

I write of warfare and of a man, and of a man at war, though he was not always such a man. For the world made him one, fashioned him thus from weak and unpromising materials, like a sublime sculpture made of humble river clay—and then the world recoiled at what it had made, though it would be many years before it would know to do so. A man's destiny is forged by events, surely, for we cannot help bearing the crowns and the scars that random fate has bequeathed to us in our lives. But more than events, it is a man's own free will that shapes him—that reflection and echo within him of the very God who created him. Free will, like God, can rise above any circumstances or obstacles one may face; like God it can make the humble great, make a weak boy into a strong man, make a timorous student into the Emperor of the world. And like God's own rival Lucifer, it can cause him to flail his fists fruitlessly against the breast of his very Creator, if by his free will he so chooses.

On a moonless night a thousand miles from home, an exhausted army slept in a desolate wasteland of dust and black ashes. None of the myriad sounds a resting army makes—the snuffling of horses, the moans of the wounded, the shouts from the guards calling the watch—none of those had disturbed my dreams, so accustomed to them was I that I found them almost comforting. Something, however, perhaps some soft breath of air suddenly entering the tent, had summoned me, though I remained motionless, slumped in the hard, high-backed camp chair where I had slipped into a restless doze. Only my eyes stirred beneath half-hooded lids as I peered past the flickering light of the tiny oil lamp.

She was a goddess, otherworldly in her beauty, her skin and hair shimmering with a dim aura as she passed through the silent awnings, winding her way smoothly and effortlessly through the assorted maps and volumes scattered about the floor. Like a spirit, she scarcely moved her feet, not deigning even to glance down to discern their placement, her luminous eyes ignoring me and the others resting fitfully in their corners, her gaze fixed only on him; and I saw that Julian, too, was awake and alert, sitting up in his cot, his body tense and motionless, staring back at her unblinkingly and without fear.

In her profile, in the welling of her eyes, there was a depth of sadness impossible to describe, an ineffable sorrow that illumined her beauty like moonlight on the white limestone façade of a temple. The gown floated featherlike around her, swirling at her feet, though the heavy desert air offered not a breath of wind to relieve us of the stifling heat. The veil over her head and face, fastened in the manner of one in mourning, was gossamer, transparent as a spider's web, enhancing, rather than obscuring, the smoothness of her neck and face. Her braids, wound in the ancient style beneath the veil, were scented with the biting fragrance of the myrrh that had been suffused into the dressing. I sat stone-still, my nails cutting into the palms of my hands, as she approached, soft as a psalm, silent as a prayer.

Stopping just short of the foot of his bed, she stood motionless for a long moment. A glistening tear coursed slowly down her cheek, disappearing into the darkness at her feet as it dropped. Julian looked on in wonder as she held her arms out toward him, cradling in them a burden, what I at first took to be an infant, but what I later realized was not a living being. She showed it to him and his face clouded—in disappointment? fear?—and as she turned away her gaze lingered on him for a brief moment longer, as if she were reluctant to leave.

Passing back across the floor with a measured cadence, her head bowed in sorrow, she paused before slipping out the door, and to my astonishment she then turned slowly and deliberately toward me, lifting the veil from her face with one hand and raising her downcast eyes. As she focused directly on me, her serene, sorrowful expression twisted suddenly into a snarl of such utter malevolence and loathing that I gasped and leaped up, toppling the chair on which I had been sitting with a loud clatter. The veiled woman then vanished through the tent hangings, as silently as she had appeared.

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Dawn came impossibly early, bringing on a sickly light for ill mankind, a pallid harbinger of toil and distress. A pale yellowish desert fog had sprung up, as it often did on those early summer mornings, a moistness not refreshing like the cool mists of Gaul I had so loved, but rather stinking and malignant, clammy in the heat that was already starting to build though the sun had scarcely risen. The dampness lent an oily stickiness to the skin, which combined with the smoke from the smoldering fires and the grit in the air to coat one's face with an irritating film. Gnats and flies swarmed everywhere, seeking moisture at the corners of one's eyes and lips, driving the pack animals mad with their incessant buzzing and stinging, and gathering in lethal clouds on the bare asses of the men squatting in the fetid latrines, cursing the leisurely pace of their bowels. The troops broke camp in a resentful silence, and before the sun was half exposed above the horizon the cavalry scouts had thundered off beyond the army's flanks in a blinding cloud of heavy dust. The vanguard cohorts and the rest of the legions were not far behind, shouldering their packs and marching forward at a brisk pace, the men still gagging down their dry breakfast of rock biscuit.

As we marched, the Persians, who had learned from their previous defeats at the hands of Julian's troops to avoid pitched battles, adopted a strategy of piecemeal harassment, dogging our steps at every turn without ever committing to a full-scale assault. From various vantage points we could see King Sapor's army, divided into two parts, each half marching a route parallel to our own on the high hills on either side of us. Outlined against the hazy, whitish-blue sky were the ranks of thousands upon thousands of his heavy infantry, fierce warriors from Media with their fish-scale armor reflecting blindingly in the sunlight, passing in and out of the swirling dust raised by the huge forces of Persian cavalry trotting in close formation before them.

On the left ridge marched the swaying corps of Indian elephants, wrinkled gray monsters of enormous height, their dreadful bulk dwarfing the lines of soldiers marching before and behind. The beasts plodded heavily, bearing large platforms on their backs, “towers” of wood-framed leather walls, each containing four archers and spearmen. The animals were painted in horrifying colors, circles and spirals around their eyes, flapping ears blood-red and rimmed with black. Plates of gleaming bronze fitted closely across their foreheads were adorned with stiff plumed crests dyed a bloody crimson. A large lance, like a third tusk, had been fitted by stout leather straps to each monster’s chest, and leather bands, studded with glistening spikes, encircled their legs. They bore gleaming armor and bangles on their heads and shoulders, and blinders on their eyes, forcing them to look relentlessly forward, to prevent them from being distracted by activities to the side. The animals were led by a huge bull, his yellowish eight-foot tusks tipped with lustrous bronze spear points. The wind shifted in our direction, wafting toward us the beasts’ rank odor, rendered even more foul by the rancid tallow the Persians had smeared on their hides to prevent cracking and chafing in the dry desert heat. Our horses visibly shuddered and shied.

I cantered up to the Emperor where he rode hollow-eyed and stoop-shouldered, lost in silent thought.

“Julian,” I said. “Our men haven’t fought against elephants. The Gauls have never even seen them before, except from a distance.”

He roused himself as if with a great effort, and glanced warily up the ridge where the lumbering column seemed to hover over us, their long shadows reaching almost to our own line of march. He then looked back at me, a faint smile showing through his wiry, dust-laden beard.

“Caesarius—always worrying, always planning, eh? If only my generals were as concerned about my welfare as is my physician. How long have we been friends now—eight years, ten? With your help I conquered Gaul and Germany, with you beside me I was raised to Emperor! We have sacked every Persian fortress on the Euphrates, and have defeated King Sapor’s garrison under the very walls of his palace. The men are at their prime, Caesarius, they are like hounds, baying for Persian blood! Sacrifices to the gods were made this morning, three oxen. The omens were favorable this time, the livers healthy—the gods are with us now! Caesarius, I saw the livers, this time the gods are with us...”

He was rambling again, and I moved quickly to calm him, not as a subject to his Emperor but as a friend to a friend, as a physician to his patient—as a concerned soldier to his mad general.

“Eight years we have been together, Julian,” I said, “ever since we met in Athens. God has been good to us. Nevertheless...the elephants.”

Julian stared at me, his eyes focusing with difficulty, his lips moving as if he were about to say something. I continued before he could interrupt.

“The men are nervous and the horses skittish. The army has no experience with such beasts. We need a plan.”

He glanced again up to the ridge. “No experience,” he muttered, then lifted his head sharply. “But they are only animals! I have read of them, Caesarius.” He paused for a moment, recollecting the lessons in military strategy and tactics he had absorbed years before, under Sallustius’ tutelage. “The Persians used elephants against Roman troops at Nisibis thirteen years ago. They killed many of our men, but then they began running amok among their own, devastating the Persian lines. Look—you see the drivers? King Sapor has learned his lesson well.”

I peered up through the haze. Each elephant in the column was guided by a slightly built, armored driver perched precariously on the back of the beast’s head. I nodded.

“Indians,” Julian continued. “They know best how to control them. Each one ties a long, stout spike to his left wrist. If the elephant loses control the driver thrusts it into the animal’s neck at the base of the skull, severing the vertebrae and killing the animal. They carry wooden mallets to pound the spikes in deeper.”

“But that would topple all the men in the tower as well. Falling from such a height...”

Julian shrugged. “Just so. They are crushed or killed. Better them, the king reasons, than a whole line of his own troops in the middle of a battle.”

“So how do we fight them?”

He rode in thoughtful silence for a moment before turning again to me.

“Pigs.”

“Pigs, Julian?”

“They say that elephants are terrified of squealing pigs. You smear them with fat and set them on fire, and then send them to run squealing amongst the elephants’ legs.”

I paused to consider this extraordinary suggestion—whether it was based on fact or the product of madness.

“We don’t have any more pigs,” I said cautiously, and not without some relief.

Julian sighed. “Then we’ll just have to hope Sapor keeps to his truce.”

Five hours we marched that morning through the desolate valley known locally as Maranga, in full armor and battle formation, along a trackless route visible only to our Arab scouts. The earth had been scorched by Sapor’s advance guard to prevent us from obtaining grain or game, and the landscape was nightmarish—lacking in all color but shades of gray, ashy dust that settled on every object, softening the stark blackness of the charred stumps and brush that still smoldered here and there along our path. A haze rose up from every man as he marched, every step producing a burst of fine, black ash that settled between the toes and mingled with the sweat flowing in rivulets down his face and neck. The men were parched and flagging under the relentless heat and the tension of constantly monitoring the king’s armies on the ridges above us, who in their cooler and lighter gear and their acclimation to the heat, appeared distressingly fresh and energetic. Our flanks were strongly guarded by the cavalry and heavy infantry, but

the roughness of the terrain had rendered our formation somewhat ragged, and the line of march had now stretched to beyond three miles from van to rear.

Suddenly, we heard a commotion far behind us, the faint blare of trumpets and the high-pitched, womanlike screams of wounded horses. Julian, riding beside Sallustius and several other advisers just ahead of me in the vanguard, galloped out of the line of march and wheeled his horse, peering to the rear through the haze.

Shouts passed up along the line by heralds brought the news to our ears within seconds.

“Persian attack on the rear! Cavalry and light-armed infantry!”

Julian had expected more warning from the normally heavy-handed Persians. Contrary to his own orders, he had earlier removed his armor against the heat, and he paused now only to pull down his helmet, which hung from his shoulders, and to seize a shield from a cavalry officer standing nearby. He set heels to flanks and sprinted back along the line of march in the direction of the tumult, shouting as he did so for the rest of the army to continue its march forward but to remain alert.

I broke rank and raced along with his guards and generals, weaving half blinded through the thick dust they raised, and within moments we approached the rear. Judging from the terrifying clamor and roiling cloud of dust ahead of us, full-scale battle had already been joined. We were surrounded by surging masses of grim-faced men, their skin black and shiny as they raced to the rear in confusion to assist their comrades. Julian craned his neck, peering through the dust in search of an officer who could tell him what was happening, when we were suddenly startled by another trumpet blast, this time from behind us, toward the column’s front.

“What in Hades...?” Julian muttered, as Sallustius wheeled and galloped back toward where we had just ridden. He was met by the officer who had lent his shield. Sallustius conferred with him briefly, then raced his mount back to Julian, who was still struggling to force his way through the throng of men to the rear.

“My lord!” Sallustius called out. “Sapor is attacking the front as well!”

Julian stopped short and wheeled his own horse, his grimy face twisted in rage.

“By the gods!” he shouted. “Sallustius, you lead, return to the front! We are still under a truce with the Persians—Sapor will pay for his treachery!”

Leaping forward, he raced back up the track, against the tide of running men who at Sallustius’ frantic shouts hastened to step aside to avoid the sharp hooves of the Emperor’s horse.

We cleared the rear guard, crossing the gap that had opened between the army’s two ends and joining the weary units of troops trotting resignedly to the front. Just then, we were startled by yet more trumpeting, this time maddened and frantic, from what sounded like dozens of instruments, not behind us or ahead, but directly to the side. An enormous cloud of dust surged down the high ridge from the Persian troops on our left flank. Straining to see through the dense haze I could make out the gleam of glittering armor and weapons, the helmets and spear tips seeming to advance at an impossible height relative to the

ground. The horrifying trumpeting continued, pressing ever louder, and the troops beside us froze in awe and horror at the sight—a brigade of the King’s armored war elephants, bearing down on us at a speed unmatched by any beast or machine on earth.

At the dreadful sound of the trumpeting elephants, the Roman horses reared, rolling their eyes in terror, and even Julian’s well-trained mount almost threw him in the dust. The elephants’ awful appearance, their gaping jaws and horrendous smell, struck fear in man and animal, and as the line of beasts approached, the earth physically trembled under the terrible weight of their stumplike feet. They thundered straight toward the center of our panicking column as the drivers perched precariously on the base of the beasts’ necks, peering down at us with evil grins, their white teeth gleaming through the blackness of their faces.

The beasts plowed into our line, enraged at the screams of our terrified troops. The men scattered, fleeing for their lives, while the elephants reared in their midst, bellowing and trumpeting, stomping again and again on the bodies of those they had trampled until they were nothing more than dark smears in the sooty earth. Roman limbs and torsos hung limp and dripping from the tusks, emboldening the animals further in their blood rage. The archers in the towers above rained arrows down upon our men, felling them where they stood to create lines of writhing wounded whom the elephants hastened to stamp upon and crush, or to scoop up in their tusks and tear apart with their jaws. When our Gauls finally managed to scramble out of range of the flashing ivory, the elephant drivers deftly maneuvered their beasts away from the scene of slaughter and formed up in a rank to prepare for another charge at our massed and terrified troops. Behind them, marching implacably down the ridge in tight formation, came an enormous body of Persian infantry, raising their ululating battle cry, preparing to rush in and finish off the destruction begun by the elephants as soon as the terrible beasts had completed their work.

As the elephants withdrew and began reforming, Julian plunged into the thick of his troops, his energy restored, eyes glinting with an almost terrifying intensity behind the visor of his battle helmet. The man was everywhere, wheeling and careening his horse like one possessed, shouting encouragement, arranging his troops into a tight battle formation, bellowing instructions for defeating the monsters when they next attacked. The Gauls stared, but swallowed their fear and their impulse to flee into the desert, obeying him with the military precision he had instilled in them over years of campaigning. Shields were raised, bronze-tipped pikes lowered into position, and as the thick black dust settled on our heads we turned to face the elephants’ renewed onslaught.

It came immediately. Led by the huge bull, its red mouth gaping and lips flapping, the beasts charged again into our column, twenty or more of them, shoulder to shoulder in ranks of four. One carried a Roman soldier, impaled through the belly on the beast’s chest spike during the previous charge, the man’s legs and head flailing helplessly with the animal’s swaying strides, his lifeless eyes staring forward at his comrades like a bloodied figurehead on the prow of a ship. Onward they charged, trumpeting, the ground trembling, and as they approached the men fell silent and tensed.

“Stay your weapons!” shouted Julian, his lips twisted into a kind of mad grin or a grimace, eyeing the onrushing brutes, blinders forcing their stare straight into the thick of the Roman legion. “Stay!” he repeated, his voice rising, and the terrible, rancid stench of the animals filled our nostrils, mixing with the reek of the blood and excrement covering our feet and the ground around us, “Stay!...Until I say...”

“NOW!”

As the elephants thundered furiously into our midst, the ranks of men suddenly parted in the middle like a split sheet of parchment, the two halves of the cohorts leaping frantically to the sides, leaving nothing but empty ground in the middle as the enraged elephants raced through the passage left between the men and skidded to a confused stop.

Instantly our troops let out a roar, drowning out the trumpeting of the angry beasts, which wrenched their heads in bewilderment from side to side as they sought to peer around their blinders and make out the source of the sound.

“Pikes!” screamed Julian, though his order was superfluous, overwhelmed by the bellowing of the furious troops. A hundred, five hundred heavy-shanked spears flew through the air simultaneously at point-blank range, penetrating the elephants’ thick hides with a slicing sound, burying themselves deep in flanks and ribs. The beasts reared, thrashing front legs and trunks in fear and agony, as the archers in the towers on top ceased to fire and struggled to hold on to their ominously rocking platforms.

Emboldened at their success, the men rushed in closer to the enraged animals, encircling each elephant on all sides, cutting off the beasts’ contact with one another. Soldiers who had kept or recovered their pikes dove in toward the elephants’ stamping and circling feet from behind, poking and slashing at the backs of their legs and arses, further maddening the animals, which shook and stamped in a desperate effort to dissuade their tormentors. The tower on the enraged bull tilted precariously off its back, leaning almost horizontally to the side as the Persians inside clung to the support posts with their hands, and then the girth strap broke, sending the entire contraption tumbling to the ground where it crumpled into a confused jumble of leather, lumber and broken limbs. Twenty Gauls surged forward to finish off the hapless archers, but scrambled back as the bull did the job for them, wreaking revenge for the years of training and torment his masters had put him through as he leaped upon the broken structure and stomped and slashed at the screaming survivors until they were silent.

A cheer rose from the Roman troops as the first of the beasts dropped bawling and trumpeting to the ground, the tendons at the back of its knees severed. The drivers had lost control of their terrified mounts now, and all around were thrusting their great iron spikes into the necks of the doomed beasts. One by one the monsters dropped, to the shrill shouts of triumph of the Gauls, who now swarmed over them even before they fell. One ill-trained driver thrust frantically again and again into the leathery hide of his animal’s neck, each time pounding the spike in deeply with his mallet in an unsuccessful effort to find the fatal spot. Another elephant slammed into it with a terrible scream, and then a third, creating a wall, a writhing mountain of bloody flesh, legs kicking and trunks flailing. The Romans flung spears and

shot arrows into the heaving mound, and one of the animals, thrashing blindly about with its trunk, seized a dead driver from off the neck of another, and placing the man's torso between its great rubbery lips proceeded to tear off his limbs one by one in its own terrible death throes.

Seeing that the elephant charge had been repelled, the body of Persian infantry, who had now approached to the very edge of our lines, stopped suddenly in a confused jumble, their officers unsure whether to follow through with the attack or retreat to safety on the ridge top. Julian did not hesitate. Turning the attention of his troops away from the dying elephants to the greater danger they faced from the Persians at their backs, he quickly organized a charge. The Roman troops howled for revenge for their downed comrades, their shields and weapons smeared and dripping with elephant and Persian blood. They leaped at the enemy, slashing and hacking, blood spraying the filthy dust which was now scattered with severed limbs, and no longer were there distinct lines of battle, for the two sides had become thoroughly confused with each other, the one seeking only to preserve their lives, the other seeking the enemy's complete annihilation. A black cloud rose into the thick and sweltering air, obliterating any view of the heights above, obscuring the direction of retreat, preventing the Persians from identifying the route to safety except by the feel of their feet as they sought to run uphill toward the ridge top.

Sallustius had long since been diverted to another part of the field, and even Julian's crack escort of Gallic guards had been scattered. They raced frantically through the dust, seeking sight of their Emperor, shouting to him to break free of the dangerous surge of Persians around him. Only I had somehow managed to stay close at hand, and even while wheeling my horse through the swirling dust, slashing at the mass of enemy rushing in from all sides, my eyes never left him.

Julian ignored caution, charging heedlessly into the midst of the battle, urging his men on. Terrified Persians surged around him and his horse, seemingly unaware that the sovereign of the Roman Empire was rearing and hacking with his sword in their very midst. A huge Mede, overcoming his comrades' panic, leaped at the Emperor's horse, wrapping his arms around the animal's neck in an effort to drag him and his rider down into the dust. Julian plunged his long blade up to the hilt just under the man's collarbone, and then drew it backward, streaming death, half the broken sword remaining still in the man's lung. The Mede stared for a moment in surprise, and then belching crimson, dropped from the struggling horse's neck to the ground beneath its sharp hooves.

He was replaced a moment later by another snarling attacker, who leaped from the fray to seize the Emperor's leg while hacking at his shield with a sword, seeking a gap through which to drive the blade home. Julian smashed again and again at the Persian's face with the hilt of his own broken sword until, with skull bones shattered to the brains, the man released his grip and dropped to the black mire beneath. Julian lifted his broken sword in triumph, bellowing incoherently, and his horse wheeled over the Persian's body, stamping and mutilating the man's torso with its sharpened hooves. Never had I seen the Emperor so taken with violence, so maddened with killing. So absorbed was he, so engrossed in this wanton display of brutality, that he had lost all sense of the battle and danger surrounding him.

Suddenly, I saw a hand raised from among the mob, a finger pointing at Julian as he cut and slashed his way through the enemy. A moment later a thin, reedy spear, a javelin used for throwing at the enemy from the middle distance, emerged from among the sea of bronze helmets, aimed carefully and flung directly toward the Emperor. I lunged on my horse, urging it forward and nearly trampling the soldiers in front of me, all the while watching the missile. It coursed through the air for the short distance, its tail wobbling slightly at first until it found its momentum and truth of aim, and then sheared into Julian's side, unprotected by the breastplate he had neglected to don before racing to oversee the battle. Like a bird shot from the sky by a boy's arrow, he toppled from the horse out of my sight, disappearing beneath the feet of the fleeing Persians and Roman pursuers, his horse continuing on its way, riderless, as if unaware of its loss. I leaped off my own mount and pushed frantically through the milling throng to where I had seen him fall. Mercifully, after a moment's search on the ground, I found him.

To my astonishment, he had not been trampled by the panicked hooves around him, nor even injured by the fall itself. Writhing in the dust, however, he clutched at the spear. Its point had scarcely penetrated his body, as it had become firmly embedded in his bottom-most rib. As I knelt beside him, the commotion around us quickly subsided and the Persians' retreat turned into a general rout. The Roman troops had now raced past us and were pursuing the enemy up the ridge, hacking at the Persians' backs and legs just as they had the elephants.

Three guards thundered up on their horses, their faces ashen even through the grime, staring down at the groaning and writhing Emperor on the ground.

"Physician! How is he hurt?"

I pried Julian's hands off the spearhead. The light weapon, thrown from close in, had struck him a glancing blow that had pierced so shallowly that the sharp cutting edges and double barbs of the head were still outside his body. Had the hooklike barbs penetrated it would have been terrible work to remove the spearhead without tearing the flesh and vital organs; yet even so, they had made deep slashes in the Emperor's fingers and palms where he had grasped the head in an effort to pull it out of his rib. The shaft, too, had broken off at the iron socket upon impact, as it was designed, to prevent the enemy from picking it up and launching it back.

"I will attend to him," I said, in a voice that was far calmer than I felt. "Don't hover over me with your horses—you'll trample us if they take fright. Form up in a line toward the ridge and prevent any Persian strays from returning and overrunning us. We'll carry him to camp in a moment."

The guards nodded, relieved to receive concrete orders, and wheeling their mounts they galloped several hundred feet toward the ridge, shouting for their fellows to join them in forming a barricade. They sat their skittish horses in the slowly subsiding dust cloud, watching the battle move away from them and listening to the cheers of the Roman victors who continued to slash at the backs of the retreating enemy.

I bent back down to Julian, who by this time had fallen into a swoon from the pain. Quickly I removed his helmet, the metal of which was almost too hot to touch, and a trickle of sweat poured out the

basin. I then turned to the spearhead embedded in his rib. Muttering silent thanks that he was unconscious, and resting my left hand carefully on his rib cage, I grasped the shaft with my right and gave a hard, quick jerk.

Despite my effort to pull straight back, the surprising weight of the long iron tip and socket created some torque, and I heard an audible snap from the already weakened rib as the weapon popped out. Julian twitched, his right arm flailing blindly and his mouth contorting into a grimace, even in his swoon. The piercing bled freely, though no more than would be expected from such a wound, and the blood showed a bright, clear red, a good sign.

I held the point of the spearhead up before my face, viewing its symmetrical, deadly outline against the pale sky. For a long moment I stared at the tip, at its beautifully cast smoothness and blackness, the carefully balanced barbs, the razor sharpness of its point and edge undulled by its recent impact with hard bone, its effectiveness unimpeded, its deadly potential yet unfulfilled...

I glanced down at my unconscious patient, face streaked with sweat and dust, expression contorted with pain, and I hesitated. Great evil was afoot in the world. Vows had been taken, oaths had been sworn, and these could not be discarded lightly. It is not often that a common man, a humble physician, has a chance to affect the very course of history, and I prayed to God for courage to be worthy of the opportunity. I glanced up at the guards, making sure they had secured the area and were remaining on vigilant watch against any possible recurrence of the Persian attack.

I then bent to complete my work.