's face and shoved it in through his mouth until it smashed out of the back of the Celt's head... 'Grrraarr!!!' he cried out in rage as he drew his blade back and stabbed another Celt with it. He lost his shield and immediately reached to his shoulder with his left hand and drew his xiphos short sword, and wasted no time using it.

They were swamped, and his men were falling fast., the barbarians now coming at their backs and flanks as well as their front. They packed in ever tighter – Sabinus knew they were doomed, but still he fought ferociously...

Suddenly a dozen Roman horsemen crashed into the Celts' flank to their left! – His father's Rogues, and never was he more pleased to see them-

Sabinus plunged both his blood slicked swords into a Celt's chest and the Celt crumpled down into the press of men – more fodder for the mud.

'Eat this, you ugly cunt!' his optio roared as he slammed the bronze boss of his shield into a big brawny Celt's grimacing face and served him death with an undercutting thrust of his gladius, up into the Celt's abdomen, driving the blade in to the hilt, and as the Celt fell, Perdiccas' horse trampled on him as the Rogues charged in, hacking down at the barbarians – smashing their swords down onto their heads, driving their warhorses into the thick of the melee to rescue the Bastard's son.

It bought Sabinus and the thirty or so men left of his prime century time enough for the rest of the Sixteenth to push through and reinforce him.

The Celt flank now disintegrated, the Bastard and three hundred cavalry of the wing were decimating the centre, driving their wedged formation ever deeper into the barbarous horde, splitting it in two, while Faustus now advanced with the host of the Fifth to the enemy's left flank, while the

Gemina made a pincer towards the enemy's right where Sabinus and the Rogues were fighting.

Sabinus spotted a lone tribune, somehow separated from the battle, riding through acrid black smoke on his grey horse, glowing in the wall of flames behind him, wielding a bloody spatha – *Drusus!*

Drusus' horse whinnied and reared up on its hind legs in panic as another incendiary plummeted down from above and exploded twenty yards in front of him, setting bushes alight. Drusus tried to steady his terrified horse, but it reared again with a terrified whinny and threw Drusus out of his saddle and sent him flying back through the air.

He landed with a hard splat in the cold mud, and for a moment he was too stunned and too winded to move and he stared dazed up into the smoke streaked sky through the leafless treetops. Then a barbarian charged out of the flaming smoke towards him, his blackened face twisted hideously as he lurched through the smoke at him, bearing his black teeth as he raised his long-sword, a look of frenzied madness in his wide bright eyes as he heaved the blade up over his head ready to smash it into Drusus' body – Drusus scrambled back quickly, his feet slipping hopelessly in the slimy mud and getting him nowhere fast, the barbarian bearing down on him with a bloodthirsty grin on his face, thinking what a fine trophy his head would make for his warhorse...

Too late! The barbarian's sword cut the air towards him–

Then, suddenly, a lean dark figure flew out of nowhere from behind the barbarian – a flash of steel – a jet of blood shot from the Celt's neck as his head flipped unnaturally to the side revealing a gaping wound, his head was almost completely decapitated. He collapsed in a twitching heap in the mud between Drusus' legs, his blood pumping rapidly from the gaping wound in the final beats of his savage heart.

Drusus gazed up at Sabinus in utter dismay.

Sabinus, as bloody as a butcher, held his hand out to Drusus. 'Are you injured?'

'Injured?' Drusus echoed as he pulled himself up, stunned that he was even still alive to respond. He looked at his youthful saviour. 'I'm fine,' he said quickly checking himself over... 'Fine...' He was pale and trembling.

Drusus looked into the chaos of the battle beyond the burning trees. 'I'll not forget this, Sabinus Maximo.'

The bloody madness raged on with unrelenting butchery.

It was every man for himself. The Romans deploying their spears and taking to their swords, neither side were willing to disengage.

Nepos' First century had managed to butcher their way into the enemy's heart, opening them up like a fish with his wedge for Regillensis' cavalry to fill the void.

The Celts were losing cohesion in their undisciplined and poorly trained ranks, exhausted by their furor Celtica, charging uphill, they were losing their strength and their will to fight the relentless Romans.

'Open their fucking throats!!!' Nepos yelled when he saw his friend fall.

The firmament of carnage and violence went on. The Romans were fighting the last die hard barbarians, sacrificing themselves for their country, their king and their gods, whilst in the rear, Budorix and his commanders were fleeing east into the forests.