

The King of Winter

by Mark Anthony

“It will be a cold winter,” old Yarrow said. He gazed with age-dimmed eyes at the runes scattered on the stone plate. I studied the pattern. True, I am no scholar, but I have more than a passing interest in the learned arts. Although books are rarer than honest men here in the farthest hinterlands of the empire, over the years—through good fortune and a fair sum of gold—I have come by more than a dozen codices on a variety of subjects, from history to philosophy to rhetoric. A soldier does well to keep his mind keen, not just his sword.

“How cold, Yarrow?” I asked. I gathered my cloak more closely about my shoulders. Outside, the world shone under an amber varnish of autumn sunlight, but the air coming through the chamber’s narrow window bore a sharp edge to it.

“Snow for five months and frost for seven,” the old man said in his cracked voice. “Cold the likes of which has not been known in a year of years will clutch the land. Ancient trees, lords of the forest, will splinter in its grip.”

“And the river?”

The runespeaker’s pock-scarred face grew grim. “The Dimduorn will freeze. Of this the runes tell clearly. For days on end the river will stand as stone.”

I picked up one of the bone runes. In all my years as commander of the Tarrasian garrison at Theysa, I had never known Yarrow’s runespeakings to prove false. True, it was a barbarian craft, and no doubt far beneath the high art of augury employed in the temples of Tarras. But the runic crafts had been practiced in Malachor before its fall. If runes had been good enough for the great lords of that kingdom, certainly they were good enough for the likes of me.

“They will cross it, Dor Calavus,” Yarrow said, his voice quavering now. “The Thanadain—surely they will cross the Dimduorn when it freezes.”

“I know, Yarrow.” I set down the rune. “The barbarians will come.”

I turned from the old man and crossed the stone room that had housed the commanders of this garrison for centuries. On a table lay scattered sheets of paper. I picked up the topmost sheaf, the

words upon it half-finished. A missive—my fifth to Tarras that year. But then, this was not the first time Yarrow’s runes had foretold trouble.

That spring, at the festival of Jorus, the runes had spoken of upheavals to come. Although these had been unnamed at that point, I had heeded Yarrow’s warning and had penned a letter to Tarras. Only now it was autumn, and after three more missives to the empire’s capital city, no help had come. All of my requests for reinforcements had gone unanswered.

But why? I didn’t know. Perhaps none of my riders had made it all the way south to Tarras. After all, no one from Theysa had journeyed there in decades. Not even I. Nor did it matter now. I set the paper down. It was too late to call for help.

A shuffling behind me. “If the Thanadain cross the river, we cannot hold them, Dor Calavus.”

“We have held them at the bridge for years, Yarrow.”

I did not need to see him to know he shook his head.

“At the bridge they can fight but ten abreast, and the sticks they fletch for arrows have no teeth for shields of good Tarrasian iron. But when the Dimduorn freezes, they will come at us not ten abreast but a thousand—nay, five thousand, their flesh white like the snow, and naked as if they feel not the bite of the cold, wielding swords as pale as frost.”

I turned toward the bone-thin man. “Don’t tell me you saw all of *that* in your runes.”

Yarrow trembled inside his gray robe, although whether from fear or age I could not tell. “I do not need runes to tell me this. It is clear for all to see. Tarras will not come. The emperor has forgotten us.”

“That is not so!” My voice was more angry than I intended—perhaps because Yarrow’s words echoed my own fears.

Silence filled the room, then the distant trilling of one last thrush outside the window, singing to the waning sun.

“There is...there is another who can help us,

Dor Calavus.”

The call of the thrush ceased. My eyes narrowed. “Who?” I said. However, I knew what he was going to say before he uttered the words. I had heard the stories whispered in the village below the garrison.

“The witch of the vale.”

I snorted. “There is no witch in the valley, Yarrow. Even if there were, we need a thousand soldiers to aid us, not one mad hag. We will find a way to fight on our own.”

Yarrow’s knobby shoulders slumped. “But you cannot fight ice, Dor Calavus. Even the mightiest of stones must crack under its hold.” He gestured to the plate of runes. “Winter is against us in this. Without help, we cannot win.”

Outside the window, the sun vanished. Blue shadows stole into the chamber, as dim as deep ice. I gazed at the runes and shuddered.

* * *

Three days later, just after a cold, red dawn, I set out on horseback from the garrison to find the witch.

It was foolishness, of course. No doubt Vathris Bullslayer, whose mysteries I followed when time allowed, would frown on what I was doing. He was the god of warriors, a lover of blood and battle, and he cared little for tricks or magic.

I snorted in unison with my horse, our breath forming white clouds on the air. Perhaps that was my problem. Perhaps I needed to be less a scholar and more a warrior. I slipped a gloved hand to the sword at my hip, its grip polished by the hands and sweat of three generations. My snort became a sigh.

Often over the years, I had wished that I possessed my father’s height, or his father’s bulk and muscle. Instead I was slight as my mother had been, with her quick, slender hands. When I gazed into the polished silver mirror in my chamber, it was her dark eyes that gazed back at me, not his.

However, it was his sword I wore about my hip. From him the cloak of command had passed to my

shoulders, and I had no choice but to wear it. Not that this was how it should be—the garrison command was not meant to be a hereditary position. But we did the best we could, given that no relief had come from Tarras in nearly half a century.

When I reached the base of the garrison’s hill, I turned west, toward the dim mouth of a valley I could now just glimpse between two distant hills. Something told me the emperor would appreciate what I was doing as little as Vathris. But both ruler and god seemed to have forgotten the cold lands of the north. Instead they dozed in the spice-soaked air along the shores of the Summer Sea. And I had an army of ten thousand hungry barbarians to keep from crossing the ice.

It was nearing midmorning when a mound hove before me, rising from the sere landscape in a perfect circle. I brought my horse to a halt, then dismounted at the foot of the mound.

I could still recall in crisp detail the day my mother brought me to this place, although I could not have been more than seven winters old. She had spoken in soft tones of those who had fought here against the minions of the Pale King, during the War of the Stones long ago. All who had fallen had been buried in this place. Gazing up at the great mound, both then and now, I could not imagine the number that had perished. Was victory worth so many lives?

But had the Pale King won—and by all the tales he nearly *did* win—Falengarth would have fallen under ice and shadow forever. And if the Thanadain crossed the Dimduorn? Perhaps it would not be so dire as the rule of the Pale King, but it would herald the end of our world—the Tarrasian world—just the same.

The wind hissed through dead grass. Above, thin clouds sliced across the colorless sky like pale knives. For another moment I gazed at the mound, thinking of the stories my mother had told me—stories of the Pale King, and the Old Gods, and the Little People. And of witches. As a child I had believed them all. And now?

Well, the Pale King was real—the mound proved that. As for the rest, I supposed I would find out. I turned to mount again—

—and halted. I thought it odd my horse had not stamped or snorted. Instead the beast placidly nosed the withered grass, searching for a still-tender sprout. A lithe form moved past, clad in a cloak the color of the late autumn land, then lifted slender hands and pushed back the cloak’s hood.

A gasp escaped my lips. Even before I took in her visage—cheeks high, emerald eyes bright, smooth skin tawny from sun and wind—I knew who she must be. She was no hag, this one.

“How?” I murmured. “How did you know I was looking for you?”

It seemed she whispered to me, although her lips did not move.

Am I not a witch, Calavus of Tarras?

In that moment the air around me was as warm and golden as springtime. Then the words faded from my mind, and the gray chill closed around me again. I blinked. Had I imagined the voice?

She laughed, displaying white teeth. Her hair was the color of wheat. “You’re cold,” she said. “Come.”

The witch led me to a hollow on the far side of the mound. A campfire blazed. Why had I not seen the smoke earlier? I didn’t know, but when she gestured for me to sit I did so and was glad for the warmth.

She took a pot from the coals and filled two clay cups with dark, steaming liquid. No witch’s brew this, but instead good, rich *maddock*. I drank and felt a tingling infuse me. *Maddock* was a barbarian drink, and I knew it was frowned upon by the higher classes of Tarras, but it was one outland custom I had willingly accepted. What ability I had to command the garrison would have vanished were it not for my morning pot of the stuff.

Only as I set down the cup did I realize she was staring at me. I shifted under her gaze, but this was foolish. *Maddock* drinker or no, I was Tarrasian and a man of logic. I would not believe she had magic.

Then why did you come seeking me, Dor Calavus?

I dropped the cup as the voice—*her* voice—whispered again in my mind. So much for trusty Tarrasian logic.

“You know my name,” I said, throat tight.

“Your mother came to me once. I gave her a simple of herbs to help quicken the womb. Nine moons later, you were born.”

I scowled at her. “But you could not have met my mother before I was born. I am three-and-thirty winters. And by your look you have fewer years than I.”

Again she laughed. “Do I, Calavus?”

I opened my mouth, then stopped. Something told me I did not want to know the answer to that question.

“What have you come to say to me, Calavus?”

“What? Don’t you already know?”

“I do. You wonder whether Tarras will yet come before the Dimduorn freezes.”

I leaned closer, ignoring the heat of the fire. “And will they? Will Tarras come?”

The witch seemed to think. I wondered if I had called her bluff—if now that I had asked she would be forced to admit she had no true magic, only tricks. At last she nodded.

“I will show you Tarras. Then you may judge for yourself.”

“What do you mean?”

She gestured to the fire. “Look. And see.”

I followed her motion with my eyes but saw only embers glowing amid the dancing flames. I began to turn away. Then, as if the flames had become a window of crimson glass, I saw images through the fire.

A city stood on cliffs above an azure sea: high arches, slender columns, soaring domes blazing with gold. I had never been there, but in my heart I knew it. Tarras.

It was huge—so much greater than I imagined. Like a bird I soared over the web of its streets, its houses, its temples, its markets and palaces without number. My heart thrilled. How could I ever have doubted the might of my empire?

I drew closer, and my stomach clenched. What had seemed white and serene from far above resolved into crowded filth and squalor. The white columns were soiled. The gold domes peeled and cracked. Throngs of unwashed people crowded the streets. They ate sweets and burnt meat and laughed at the crude entertainments of pock-faced jesters, or watched as dogs were pitted in fights to the death, tearing at one another with their teeth until blood ran. Or sometimes it was men, not dogs.

Sickened, I tried to pull away. Instead I was drawn toward a sprawling building, its shaded colonnades surrounding tiled courtyards and marbled fountains. A banner soared above it, gaudy yet faded: the three trees and five stars of Tarras. The emperor’s palace. Gilded doors opened before me, and I drifted into a vast, domed hall.

No, I whispered, but I had no voice, nor eyes to close to shut out the vision. Like a sea of flesh, naked bodies writhed on the floor of the throneroom. Above, on a dais, a lumpy man wearing the gilded *ithaya* leaf crown of the emperor looked on, his leering visage dull but not sated, wine red as blood dribbling down his chin.

“No!”

This time I did cry out. I plunged my gloved fist into the fire. Sparks crackled on the air, and I jerked my hand back. The words burned my throat as I spoke to them. “What is this lie you have shown me, witch?”

Her words were cool and simple as rain. “It is no lie.”

I clenched my scorched fist. Had I not already known that it was so? Why else had all my missives gone unanswered? “So the emperor will never send aid. We are lost.”

“No, Calavus. Tarras is lost. It was lost centuries ago. You are not.”

A gentle touch on my arm. I looked up. I had not seen her draw close to me.

“What’s the difference?” I said. “Why should we fight? We are nothing now. Men without an empire.”

“Then *give* them an empire.” Her words were soft yet pricked my heart. “You will rule a great land, Calavus. If you choose. I have seen it in the flames.”

I pressed my eyes shut. Her words were tempting. But this was madness. I was the unappointed commander of an outland Tarrasian garrison. I was no emperor.

I opened my eyes. “And what of you, witch? What have you seen for yourself in the fire?”

She turned away. “It is best not to look to the flames for one’s own fate.”

I had no answer for that.

The witch turned back. “There is yet help for you in your battle, Dor Calavus—a treasure of the War of the Stones. Seek for it in this place, here were the ancients slumber.”

I shook my head. “What is it?”

“If one fights fire with fire, then you must fight frost with frost.”

Her words meant nothing to me. I laughed so that I would not weep. “And what payment do you wish for this great gift?”

She rose to her feet. “Only this, Calavus. That when you rule your land as I have seen, you swear never to harm or cast out the crones and hags and workers of healing, whatever your followers might say. Do you swear this?”

I stood and gazed on her radiant face. It was absurd. I had no land to cast others out of. All the same I spoke the words. “I swear it.”

The witch smiled. She lifted a slender hand and touched my cheek. “The flames cannot lie. You *will* rule, Calavus. And you will make a place for my sisters. I have seen it.”

Before I could answer, the campfire flared upward, its glare blinding me. Then the flames died down, and I saw that I was alone.

* * *

Three weeks later, winter came to Theysa on the same day Tarras did.

I stood atop the outer wall of the garrison just

as snow began to fall from a hard iron sky and watched the line of soldiers march along the Tarras road. Before them rode twenty men on black horses, and behind came a long train of mule-drawn carts burdened with supplies. Despite the bleakness of the day, I laughed. The emperor had not forgotten us after all.

True, it was only three companies that marched toward the garrison, with no more in sight. Three hundred men, plus the twenty mounted. However, these were men of Tarras—small and dark-haired like me, but proud and muscular. Their breastplates shone like the sun above the Summer Sea. Surely one warrior of Tarras was worth five wild Thanadain.

My eyes moved to the horizon, but I could not see the burial mound for the thickening snow. Not that it mattered. The witch’s magic had been wrong—if she had any magic at all.

And if she did not have magic, then how do you explain what you saw in the fire, Calavus?

A trick, then. Or herbs stirred into my *maddok*. It did not matter. Tarras had come, and at that moment I cared little about the workings of witches.

“Sound the horns, Garius,” I said to the young soldier beside me. “Let the gates be opened.”

Garius nodded and dashed off.

I left the wall and headed to my chamber, where I donned my good cloak and my father’s sword. As I turned to go, motion caught my eye. I paused, gazing back at the dim shadow of a man who stared from the polished silver mirror in the corner of the room. He was dressed in Tarrasian fashion, and his eyes and hair were as dark as any who dwelled in southern lands. But there was something about him—the paleness of his skin, the high, sharp edges of his cheeks—that spoke of colder lands.

“That’s foolish, Calavus,” I murmured. “You’re as Tarrasian as any man of the empire.”

Wasn’t I?

Your mother came to me once....

I moved to the room’s table. From beneath a

heap of papers I pulled a small box. It fit easily in one hand, but it was heavy, fashioned of iron. Its surface might once have borne writing or symbols, but long burial had corroded them beyond legibility. Prying the rusted box open for the first time had been no easy feat, but now, well-oiled, the lid lifted without effort.

The witch had been right about one thing, I would give the madwoman that—there had indeed been something beneath the burial mound from the War of the Stones. How she had known it was there I could not guess, for it was not easily found, and then only by blind luck.

It was a week after I met the witch that I returned to the mound. I had told myself it was to see if she spoke truth, if there really was something to be discovered. However, I think it was not an artifact of Malachor I hoped to find. For all that week, each time I slept, I dreamed of eyes like green emeralds peering at me over dancing flames.

All day I clambered over the surface of the mound, sinking a shovel here and there. By sunset I had nothing to show for it save a good set of blisters and filthy clothes. It was only then, as I descended the mound, that my boot found what my eyes had missed: a small sink hole hidden by a patch of weeds. Even as I groped in the hole to free my boot, my fingers brushed against something far too square to be a rock.

Now, as I had a dozen times since finding the box at the burial mound, I stared at the object within. It was a disk of creamy stone, just slightly larger than a Tarrasian coin. Incised into its surface was a silvery symbol. I had not needed Yarrow to know it was a rune, but when I showed it to the old runespeaker even he did not know which rune it was or the nature of the artifact. I had bid him to find an answer to these questions, but as yet the old man had not returned.

Once again troubling thoughts came to me. How *had* the witch known I would find this? But perhaps it was not such a mystery. After all, she had not said *what* it was I would find. And logic held that if one dug in an old burial mound all day,

one was bound to find something.

“Dor Calavus?”

I closed my hand around the box and turned toward the door. The soldier Garius stood in the entrance.

“The reinforcements approach the gates, sir.”

I nodded. “I’ll be right there.”

The soldier grinned. “It’s like magic, isn’t it, sir? Three Tarrasian companies marching out of the mist, bright and shining. It’s as if they walked out of a story.”

I smiled at him. “Yes. Just like that.”

I slipped the box inside my jerkin, then stepped through the door to meet my fellow Tarrasians.

* * *

“Not bad, Dor Calavus,” said Dor Virago, High Commander of the third sect of the fifth division of the Army of Tarras. “Not bad at all. I’ve seen outposts half this far from Tarras that aren’t in half as good a shape. You’ve done well out here.”

I smiled at the high commander, who stood next to me atop the outer wall. However, when he turned his gaze to look down on the activity of the garrison, the expression faded from my lips. *If I’ve done so well, then why have you commanded your men to alter everything I’ve made here, Dor Virago?*

Belatedly, I scolded myself for this petty thought. Wasn’t this what I had hoped for all these years—for Tarras to come with the men and supplies this garrison needed to survive?

True, some of Dor Virago’s ways, and the ways of his men, were different than ours. A few of my soldiers had come to me over the last several days. They were troubled by Virago’s brusque commands, or his tendency to slap a man with the flat of his sword if an order wasn’t answered swiftly enough. And I had heard disturbing reports from the village, of young women being accosted by the new Tarrasian soldiers. However, when I spoke to Virago, he assured me no such incidents had occurred, and he reminded me of what I already knew—that simple folk tended to fear that which

was not familiar to them.

“Come, Dor Calavus,” Virago said, taking my elbow. “Let’s go see how our men our faring.”

The high commander smiled again, and this time it was hard not to respond.

On the frozen mud of the garrison’s yard, twenty of my men sparred with twenty of Virago’s, all using padded swords. My soldiers had learned to fight in the field, but many of them were young, and all lacked the formal training of the military schools of Tarras. They were, to be blunt, losing badly.

I winced as Mardug, one of my larger and more experienced warriors, flew past me and sprawled to the ground.

Virago clapped my shoulder. “Don’t fear, Calavus. We’ll turn your men into proper Tarrasians yet.”

I eyed the sullen sky. Hard bits of ice fell from the clouds. *You had better hurry*, I wanted to say.

Motion caught my eye, and I saw Yarrow on the far side of the yard, clutching his gray robe around himself as he started toward me. Had the old man learned something about the artifact?

“I must say, Calavus, I had feared the worst on my journey here.”

I blinked and turned toward Virago. “What?”

The high commander watched the sparring men. “While not all is as it should be here, you’ve kept true to the Tarrasian spirit. That hasn’t been the case at all of the hinterland outposts I’ve visited. I’ve seen commanders who’ve gone vulgar.”

“Gone vulgar?”

Virago nodded. “It’s a terrible thing to see. Men who’ve forgotten their duty to Tarras, and who’ve taken to consorting with the barbarians—drinking their drink, wenching their women, working their petty magics and runes....”

I froze. Yarrow had nearly reached us. I lifted a hand part way and made a slicing motion.

Virago frowned. “Is something wrong, Calavus?”

Again I motioned to Yarrow. The old man cocked his head, then shrugged and turned away. I

sighed as he vanished through a doorway.

“No,” I said, “nothing’s wrong. Your words just made me think of the Thanadain across the river. They are at least ten thousand, and we are but seven hundred.”

Virago snorted. “Ten thousand, yes. But over two thirds of those will be old, or women, or children. Of the men who remain, they will attack but a few at a time, in bands of five hundred at the most. And when we defeat one band, the others will turn and flee. It is the way of barbarians.” The high commander spat on the rock-hard ground. “They’re just animals, you know.”

I shivered. I was not so certain of that as Virago. Yet the high commander was an experienced warrior and had fought on many of the empire’s fronts.

“I think we’ve seen enough here, Dor Calavus. Let’s leave the cold to the men and have a cup of spiced wine.”

I hesitated, loath to enjoy the warmth of indoors while my men worked out in the thickening snow. However, warm wine did sound good. I glanced at my soldiers, then turned and followed Virago into the garrison.

* * *

The next morning I left Theysa and rode east across frozen fields toward the village of Faxfarus.

Faxfarus was a day’s trek from the garrison, and I was reluctant to go so far from Theysa. I had awakened that dawn to find the world white with frost. Some of my men reported seeing great chunks of ice floating on the surface of the Dimduorn, and across the river the smoke of Thanadain campfires rose into the still air like a forest of gray trees.

However, I had little choice but to go. A farmer had come to the garrison bearing ill rumors in addition to his cart of peat. He spoke of trouble in Faxfarus—although exactly what had happened he did not know. True, I might have sent one of my captains, as Dor Virago suggested, but that had never been my way. I preferred to see things with

my own eyes rather than rely on the words of others.

The day grew colder rather than warmer as I rode across the empty land. The leaden sky sank lower, and sharp grains of ice hissed in all directions. From time to time, I slipped a hand inside my jerkin for warmth—and to feel the small disk of stone I had tucked there. Yarrow’s words of the night before still echoed in my mind.

It is the work of the Runelords of old, Dor Calavus, and an artifact of great power. I did not recognize it at first, for it is inscribed in the archaic fashion. But I know now that it is Hadeth, which is the rune of frost.

Other words drifted into my mind as I recalled eyes as green as summer. *You must fight frost with frost....*

I didn’t understand. What had she meant? However, the passing of the leagues brought no answers.

The day faded. At last, as a tincture of red colored the gray air, hinting at the setting sun I could not see, I rode into the shallow dell where the village of Faxfarus lay.

Where the village of Faxfarus *had* lain.

I brought my horse to an abrupt halt and slipped from the saddle. Shadows stalked among the ruins of the village, muting the edges of the destruction but not concealing it. No building had been left untouched. Most had burned, their stone chimneys reaching skyward like skeletal fingers. The twisted shapes of kine and pigs scattered the village common, their half-rotted bodies now frozen solid, their slit throats gaping open.

My boots crunched against the ground, then halted beside a barren patch of soil. I knelt, and before I could wonder what might have been buried here, something that glowed pale in the gloom caught my eye. I pried up a clump of iron-hard dirt, revealing the object beneath. It was small, slender, and perfect: the hand of a child.

With a cry I staggered to my feet. Only then did I see the other filled-in pits, all in line with the first. I grabbed at the bridle of my horse to keep from falling. Had the Thanadain managed to cross

the river already?

But that didn’t make sense. The barbarians would not have slain the farm animals, but would have taken them instead. And they would not have lingered to bury the dead in such precisely-arranged rows....

Something on the ground caught my eye. I bent and brushed dirt from the thing’s surface. It was a circular shield forged of iron and wood. I snatched my hand back as a new cold gripped me, freezing my blood.

Emblazoned on the shield were three trees and five stars.

* * *

I reached Theysa at dawn.

My horse staggered through the gates of the garrison. Sometime in the middle of the night I had finally let the poor beast rest. The delay had eaten at me, but the horse would have done me little good had its heart burst.

Now the sun crested the horizon, but its ruddy light did nothing to soften the crystalline air. There was no wind, no birdsong. Only a low groan that thrummed just beyond the edge of hearing and whose source I could not place. Yarrow had been right. Never had there been a cold like this in Theysa. However, I hardly felt the air’s bite as I dismounted and marched into the garrison’s yard.

Virago was waiting for me. He wore a smile on his handsome face, but his dark eyes were narrow. So he had known what I would find in Faxfarus.

“Why?” My voice was like the croak of a raven. “Why did you do it, Dor Virago?”

The high commander shrugged. “They refused hospitality for myself and my captains, Dor Calavus. We had to teach them a lesson.”

I pressed my eyes shut, and in my mind I saw them: the folk of Faxfarus hiding in their crude houses, not understanding that these strange men were of the empire to which they themselves belonged—an empire they had heard of only in stories. Then came the swords, the fires, and the

screams.

I opened my eyes. “And was this the only village that refused hospitality to you on your march from Tarras?”

Virago sighed and pressed his hand to his chest. “Sadly, it was not.”

I clenched a fist. “By Vathris...”

“By Vathris it was done.”

Virago stepped forward and gripped my shoulders, his handsome face inches from mine.

“Listen to me, Dor Calavus. Do not think this act was done out of pleasure or lust, for it was not. Rather it was done in the same way a soldier in the field cuts off his own gangrenous hand, knowing he must remove the part, precious as it is, lest the poison spread to the rest of his body.”

I stared past him, not wanting to hear his words, although they pierced me like icicles all the same.

“The empire is like that body, Dor Calavus. Sometimes a rotten part must be excised that the whole might survive. What happened in that village is unfortunate, yes. But as others hear of it, they will choose to remember that they are part of the great empire of Tarras and not rulerless barbarians. In this way the empire—and its people—are preserved.”

A sickness filled me, but with it also came the cold whisper of logic. Yes, it made sense. Sometimes a few must be punished to safeguard the many. I met Virago’s eyes.

“Yes!” he said. “I see you understand, that you are a true man of Tarras. As I said, you have done well here in the outlands, Dor Calavus. But there is yet peril for you here, as I saw firsthand while you were gone.”

My breath was a ghost on the air. “What do you mean?”

“A heathen woman came to the garrison yesterday, asking for you. She claimed to have news of the Thanadain, but no doubt what she truly sought was to ensnare you in her godless ways, to prevent your fighting her barbarian kindred. Then, when we took her in custody, one of your very own

servants protested, revealing himself for a worker of runes and barbarian crafts.”

Sickness flooded my chest. “*What?*”

He misread the horror on my visage. “Don’t fear, Dor Calavus. We dealt with the two barbarian sympathizers. They will not trouble us now.”

He gestured to the far side of the garrison’s yard. I staggered past him, then gazed up at two ragged bundles hanging from poles I had not noticed before. Bile rose in my throat and froze there.

One was thin and bony, his gray robe smeared with dirt and blood. The other possessed hair golden as the dawn. However, her eyes, once green jewels, now bulged like dull stones amid the bloated oval of her face. Yarrow and the witch. Both of them had been hung by their necks.

Frost stole into my heart. I felt neither sorrow nor rage. Instead I felt...nothing. *Sometimes a rotten part must be excised that the whole might survive.*

Before I could find words to speak, the sound of a horn shattered the brittle air.

“The river has frozen!” a voice called from one of the garrison’s walls. “The Thanadain come!”

A strong hand gripped my arm. “Come, Dor Calavus. Forget this crude wench and old bag of bones. Do not doubt that what we do is right. Glory awaits us. Once we defeat the barbarians, you shall journey to Tarras and present their king’s head to the emperor himself.”

I gazed at Dor Virago. He stood straight, his visage noble, his eyes clear of doubt. In every way he was a true Tarrasian—everything I had ever believed I should be. I turned my back on the two limp forms dangling from the poles, gripped my sword, and followed the high commander to battle.

* * *

We approached the river as one, four hundred men of Theysa and three hundred soldiers of Tarras. I rode beside Dor Virago beneath the golden banner of the empire. The high commander had announced that I was to help lead the

combined force.

“Consider this your reward for all the years you’ve diligently stood guard here in these backwaters,” Virago said as we rode. “Soon all in the empire will speak the name Calavus.”

Still numb, I could not unclench my jaw, and I suppose he mistook my silence for agreement, for he grinned and spurred his mount on.

We halted at the top of the Dimduorn’s south embankment, and a gasp of frigid air filled my lungs. Even knowing their numbers, I was not prepared for the horde of Thanadain that huddled on the far side of the frozen river. To an extent Dor Virago was right—only a fraction of the barbarians approached the rough surface of the Dimduorn. However, it was still far more than five hundred. Two thousand at least. Thrice our number.

Then again, they were clad in crude clothes and furs. They bore no shields, and I knew that their swords, while bright, would be as brittle as glass in this cold, unlike the tempered steel of Tarras. There was a chance. If we fought well, and cleverly, we could hold these barbarians back.

I gazed at the Tarrasian soldiers around me, arranged in precise rows, clad in bright armor, and sudden pride surged in my chest. Were they not superior to the Thanadain in every way? And was I not one of them? Virago was right—it was time to forget fear and doubt. None would stand in the empire’s way. What we did was right simply because we did it.

In that moment, I felt my heart grow strong and pure as ice, and I knew I was a true Tarrasian at last. Shoulders square, back straight, I wheeled my horse around to ride toward Virago.

“It was three gold marks, not two, Lenarus,” a coarse voice said beside me.

“All right, you bastard of a bull. But I still don’t know how you were so sure she would go first. The wench seemed strong, while the old coot looked like a breeze could knock him over. But he kept crying up there all blasted day.”

“I knew she’d go quick. I could see it in her eyes when we strung her up. Her kind can’t stand

to be captured.”

I pulled hard on the reins and stared at the two Tarrasian soldiers who stood a few paces off. Gold passed between rough fingers, then the men marched to join their companions. Pride and thoughts of glory fled me, replaced by anguish. In my chest, my heart melted, becoming a thing of warm, weak flesh once more.

A light touch on my knee. I glanced down at Mardug, one of my men. He wore a stricken look on his plain, bearded face.

“We tried to stop them, Dor Calavus. But they had hung poor old Yarrow before we even knew what they were doing. I don’t know who the woman was. She said she came with a message for you.”

“A message?”

Mardug nodded. “Except it didn’t make much sense. It had something to do with frost, and how it was your enemy, only it was your ally, too.”

My hand slipped inside my leather jerkin and felt the small, smooth circle of stone tucked within. When the Tarrasians came to Theysa, I thought it meant the witch was wrong, that she had no magic. I knew now that wasn’t true. The witch had never said the empire would not come. Instead she had shown me Tarras in the fire, to let me judge for myself.

Yet if she truly had magic, why had she come to the garrison? Hadn’t she seen her own death?

It is best not to look to the flames for one’s own fate...

Before I could wonder more, Virago was suddenly beside me on his black horse. He laughed, and his sword glinted crimson in the morning sun.

“Come on, Calavus! Glory awaits you!”

I hesitated, then reached out and gripped Virago’s arm, halting him. “Wait...I have an idea.”

Virago frowned. “Yes?”

I licked my lips. The words hardly seemed my own. “Let us leave the Theysan companies in reserve. Let the Thanadain think we are weaker than we are. Then, as they rush to meet us, I will call my soldiers in and—”

“And we will crush them from both sides!” Virago’s eyes shone. “By Vathris, I think you’re a true Tarrasian after all, Calavaus.”

I nodded and said nothing. Virago gave the orders. Moments later a horn shattered the air, and I spurred my horse after the high commander. The other mounted soldiers pounded to either side, while behind us, in three precisely-ordered companies, the Tarrasian foot soldiers marched down the embankment. My men remained out of sight above. Ice crackled under hooves and boots as we moved onto the river, then Virago spread his arms, and all came to a halt, standing in formation.

The Thanadain huddled in an orderless mob thirty paces away. Now that I was close I could see how pitiful the barbarians were. While they were tall, bones protruded beneath their pale skin. They were half-dead already from hunger and cold. But the light of desperation shone in their strange, pale eyes.

Virago raised his hand above his head, ready to bring it down in a swift, chopping motion: Charge.

Before he could act, I reached inside my jerkin and drew out the pale disk of stone. *Hadeth*. Frost.

I pressed my eyes shut, and for a moment I saw Tarras: its gilded gates opening as I marched through in triumph. Soon all in the empire would know the name Calavaus. That was what Virago had said. And so it would be—but not in the way he had thought. The vision of Tarras faded in my mind, and I knew I would never see the golden domes again, neither in visions nor in life. I was no Tarrasian.

“By the Bloody Bull!” Virago snarled. “What are you doing, Calavaus? Is that some sort of barbarian charm?”

I opened my eyes and met Virago’s gaze. “You must fight frost with frost.”

Before he could question me, I hurled the rune forward. With a sound like a chime it struck the ice halfway between the Tarrasians and the Thanadain. Virago opened his mouth, but whatever words he uttered were lost as a deep groan thrummed on the air. The horses pranced, and the barbarians

scrambled back as the ice of the river trembled beneath our feet.

At first I thought the ice was breaking in the place where the rune had fallen. It seemed water bubbled up from a great crack, forming new, crystalline shapes as it met the frigid air. Then the shapes began to move.

One by one, with brittle steps, they walked from the gap in the ice: warriors as pale as frost bearing swords like icicles. Screams rose from the Thanadain and oaths from the Tarrasians. More cracks opened, and more warriors of frost poured forth, until there were hundreds of them. Armor like broken glass covered them, and their translucent bodies refracted the crimson winter sun, so that it seemed a heart beat within each icy warrior’s breast.

Howls of terror came from the Thanadain now. They quailed, falling and retreating over the ice. Virago leaned in his saddle to grip my arm. His eyes blazed.

“Of course, Calavaus—now I see. You fight them with their own foul magic. It’s brilliant. Now call in your men, and we’ll kill them all.”

I swallowed hard. Did I truly mean to do this? However, even as I wondered, I spoke the words.

“You will never kill again, Dor Virago.”

He frowned at me, and the light in his eyes wavered. Before he could speak, I lifted a hand and pointed to him and the other Tarrasians.

“*Hadeth!*” I called.

The frost warriors knew their equals and foes. Together they shambled across the frozen river.

By the time the soldiers of Tarras understood what was happening, it was far too late. With the sound of ice on steel the two forces met. At first it seemed no contest. The frost warriors shattered to splinters under the blows of Tarrasian swords. Then more of the icy figures came, and more. Steel was stronger, but ice was inexorable. You cannot defeat winter, Yarrow had said.

Cold ice pierced warm flesh. Screams soared on the air. Blood flowed briefly, then froze. As the Tarrasians died, pale hands reached from crevices in

the river and pulled the still-thrashing bodies of the men beneath the ice.

Virago's eyes whirled. Spittle frothed and froze on his lips. "By Vathris—you've ruined us all, Calavus!" He swung his sword at me.

The motions were so easy, as if I had been a great warrior all along. I deflected his blow, then brought my father's sword around in a glittering arc to lay open his throat.

"No, Virago," I murmured. "You ruined yourselves long ago."

His eyes fluttered shut, and he toppled from the back of his horse as the beast bolted. Even as Virago struck the ice a crack opened. White hands encircled his arms and his legs, then pulled him down into dark water. The crevice froze over again, and he was lost to sight.

I slipped from the back of my horse and looked up to see the last of the frost warriors fall and shatter, turning into so much snow. It was over. To a man the Tarrasians were gone. Atop the embankment my men watched on, their eyes wide with wonder.

I looked down and saw that my sword and my hands were spattered with blood. Virago's blood. Was it right what I had done? I didn't know. But perhaps it was a good thing to doubt, to always question one's own actions, lest the coldness of pride turn one to ice.

"Great wizard..." a deep voice spoke.

I turned and saw a huge barbarian man standing before me. The silver torc around his neck told me he was their king. Behind him were a dozen warriors. Had they come to slay me now that I was alone? I gazed into the king's eyes, the color of the winter sky. Then, to my astonishment, he knelt on the ice before me. His warriors did the same.

"We shall follow you, great wizard of winter," the barbarian king said in thickly-accented Tarrasian.

In a crystalline moment I saw it. They were cold and wretched, yes, but still proud. I would march on Tarras with ten thousand Thanadain behind me. None would stand in our way. The witch was right, I would rule....

I shook my head, dispelling the image. Yes, I would rule—but as king, not as emperor. We had no need of Tarras and its golden spires here. Light sparked off ice, and in it I saw a new vision: a stone keep of many towers rising over the verdant plains along the river.

I gripped the barbarian king's thick wrists. "We will build a new kingdom here. Together."

He smiled in return, displaying big, white teeth. Then he turned, raised his arms, and shouted to his people in their own tongue, translating my words. Shouts of joy rose from the throng, echoed by my own men.

And there, in the midst of winter, it felt as warm as springtime.

4 7 1 8 9 10 11 12 13 14 15 16 17 18 19 20