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THE SIEGE

by

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CHAPTER I

Adval did not sleep often, or well. When night fell, he lay on the dusty, warped floor of his bare cubicle, straining his ears to hear the call to arms or the scuffling of sandaled feet, or willing his eyes to penetrate the darkness and the stone wall beyond in order to catch a glimpse of preparations for a surprise night attack. Occasionally he convinced himself he had heard the frantic trumpets or seen the advancing enemy, and he bolted out into the dark and almost to the wall, a cry of alarm in his throat, before he realized he had hallucinated again. Normally the ears strained and the eyes burned until exhaustion crept over Adval and gently induced him into a fitful sleep, or until dawn drove him back onto the wall.

Tonight, he lay alert again, for how long he did not care. Absolute darkness surrounded him, yet his open eyes rolled continuously. His hands and arms itched; they always itched at night--irritated by the coarse blanket thrown over him. He wanted to rub and scratch them, but he dared not move. If Roman spies watched this room, through the hanging over the window, or through cracks in the wall boards, they might see the movement and attack him. Spies did watch the room, Adval was certain, but they disguised themselves well among the shadows. They disappeared in daylight, melting into the corners, but they always returned. He never saw them, or heard them, but he sensed them nevertheless. They looked for him every night, but he lay motionless. At times when Adval found himself out under the stars, his hallucination subsiding, he had to throw rocks against the wall to distract the spies before he slipped back under his

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blanket.

Although tortured by fear of discovery, Adval subdued the urge to rush the spies at night, ferret them out, and kill them. He might find one or two, but they vastly outnumbered him. He wondered if others in the fort had sensed the spies, wondered if he should confide in someone.

Then, tonight, he heard the realization of his fears: the thump of running feet approaching. Adval nearly cried out in surprise and fright. The spies had found him. Blood thrummed through his veins, perspiration trickled from his forehead. Fumbling for, then gripping the hilt of the sword which lay ever ready by his head, Adval envisioned a dozen grinning Romans spilling through his door, throats vomiting their war cries, pikes ready to impale him and carry his head as a standard, feeble moonlight glittering evilly from their round helms and brass corselets. He imagined himself standing in the middle of the tiny room, frozen in fear, too exhausted, too terrified, too hungry to raise his weapon and fight, watching the spears puncture his chest, feeling his life leak away.

When the door burst open, Adval was not standing in the middle of the room. He knelt there on one knee, halfway to a standing position, sword held loosely. Only a single grey shadow poured through the opening, limned by pale yellow moonlight. No pike levelled threateningly, the corselet was only leather, and the helmet sported the bent spire unique to Sergeant Turrall. When the shadow opened its mouth, no war cry emerged.

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"Commander," said the scratchy voice in Adval's native Persian. "Come quickly. Pelato has lost his wits."

Adval's shoulders sagged, either in relief or resignation or disappointment--he did not know which. No Romans tonight. No spies boiled out of their shadows at the sergeant's bold entrance. Perhaps tomorrow, or in a fortnight, or another eight months.

Adval looked at his boot, visible in the weak moonlight. The sight fortified him. He should not despair. Despair implied hopelessness. When a man is finally forced to eat his own boots, then is the time for despondency.

"Commander?"

A man can survive though constantly hungry and thirsty. When the hard bread crusts, the horses, and the horses' hay are gone, a man may live, although relegated to rats and raw wheat and two cups of water a day. But the boots. They are friends, companions. They offer only good. When a man forsakes his friends for himself, boils his leather boots for his growling stomach, then all is lost.

"Hurry, Commander. Pelato has run amuck in the infirmary. He has a spear and threatens to murder any who enter. He's mad."

Adval felt his body hauled to his feet and led toward the door. Pelato, a pikeman. He would talk to Pelato. He would say that madness and desperation are cousins but not brothers; that madmen are irretrievable but desperate men still have hope. He would tell Pelato about the boots and despair.

With no torch, and the moon on the wane, Adval and the Turrall felt their way

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past the empty barracks and the citadel and into the courtyard, the latter holding the former's elbow. Adval watched the citadel as they passed. In there lay the remaining food and the terminus of the aqueduct, under the guard of four trusted men. In there lay the armory, brimming with weapons and armor. Adval did not like the citadel, it reminded him of the hunger and the threat of battle.

A group of men hung about outside the infirmary, muttering.

The infirmary, a small ramshackle building, lay near the east wall, near the heaps of corpses. Those so severely wounded as to be in the infirmary usually ended up among the heaps. This way there was not far to carry them once they died.

Even at night, when the air cooled, the stench remained oppressive. In the day, men regularly went about with cloths over their mouths to minimize the odor of putrefaction. As the watch walked along the eastern rampart, they occasionally needed to cover their ears against the excited drone of flies. At night the gorged insects slept. With the oil practically gone and stringently rationed, no torches burned in the courtyard to wake and attract them.

"What news?" called the sergeant as he drew near.

"Ravings," one of the men replied, voice muffled by the rag over his nose and lips. "He won't let anyone inside. We sent someone for Commander Reminy." The group stood to a haggard form of attention as they spied Adval.

Adval stopped to notice them. The men appeared as draped skeletons in the meager illumination. Gaunt, unsteady, half starved, some occasionally glanced

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suspiciously at the walls. Others swayed a bit as they stood--or perhaps it was Adval who swayed. He watched them for a moment, unsure what to say, if anything. Silently, he handed his sword to Turrall and turned and shuffled to the infirmary door. The sergeant held the sword stupidly and made a noise as if to question Adval, but the commander silenced him with a half-gesture.

"Pelato," Adval said weakly. He cleared his throat and tried again.

No answer came.

"This is Commander Adval, Pelato. Put away your weapon; I'm coming inside to speak with you." He pushed the door open and entered.

He had been in the infirmary before and vaguely recalled where the pallets lay. This served him well, for the darkness here was nearly total, impeded by a single window and the open door. He moved away from the opening, toward the nearest corner. There were no pallets along the walls; he would avoid tripping over any of the wounded if he stayed to the side. He could not hear the casualties moaning, as they usually did.

"I understand, Pelato; the times are desperate." He cleared his throat again. "But there is no need to despair. I--" Adval stopped as his left foot slid out from under him. He caught himself, slapping his hand against the rickety wall. The thin boards vibrated hollowly, stinging Adval's ears. The noise died quickly, and he squinted into the dark. A familiar sweet odor drifted into his nostrils. Someone in the corner sobbed.

The commander peered toward the origin of the noise. His eyes, now accustomed to the gloom, saw a spearhead lying on the floor, shining pitifully in the refracted

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moonlight. With the spearhead defined, the shape of its shaft could be inferred, and Adval traced it toward the far corner. Beyond it squatted a figure, and several moments passed before Adval realized it was a man sitting on the floor, face buried in his knees.

"I am hungry," said the figure. "There is so little food."

Adval did not reply. He stepped forward and felt the faint squish of liquid. The sweet odor now overpowered the rancid smell of death penetrating from outside. He bent forward slightly and sniffed again. Blood. Blood lay on the floor. His foot had slid in a puddle of blood, he could see it now, little pools and rivulets definable against the flat black of the floor. There was blood all over the floor.

"These men," the figure--it must be Pelato--continued. "They would die soon. I knew that, they knew that. We wasted food on them, extending their agony, depleting the store for the rest of us."

"You killed them?" said Adval quietly, his head spinning. He realized he did not have a cloth over his nose. The stink of death and blood became oppressive, suffocating. His voice trembled as he said again "You killed them." He looked around him. The pallets where the wounded men lay were merely deep, still shadows.

"We wasted food on them. I was so hungry.... No rats, my rations gone... I ate all I could... the dead are dead... food for the living..."

Adval looked at the figure, saying nothing. He drew nearer, steadying himself against the wall. He looked closer. His eyes widened, then started tears. His knees buckled, his chin quivered.

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Pelato's feet were bare.

Adval sat in the puddle of blood and began to weep.

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CHAPTER II

When Commander Reminy came within sight of the knot of soldiers, they immediately turned to him. Sergeant Turrall stepped away from the others.

"What has happened?" asked Reminy.

"Pelato's mind snapped, Commander. He ran into the infirmary, yelling about food, and threatened to spear anyone who followed. Commander Adval went in a while ago. Nothing since. The men are a bit restless."

Reminy glanced at the darkened infirmary, then at the black sky. "Fetch a torch from the watch," he commanded. Only the sentinels along the ramparts had light, in order to thwart any Roman spies.

Turrall sent one of the crowd up to the ramparts. "Pelato has been a bad influence, Commander," he said quietly to Reminy, "whining about the lack of food, discouraging the men's hope for relief. I tried to--"

"Never mind, Sergeant." Reminy moved to the open infirmary door and squinted inside. The shadows lay too thick for him to see anything. A barely perceptible snuffle reached his ears.

The commander knew the great variety of mankind, not only among races and cultures, but among individuals of the same class and even the same family. However, the differences occasionally astonished him still. He had little truck with the enlisted men, but he saw Adval often enough. The man had obviously been slowly disintegrating

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for months. His judgment, decisiveness, and mental stability had eroded as the siege dragged on. Adval would be the last person Reminy would send to console someone who had apparently taken leave of his senses. Pelato had apparently experienced similar debilitation, but to a greater degree. And yet, other conscripts--Sergeant Turrall, for one--did not seem one whit affected.

The narrow mind is durable, thought Reminy, more compact. Like the fortress built into the mountainside, it exposes less area to the enemy. The seasoned sergeant will long outlast the erudite poet under these circumstances.

"The torch, sir."

Reminy felt the heat as the soldier extended the brand toward him. Without hesitation, he took the torch and thrust it and his head through the doorway. After a moment, he stepped inside, then returned within the span of a few heartbeats, motioning to the sergeant.

"Get these men out of here," he ordered. "They need their rest."

Turrall understood immediately. He did not try to look over the commander's shoulder, nor even change expression. "Off with you, men," he bellowed as he turned. "Get your rest. The moon's almost down. Ohrmazd won't aid the fool who neglects himself. Off with you. Off." He accentuated the words with exaggerated arm-waving, mangled helmet glinting in the firelight.

They grumbled, they questioned half-heartedly, they glanced frequently over their shoulders, but they left. Within a few minutes, the courtyard lay clear of the empty, save

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for Reminy and Turrall and the pile of bodies. Only the crackling torch and whispering late night breeze reached their ears.

The weak firelight caught the very fringes of the heap. Black-eyed corpses stared out at the pair, mouths open in voiceless shrieks. A gentle breeze tugged at the wispy hairs. Blackened fingertips pointed accusingly from between the layers of bodies.

A horrible, disgusting sight, thought Reminy. *And the smell!* He returned his gaze to the infirmary's gaping doorway. The heap would only grow before daylight. It would never shrink, of course, never. It could only grow.

"Come," he said to Turrall, and ducked inside.

Protocol had slackened during the siege, and Reminy thought that a good thing. Men concentrating on simple survival need not be burdened with the useless aspects of discipline. Normally, the commanding officer required briefings from his subordinates at dawn. Such a procedure had persisted during the first few months after the Roman attack. As food became scarce, however, and more rest became necessary, the briefings had been pushed back further into the day.

After the late night, Reminy found himself climbing the stairs to the general's quarters only a few turns of the glass before noon. The surviving adjutant saluted as smartly as he could, and Reminy admired his ability to do so. Such alacrity had disappeared from his own salute quite a while ago. The adjutant opened the stout door and stepped aside as Reminy entered.

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The general sat behind a large desk, hands folded on the empty top. He leaned forward stiffly, as if listening for the watch's alarum. Reminy often caught himself in a similar attitude, anticipating an assault on the wall. Now, with nearly a thousand of the fifteen-hundred men dead, no noise or buzz of activity could be heard inside the office.

The lone, small window in this room looked north and viewed the entire fortress. The high morning sunlight illuminated the office well. The stench was strong here, as everywhere, but the general wore nothing over his nose. His carved helmet and equally ornate brass breastplate rested on the desk. He did not wear his coat of chain mail.

The general did not relax nor did he sharpen his gaze. After so long a time together, he knew Reminy would speak without a command to do so.

"Last night," Reminy began, "shortly after moonrise, Pikeman Pelato entered the infirmary and cut the throats of all the wounded. Commander Adval followed a bit later, seeking to reason with the pikeman. He then slit his own wrists; I saw his own dagger in his hand. I found the pikeman in the corner, weeping uncontrollably, and ran him through. Sergeant Turrall and I stripped the bodies of their weapons and armor and placed the corpses on the heap. I told the sergeant that the pikeman had also murdered Adval and had attempted to do the same to me before I killed him." Reminy took a shallow breath. "I would have fired the infirmary with all inside, but we may need the wood later--when winter comes."

The general had showed no change in emotion. His only shift had been in posture. His shoulders slumped inward slightly, and the folded hands now clenched each other

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tightly. "The sergeant believed you?"

"Perhaps. But that will not affect him nor the story he relays to the men."

The general blinked slowly. "Madness," he muttered, almost under his breath. "We must keep alert; forestall the spread of this disease. Why would a pikeman and an officer succumb to madness at the same time? Officers and nobles should be made of sterner stuff."

"They are only men," replied Reminy. "We are all in the same circumstance here; all on the same rations."

"Hunger addles a man's mind, to be sure," said the general reflectively. "There was famine in my satrapy, once, when I was only a boy. Early frost destroyed the crops. I remember hearing stories of mothers and fathers slaughtering and eating their own children in order to remain alive."

"General, we must forestall the spread of all diseases."

"The dead, you mean."

"Yes. I realize my speech may be sacrilegious, but we have both been on the battlefield, we have both seen the consequences of leaving the dead unburied. And here, the sight of rotting, bloated, blackening corpses cannot ease a man's mind in any way."

The general stood and paced beside his desk, boots clumping hollowly on the wood floor. "Not only am I a man of faith, Commander, but also am I a man of reason. Burying the dead pollutes the Earth and goes against the basic teachings of Zoroaster. The men complain of the stench, and--I am sure--do not relish seeing their friends and

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comrades putrefying before their eyes. But these men died in the struggle against hated Constantinople," he spat as he said the last word, "and their deaths would be made worse by their empty corpses polluting the Earth. I don't think they would have wished this, nor do their brothers-in-arms wish it."

He wandered to the tiny window. "And burying the dead requires too much effort and time. You must realize this. The threat of disease is real, I grant you, but it would increase were we to begin handling bodies in order to bury them." He snorted. "Although the odor is oppressive."

"We leave our dead on remote mountaintops so they may decompose and not endanger the living," replied Reminy. "Here we stack them like bales of wheat. There's no ceremony in it; their souls have fled. If we wish to hold until relieved, we must use every advantage. Throw the bodies over the wall, let the Romans worry over them."

"The Romans will bury them. More, they will realize how many casualties we have actually suffered; we cannot burn for the same reason. I will talk with the men, learn their feelings. Lieutenant," the general called.

The door swung open immediately, admitting the adjutant, who again saluted sharply. "Yes, sir."

"When did I last speak to the men?"

"Second day of the last new moon, sir."

"That will be all." The general waited until the adjutant left. "A leader must not give speeches too often," he said. "The men think he does not trust them or that he

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values words over decisions. In another week or so I will talk to the men. You, the lieutenant, and I are the only officers now, and the lieutenant but a boy." He faced Reminy squarely. "We need every *able* man. Dissenters are worse than useless. You did well last night. I hope for no further similar occurrences, but that is pure fancy. This company will hold until relief comes, I am sure of this, but we must remain vigilant."

The sound of heavy feet rushing up the stairs forestalled Reminy's reply. Both he and the general listened but could make no sense of the babbling voices outside. The door opened once again, revealing a young pikeman, ragged clothing and cuirass hanging from his spare body. The blazing sunlight seemed to almost shine through his scrawny limbs. Old bandages hung from each thigh.

"General," he said as he saluted. "Besas is approaching the wall--without the army," he added quickly. Then he disappeared, footsteps resounding as he sprang down the steps.

"See to that old fool," said the general, "and double the guard at the mine."

Just as the general did not wish to speak to the men too often, Besas, the Eastern Roman commander, waited many weeks between speeches to the Persians. No one knew where he had learned the language--possibly while stationed along the amorphous border--but he spoke it passably well, albeit imperfectly and with a heavy accent. His short speeches played on a man's fears, sentiments and desires. At first, the words had seemed childish and foolish, but no longer. A psychological siege, that is what the general called

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these displays. He would not even hear second-hand reports of what Besas said, would not lend any conceivable sort of dignity to the remarks. Psychological battlements, not only for him but for the men, who would lose confidence if they caught their leader listening to Besas.

As Reminy stood on the rampart, watching the Romans approach, he wondered if some word of last night had reached the enemy camp, for Besas could not have chosen a worse time to deliver some demoralizing discourse. If Reminy commanded, he would forbid the men to listen, ordering them all off the rampart until the echoing steps retreated, but the general believed such action to be harmful; he felt it would only make the men more interested in Besas' words if they were purposely kept from them. Reminy did not agree, but he kept his own counsel on the matter.

The long pikes of Besas' escort waved rhythmically with their march. Red-plumed helmets held steady; the escort never turned their heads. Their gold-filigreed shields, polished to the point of reflection nearly blinded the men lined along the rampart. And there were many men, more than usual. They did not jeer or spit ribald jests as in times past, but mumbled solemnly amongst themselves. Frowning, Reminy gruffly ordered four soldiers to join those already at the mine.

The escort marched closer, now in range of the Persian bows. At three-score and more years of age, Besas needed to be close to be heard, well within a spear-cast distance, almost close enough to drop the oil of Medea on him. The sandaled footsteps echoed thunderously off the towering fortress wall and adjacent rocks. Only a score of

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men produced all this clamor, Reminy realized, almost loosening his frown. In no way could an army sneak up on Petra. The barriers here redoubled any sound without the gates. Only the sappers had reached the wall undetected, and their narrow, colubrine mine could not accommodate a large force.

The winding path that led from Petra's gates turned sharply after approximately five-hundred paces, vanishing around a column of sandstone. Past the curve lay a precipitous drop to the beach and a short march to the Euxine Sea. From the ramparts Reminy felt the breeze that constantly blew inland, that kept the stench of putrefaction from the Romans. A spacious wedge of the sea revealed itself between the rocks, continually widening until it reached the horizon. Like the ostentatious shields, the coruscant waters almost blinded Reminy.

He glanced about him, blinking the blue afterglow from his eyes. More and more men joined their comrades along the battlements. *They are escaping the odor*, he thought. *The air is so much clearer and sweeter up here. I almost envy the guards. We should rotate the sentinels more frequently, give every man a breath of fresh air.* He looked around once more, and his frowned deepened. *Or perhaps they have come to hear Besas speak.*

The knot of Romans halted, shields ready to deflect any objects hurled from the wall. Amidst them stood Besas, his bare, nearly bald head obvious among the scintillant helmets. He seemed, as usual, shorter than any of his escort, but he remained clearly visible to those watching from above.

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"Men of Persia," he began in his aged, raspy voice, "you are lost. The numbers of my army have become ten-thousand, and more arrive today. Look for yourself, the troop galleys are on the sea."

Reminy received the impression the Roman would have gestured had he not been hemmed in by a dozen men. He squinted out toward the sea. A few black specks hovered among the brilliant gleams. They could as easily have been fishing boats as war galleys.

"They will arrive in Lazica this evening and join my army tomorrow. With them will come barrels of wine and fruit, carts of bread, and three-hundred cattle and as many sheep. Tomorrow night we will celebrate the arriving soldiers with a large feast; perhaps you will hear us laughing and singing as you enjoy your own repast, or perhaps the grumblings in your belly will drown us out. Some of you might wish to join. As a generous and forgiving man, I invite any of you who wish to come to my camp. With a little luck, the Mingrelian dancing girls will have arrived just as we quit our meal. No one will hinder you. After the feast, you are free to go where you will, unharmed. What say you?"

Silence met the remarks. Reminy expected unflattering comments on the Mingrelian girls or Besas himself, but none came. He did not know to be reassured or apprehensive.

Besas waited for a few heartbeats before continuing, a smile on his lips. "Those who cannot walk themselves from the fortress will not be forgotten. My men will give them gifts of rock and ballista darts. Then, the next morning, perhaps we will storm the

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walls, or perhaps we will wait. The weather is good. We will sit and eat until the last defender dies of hunger or madness."

Silence again. The Roman seemed to be encouraged by the lack of response.

"And do not think of relief. The Persian army was destroyed. Belisarius scattered it among the Caucasus Mountains. You are lost."

The only answer was the humming sea breeze. Reminy studied the faces around him. He found no expressions of disdain or wry humor, only forlornness and pity--self-pity. They did not fear death itself; they feared its circumstances and attendant suffering. Starvation, insanity, hopelessness--these were the soldiers' only prospects for the future, and such prospects often compelled men to see death as a liberator, as perhaps Adval had. Besas, a veteran of many wars and many sieges, knew this. He would sprinkle salt in the fears. He also knew the way men thought, how they perceived actions. Were Reminy to cast a spear at him, or try to shout him down, the Persians would see their officer as instilling credence in the fears through his very act of denial. No man on that wall could understand why that would be so, nor even satisfactorily articulate the actual feelings, but they did not need to do so. They need only feel and comprehend intuitively.

Reminy wanted desperately to declaim Besas in some way, yet did not know how. And so he stood and watched, frustrated.

"No answer?" asked the Roman, scanning the faces above him. "Then I leave. Remember my offer, and remember your options." He gave an order in Greek. The escort retreated immediately, armor gleaming dazzlingly. The rear guard maintained a

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wary eye on the fortress until they had marched beyond bowshot. Within moments they passed out of sight.

Wordlessly, the Persians slowly disbanded, carefully descending the ladders. The watch resumed their positions with equal sullenness. To Reminy they all appeared as mourners returning from the funeral of a beloved relative. No one wished to be the first to speak and disturb the others.

"Tural!" Reminy shouted, a little too loudly, a little too anxious to end the silence. He noticed many heads turn his way. The sergeant broke from the line of men waiting at the head of the ladder and stepped toward him.

"Sir?" he said, almost reluctant to utter a sound.

"Send some men to relieve the watch at the mine, but keep the guard doubled until tomorrow after dawn."

"Yes, sir." Tural hastened away, barging to the front of the line.

Reminy heard no other conversation, only the scuff of sandals and creak of leather. He stood and watched everyone descend, still frustrated.

When the messenger had told him the enemy was digging a mine at the east wall, Reminy had envisioned the great iron mine in his native province. That mine was a tremendous hole tunneled into the Hindu-Kush mountains, worked from dawn to dusk by hundreds of slaves. The mine at the east wall was merely a burrow dug by the Eastern Romans. It began out of the guards' line of fire--around a rocky promontory--and ran

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along a narrow ledge right to the foot of the wall. The objective was not to tunnel into the fortress' compound but to undermine a portion of the wall itself and cause it to collapse, creating a breach. No one knew for certain why the mine had been discontinued, but many reasons were obvious. A military eye, even one not trained in siege warfare, could see that any sizable force of men would have inordinate difficulty negotiating the promontory and ledge. They must need storm the fortress only two or three abreast, a number easily managed by only a few defenders.

Months ago, after sappers had left the mine, a few Persians had been lowered outside the wall to open the tunnel and inspect the damage. They found the wall supported by only a few timbers. They hastily repaired what they could and collapsed some of the passage, but the enemy began patrolling the area, and no further work could be done. Since the mine had been laid open at the base of the wall, and could now be watched by archers on the ramparts, no further damage could be done either. However, the wall remained weak. Reminy expected it would require further repair one day, so he was not surprised when two of his men came to him and reported ominous cracking sounds from under the wall.

At dawn on the day after Besas' speech, the watch at the mine had been reduced to the normal number of two. After their relief at noon, these men had come to Reminy and claimed the wall had made some odd noises and shuddered slightly during their turn. Reminy could not afford to wait and learn whether the wall was crumbling or harmlessly settling. He gathered a dozen men along the inside of the east wall. Another two, along

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with the commander, stood along the walk on top. The pair who had reported the disquiet had volunteered to be lowered to the outside and examine the supports.

Five men now occupied the rampart, three crouched out of sight. If this section of the wall was weak, then as few men as possible should stand on it. Reminy had the men securely knot two pairs of long ropes together, so they could lower and raise any weight over the top while remaining on the ground.

"There, sir," one of the guards said suddenly. "They've come and gone."

The other began counting slowly. "One, two, three..."

Reminy and the volunteers straightened and the latter hurriedly checked the knots around their waists. "Tighten the rope," called down the commander. The men on the ground reeled in the slack until they felt the resistance of the others' bodies.

"Go," ordered Reminy. The volunteers threw their legs over the edge. "Arnush says he can count to two-hundred before the patrol returns. Not much time, so hurry."

"Thirty, thirty-one, thirty-two..."

At the commander's signal, those on the ground--six per rope--quickly lowered their comrades beside the open mine. Today was overcast, and the usual onshore breeze seemed to have shifted to blow from the West. Devoid of armor in order to lessen their weight, the volunteers carried only a sword apiece in addition to their clothing. Six soldiers should be enough to raise and lower a single man, even as weak as they had become.

"Sixty-three, sixty-four..."

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Enough slack remained to allow the pair to enter the mine without disengaging the knots about their waists. They ducked under the ground, rope umbilical cords brushing gently against the stone wall.

Reminy peered toward the horizon. Much as the north, the eastern view ran away for a hundred paces or more then fell off steeply. An upthrust of rock hid the Roman camp--perhaps ten bowshots distant--from sight. Above and to the right of the promontory one could see the checkered farmland in the plains below and, partially obscured by a bluish haze, the walled city of Lazica. On clearer days, one could plainly see the Caucasus Mountains in the northeast.

Besas, a wily veteran, kept his exaggerations barely believable. Reminy did not think ten thousand Romans lay encamped out there, and he was certain the Persian army had not been destroyed. The only holding Persia retained in this area was the fortress, Petra. A Persian army would come here to relieve the fort and attack Lazica from a position of strength. The path from Persia or Mesopotamia to Petra did not come near the Caucasus.

"Eighty-six..."

"Commander! The men are running."

Reminy jerked his gaze downward. The two volunteers *were* running, but not toward the wall. They sprinted away, along the top of the mine shaft. The two lengths of rope still snaked into the mine's opening and swayed in the breeze. Another dozen paces and the men would round the promontory and be lost.

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Reminy did not hesitate. "They're deserting," he growled. "Shoot them."

His tone did not allow the archers to hesitate, either. In a single, synchronized move they raised their bows, drew the strings to their chins, and let loose. At such close range, the light wind had little effect. Both arrows hit home and their targets pitched forward. One lay still. The other attempted to rise, then fell back, convulsed twice, and also lay motionless.

"Stand to!" Reminy bellowed to the dozen men below. He seized the nearest rope, swung his legs over the wall's edge, and began to shimmy down. "Keep counting," he barked as the guards disappeared from his sight. He also began counting, silently.

One-hundred...

The Romans could not be permitted to find those Persian bodies, skewered by Persian arrows. They would then have evidence that morale in the fortress was low, for how else could one explain this situation than these men had been shot as they deserted. More, the corpses' emaciated, dishevelled appearance would correctly identify the desperate situation within Petra. Those bodies must not be left.

Halfway down the wall, with burning pain already lancing through his shoulders, Reminy recalled he had not eaten since the prior evening. The meager strength he might have had then had been used in mere survival. Only a few months ago, he would have thought nothing about descending this wall. Today he knew he needed to move more quickly, if more recklessly, in order to reach the ground before his body failed. He used only the grip of his hands to halt a fall, swiftly dropping from handhold to handhold.

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Anyone watching would have thought him out of control, and he was. His feet striking the earth came as a surprise, and he fell to one knee.

One-hundred and fifteen...

Reminy did not pause long enough to catch his breath--he could not afford the time. He did, however, glimpse the damage to his hands; recklessly scaling the rope had turned his palms raw and bloody. Grunting, he propelled himself upright and began running. The steps were not well coordinated; weakness made his strides shorter than normal, and he stumbled most of the way, painfully jarring his knees and hips. He did not think the guards would shoot him for a deserter, but he would not be surprised if they did so, nor could he blame them; he had given them no explanation for his actions, and one comrade--to their knowledge--had already lost his mind.

Reminy berated himself for being out here. He was one of only three officers remaining alive, one of only three leaders. Insufficient leadership had contributed to the low morale. This was a task for a conscript, he told himself, not for an officer.

By the time he reached the bodies--and he knew he had taken too long, knew he could not return before the Roman patrol saw him-- Reminy's breath came in unsteady, ragged gasps. Dizziness and weakness assailed him, and his heart beat so strongly in his ears he could hear nothing else. His vision blurred; the white of the sky and the grey/brown/green of the earth had melded into an indistinguishable mass of color. He did not possess the energy to shut his eyes against it. Yet again he did not linger to gather strength, for he had no strength to gather nor time to orient himself. Force of will

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animated him now, and instinct directed him.

Bloody hands grabbed the nearest ankle of each man, and began dragging them both back toward the wall, taking ponderous, plodding backward shuffling steps. The protestation of his open wounds quickly died under the screams of his shoulders. He knew if he paused to rest or muffle the screams, he would be unable to resume. So he continued, now fending off the dizziness, now the pain, losing both battles, losing his grasp on consciousness. Then numbness appeared. It began in his hands, and spread up the arms. He welcomed the relief from agony, but he knew the numbness would not stop there. It would continue to his brain where it would deaden to beating in his ears, blacken the blur of his eyes, and settle the dizziness. Then he would collapse, lose consciousness, and remain so until the searing heat of Roman torture irons awakened him.

One-hundred and fifty...

He was unsure if his counting were steady, or if he had skipped some numbers, or if he had been counting the same number all along. He struggled to concentrate, hoping to stave the numbness from his mind.

The pain had melted from his shoulders. The numbness had reached them, or he had stopped moving--he could not tell. He tried to concentrate.... Yes, he still moved, the pace of his gasps told him that. He must keep moving.

The pounding in his ears nearly deafened him, yet he thought he heard a shout. He hoped it was not the Romans. His death or capture would only serve to discourage

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the men further. It may have been the men along the wall hollering, or perhaps Reminy himself. He was too tired to concentrate and learn the truth.

The jarring of his back told him he had reached the wall. He dropped the ankles and reached for a rope. With numbed digits and blurry eyesight, he wondered how he would know if he ever found a rope, much less tie it about a corpse's waist. Where were the Romans? He had taken too long, he was sure of it.

Someone was shouting. Someone nearby. Reminy gritted his teeth and forced his eyes to focus. Slowly the colors resolved into a comprehensible picture. Arnush, the archer from the wall, stood next to him, deftly lacing a rope around one of the corpses. At the top edge of his vision, Reminy saw the other corpse being raised pell mell up the wall.

Then he went deaf; the shouting and the pounding quickly faded. The numbness had reached his ears. Even as he realized this, Reminy saw the blackness growing in his sight. He kept his vision long enough to see and feel Arnush pulling a rope under his shoulders. Time must have become distorted. The ropes had not had time to reach the top of the wall and then be thrown back.

Reminy felt a sharp jerk beneath his arms, then weightlessness. Now he felt nothing. With no hearing, no sight, no sense of touch, Reminy had no reason to remain conscious. He gladly allowed the numbness to seize him.

Consciousness returned in phases. In one moment Reminy sensed nothing, in the

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next he heard men's voices admonishing each other in scratchy whispers. Then Reminy felt the warped wood pressing on his back and head, and the coarse blanket irritating his exposed skin. One arm lay across his chest, fingertips resting on his ribs, the other arm lay by his side. He felt an uncomfortable tightness across his hands.

The rotten, familiar odor of decaying flesh stung his nostrils, and Reminy felt the muscles slide and tighten as he winced against in disgust. No other muscles responded, and he could not pull the blanket over his nose. Perhaps the sensitivity would weaken and the stench grow less foul.

The well-known smell seemed to incite the commander's memory, for his current plight, heretofore accepted but not understood, quickly took on import. And the memories brought questions. But he was too exhausted to attempt to puzzle them out. Perhaps answers would come to him intuitively.

Reminy rolled his head to one side and waited out the brief bout of dizziness which followed. He opened his eyes half way. Dingy brown light peeked through the cracks between the wall boards, barely illuminating a tiny room. Reminy recognized the proportions as belonging to his quarters. Painfully and slowly rotating his gaze, Reminy came across two brown blotches that he soon recognized as squatting men. Their backs to him, the men conversed in audible yet incomprehensible whispers, although their heads never moved. They seemed intent on a particular spot on the floor or low on the nearer wall.

Reminy slowly licked his lips in preparation of hailing the men. As he opened his

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mouth to speak, however, the sibilant discourse halted abruptly, and a palpable tension caused him to set his teeth soundlessly. Absolute silence. Reminy, afraid to move, breathe, or even think lest he be the first to make a noise, stared unblinkingly at the crouched forms.

Then, a scuff--a quick, surreptitious, almost imperceptible scratch. Reminy almost believed he had imagined it; he had seen no one move, had not felt himself move. The tension began to grate on his jagged nerves. He wanted to speak and hear and move, to assure himself he was whole, assess the damage done to his mind and body.

Someone shouted, and Reminy started violently. The two forms crashed to their knees, cursing loudly. An angry squeak stabbed at Reminy's spine before being rudely choked off. One of the men let out a short laugh of triumph. They both stood quickly, backs still turned, huddling around something Reminy could not see. One turned his head to other, a large smile on his face. He must have caught sight of the commander, for the smile faded immediately. Slapping his comrade roughly across the chest, he spun into a rigid form of attention. The other seemed startled for a moment, then acted likewise, but with one hand tucked out of sight behind him.

"Our apologies, Commander," said the first. "We did not mean to wake you."

Reminy did not bother to say he had been awake for a while. He glanced inquisitively at the second man's hidden arm.

Following the gaze and expression, the second man brought forth his fist. From it hung a long, lean, grey body with a pink, scabrous tail. "A rat, sir," he said, then

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cleared his throat. "We caught a rat for you."

Perhaps a hastily-concocted lie, perhaps not. In either case, Reminy's reaction was the same. "I don't want it. Keep it for yourselves." He blinked slowly, and surprised himself by saying: "But thank you." An officer and a noble did not need to thank anyone, nor was it expected, but Reminy had felt the inexplicable urge to express thanks. He frowned at what he thought had been a mental lapse.

"You may, however," he said quietly, "bring my ration."

"Yes, Commander." The man with the rat saluted and bolted for the door.

The angle of the sudden sunlight piercing the doorway suggested that the sun had only risen of few turns of the glass ago. Reminy squinted against the glare. "Close that door," he said.

"Yes, sir." The first man stepped to the door, then once again froze to attention.

The adjutant entered stolidly. "The general to see you, Commander," he snapped, swivelling himself aside.

The general came next, boots echoing on the grey floor boards. He wore no sword. Long horsehair, dyed a brilliant crimson, bobbed from his helmet. The gold and silver breastplate caught the sun and refracted it straight into Reminy's eyes.

The general returned the rat-catcher's salute. At the adjutant's covert insistence, the man scampered outside, and the adjutant closed the door behind him. Reminy's squint faded in the more comfortable light. He wondered if it were more acceptable for him to salute from a supine position or merely look respectful. He knew he had no chance of

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even sitting up. He did not come to a decision before the general spoke.

"How do you feel, Commander?"

Reminy cleared his throat. "Better than I had hoped, General." His voice emerged too hoarse, and he cleared his throat again.

The general removed the horse-plume helmet and handed it to the adjutant, who had suddenly appeared at his elbow, and who disappeared just as suddenly. He returned with a beaten, crudely-made chair that--along with an equally rude desk--comprised all of Reminy's furniture. The general pulled the chair to a pace from Reminy's upper body and sat down gently, distrustful of the thing's construction.

"I heard the story," he said once he had settled himself. "You look better than I had hoped. I was touring the courtyard when I saw one of the pikemen run from here. I thought you might be conscious." A short silence. "The men think a great deal of you."

"For saving the carcasses of two deserters? In my opinion, that is not a feat worthy of praise." Reminy's voice cracked more than once, and he cleared his throat a third time.

"Perhaps I should rephrase my statement. The men are concerned about you. They have always thought a great deal about you--which they should. You are an officer."

Reminy had no reply.

"Do not misunderstand me, Commander, but this incident may be the most beneficial of the siege, for many reasons. Firstly, it reveals how low the men's morale

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has sunk." He grimaced. "Deserters in my army--an outrageous disgrace. I wish I might have killed them myself. However, they were dealt with as deserters should be dealt with, which provides a good example for the others, and that is another reason. And most importantly, the men witnessed what they have lacked most: demonstrative leadership."

"You're a fine leader, sir." Reminy's voice cracked on the last words. He angrily resolved to avoid speaking.

"I know that. But these men need demonstrative leadership. I lead with words--good words, perhaps, but only words. A soldier more easily understands actions. They are conscripts. The army has taught them of honor, but they have not been raised with it as we have. They lose it much more quickly, and regain it very slowly. Men can be taught to march in step, but they cannot be taught to keep good spirits. Morale was abysmal. Your one act has done more for morale than all my speeches could have. Morale remains abominable, but it has improved."

A timid knock sounded at the door. The adjutant waited for the general's nod of assent before jerking open the door. The second rat-catcher stood without, a rough ceramic bowl and ale-jack in his hands. The rat was nowhere to be seen. He meekly peered inside, gaped at the general then at the adjutant, his eyes soon coming to rest on the resplendent helmet tucked under the officer's arm.

The adjutant gave a low command that Reminy could not hear. The rat-catcher fairly sprinted to the commander's side, laid down the bowl and jack, markedly avoided

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looking at the general, and sprinted out again. Reminy noticed the general watching after the man long after the door had closed and the adjutant had resumed his previous position.

"Men always seem to be hurrying from my presence," said the general, echoing Reminy's exact thought. He glanced at the food. "Do you need aid?" he asked, raising a hand to summon the adjutant.

"No," Reminy replied quickly. The thought of being fed like a babe plus the thought of sustenance enabled him to struggle upon one elbow. He waited for the attendant bout of dizziness to pass before pulling the bowl closer. He blinked, astonished at the amount of mush before him.

"I've ordered the deserters' rations to be added to yours until you regain strength. Don't protest, Commander; be grateful."

Reminy felt a twinge of guilt, but not enough to keep him from finishing the triple ration. He could not recall what went into this concoction. Whatever precious grain remained--oat or wheat, surely, and some salt, and water. The jack held more water. The fortress had a system of three aqueducts, two of which had been found and dammed by the Romans. Enough poured through the last duct to supply an adequate amount of drinking water for the garrison.

The general watched Reminy eat for several long moments before he spoke again. "Relief will come, I am sure," he said absently, staring at a knothole in the floor. "It may arrive too late, however. The Romans need only gather a clue as to our condition

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or number and they will overwhelm us. Petra is worth five-thousand men, but my five-hundred--containing the strength of only three-hundred--cannot man the walls satisfactorily. But a thousand men, in this fortress, could keep any army at bay."

He leaned forward slightly. Reminy saw the adjutant take step closer, head bent in the attitude of listening. "Commander," continued the general, "how many men did you have at hand to raise one man up the east wall?"

Reminy swallowed hastily. "Six," he said, although he received the impression the general knew the answer already.

"Why so many?"

The general must have known this as well, but Reminy played along. "The men are undernourished, perhaps only half as strong as they once were. Three full-strength men can raise and lower another rapidly, so I presumed six half-strength men could do the same."

"Well reasoned, well reasoned. But only partly true. Yesterday, upon hearing that my only remaining command officer was in peril of a Roman patrol, I rushed to the east wall. Twelve men stood along the rampart--one had been sent for me, and another stood outside the wall, a rope around his chest."

Arnush, Reminy thought, the archer who helped me.

"Someone among their number had taken charge and done well. Four ropes had been made from the two, and bows collected. Two soldiers manned each rope, and the remaining four held off the advancing Romans with arrows." The general leaned back.

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His eyes glinted almost gleefully, but he did not allow himself to smile. "I noticed the man below sent up the corpses before you--an error in judgment, but a trivial point. What shocked me, Commander, was that two half-strength men lifted another man up the wall as quickly as any three full-strength men ever did. They did not realize their feat, and perhaps never will. But I saw. And as they pulled, hand over hand, without slackening pace, they shouted insults to the enemy. These men are exhausted today, and need time to recover, but the act remains."

"I've seen the phenomena you speak of, General; men seeming to pass beyond their physical limits. They usually believe they are deriving power from Ohrmazd."

"It is more than that, Commander. I fully believe they would not have been so...powerful if they had been raising four dead men, even under the tension and excitement of the approaching Romans. Your act of leadership and endangerment galvanized those men. This is how five-hundred men become a thousand, how we may defend Petra successfully."

After only a few mouthfuls, Reminy felt noticeably stronger. He had already recanted his resolution to keep quiet, and had experienced no ill effects. "General," he began, "I think you overestimate this episode..." He trailed off awkwardly. Reminy had never seen the general so garrulous, and he felt a bit uncomfortable in carrying on a conversation with a man to whom he had only given reports and briefings.

"Perhaps." Now the general seemed uncomfortable. "Rare is the man who realizes he is mad, who can distinguish rhetoric and reasoning from the beginnings of insanity."

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And brilliance can be mistaken for--even a cousin of--insanity. Nowhere are genius and madness closer than in war, and this is a war against madness as much as against the enemy."

Reminy nodded slowly, reflexively, trying to follow the general's train of thought.

"Men--soldiers--need confidence. Our men must have confidence in their food supply, comrades, chance for relief, and leadership. You can look in your bowl and see the sorry state of our supply, the action of Pikeman Pelato has undermined confidence in their comrades, Besas has done nearly the same for our chance of relief, and Commander Adval *had* damaged confidence in leadership. Yesterday I saw what the restoration of only one of those confidences did to the men. I want, with your help, to keep that and restore another."

By process of elimination, Reminy knew which other the general meant, and the train of thought suddenly became clear. "Confidence in the men's comrades is the only one over which we could possibly have any control. But how can we avoid madness?"

"By the same tactic that allowed two men to lift you over the wall: distraction. If they have time to reflect on their situation, the burden grows much heavier. Their minds must remain occupied, free from melancholy."

"What do you propose, General?"

"I? I propose that you regain health and then think of something to occupy the men. I have formulated the theory, you are to put it into practice."

The general stood and extended his hand. The adjutant reappeared and placed the

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helmet in the general's palm, then hastened to the door and held it open. Without a second glance, the general donned the helmet and strode outside.

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CHAPTER III

Despite the triple ration, Reminy recovered slowly, a fact both frustrating and welcome. Frustrating because he despised weakness and inactivity--particularly in himself--and to alleviate the former, he must perform the latter. Welcome because the general's command (although not couched as an order, it remained just as forceful) confounded him.

After eight months in the fort, the men had run out of activities and had slipped into a routine of patrolling the ramparts, chasing rats, and sleeping. Only the Romans could provide any diversion, usually by catapulting boulders into the compound. The clean-up and repair after such an attack occupied the men for a time, but the enemy realized this. Besas, an expert at siege tactics, knew that inactivity would enfeeble the Persians' fighting spirit more than continuous bombardment, so he rarely engaged in the latter. Perhaps he also knew ways to keep men busy during a siege.

The general, a field commander and not one accustomed to holding a garrison, had no experience with siege warfare and therefore had to begin from nothing. With time to reflect, Reminy came to understand this. Many of the general's early orders--such as keeping the wall fully manned even during catapult attacks and enforcing marching discipline on weakening men--were clearly detrimental. Many of the men now lying in the putrefying pile would probably be alive today if not for such orders. But the general, a supremely intelligent man, learned quickly. He coped well with the disproportionate

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loss of his officers and remained an admirable leader.

Reminy could not believe he had done the same. He had assumed the duties of the other officers, but not the leadership or rapport with the men. He communicated to the conscripts mainly through orders, infrequently through explanations, and never through idle banter. The general chose him as some sort of morale organizer, Reminy was convinced, simply because only he out of a dozen line officers continued to draw breath. He felt himself chiefly responsible for the low morale, he and that mountain of rotting bodies across the parade grounds.

Reminy quickly saw his current task as one in which he might redeem himself and perhaps amend his incommunicative ways. For the past six years, and especially the past eight months, he had thought automatically like an officer. Now he would think deliberately like an officer and--more importantly--like another of the men.

His first inclination had been to order those damned corpses buried with all due speed. The very thought of them made him queasy. However, the general, days ago, had seemed rather adamant about that subject, and Reminy did not wish to incur any wrath just yet. Perhaps he could think of a way to hide or disguise the bodies, or their odor, anyway.

The next inclination, the first on which he acted, came after two days of recuperation.

"Sergeant Turrall reporting, sir." The sergeant stood in the center of the room, rigidly at attention. All the men who had had occasion to see Reminy since his "incident"

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had appeared to be striving for a proper form of attention and salute and terseness of words. The helmet with the bent spire lay tucked under his arm, and he clasped his pike with the opposite fist.

The commander had stood for a few moments earlier that day, and taken a few small steps, but did not feel strong enough to remain standing for long. So he faced the sergeant from a sitting position, back braced against a spot on a wall where the warped boards were not so uncomfortable, blanket spread over his legs.

"Where are you from, Sergeant?" asked Reminy a bit stiffly. This was perhaps his first attempt at conversation with a conscript since entering the army, and he felt decidedly awkward. His hands reflexively clenched and relaxed under the blanket.

The sergeant, understandably taken aback, hesitated before replying, and seemed unsure as to how precise he should be. "Hyrkania, sir. Western Hyrkania." He did not seem grow more at ease--the exact opposite, in fact. His tone suggested he thought Reminy sought a particular answer.

"How long have you been in the Great King's army?" Reminy felt stupid, but attempted to appear dignified. He contemplated venturing a smile, then dismissed the thought. He did not want to appear an idiot.

"This will be the fourteenth winter, sir."

"And have you enjoyed the soldier's life?" Reminy realized he had few if any conversation skills. He did not know what to ask or how to phrase a question expertly.

"I don't have much to compare it with, sir. I suppose I have."

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"What experience of yours do you think was most--" Reminy angrily cut himself short. *Enough of this ridiculous charade.* He would rather seem a detached statue than a clumsy fop. "Sergeant, I hereby promote you to the rank of lieutenant. Fetch the proper insignia and accoutrements from the general's adjutant and report to me early tomorrow morning."

The former sergeant stood dumbfounded, whiskers vibrating as he tried to form a reply.

Reminy watched him for only a moment. "Dismissed, Lieutenant. And find a new helmet, that one makes you look comical and unbefits an officer of the Persian army."

"Sir?"

"Go!"

Turrall went.

A conscript raised to the rank of officer might lose touch with the other conscripts, grow too full of himself--a stern argument against promoting Turrall. Reminy would encourage him not to drift away, and his fourteen years among the men would make such a process difficult. The promotion might restore some confidence of army operations in the men, and certainly provided another leader, something that had been desperately lacking for quite a while. Besides, Turrall was liked and respected by the men, at least as far as Reminy could tell, and that made him a natural candidate for officer. If and when relief arrived, Reminy would worry about the laws which allowed only nobles to be officers.

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Tomorrow, when Turrall reported, Reminy would need to tell him his plan for raising morale. Between now and then, the commander needed to formulate a plan. He sat the rest of the day and into the night in solitude, sifting his mind. Several times he drifted to sleep only to rouse himself and curse his tiredness.

As a child, Reminy's mother had set him and his brothers in contests--often involving treasure hunts or long distance rides--to keep them occupied and out of mischief. Games, however, were too strenuous for these weakened men. He needed an idea that required little physical effort, yet held one's attention. An idea that would raise spirits as well.

"Drama, sir?"

"Yes, Lieutenant. Plays, performances and the like."

"I don't think most of the men have seen a drama, sir; some may not have even heard of such a thing. I'm not sure that I--"

"Then this shall be an educational as well as diverting experience for them all. Unless you have a better idea...."

Turrall squared his shoulders sharply, causing his new helmet to slip sideways a bit. "No, sir."

The adjutant had kept good care of the officer insignia, for Turrall's lieutenant emblems shone almost with a light of their own from his ragged uniform. In comparison, Reminy's emblems could scarcely be distinguished from his grimy tunic. The lieutenant's

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new helmet seemed that of an officer (and did indeed resemble Reminy's own): tall steel spire, padded interior, and an aventail of leather lamellar. Turrall, accustomed to the misdistributed weight of his old helmet, wore the new headgear too far to one side and it frequently slid over one ear. Hopefully he would correct the error before he became a laughingstock.

Reminy sat in a chair this morning; the floor being too uncomfortable and unseemly besides. Tomorrow he would venture outside the room for a short walk, gradually increasing the duration of his daily rounds. An officer should often remain in the men's sight in order to hand down discipline and instill confidence. Until then, Turrall would need to act his part as a new officer.

"Have the men form groups of a score and five," the commander said, "preferably within the structure of their own companies. Each group will present a drama or somesuch for the amusement of the others. The presentation need not be long, but everyone must be involved."

Turrall had done some quick calculations. "That's almost a score of dramas, sir."

"And all will be performed beginning on the day of the equinox; that allows the men a few weeks to prepare."

The lieutenant's expression had gradually evolved from one of surprise to one of pain, although he did his best to conceal his inner feelings. "And what drama shall they produce, sir?"

"Whatever they like, although I suggest they look to our mythology and folktales

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for sources; every man must know scores of childhood tales from which to draw. Every drama must, however, be different from any others. I won't sit through nineteen versions of Tishtrya and Apaosha. Tell the men creativity will be rewarded."

"Rewarded, sir?" Turrall straightened his helmet.

"There should be rewards for the better dramas, but I have yet to think of what might be used." Reminy deliberated for a few moments, then snorted. "I'll think on it later; tell them only that there will be prizes."

The pained expression had deepened, and his flattery seemed forced. "Despite the brilliance of your idea, Commander, the men may react unfavorably."

"The initial reactions are unimportant; they have no choice in the matter. All will participate. Report to the general and tell him of my plan, then assemble the men in small groups and give them the news--I leave the base organization to you."

After Turrall left, Reminy stood and paced carefully until he satisfied himself that he could walk without stumbling or succumbing to waves of weakness. Tonight he would order himself off the increased ration. As weak as he felt, he might have reached the limit of recuperation possible under these conditions. Also, the thought of unnecessarily depleting the food stores left the commander with a clinging sense of guilt which he wished alleviated as soon as possible.

Another feeling he wished alleviated as soon as possible was the horrified revulsion he experienced every time he thought of the heap of corpses only a hundred paces away. The sight or smell infused Reminy with a nausea that seemed to grow

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stronger as the siege continued. Lately, the very conception of the pile of hundreds of rotting bodies left him sick also, a fact that would be unremarkable in a merchant, or a magus, or a woman, but that should not be so in a soldier. Reminy had seen the aftermath of a score of battles, had even come upon a battle site a week later, after the dead had lain in the summer sun for days. His reactions had been stoic, imperturbable, just as last autumn when the stack of corpses had begun. *Those bodies must be discarded somehow*, Reminy told himself, *before summer comes, before they drive me mad.*

Reminy expected the men to resist forced activity, and they did initially. After several months of lax protocol, a strategy eventually undertaken by the general in order to improve morale, no one leaped to the almost preposterous notion of performing a drama. The men grumbled and cursed and many flatly refused--to Turrall, mostly; to the commander also when he appeared, though less vociferously. Turrall relayed expurgated versions of the complaints he received to Reminy, who listened patiently although he remained unmoved. A font of disciplining and direct orders would probably serve only to stiffen the resistance and ensure the unenjoyability of the plan. Reminy restricted his comments to a single, simple statement: "With scarcely a month to prepare, you are better off preparing than complaining."

Eleven days after the initial announcement, a group of eight or more men approached Reminy as he toured the parade grounds, his gaze constantly averted from the west wall. The bright, crisp sunlight cast their bony frames in angular relief. The

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constant sea breeze tugging at the handkerchiefs they wore over their mouths and noses. As they approached, Reminy realized that he could name every one of them, a disheartening fact. The number of soldiers had dropped to the point where the commander had learned, without diligence, all their names. That would make it all the more difficult to throw them onto the heap.

The leader of this group was Corporal Fazes, a swarthy, stalwart soldier with long, plaited black hair. An Arab. Reminy once heard that Fazes had twelve sisters. "Commander," he called as Reminy noticed him, "we would like to speak with you."

Reminy stopped. The group came to within a few paces and gradually halted as well.

"Yes?" prodded the commander.

Fazes cleared his throat. "About this drama business, sir..." he trailed off and cleared his throat again, but said nothing.

Reminy glanced at the faces before him. He heard some shuffling feet and coughing; no one met his gaze squarely. "What is it?" he asked sternly, face set in his best no-trifling expression.

"Well, sir," Fazes began again, and again stopped short. He also looked at the men behind him, although he received no support.

"Speak up, man," snapped Reminy.

"None of us relishes the thought of performing a drama, sir," Fazes said quickly. He rushed on before Reminy could reply. "We were wondering, sir, if we might, that

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is, if we could put on a comedy in the stead of a drama."

Reminy was sure his surprise revealed itself on his face. Prepared to engage in argument, he had no ready answer for this question.

"Dokada says he saw a comedy in Constantinople some years ago, and we thought we might--"

"Certainly," Reminy said as he regained composure. "A fine idea, yes. Go ahead. Well done."

"Thank you, sir," said Fazes, thankful to be spared any explanation. He and the group quickly dispersed.

"I must admit," said the general days later, "that I had a qualm or two over your idea." He stood at the window of his office, looking over the parade ground. In one corner of the grounds, Reminy knew, stood the skeletal frame of a stage with dozens of men hanging about it or on it. Faraway shouts drifted through the window. "However, the men seem to have taken to it with feverish intensity." The general turned away from the window toward Reminy. "How large is that platform?" he asked incredulously, as if he knew the answer would startle him.

"Large enough to hold four ox carts, sir, and they may yet add to it. Corporal Fazes mentioned that he would like to be able to drive his father's sheep on it."

"Do they need such space?"

"They don't need half such space, but I thought it best to let them find their own

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way; they actually seem to be enjoying themselves."

"I agree." The general glanced out the window again. "I've seen the old amphitheater in Persepolis. The performance floor there did not encompass so much space."

Reminy believed him. During the winter, the men had used planks from the empty barracks for fueling their fires, a practice they continued on a smaller scale now. What remained of the deserted barracks had been destroyed, completely dismembered in order to build the gargantuan platform. Thankfully the men had not proceeded with their original plan to construct an artificial amphitheater, with tiers of seats for spectators; not enough rope could be spared to hold such a thing together. They optioned for a raised platform abutting the occupied barracks. The stage's height allowed audience members in the rear to hear and see the action while the proximity to the barracks let the troupe's members enter and exit the performance conveniently.

"I retain one reservation, Commander," said the general, "despite the present ... progress. Do these men, former farmers and herders, know enough of drama to accomplish one? Will the effort and lack of result bore and frustrate us all so that we end more poorly than we began?"

"I do not believe so, sir. Those with low ability would probably have low expectations. Most of these men have never seen a staged drama, they have no standards to hold their comrades against. More than that, however, the success of this plan does not require a product worthy of Aeschylus, or Plautus. The success comes in the process,

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keeping the men occupied, just as you wanted. I hope the audience will appreciate the effort--comparing the current actors' with their own--more than the product. I gave a short time for preparation so that quality would not become a great issue."

"You did offer rewards of some sort, did you not?"

"Yes, as an incentive. I will let the men themselves choose the better plays, removing that responsibility from me, at least. That should seem fair to everyone."

The general nodded absently then retreated from the window. He looked squarely at Reminy and spoke in a tone even more serious than normal. "I have recently inspected the stores, Commander. At the current rate, I believe we will use our last bit of food in three weeks. I shall not water down the gruel any further, for three reasons: such an act would tell the men of the desperate situation, we don't have much water, and the current fare already tastes like horse droppings." The general rubbed his chin. "I am considering the possibility of tripling rations for a week, then sallying forth against the Romans. Or perhaps making some sort of clandestine raid into their camp."

Reminy had expected this news for months, had steeled himself against it. Nonetheless, he felt his heart drop at the words, and he fought to keep down the rising sense of frustration. "Even at full strength we have no chance in a battle with Besas' men" was all he said.

"At least we would die like soldiers, with a chance to avenge our comrades. Whether we fight or starve, we will lose Petra. I was charged with holding the fortress until relief arrived. Although I have never failed in carrying out the Great King's orders,

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I am resigned to fate."

Suddenly, Reminy noticed, the general seemed as thin and haggard as the conscripts outside. Moreso, for he had no platform to build or drama to perform.

"Have you any special orders, General?"

"None yet. You know to keep this knowledge to yourself. Continue with the entertainment, and when the performances are done, we will inform the men they have a day or two of food remaining. You may go."

As Reminy turned to leave, he felt the room shudder, and heard the crack and thud of a large object striking a larger object. He leaped to the door and flung it open. He heard and saw crowds of men shouting and running from the construction site toward the gate. Reminy sprinted after them. After a dozen steps, he felt the ground shudder again, and he nearly pitched forward. He ran to the wall without further incident.

Nearby, a cluster of men stood about a broken body, and several paces away a similar knot gathered. A third group held a hide blanket and stared up at the battlements where a lone guard clung desperately to the crenelations as he stared over the top of the wall.

Lieutenant Turrall appeared at Reminy's elbow. "Catapult attack, sir. Knocked poor Hobal and Mendolas right off the wall."

Reminy wordlessly pointed to the man holding to the crenelations.

"He says no Romans are in sight, sir," Turrall replied. "They don't need to be anymore. They can hide around the corner and lob rocks over the mountain and into our

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lap."

More of Besas' warfare of the mind. He did not plan to attack Petra, merely scare the defenders. By pounding the north wall, he strove only to knock a sentry or two off the walkway and frighten any would-be sentries. He knew the Persians needed to keep men on the wall at all times, and these men would be ever-fearful.

"These men know better than to crowd together," Reminy said. "Scatter them, Lieutenant, but tell them to remain within shouting distance."

"Yes, sir." Turrall stepped to the nearest clump of men and began gesturing and ordering. After a few moments, Reminy stood nearly alone beneath the walkway. A few paces away stood the soldiers holding the hide blanket, whispering uneasily among themselves.

Reminy noticed Turrall coming back in his direction when the sentry voiced a terrified yell. He ducked below the level of the wall and hugged the stone battlements. Reminy braced himself, waiting for the shudder that would herald another missile striking the fort. When it came, the commander stood his ground easily and merely winced at the scrape and squeal of dislodged stone. The sentry's body bounced several times, but he held fast.

"Should we call him down, sir?" asked Turrall. "He said no one is approaching."

"If he thought it safe, he would have joined us long ago. He's safer up there than trying to climb down the ladder."

The sentry raised his head timidly, then retracted it quickly, shouting another

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warning. The sound had barely escaped his throat when the ground and walls shook again. Caught somewhat off guard, Reminy nevertheless managed to keep his balance. He recovered in time to see the dark blur hurtle over the battlements.

Reminy saw everything perfectly. Although he felt embedded in river mud, moving inordinately slowly, he saw the blur, saw the collection of rocks as large as horses' heads flying just over the top of the wall. One struck the defenses and shattered. The sentry shrieked. The others sailed over Reminy's head, rotating almost imperceptibly. There were many of them, too many to be counted, but a score at least, all descending into the fortress.

Reminy's head turned excruciatingly slowly. Men behind him shouted and ran from the oncoming projectiles. The rocks crashed into the parade ground, excavating pits large enough to stand in. Someone else screamed, and Reminy saw a man lying on the ground, his legs twisted into unnatural angles, blood squirting from numerous lacerations.

Now everyone yelled and ran in confused circles, seeking refuge from another such attack. Most retreated, seeking to pass out of range. Others huddled at the base of the wall. The sentry called for help incessantly. He held the wall with one arm and kept the other close to his body, holding it as if it were injured.

Reminy started toward the ladder, but Turrall nimbly jumped in front of him. "I'll get him, Commander," he said as he passed. Time no longer dilated, but Turrall still moved too slowly to suit Reminy.

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Another missile smashed into the wall as the lieutenant neared the catwalk. He froze and clutched the rickety wooden ladder and weathered the tremendous vibration. He resumed his climb before the crash had died and soon scrambled onto the walkway. Within moments he reached the sentry's side, grabbed him unceremoniously, and heaved him over the edge. The men with the hide blanket scarcely had time to prepare before the sentry struck the blanket, nearly knocking them all to the ground.

The sentry bellowed in pain, clutching his upper arm as the others rushed him away from the wall. Turrall jumped onto the nearest ladder and began descending. He moved rapidly, recklessly, obviously trying to outrun the next assault rather than endure it. The next blast, however, came too soon, and Turrall toppled from his perch while still several paces above the earth. He landed heavily and lay still, his helmet bouncing and rolling away.

Reminy ran toward the supine form. Something else impacted the wall, or rather many something elses, for a staccato drumbeat, like hail pelting a cobble-stone street, replaced the characteristic thunderous crash and shudder. The Romans had apparently tried to throw another set of rocks over the fortifications but failed this time.

A few men had gathered around Turrall before Reminy arrived. The lieutenant rested on one elbow, gaining strength to rise. He picked up his head when some men stepped aside to allow Reminy through.

"They seem to have an onager as well as a catapult now, Commander." He frowned deeply. "Not pretty."

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"Help him up," said Reminy.

As two men aided Turrall to his feet, a third fetched his helmet and handed it to him. He clapped it on his head and it immediately slid over one ear. Cursing under his breath, Turrall straightened the headgear and fumbled for the chin strap.

"Commander!"

Someone fifteen paces away, amid yet another knot of men, shouted and waved his arm. Reminy marched over quickly, Turrall straggling behind and yelling to everyone.

"Stay scattered, men. Five paces apart."

As Reminy neared, the man who had shouted stepped out to meet him. "It's Arnush, sir," the man said. "A rock crushed his legs. We tried to help him, but no one knows what to do. He's bleeding very badly."

They reached the broken body, but it lay motionless. Blood oozed rather than pumped from the many wounds and the chest did not rise or fall. The handle of a dagger protruded from below the ribs.

"He's dead, Commander," said another man standing, as ordered, five paces away. "He stuck his own dagger in his heart."

"Did he say anything?" asked Turrall immediately, glancing only briefly at the carnage.

The man hesitated before answering. "He asked that I take his part in the drama, that is all. Then he stuck the dagger in his heart. He did not moan or weep."

"Died like a soldier of the Great King," Turrall said absently but proudly.

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Reminy did not react; he stood impassively. After a great deal of waiting, someone speculated that the attack had ceased. A short while later a pikeman garnered the courage to scale the ladder again, and reported all clear. Most of the men returned uneasily to constructing the platform. Others carried the three corpses to the west wall. The splintered rock had sent slivers into the sentry's right arm; a bloody, painful wound, but without permanent damage.

Three more for the stack of dead. Reminy did not watch the pile grow, but he knew it did. He remained impassive, although it took all his will.

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CHAPTER IV

Turrall awoke Reminy shortly after dawn.

"Sorry to wake you, Commander. The men are growing anxious."

Reminy sat up automatically, although he remained nearly asleep. He squinted toward the lone window and saw the hangings were still dark; no light came from beneath the door.

"Has something happened?" he asked dully.

"Not yet, sir." Turrall paused, evidently waiting for Reminy to recall a fact he should have. After a long moment, the lieutenant continued. "The dramas, Commander," he prodded.

"Today, Lieutenant?"

"Right now, sir. The men can't contain themselves."

Reminy stood slowly. "I do not remember us agreeing to begin at dawn."

"Midmorning was the time. But the men are growing restless. Some have not slept all night."

Reminy thought for a moment, then nodded. "Tell the adjutant. Strongly suggest that he tell the general."

"Yes, sir."

At a motion from the Commander, Turrall strode quickly out the door, letting it stand open. The chill pre-dawn breeze drifted through, redolent with the salty sea. The

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faint odor of death came along as well, stronger than other mornings when Reminy had risen early. The coming Spring warmed the air; the stench would only grow worse from now on.

Silently wrapping a piece of cloth over his mouth and nose, Reminy stepped outside. Against the glittering veil of stars, ragged clumps of clouds journeyed to the east, where a pink glow had begun to regular outline the wall.

The looming shadow of the deserted east barracks no longer existed, the structure being now incorporated into the sprawling platform on the parade ground. Reminy never thought he would miss the ominous shadow, the stark reminder of the dead. Every morning for months he had passed the barracks, listening to the scuffle of activity inside rapidly dwindle until the general ordered all the remaining men into the north barracks. The silent building had been an eerie presence ever since. Now that it had gone, Reminy experienced a disturbing lack of eeriness. *Astounding with what a man can become comfortable*, Reminy thought. *Even situations he considers abominable eventually grow tolerable. And when the abominableness goes, a man again feels uncomfortable. Familiarity; everyone longs for familiarity.*

He would not miss the stack of dead, he knew. Death was familiar to no man, no man felt comfortable with it.

Without the barracks, Reminy saw into the parade ground much sooner. His eyes widened at the sight of over three-hundred and fifty men milling about agitatedly. When arranged into ranks, numbers of men became deceptive, seemed smaller. Since Reminy

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had not seen these men in formation or in groups of over three score for months, their number impressed him all the more. He tried not to think that, for every man on the parade ground, three lay piled against the west wall.

Through the morning gloom, someone recognized the commander. Within instants, Reminy was surrounded by every man, some near tears with nervousness, others absently reciting lines under their breaths, others arguing among themselves over direction and positioning, and still others smiling so broadly they came near to laughing. All wanted to know which company would perform first.

Most of these men have never seen a drama, yet they feel it the most important activity of their lives. The drama is not familiar, but it represents a culture which is.

The commander wanted no ill feelings, so he allowed the men to game for precedence. Eighteen representatives leaped to the task, hurling sticks and carved chicken bones and cursing or cheering the result. By the time the order of performances had been established, the sky had grown much lighter and the general had emerged from his quarters.

The men hardly noticed him as they scurried about their activities, but Reminy saw the drawn and worried cast to the general's features. Worry, he knew, not for the earliness of the hour or the day's events, but for a much larger concern.

Behind the general came the adjutant, stiff and proper as always. He carried a small rolled rug under one arm; a clean seat for the general. Behind him straggled Turrall, looking rather tired. The lieutenant veered off as they neared the crowd of men,

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perhaps to inspect the first troupe's preparations or sneak off for a short nap.

The general nodded as he drew within a few paces of Reminy.

"Sorry for the inconvenience, sir," said the latter courteously.

The general waved his hand in a dismissive gesture. "Throughout the past months I have experienced periods wherein I find trouble sleeping at all, let alone much past dawn. Today happened to belong to one of those periods."

"I understand."

"Yes, I believe all of us would," said the general in a resigned tone. He scanned the crowd quickly, then looked to the walls, undeniably searching for sentries at their assigned posts. When he saw one, he pointed at it and said, "I assume there were no volunteers for those chores."

Reminy nodded. "Now that the sequence of the dramas has been determined, I will rotate the guard after every performance. No one will miss more than one, then."

"Very equitable, Commander. Lieutenant," the general motioned to the adjutant, "find me a good place."

The adjutant saluted smartly and moved into the throng, which parted almost magically to allow him through, then closed just as quickly.

The general studied the gathering once again. "These men haven't been so animated in a long time. You did well, Commander."

"Thank you, sir."

The general did not seem to hear. He squinted into the pale blue sky and its

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scattering of white clouds. "What shall we see first?"

"Something based on one of the tales of Sroasha and Aeshma. I don't recall hearing any such tales, but I was told there are many."

"Yes, perhaps a score or more. Obedience versus fury, a common theme in the troublesome West and South. Not so much in the Hindu-Kush; no more wars there since Persia drove the White Huns away. I heard them all when I was a boy. Didn't care for them too much. Sroasha sounded more like a Christian monk than a magus."

A ripple in the crowd heralded the adjutant's return. He saluted again. "Your place is ready, sir," he said.

"Good," replied the general. He glanced at Reminy. "Tell them to begin, Commander."

After the first drama finished--to uproarious cheers and whistles--the general leaned over toward Reminy, who sat beside him, and--trying to be heard above the shouts--said, "Are they all this long, Commander?"

Reminy, also a bit surprised at the length of the spectacle they had just witnessed, hesitated before answering in an equally loud voice. "I don't know, General, but perhaps so. I set no limit to the performance."

Nearly two turns of the glass had passed since the play began. The sun had climbed well above the ramparts and shone on the parade ground, occasionally obscured by a wandering cloud. Flies had already begun their annoying dances. The men had sat

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silently for the entire time, devoting all their attention to the players. As soon as the defeated Aeshma slunk from the stage, heralding the end of the display, the assemblage--save for the officers--leaped to their feet, howling with delight and waving their arms, and they were slow to die down.

The general frowned. "Even beginning at dawn as we did, we won't finish before dusk."

"Shall I tell the others to shorten their dramas?" asked Reminy, though he did not make to stand.

"No. I'm not sure either of us would survive such an order. We shall simply continue tomorrow." The general paused, waiting for the noise to subside. "I rather enjoyed it; I haven't seen such a thing since..." he trailed off, thinking. He gave up after only a few moments. "Many years, in any case. However, eighteen of these might begin to wear. The men might lose their enthusiasm."

Reminy agreed with the sentiments, although the exuberant smiles around him seem to argue otherwise. Looking at the milling crowd, only a few of whom had sat down, he saw Turrat at the edge of the crowd, gesturing forcefully, as if urging someone to move faster. The commander craned his neck and saw that the sentries waited at the head of the ladder, calling angrily for their relief. The relief, to whom Turrat evidently motioned, seemed loath to tear themselves away and attend to their duties, and hesitated and delayed.

Not until Reminy clambered upon the stage and told the men that the next

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performance would not begin before the current sentries had been relieved did the relief run to the ladder, and this because the rest of the crowd--sincerely or not--threatened their lives and chased them to their posts.

The general waited until the next drama was well under way, until everyone was absorbed in the action, before he motioned for Reminy to lean toward him.

"The food has gone," he whispered. "Even the rats have starved. All that remains will last through today and tomorrow, and perhaps the next day, but certainly no more than that. The corporal in stores has been sworn to secrecy."

Reminy accepted the news as the general had given it: emotionless, unexpressive. He would remain that way until the third day, or until the general decided to tell the men. After that, he did not know. He had faced hunger many times in his life--marching through the desert or wintering among the barren mountains--but he had only superficially entertained the thought of starving to death. In the next days, when the realization struck him that he would, indeed, die of hunger, then he would react emotionally and possibly irrationally. Perhaps he would take Adval's course; suicide in this situation would be a noble act. Or perhaps his mind would collapse like Pelato's, and he would slay his own comrades. No doubt some men would not withstand these desperate straits and go insane.

Reminy avoided looking at the faces around him--trained his eyes on an empty space on the platform and merely listened to the players. He did not wish to look into the eyes of another madman.

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Reminy watched the dramas and comedies quietly, as he normally would. He smiled occasionally, when the comedy players poked fun at the Romans, and found himself recalling legends and tales he had heard as a boy that he thought he had forgotten years ago. The performances ended just before dark and with no interference from the enemy throughout the day. Seven of the plays needed to be postponed until the next day.

The commander left the gathering a short while after dark and returned to it the next morning, again at the insistence of Lieutenant Turrall. The general returned early also, his mouth set a bit more grimly, his shoulders a bit less straight. His forcefully inexpressive gaze told Reminy of the worsening predicament. Neither spoke as they took the same seats as the day before, nor did they converse on other than the merits of each drama or comedy throughout the day.

Neither the number of plays nor the interruption of evening deflated the men's spirits, for they hooted and cheered as loudly for the final troupe as for the first. Ironically, one man seated behind the officers mentioned to his comrades that the recent emotional activity had made him hungrier than usual. Reminy noticed the general seemed to force himself to react not at all to the statement.

Reminy had been in the Persian army for years--as an officer, of course--and had been raised in the minor nobility in the far eastern portion of the empire. The ideas and practice of leadership and responsibility had surrounded him since birth and had been pounded into his brain by the army. A corporal was responsible for his squad, a sergeant for his company, a lieutenant for his battalion, a commander for his regiment, and a

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general for them all, and more. As in nearly all armies, leaders feared humiliation more than death. The men in Petra had survived and rebuffed their besiegers under remarkable circumstances. They endured the sight and stench of well over a thousand rotting corpses and did not surrender or devolve into gibbering lunatics. These feats had no value if the fortress was lost. The general was charged with holding Petra until relieved, not until he either died in the course of duty or was relieved, but only until relieved. Reminy knew the general faced the worst of all possible catastrophes: death and humiliation combined. The conquerors might speak in awe of the abominable conditions the Persians faced, but they would still be the conquerors.

Yelling and action upon the stage drew Reminy back to the immediate present. He watched the players chasing themselves around in exaggeratedly stupid fashion and heard the laughter of the crowd. The general remained lost in his thoughts, perhaps the very thoughts Reminy had had only moments ago. The commotion had not jerked him from them.

And Reminy did not have time to lose himself in the comedy before he heard the shouting, screaming and sobbing from the east wall.

At first he thought he had hallucinated, for no one else seemed to take note of the odd sounds. The actors continued with their flourishes, the audience sat in rapt attention, the general was oblivious to both. But as Reminy peered toward the east wall he heard another shout dissolve into a hysterical sob, and he saw the two sentries standing at the ramparts, backs to the parade ground. These men had the best view of the play of all the

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sentries, yet they seemed to be watching something on the other side of the wall. Yet, for all their unusual utterances, they did not sound an alarm.

Suddenly, among the hundreds of comrades-in-arms and before the bawdy performance, Reminy felt alone. Not the loneliness one feels in the deep forest when the underbrush physically isolates one, but a dreamlike loneliness where, no matter how many others inhabit the vision, they all ignore what the dreamer sees or tells them. Everyone has dreams in which he cannot convey some urgent message to others in the dream, and this is how Reminy felt, save that he did not seek to convey information, but receive it.

Reminy did not want to go the east ramparts--not because he wanted to avoid the effort, but because the act would be more like a dream, where one fruitlessly pursues the unidentifiable object or emotion. He would have sent Turrall to investigate, but the lieutenant was lost among the crowd. The commander searched for him long after he realized he would never see him, then--resignedly--stood and waded through the ranks of seated men toward the nearest ladder. Another faint gasping sob reached his ears through the hum of the flies, but again no one but he had seemed to notice. He wondered again if he imagined the noises, but continued mechanically toward and up the ladder.

His worn boots clumped hollowly on the wooden walkway, louder than he had ever known. The ramparts had never been so quiet. The shouted actors' lines bounced off the walls around him, muffled by the warm sunlight. The sobbing grew louder; he could hear it above the thud of his footsteps.

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He was aware of little else besides the various sounds and the golden sunlight. He tried to clear his mind, but the loud, overbearing steps against the background of incongruity of an actor's practiced words and a man overtly weeping and shouting forced him to remain in the pseudo-dream state.

The mountainside loomed on his left as Reminy crossed the corner to the east walkway. From this angle he could only see blue-white open sky to the north; the mountainside blocked his view of the plain below. He looked down the outside of the wall, but saw only empty ground and the churned earth of the old mine. The sentries, many paces away, were beyond the edge of the mountain. The object of their attention must be on the plain. Reminy wanted to run to see, but his pace never quickened, and the anticipation grew.

Conjecture would not come. His brain frozen within the limited sensory impressions, Reminy could not think--merely listen to his regularly-spaced boot-clumpings, the fading comedy, the rising hysterics, the droning flies, and watch the sky grow larger as he approached the sentries. Not until he was nearly upon them did one turn toward him.

The guard, tear-trails streaking his dirty face, lips quivering, was not surprised by Reminy's presence. It was as if he had been watching the commander all along.

"Do you see them, Commander?" he said, sobs choking him. "Do you see them?"

He stepped aside and Reminy saw, far below on the brown and green plain, the huge cloud of dust hugging the horizon, pushed along by the sea breeze. He saw the

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regularly ordered dark spots moving across the earth, coming out of the southeast and toward the mountain.

He saw them.

Hundreds, perhaps thousands, of glinting, sparkling figures marched across the plain. Around them were other figures, dun-colored and appearing much smaller since they did not gleam in the sun. Churned up dust drifted westward, forming a giant brown cloud that obscured the horizon. Very faintly, amid the shining body, could be seen colored banners and pennons, also tugged by the breeze. Far to the rear loomed a dozen grey-white shapes, larger by far than anything around them, made indistinct by the distance.

An army. A large army. Reminy squinted at those shapes for a long moment, opposing emotions raging within himself. He could not afford to be lured by false hopes and have them destroyed; his mind would not stand that. But there was a way to be sure. If only those shapes were what he hoped. What else could they be? he told himself, but did not dare to believe his eyesight.

He stared at them again, cleared his throat, then asked the men beside him, "What are those white shapes in the rear?"

The sentry did not look at him. He took a moment to compose himself. "Elephants, Commander," he said finally. "They're elephants. The most beautiful elephants I ever saw."

Reminy forced himself to remain calm. Even so, his voice shook with

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anticipation. "Are you sure? Do you see them well?"

"I've watched them since we first noticed the cloud of dust. They are without doubt elephants. From the east; I can see the small ears." He collapsed into a fit of sobbing.

"The clibanarii are in the center; I can see their horses' armor," said the other sentry, who had a greater hold on his emotions.

Reminy saw them too. They coruscated like the sea on a clear day.

"In front of them are the slingers and bowmen." The guard paused, squinting intently. "And on either side are the horse archers. Most of them look like Turks, maybe Huns too. The infantry must be in the rear, between the elephants and the clibanarii."

Reminy recognized the march formation. The general of that army must know of the besieging Romans and had placed his forces in a ready formation. The Romans, for their part, must have noticed the army by now. At any moment, Reminy expected to see their forces arrayed on the plain and marching to meet their enemy. The Persian army would have to change formation to meet them.

"I can't count the ranks of the clibanarii," said the second sentry, "but there must be more than two score."

"How many men could there be, Commander?" said the first.

"Twenty-thousand, at least," replied Reminy without hesitation. Battles were won or lost on the heavy cavalry, all other units, while important (save for the peasant infantry), spent themselves only to aid the clibanarii. With so many clibanarii, the

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supporting units must number over fifteen-thousand.

"Shall I tell the general?" asked the second sentry, moving off.

"No," said Reminy, and motioned for the man to stay. Not only would the news create a sensation and cause hundreds of men to storm a wall that could not hold much weight, but the Persian army might lose to the Romans. The fewer men who saw such a demoralizing sight the better.

"They're breaking formation, Commander," cried the first man.

Reminy saw the movement in his mind rather than with his physical eye, for he had witnessed the metamorphosis many times. The bowmen spread out into a line two or three men deep. The horse archers spread out one man deep, reinforcing and flanking the foot archers. The slingers fell back with the mounted javelineers. Then, most likely, light cavalry and supporting infantry would be mixed, with *clibanarii* and the elephants to the rear.

If all went as planned, the archers from both armies would exchange missiles for a while, then the armies would close until short range weapons like the sling and javelin could be used. Meanwhile, the archers would fall back to flank the cavalry and continue to provide support. Once the light cavalries charged and became entangled, arrow flights would stop. The Persian general would also send in the elephants (Reminy doubted the Romans used any elephants--they never had, as far as he knew), their howdahs carrying archers and javelineers. In the melee, these men could pick out the enemy and fire at them without fear of striking an ally.

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Then the battle would surge back and forth, each side seeking to gain that fleeting moment of advantage when the general would order the charge of the heavy cavalry. Reminy was a horse archer (Persians commanded the units of the army, no matter how much better the mercenaries were with the weapon), and he had always had good position in which to see the *clibanarii* charge, and had suffered such a charge by Roman *cataphractii* twice. Many times the opponents could not even see the riders coming at them, merely hear the growing roar of pounding hoofs and feel the earth vibrating beneath them. At impact the entire battle swayed, bent by the force of the charge. Reminy's feature twisted at the thought of the carnage.

Often the opponent could mount a counter charge with his own heavy cavalry and meet the enemy half way. Most of the time the rest of the battle would halt, and everyone watch the spectacle, for they knew the outcome of the clash between heavy cavalry determined the outcome of the entire battle. Sparks and shrieks of metal striking metal would fill the air. The sound belied the action, for with each man mailed from head to toe--and his horse armored also--it took either a few hacks or an exceptionally well-placed blow to fell a *cataphract* or *clibanarius*.

The army shifted into battle formation a bit too slowly to satisfy Reminy (an unseasoned lot, obviously) but did so without incident. Reminy still could not see the Roman army which must be present. He ran to the far corner of the fortress, followed by the sentries. From here one could see as much of the plain as possible, and from here the Romans were finally visible. Some of them, anyway--the horse archers and mounted

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javelineers. Reminy did not know how the Roman army was composed. It almost surely did not have elephants, but the siege engines could wreak havoc from a tremendous distance.

As they three men watched, the horse archers gave a short charge, reined up, and loosed a hailstorm of arrows. The move seemed to have taken the Persians by surprise, for they did not counter attack, simply holding their shields above their heads to ward off the missiles. Hardly anyone fell. Another arrow storm followed and met with a similar result.

Now the Persians, as a body, began to move forward slowly. The Romans held their ground for another volley, then wheeled away and retreated at a gallop, until they were nearly hidden by the mountainside. They reined up, turned again, and readied for yet another missile attack.

"They must be baiting us," said the second sentry nervously. "We're being led into an ambush."

Reminy frowned. Decoys could be better disguised than the Romans had done--if these were indeed decoys. Any army commander worth his training would realize that a fortress would not be besieged by a bunch of horse archers. *However*, Reminy thought, *this may not be a decoy at all, but a holding action; the rest of the army may be escaping.*

"What can you see?" he asked the first sentry, who leaned perilously over the southern edge of the battlement.

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The man faced him, fear and ecstasy inscribed on his features all at once. "I can't see anything," he shouted in frustration, clutching at the hair hanging beneath the edge of his helmet. "I can't see!" This man, to Reminy's mind, had dropped into madness at the thought of relief being within grasp yet denied him. He hoped the condition was only temporary.

Meanwhile, the Romans had loosed again, and again had not harmed the approaching army at all. The Persians continued their advance, and the Romans held their ground for the moment. The rising cloud of dust kicked up by the skirmishers now dimmed Reminy's view. He squinted through the brown haze. He accounted his eyesight as good, but he cursed its inability to bring everything to him clearly.

"I don't see anyone approaching from the city," he said.

"No," replied the second sentry, who also pursed his eyes with effort.

The city, Lazica, was only a dim grey outline through the brown haze. Any Roman reserves or troops newly arrived would be stationed there. From there would aid for the enemy, if any, come.

When the Persians lowered their shields to reply with their own arrows, the Roman horse archers quickly retreated out of range and out of Reminy's sight. The Persian army followed at their regular pace, the elephants--now readily visible--unconsciously swaying as they walked. The commander cursed acidly, and the first sentry began pulling his hair and screaming in frustrated rage.

"Wait," called the second sentry, a snaggle-toothed grin spread on his face, "I see

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a column." He pointed over the battlements and out toward the city. "There."

Reminy squinted again, and stared until his eyeballs began to ache. The sea breeze caught tendrils of dust and dragged them to and fro, sometimes clearing the view for an instant, sometimes obscuring it completely. Reminy grimaced angrily, but the dusty haze faded for a moment, and he saw the black shape, strung out like a retreating snake, emerging from the shadow of the mountain. A marching column. After a few more moments he realized the column pulled some large, ill-defined silhouettes that could only be catapults. The column grew longer as he watched; it was moving away from the mountain and toward the city.

"It's Besas' army," Reminy said finally, fighting through the sticky lump which had suddenly formed in his throat. He swallowed and motioned toward the second sentry. "Go. Tell the general that the Roman army is retreating to Lazica and a Persian army is approaching the gates."

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CHAPTER V

Reminy knew no matter how long he lived or how many wars he survived, the emotions he felt at the moment he realized he had been freed could never be matched, or even approximated. His head reeled, and he thought he might as easily walk on the air as he did the planks of the walkway. He left the first sentry weeping happily in the corner and wandered to the north ladder.

The feelings came and went, for when the men heard the news they exploded in joy and raced for the gate, everyone clambering onto the wall at once. Reminy had to regain his head in time to forestall some of the chaos. The men would crush each other if they surged up the ladder. Even with his stern orders, the north rampart soon became a seething mass of humanity, and several men nearly fell to their deaths, either on the outside or inside of the wall.

In the tumult, the general ordered the gate opened. An intelligent move, for the perilously crowded walkway emptied as suddenly as it had filled, and four hundred men attempted to pull back the huge, iron-laced cross beam that barred the gate. After nine months in place, the beam would not move easily.

Reminy descended the ladder methodically, wary of his lightheadedness. From his vantage point, he saw the frantically milling crowd, hundreds of bare or helmeted heads pressing toward the gate or watching the others anxiously. He saw several others standing or sitting away from the mob. They rocked or swayed, some laughing insanely,

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others weeping unabashedly. Many at the gate cried also, and perhaps laughed at the same time, alternately hugging a comrade and surging toward the gate to aid the multitude of hands that struggled with the cross beam. The air filled with shouts and curses, laughter and sobs.

The general stood well apart, attended by the adjutant, watching the melee dispassionately. After reaching the bottom of the ladder Reminy walked toward him, still dizzy. He stumbled once, then reprimanded himself under control.

"You're sure of your information?" asked the general, obviously barely able to contain himself. He must already believe the sentry, or else he would not have ordered the gate open. It was probably the only thing he could think to say that would not sound overly emotional and un-officerlike.

"Yes" was the only reply Reminy could make.

A long pause ensued. Both men turned when a tremendous cheer went up from the gate. The cross beam tilted up, pushed off one support. The whole crowd seemed to move in one direction and cross beam tipped up and over, to more enthusiastic cheers. Within seconds the giant wood gates swung inward, revealing the narrow dusty path outside. The men rushed out, their emaciated bodies leaping and running and kicking up dust. Their voices faded quickly, and soon Reminy could only hear the occasional shout among the solitary laughers and weepers who remained in the fort.

"Well," said the general, turning away. His voice broke, but Reminy couldn't see if tears were in his eyes. "I'd best put on my dress armor if I'm to greet a fellow

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general."

He marched toward his quarters, his steps a bit lighter.[18466]