

THE SLAVE OF ATHENIODONIS

CHAPTER I

*“We take nothing... we leave nothing but the trail of our prayers; the dust and ashes are not us.
But only a distant song ringing in our heart of hearts that the gods alone can hear.”*

The wind blew cold on the hills of Rome.

It hadn't snowed here for the past three years and much of the city would welcome the relief from the stench of death. Dark clouds above threatened like so many angry voices of the past. Churning, twisting towards heaven and then down again. Did the gods still smile on this, the Eternal City, or was it too late?

Just one good storm. White covering the Colosseum, white purity on the Forum- white, white falling white. Wash away the common blood, cover the filth in the streets. Ages and ages of corruption, greed and murder to be cleansed away. From those perilous days before the Republic through the time of the emperors Rome still stood, for better or for worse. Maybe, there was a chance to start anew.

But Novos knew differently. He wrapped his thick black woolen scarf around that famous neck of his to keep out the bitter chill. He hadn't been back in Rome in many months, since the time he came to search for Caesar, to speak to Caesar. Now it was all too late. He was less than nothing in the eyes of this palace, the only kindness coming from Miranthum Germana, who helped raise Hadrian. Now she was in her nineties, kindly allowing Novos back. She had been part of this palace and cared for Hadrian since he was a boy, and had always been a friend to Novos and cared for his safety and well-being.

Novos was Greek. Born and raised, much less than a Roman. And up until this day he was still considered a servant, an actor at best and had no rights or privileges of his own. He had never been sold to Hadrian, but for so long felt that he belonged to him. That he was part of Caesar's life, part of his world. How quickly everything changes.

“I was a slave by the whim of the universe,” he quietly said to the falling snow, recalling a time so long ago. “Hated for what I am. Always considered an ephebe in the eyes of this world- daring to become a performer of songs for an empire. I have been despised by those in authority, seen as less than nothing. And now, surviving all of this- I have returned to Rome, to honor Caesar.”

Looking out of a wide window from the Palatine, Novos scanned aimlessly the best homes that the city could offer, leading up to the Temple of Jupiter Optimus Maximus where incense burned night and day to cover the smell of death from the sacrificial offerings.

Could the gods ever get enough blood? The blood of the innocent- the blood of humankind. Novos knew every nuance from this bedroom view- every tree, fountain and red tiled roof. He thought of all the families over the ages that had lived here, grown old here, died here. How sad it was to think that this would be the last time he would savor this splendor, this particular areanus Romanus. No, the simplicity of a natural occurrence like a snow storm could not wipe away over a thousand years of filth. No, surely not something that pure and that simple. Was that a snowflake on his eyelash? His eyes felt tired. Novos kept his left hand on the column next to Caesar's window, and wiped his tears with the back of his other hand, focusing as he could upon the gift that Hadrian had given him. It was a ring that Caesar had presented to him on his birthday. A turquoise ring in the shape of a lion's head from Egypt, set in the finest gold. It was while they were in Alexandria for the first time- those fond days when everything was new.

A memento from those innocent, warm days before the first long winter. Before seeing this place called Rome. Before the great fall. As happens in all stories of great love, there is always the chance for great loss. Loss of self, loss of soul- the ending of what should never end. And so much has happened since that time when everything was new, so many years of traveling alone without Caesar to call his own, if that were possible.

Somewhere he remembered a hundred thousand nights ago that Hadrian himself told Novos in the sweetness of an evening alone that this very ring was once worn by Marc Antony, no doubt given to him by his infamous love, Cleopatra- last of the pharaohs. The last of her kind. Love immortal. Love undone.

It seemed to Novos as well it must have been two, no three lifetimes ago that he was a silly, scrawny boy playing in the hills near Zankinthis. Finding himself, dreaming simple dreams...
“How could I go back now? How would I begin?”

“They are ready for you now, Novos, if you please,” said Miranthum. “I want you to know,” she croaked through her own tears, “that even though he never considered you a slave, it is written in Hadrian's will that your freedom is to be made public and that you are to become a Citizen of Rome. I know this to be true, because he told me so himself.” Why should Hadrian think of a simple servant with so many other people to destroy?

Miranthum's bright eyes twinkled with tears in the light of the oil lamps strewn around the vast room. The same bright blue that matched her shawl covering her mass of silver hair, held in place by a single pin. She was like a mother to all, especially to Novos.

“Inform the choir to begin the hymns. Start with the 'Ode to Minerva and Apollo,’” Novos said in a commanding voice, finally breaking the silence. “Before the solo section. Then the Chorus to Venus.” A voice that seemed to show years of training and encouragement- of destiny. “I shall present my finest songs for Lord Hadrian!” he cried. Novos stared down at the ring kissing it gently. It was from a time when life was sweet, endless days flowing easily into each other. A time that seemed a hundred years ago, before pain became Novos' only companion.

Caesar Titus Aurelius Antoninus Pius had declared Hadrianus Olympius Augustus to be a god, and would be deified within his own temple. It had taken six long months of fighting back and forth with the Senate of Rome, and six months since Hadrian had died at his villa in Baiae. Six months to convince the world that Hadrian was deserving of being divine, his rightful place in Olympus as Caesars are wont to be. From that hot summer afternoon when his body simply relinquished its last breath, to this day of frozen whiteness. But the senate's animosity over these last few years, especially in light of Hadrian's last actions and the many deaths prior had grown even stronger. He was readily proclaimed by these same old haggard men at his own death, “*Damnatio Memoriae!*” But proclaiming Hadrian a god had been difficult to accomplish, even for one as well liked and educated as Antoninus Pius. He was a simple man, disinterested in travel. He was a peacemaker and a business man, so very unlike the vigor and unpredictability of Hadrianos Olympios Augustus, waiting to enter Olympian heaven, still at this very moment held in purgatory.

“A man hated and loved by so many- understood by so few.” Tears flooded Novos' eyes, as he remembered the many years of love they once had shared. And then so easily taken and tossed away. But tears could never change what had happened. Effortlessly they fell down his cheeks as he continued to search the horizon towards the advancing storm. Beyond the hills, beyond the past. Was it possible that over forty years had really passed? Or was this all merely a dream, and he would suddenly awaken back on those sleepy hills of his childhood home, minding his mangy flock of sheep for his father. Thinking the simple thoughts that a shepherd thinks.

A time before the Master, a time before the betrayal. A time before singing had any other use but to while away a lazy afternoon...

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“Sing for me a song to take this chill from my bones,” Caesar would say to Novos in a time gone by, from an earlier year in their lives. “Sing in your native Greek and use your beautiful hands to express it to me.” Caesar would sit for hours with only a plate of apples and sweet wine to nourish him. “Besides your songs, no other nourishment is necessary.” It seemed that Caesar had never loved such a single soul like this; certainly not Vibia Sabina, his loathsome wife.

The songs Novos would sing calmed Caesar's troubled mind. It was more than the bewitching sound of his voice. More than the touching melodies he put forth. It was something that words could not convey their meaning- only feelings that came deep from the heart. Silent and yet understood. All of this was not new to Caesar, but the thought that such a lover, in the form of a Greek from no special family could cause such an emotion from Caesar was so new to him. This was an actor of the stage as well. It would cause any one else to stand back in question and bewilderment at such a pair. Still however as hard as it may seem to believe, this was love- simple and true.

“Night sky blooming stars that shine. Rising moon Selene and sweet perfume filling,” he sang. *“My Love where are you? With such abundance around me I am waiting, waiting for you... I came here to our special hearth last night, to express my love for you, but you were not here. Will you come to me this night, while the moon still shines? Or shall I cry to see Helios- the rising sun, to hear the morning doves coo their plaintive song... I am waiting, waiting, my Love. I am waiting here for you.”*

Caesar's eyes held transfixed on Novos, in rapture with the singer, the song and his full lips of coral. Those bright green eyes with the pupil surrounded by gold told the story as clearly as the music of his voice. Lord Hadrian had heard this song many times before, but the pangs of love unrequited, of love unfulfilled held this mighty emperor like a crystalline insect's wing caught in a net of delicate silk. Like the dew of a rose petal held in that most delicate web. Drop upon drop of dew held longer than seemed possible.

“You told me once that all the passion I possessed inside of me was enough to last the ages. But like candles in the night, or the blooming jasmine- like the nightingale and soft sweet grass on which I lay- the flame, this sweetness, the song is lost at daybreak....

Will you love me again?... I am waiting, waiting my Love- I am waiting here for you. Without you, my life fades before my eyes. Fades from existence, far from the forces of nature, beyond my reach. Don't cast me aside into the darkness, but take me into your arms, breathing life back into this chilled heart once more. I am waiting here, my Love. I wait to feel your flame, your sweetness, your secret music... I am waiting, waiting, my Love. I am waiting here for you...”

At the end of the song, Caesar held out his sure and steady left hand to his friend. “Come here and feel this heart you touch, Novos,” he said. The mighty lord was warm and honest in his emotions, unlike the subject of the mystical song. How long was that embrace, Novos thought. A minute, two? The pure silence was reward enough for the Greek. Ahh, to have touched such a wonder as Hadrian, Caesar of Rome. The curls of his beard were so soft from care and attention that Novos never minded the kisses he received. Such sure kisses, such sweet kisses... to last for all time it seemed.

His own lean frame was made for music; strength of muscle for stamina, not an extra ounce of wasted mass on him. A tight stomach, an expansive chest so firm and yet supple for a youth. His strong and elegant legs were defined with muscles graced with deep brown curling hair; an art form in themselves. Divine symmetry. Arms that were long and developed by years of exercising to develop his instrument to please the gods, to please the masses, to please an emperor. His own masculine scent was tempered with the exotic aroma of sandalwood and rosewater from Persia. The perfect representative of the Modern Greek in all his glory. Such a straight and proud nose, full eyebrows- such elegant features. Perfection in mind, body and in spirit.

Hadrian's full chest raised and lowered with each sweet breath, the fullness of an Olympian hero. Warm and secure, curling brown wisps lightly enclosing that chest of royalty.

“*Could this be a dream?*” Novos thought. “*No, the feelings were too clear for a dream.*” His senses stirred. Caesar smelt of musk. Intoxicating, an overpowering natural scent that kept Novos from thinking of anything else- of anyone else. It rose from the strength of his mighty chest and heightened under his arms. The beauty of his chiseled features became perfection at his areola, uninterrupted by any intrusion. Both remained soft and delicate, as pure and untouched as a youth's. With such violence and cruelty all around them in the outside world, how was it that these two could find such moments of heaven? And to think Hadrian could have anyone he pleased.

Praetorian Guards waited just outside the door. Hadrian's own bodyguards were not privy to their emperor's every thought let alone his every move, but were there to protect him with their own lives if necessary. And just down the hall from where Hadrian and Novos rested, the soldier and centurion joked and spat upon the the marbled palace floor at the news of Caesar's interest at the moment. As did the members of the Senate of Rome who prepared their petitions to Caesar. They too turned a blind eye to Caesar's actions and only privately sneered and passed their silent judgments. After all, Hadrian had done great deeds for Rome, her people and their modern world.

But inside their doors, behind a veil of ivory and gold, on cushions of silk the two confided in each other and relaxed to share their deepest thoughts and feelings. Maybe the gods did smile on them after all. For a moment, this moment- all seemed right with the world.

“I must prepare you for some news that you may not want to hear,” whispered Hadrian in the early hours, slowly raising his torso. “The counsel of senators has demanded retribution for the attack of the Sarmatians who sacked and destroyed the Roman towns in Pannonia and Noricum- even in Dacia,” began Caesar, suddenly achieving clarity of thought. “I know that I have just returned from the Asian provinces, Novos. But I have given them my oath that justice in the northern territories will be swift. To protect the lives of the Romans in the provinces without concern of expense and bring these lands under control once more. To bring the leaders of these barbarians back in chains *alive* for military triumph through the streets of Rome before the senate and the people themselves to see. These barbarians shall be brought to justice and delivered unto the hands of the people according to our laws. The senate has demanded as well that I lead the fight,” he added. “In order to rally the armies and give them courage. To bring an end to this unrest and treason. We must strike before more of their forces have time to gather. Before the flies and mosquitoes become as deadly as the enemy. Before any in the senate have time to procrastinate and shorten the funds for such a campaign. Knowing the geography as I do, the best time to attack would be soon.” He took a full draught of sweet wine in one full swig, as surely at if it were to seal his fate... and the fate of Rome. There are no guarantees in war, let alone in life.

Like his song, Novos felt the slow veil of sadness dropping over him like a shroud. Bit by inescapable bit, as surely as the curtains that surrounds Caesar's bedchamber kept out the winter chill. “*How amazing that this human heart still beats in this body,* he thought. *An impracticable instrument of so very much concern to Humankind. How quickly it changes and distorts from life. An organ twisted and helplessly disemboweled from joy by the simple act of human words translated into human emotions... Could this be what it is like when a heart is failing? This ice, this immeasurable pain? Is this what death must be like? Is this what my ancient master has always envied?*”

Caesar's body had grown tense by his own simple words, seeing the magic fade like the winter sky before him in Novos' face. Hadrian's strong hands rested around his beloved's slender arms. Slowly bringing him up oh so gently. Face to face, breath upon breath.

“I leave in three days,” he said, trying to find hope and at the same time forgiveness in Novos' eyes. “I cannot ask you to join me on such a dangerous mission, Novos. Your mere presence would be a distraction from the need to rid these creatures from our territories, and I must focus clearly on our mission, my dearest one. The fifth, seventh and the fourteenth legions shall join my guards.

The second legion plus the cavalry shall be waiting for us from the Asian provinces where they have been keeping the peace. They shall provide provisions and extra mounts when we arrive in Gallia Cisalpina, en route to the northern lands. Our twenty thousand troops and cavalry shall hunt them down like animals! We shall pursue and find them wherever they may hide. With so much soggy land to slow them down, they will be easier to track. We have spies and informants as well that shall infiltrate their camps that know their actions, know their methods. I fear, Novos, that the mission shall take at least three to four months,” confessed Lord Caesar Hadrianus. “I must leave you here,” Hadrian slowly admitted, searching his devoted friend's face for solace and assurance that the world was not coming to an end. “It saddens me to know that I shall not hear your sweet voice nor see your smile for some time to come. But the prayers we make to the gods for victory shall bind us- bring an end to this strife, my Novos. We shall be together again. And there shall be peace in the empire once more.”

Novos stared at this famous face he knew so very well before him, this icon of the western world. He searched for an answer in himself at the same time, for a resolute affirmation that the blessings and all the powers of justice were to be on Hadrian's side. Silently praying that both Mars and Jupiter would watch closely from above and assure victory for Rome. For them to come down close enough to Earth to rest on his wide shoulders and speak clearly in his ears like the vespers prayed in the temples. Words of divine guidance.

Hadrian's servants had left his dogs in their lord's chambers, as was the usual practice of the evening. Both mastiff pups were presented to Lord Hadrianus during a campaign in Gaul over eight years ago. A matched pair from the same litter- a gift from one of the local warlords who tattoo their faces to cause terror in their enemies. They were part of a peace offering at the end of the last Roman conquest. Today fully grown, still babies at heart in their sweetness and disposition, but monsters in their size and appetites. Far more pets to keep the beds warm than any kind of security. These treasures continued to be a permanent part of the royal family. Both males laying near their master, next to the huge canopy bed. Sleepy blood-shot eyes following Hadrian's every gesture. They were rightfully named Marius and Sulla, after two famous men from the early days of the Republic. Named after two men who were different in every way, yet inexplicably Roman. Now, the two golden hulks laid side by side, brothers for life in this, the golden age of the empire.

An answer for the ache and emptiness that was now stirring deep in Novos' own being began to wake. He seemed to find strength in those fragile moments before speaking to his lord again. And at the same time, loneliness was instilling itself into such a ferrous heart. Fears from the past coming back once more like a nightmare to haunt Novos, shaking his world even here, in the safety and comfort of Hadrian's most private of worlds.

“I understand,” muttered Novos, without reluctance to the greatest man in Rome. “I shall take the same time and use it wisely my lord, as you would have me do. I shall study and grow. Possibly return to Athens- with your permission, to resume my study and work closely with my teacher, Atheniodonis. Then wait patiently for a sign that life shall continue here with you my Lord Hadrian, when the battle is won.”

“Do you feel that returning to your teacher is wise, my Novos?” questioned Hadrian, still to this day not knowing the full extent of this mysterious and unworldly teacher of music and verse. Hadrian took a moment to fixate on the face of this young man. His curly brown hair cropped short, to remind Novos of his own subservient position. Besides, long hair was for men of fashion, wealth and sloth and not intended as being necessary for an actor. Not in this world, at least.

“How shall I continue to sing without you?” whispered Novos. A sudden flood of emotion in understanding his fate, now fully realized. “Where shall I find the inspiration, my lord?”

Hadrian in the shadows of candle light spoke softly to Novos. “Your inspiration shall come from the same place that mine does- in prayer and sacrifice. In close inspection, finding the truth in ourselves and in the power of light. The gods will watch over you- and I. They protect the obedient, the righteous- the true of heart. I shall make sacrifices for a swift victory, and pray that you are protected from harm. My tears will not be in vain while we are apart, my Novos.”

“And neither shall mine as I wait for you, my Lord Hadrian,” answered Novos quietly.

The night sky began to surrender to the softest signs of dawn. A shining half moon that had lit their lair of perfect privacy hours before was now losing its magical silver sheen. It now set low on the horizon, growing more and more golden with each passing moment, like the sun that it ran constantly away from. The city began to waken to a new day while man and animal alike began their work, oblivious to the sound of hearts breaking.

“Then... that means we have two more nights to be together,” the words stumbling out of Novos, trying as he might to be bright and happy for his master, slowly wiping the cold reality from his face. “We have that much time to share, my lord. That much more time that not even Jupiter Maximus can wrench from our arms!”

It seemed that Novos' conviction was renewed upon the morning air, the beginning of this new day. Yet, a bitter emotion was welling up inside of him- of abandonment returning to plague his soul once more. He tried to be strong for himself, for his Caesar. The actor put on a smile, keeping his own pain inside of him unseen.

Hadrian was surprised at the tone of his dear one's voice. How sure and strong Novos seemed. How accepting and matured he was in this moment, not like the youth that had shared his company these past few remarkable years together. It seemed that a new man was being reborn before his own steely-blue eyes.

“Yes, my prized one, my muse,” whispered Hadrian in agreement. They still had time together- to share, to love, to comfort.

On this early spring morning, clouds of purple and gold crossed overhead- the sky filling with an ever heightening brightness. They seemed to welcome Apollo and his flaming chariot in flight across the globe, leading the sun in its perpetual course of light. Life giving light, pure as heaven- as a mother gives life to her children.

It was a time for counting the moments like days, the hours like years. It was time to savor and spend in the company of love. Love constant, love uninterrupted.

And in a silent embrace, Hadrian and Novos found sleep in each others arms once more, finally easing their troubled minds. Perfectly matched pieces of a porcelain statue, relaxing enough for this disarming gift of forgetful slumber- for an hour or two at least. Forgetting at least for now the the demands of State, the forced separation that they must endure. Dreaming sweet dreams of a safer world- a world without strife or death. A world unlike anything they had ever known.

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CHAPTER II

“ I sing a song of the hills I see... A sea of wheat and thistles deep. Sleepy sheep and goats run free... Free to roam the sea of wheat. I am the Captain of this ship that sails like dreams upon the mid-day sky. Where I sail and what I find shall be a treasure to my eye... I sing a song of sleepy sheep and goats that roam free. A sea of wheat and thistles deep upon the mid-day sky.”

“Such a sweet smell, the summer grasses have. Ohhh, they're almost like a magical charm from some ancient sorcerer. From Egypt, perhaps- their power to dazzle the senses!” It amazed young Novos that such an exhilarating scent was free. This scent of the earth, and it never ran out. “Could this possibly be put in a bottle and sold at the marketplace? I wonder... Grab a golden shoot, chew the crispy end and taste the splendor of the grasses. Oh, the captivating scent of nature!”

Novos spent most of his youthful summer days thinking this way. Pondering the difficult choice of which name to call each sheep. They often looked alike, so sometimes he would put touches of color from flower petals on the sheep's button tails to know which one was which. “I think I'll call you... 'Bunches of Beeswax'... Or maybe ever 'Drizzle of Snow'... or better yet 'CaCaCaCowbell!’” It really didn't matter. The names always changed with each long, lazy summer day. Days that reached out forever it seemed, at least forever for this boy of nine year old. “Feed the flock, do your chores, stay out of trouble...”

Novos had picked up the shepherd's crook when he was a mere child of six, being the only child from his family's home on the outskirts of Zankinthis, a small Greek village on the Ionian coast of the western Peloponnesian plain of Achaea, south of the Isthmus of Corinth. There was also an island that had a similar name far to the west, but this small village on the coast was his home. Novos' father didn't care what his son did. He was too busy drinking himself to death, and spent a large part of his day, especially in the summertime sleeping.

There had always been a piece of Novos' heart missing, ever since his mother died. She was a strong woman, a proud woman. Tall and stately, and always with an air of grace about her, whatever she did. Many thought that she had married below her station when she wed Novos' father years ago. But, it was for “love” she said. “A woman's love for a man is hard to change.” Besides, she was marrying a landowner who had a great deal to offer Nicomedia's father as a dowry. It was seen by those who attended their simple wedding that they were happy, wealthy and would have many, many children to share their love. But it was not meant to be.

A year after Novos was born, his grandparents were taken by a violent plague that had gripped most of Asia Minor and all of Greece. His mother mourned their death. Their remains buried side by side on a hill where Nicomedia was raised as child, tending the olive orchards as generations had before. The rest of Nicomedia's sisters and brothers eventually moved far away from southern Greece. To the city or to better farmlands, away from the threat of the slave trade that was robbing this land of its people. Her marriage to Novos' father was suppose to be the salvation of her family- a barrier from the ills of these uncertain times.

She delivered her second child, stillborn and this only added to her grief. In a year, she was pregnant again, or so she had thought. The monthly flow of blood from her body had not stopped however, and the expansion in her abdomen confused both her, as well as her physician who lived in another village

twenty miles away. The old man who claimed to have medical experience felt her stomach and noticed the hardness of it, but could not decide if life grew within her or not. Nicomedia left this doctor with no answer, venturing back to her country home and her quiet family. A desolate and pensive journey for her, alone.

On her way, she passed a soothsayer. A fortune teller, a wily old troll of a man on the dry and unforgiving road. "Please madam, I beg of you. A sip of your water and a short ride to the coast is all I ask of you. In return, I can read the future in store for you and the ones you love," he croaked in the mid-day sun. He appeared to be a stranger to this southern shore. Probably from somewhere near Delphi, high in the mountains to the north.

Nicomedia remained in extreme pain, but some of the herbs that she had received from the physician earlier had calmed her and deadened her pain for a brief time. Besides, she had room and would appreciate the company. The small bag of water she had was still full from the deep well in their village and she had just enough for her to get back home.

"I do not have much in this bag," she said to the fortune teller. "But what I have- I can share."

"You are a kind woman... In distress, if I may be so bold to say." He climbed into the ox cart next to Nicomedia, sensing her concern and seeing the discomfort in her long pale face.

Her fervent prayers to the gods for this to pass were not as yet answered. "Please, if you can, tell me where this horrible pain comes from," she confessed to this small bent stranger. "I have been to a physician who knows not its cause."

This small package of a man threw his bundle into the back of the cart, grabbed the water bag and helped himself to a full guzzle of cool water.

"Ahh, yes. This is like ambrosia for the gods, is it not?" he touted, as they hobbled down the country road. "Have you any silver, my dear woman? My advice is best delivered upon a full helping, in advance."

Nicomedia felt at the mercy of strangers once again, and with any help perhaps the answer to her constant distress could be resolved, or at least put on course with the aid of a silver coin or two. With a sigh, she reached into her bundle and gave the small twisted figure the coins she had left. These would have been for a meal, if she could not reach home before nightfall.

"Ahhh, what beautiful hands you have, my dear," he said, inspecting her right hand as she offered him the few coins remaining. "Such a soft hand in such a rough land. I can see you have had children and... oh sorry, such grief I see as well." He did not say to her that he could see the lifeline on her right hand was short. Better not scare the clientele away, at least not while still traveling upon the open road. Better to mind his own business.

"Old man," Nicomedia insisted. "Please, please tell me what this pain inside my womb comes from, and what I should do!" Nicomedia was at her wits end and losing all patience.

"In time, my dear woman, in time." The journey to the coast was still far away. "I can tell you this much," he continued. "You have a child in this world already, your first born, I believe." He grabbed both her hands, held them tight and closed his eyes. It was as if time stood still for just this moment, the two of them being joined in one mind. "This child I see... the first born. He is destined for... greatness. Not all things of riches and wealth, but he shall reach the pinnacle of this world as so very few would ever see." The old man studied her face, reading her thoughts as easily as he could read a book. "I see it in your face, the reflection of your soul in your eyes. This child shall be not of the farmland, not a great military leader, nor shall follow in the ways of medicine or law. But, he shall be able to make the hardened melt, the anguished resolved, the bitter become sweet again- all because of his... songs. He shall be able to play with greatness! The greatness of the lyre of Apollo! I know not where this comes from, but understand- that I know this to be true. As true as the pain you feel within you must be resolved in order for you to survive!"

"If you know so much, old man," cried Nicomedia, "tell me this. Why do the gods punish me so?"

Her tears streamed down her tired face. “What have I done to deserve this?”

“Stop the cart! Stop!!” he cried. The sudden shouting startled Nicomedia so much that she pulled hard on the reigns of her ox, causing a dust cloud to envelope them both like smoke under the hot sun. He took his crooked hand, filthy and callused and placed it over her belly. The intrusion did not bother the poor woman. She was in no position to be offended at this point of her journey. She merely cried silent tears- no one could punish her more. All she wanted at this moment was an answer.

The twisted little man massaged her, slid his hand from side to side, and then in a sheer moment without hesitation, put his head down on her belly to listen intently inside.

“My dear woman,” he began. “You must go to your home and purge yourself of this obstruction within you. I cannot tell you what it is, but I can tell you that you are *not* with child. The gods work in the strangest ways, proud woman. The process you must undertake is not an easy one, but one that you must do in order to save your life!”

The dear mother of Novos looked at this troll of a man, searching vainly for the truth in what he was saying. Inside her heart and in her feverish mind, she knew he was right. There was no life growing inside of her womb, for she could feel that it was so. She also knew that it could be the end of her life if not taken care of, and must be done quickly- but how?

“You say that my child here on Earth is destined for greatness. Tell me what I must do to enable this to come to pass?” she pleaded, the pain creeping back into her abdomen- showing on her pale face, even stronger than before. The dark circles under her hazel eyes appearing deeper, her lips gray as her pale skin.

The old man could not bring himself to tell her the truth he saw. She would never know this child's efforts of greatness, nor witness his effect upon the world- the wonders, the magic. There was just too much grief to be said at one time.

“All I can tell you my dear woman, is that you must let destiny take its course. The wheels of life are turning, turning, turning. There is no going back now.”

They rode in silence for the remainder of the journey. So many thoughts circling in Nicomedia's mind. If she could make it home, she knew she could find some peace, some resolution. At the outskirts of Zankinthis, the soothsayer bid farewell to Nicomedia and her cart of woe. He slowly climbed down from the ox cart, grabbed his small bag and held out his right hand in farewell to this poor woman who stared at him- still with unanswerable questions.

“I bid you farewell, dear lady,” he said. They exchanged handshakes. To her surprise, Nicomedia found the coins there she had paid him for his services in her trembling hand. “I feel that you need this more than I dear lady,” he replied with an ounce of sincerity. With that he walked away from the cart, from the life he had interrupted with such dire forecasts and yet, with such tremendous glory as well. “May the gods smile upon you, dear child. In this world- or the next,” he said as the dust of the road obscured his view, causing him to cover his own face, a face now traced with his own tears.

“Oh, to know things one should never whisper,” he said to himself. “Maybe, maybe it would have been better to have just let her hear what she wanted to hear; carry on in ignorance like the rest of the world. Sometimes, to see the future can be such an awful... burden. Such a punishment.”

Pausing as he squinted through the late afternoon sun, he looked out towards the Ionian Sea, his destination at last. Maybe there were kings or nobles across the great waters for him to pander to. For him to see their rich, fat and self-indulgent futures. A terribly wealthy despot from Malta, for instance. Or in far off Armenia- with rubies the size of goose eggs. Some great Maharajah that would find him indispensable and offer him a lush and ample salon in his fine palace, where he could become fat and lazy.

He scratched his turbaned head, threw his bag over his shoulder and continued down the dusty dirt road, singing a strange little song to himself and making promises to whatever god that might be listening to him at the time. Onward to face his own future, away from the misery and pain of a stranger's life.

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“That white cloud over head could almost be a lion's head, no.... a snake or maybe, even a charging bull,” thought Novos. But the clouds moved by so fast, he wasn't sure which cloud to stare at first. *“So quickly things change; never the same, moment to moment. If only I could stop time.”*

He would lay on his back and stare up at the sky, blow at the clumps of thistle seed clusters that would float upon the wind like mystical fairies in flight, too fragile to live for more than a moment or two. He would point his shepherd's crook upwards like some kind of sorcerer's wand. As if he were causing the motion in the sky above, instead of the the wind. Novos thought back to when his father held him tight, sweetly singing an old folk song from the hills of Macedonia, rocking him back and forth as a small child. His father smelt of wine and sweat as always- hot to the touch, but firm as he held his son. Depression does strange things to men. Sometimes nothing, not even your own child could raise you up, make you feel whole again.

The story was told to Novos over the next few years, many times when he asked where mother had gone. And each and every time Novos tried his best to change the ending.

It seems that as night fell upon the village of Zankinthois, Nicomedia and the ox cart crept over the last hill and past the last orchard towards home. The evening stars shined bright at dusk as always, as if nothing drastic had happened at all. Even the tawny ox that pulled the cart forward knew his way home. Nicomedia's strength was barely enough to make it this far. She could neither prod nor hurry the stubborn animal along, even if she wanted to. She kept thinking deep in her mind of what that troll of a soothsayer had said to her. *“He is destined for greatness.”* These words tumbled in her mind and gave her added strength to keep moving forward to her home, her husband and her only child.

Reaching the final step up to the entrance of their home, Novos' father, Jesperian saw the pale gloom of death on his wife's face. Her journey had ruptured her soft bottom side and bleeding had begun. Hours must have passed since it had first started, becoming worse and worse, he could not tell. Nor would sweet Nicomedia be able to tell him so herself. If she had known, she had no choice but to continue on her path home.

Jesperian laid young Novos down upon a mat of thick woven grasses, the evening lamps blazing forth their light. He ran to his wife, gently lifting her into their bed, crying softly, her weak body a shadow of her former self. A once vibrant woman was now aged and worn- like the land they inhabited. Jesperian quickly tried his best to revive her, for he knew that the journey was a risk for her to travel alone, but she insisted on going. He had to stay here with the boy, the flocks and mind the house while she was gone. No one else around for miles was to be trusted, and there was no one they even knew who could help. *“How could such evil happened to this joyous messenger of heaven?”* he thought. *“Why hadn't Mother Artemis and blessed Hera surrounded her with their protection?”* His sweet Nicomedia, so good to all, such a faithful and loving mother. *“Please stay with me my Nicomedia, my love... I need you.”* As he sat next to her, cooling her steaming forehead with a wet cloth, baby Novos cried out to be held and assured. Being alone was foreign to the young child. He was frightened. How little he knew.

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“So many lives are spent separated from protection and left to fall freely into the arms of fate.” It was a voice he heard inside his head. A voice of him, but not by him. Reminiscing this fragile time in years to come, Novos would recall these words from somewhere in his past, as it rang through his mind... *“We each have an uncertain amount of time. Like a candle given a certain length to burn. Sometime slow and steady. Sometimes hot and quick- gone too soon. The flame growing and growing, then at last becoming ash and memory at some uncertain moment in the future.”*

No matter what we do, we all become ash and embers.”

Jesperian tried to remove the blood-soaked clothes, so much dried blood still clinging to her tender skin. He continued to cool Nicomedia with a soft cloth, the water becoming cloudy from the dust of

the road, worn deep into the crevasses of her face, streaked now with tears. How soothing it was to his wife of thirteen years, how comforting it was to feel a gentle touch. Young Novos continued to cry, and at last was given to his mother to hold in her cold white hands.

“My child, my Novos. How I wish I... everything is fading, a blur in my mind. I can't... remember what that funny little man said about you.” She smiled, realizing how impossible it all sounded. “How could he know anything about... anyone. Just a stranger... a stranger eager to take a woman's money.” Nicomedia was falling into a sullen sleep, even though she fought it, trying to continue to speak. “How could he say... that you would achieve such wondrous things... How could he know? How could he... know?” Delirium was taking over Nicomedia. The blood loss, her empty stomach, her body racked with pain, her mind twisted with fear.

In her cold right hand she still held the silver coin given back to her on the road by the fortune teller. A Roman coin, from a land that Novos' mother would never see. A dominating foreign power that had stripped their own country of everything of value, leaving them just barely enough to support their lives.

“Nicomedia, my love, I shall give you some broth to nourish you, to revive you.” It was all Jesperian could manage to offer her, unsure of anything at all that he could do to save her. He was a simple man, uneducated and inexperienced, overcome with his wife slipping away before his own tired eyes, his stomach tied in knots. He could not open his veins and give to his love his own blood. To make her comfortable and to clean her from her exhaustive journey was all he could think of. Baby Novos rested quietly down upon his mother's white naked shoulder, enough of a comfort in itself that her child was so near to her.

“Here... drink this,” he said, lifting her head to take in the broth. “Just a few more sips then you must sleep. Sleep is what you need, my love.” Jesperian prayed silently, constantly. He was distraught at the fading image of this hollow figure resting on their bed.

Nicomedia finished her second sip of the warm mixture of love and strength. “I'm afraid if I fall asleep husband that I shall not waken again.” Her loving Jesperian wiped the dirt of the road from her arms, her face and neck. She clutched his hand and closed her eyes as she finished these words, falling to sleep by the time he took the small child away from her cold white arms.

She rested for three days this way. Jesperian cleansing her bloody sores and managing to keep her alive. But the swelling in her stomach did not disappear, this cancerous tumor which she had never thought would invade her. Rather than becoming stronger, it seemed that her life was slowly draining from her, bit by bit- heartbeat by heartbeat, until there was nothing left.

On the morning of the fourth day, she was gone. At least the pain had subsided, and she died quietly in her sleep. No one was there to comfort Jesperian- no one even to care. His grief kept him from removing her body from the house for another two days, hoping beyond all hope that the gods had made a mistake. That they would have mercy on her and return Nicomedia to her former complete and beautiful self. Such anguish, such tragedy. It seemed to Jesperian that the gods had forgotten them altogether.

Little Novos would never know that his father had taken Nicomedia's remains away in the same ox cart that she traveled home in, burying her next to her own mother and father, on the hill near the olive orchard. It was a place of simplistic beauty and solitude, now and forever more to be a shrine to his departed wife. A river of tears flowed from that place. Jesperian was alone with only his son, left without a mother to care for him- unaware that the entire universe had come to a complete and brutal stop. Little Novos would never know the depth of pain that Jesperian would face. And no one would know the depth of sorrow that was still to come to pass for both of them.

“May she be at peace,” he sobbed out loud, lifting the final grave stones, one by one over the dry earth that now covered his love. “Watch over little Novos from above, my loving wife. Keep him safe and guide his tiny footsteps along the path of life.” Jesperian remained alone at the grave much longer than he had planned. Past the time when he should have remembered to return to his small son in the light of day.

Forgetting himself, wishing that the grave would take him this very moment. No more sadness, no more pain to endure. Just silent remembrances and surrender, the constant wind raced across him in its perpetual indifference.

* * * * *

CHAPTER III

“Inpudicitia in ingeno crimen est, in servo necessitas, a liberto officium” 1.

As hard as he tried, Novos could not change the ending. He always led up to the part where his father took care of Nicomedia with such tenderness, her wounds bleeding profusely. And when the fourth day would come, he would imagine that the goddess Athena herself would sprout from his mother's wounds and transform her into a full woman once more, stronger and even more radiant than ever before. Granting her pardon, eternal life and protection from all misfortune.

But the vision of her life slowly seeping away, like rain into the cracked and parched earth was a thought he could not bear. “No, no I *would* change the story this time,” he'd say to himself. But nightmares never change.

Yet, there he was- almost ten years old, a shepherd without any schooling, and now motherless. His distraught father could not be moved to marry again; the image of Nicomedia was too fully etched into Jesperian's shattered mind. He was still privately devoted to her, almost as if she were still there with them in their small dirt floored house, amongst the olive trees and the soft rolling hills near Zankinthis.

Jesperian would light candles every morning, asking the gods to give peace to his departed wife, hoping as he might for an answer. Maybe she was near by, watching and would send a message of devotion back to him. But no word was ever received, and the young father lapsed into deeper and darker despair, drinking more often throughout his days and his nights, alone. It seemed after so long apart from Nicomedia, that Jesperian only lived on the wine he could find, rarely eating until it was all that was keeping him alive.

If there was plenty of wine around and the harvest of the grapes had been good, then there was no reason for him not to drink even more. If it was scarce, he would begin to hid small jars of wine in different parts of the house, or even out in the stables where he kept his ox and his mule. But soon he would forget where they were placed and act like a madman, tearing the house apart when times proved dry, trying to locate his only friend.

A hopelessness was deepening between Jesperian and Novos- growing worse and worse. Novos therefore would spend much of his time each and everyday away from the small mud brick house, preferring to be out in the open air with his own special kind of escape: his imagination.

There were no children of his age anywhere around, no children he had even seen out beyond his village. No friends to spend his days with, play with or share with. He would continue to sing his ready made songs of the field and the sheep in his care, using his shepherd's crook like a magical staff, conjuring up invisible friends and foes alike. Sometimes it would be a distant Persian prince or even a blood-thirsty marauder from the island of Cyprus. It didn't matter to him. His life had remained about the same these past few aimless years. The falling apart of his father and Novos day dreaming in the fields of wheat and thistles surrounded by all his simple companions that paid no attention to him at all. The distant memory of his mother as beautiful and graceful, and his father as anything besides a drunk were vague images to him. He spent more and more time away with the invented lives he created than in the real world around him. Everything that related to his home life seemed so boring and depressing to Novos

Often he would take the flock of sheep and goats down near the rocky coast of the Ionian Sea. Some of them would find scrumptious fresh grass and weeds there to feast upon. The clover and the

1. “Sexual service is an offense for the free born, a necessity of the slave and a duty for the freed man.” (Seneca.)

brief flowers that could breathe in the sea mist, taking the constant pounding of the surf next to the rugged coastline would entice the woolly creature to this banquet close to the perilous edge. Novos and his invented friends would play out various games and stories near the raging surf. One such game he called "Battle of the Sea god," where Novos would stand on a rocky bluff just above the crashing waves, using his staff as a weapon to fight the ugly Kraken from the mighty depths below...

"Beware Lord Poseidon! A warning to you beast of the salty sea, oh Kraken from Hades realm! I stand before you with my magical staff of gold, ready to take on your minions of the deep in a battle to the death!"

He often developed an entire story, taking the whole afternoon to work up to the dramatic final assault. These games would dispel a great deal of the anger within him. Anger that he would carry inside for all his days as a child, and beyond.

As the tide would come closer to try and overtake Novos, he would sing louder and higher back to the surf in order to frighten the spirits that had come to do their best to defeat him. The sound of the pounding waves gave him a solid and steady resistance to the vocal music he began to create. He made up the notes and words quickly for each moment, never being able to repeat or remember the same episode from day to day.

When the afternoon began to wane, the tide would recede and this would be his final victory! He could now venture further out to the water's edge, slaying the monster beyond where he first stood. The mighty oppressor was vanquished back to Hades, and Novos would grab a lock of fresh seaweed as his plunder and prize- raising it overhead, shouting and swinging it like a rope. The flock would then sing a final chorus of thanksgiving to the victor, as the sun would begin to cast a golden sheen across the raging ocean, before Apollo and his chariot of fire would disappear into the sea. Novos would smile all the way home, remembering at least the final conflict...

The mighty waves of the sea god tried in vain to lash at him. The evil Kraken reaching out to capture Novos and destroy him, to swallow him whole. Attempting it seemed to drag Novos out to sea in his evil green clutches and there, drown him! But, ah ha!!! At the exact moment decreed by Mars, Novos took his mighty golden staff, splitting the Kraken into a giant splash of sea god's blood, causing the surf to crash it's spray all over him!

"Take that! And that! Ah, victory is mine!!!" The sea monster of the deep would have to challenge him and his virtuous band of woolly comrades some other day. Now, it was time to rejoice to the sounds of the evening cull of seagulls and venture back home to find whatever state his father would be in. No doubt Novos would have to prepare something for them to eat. A bit of lamb and wild greens, maybe some cheese and bread, if it hadn't turned too moldy. Never knowing if his father would beat him in a drunken rage, or would Jersperian end the night crying alone to himself, as so often he did. A lonely life procured by both men of this home. One reaching back to the past, one trying to escape from the present.

These nights alone with his father were long for Novos. He seldom had anything to do, but continue often some game he had invented, either in his head or with small figures he had received as a present. He did have an aunt visit him once, who came to their home to help poor Jersperian and to locate the grave of her departed sister. Aunt Sophia took the time with Novos to at least try and teach the child to read his own language of Greek. He spoke it well, or at least it seemed. He was quite bright and had an interest in learning, like a plant leaning with everything it had towards the sunshine. "The god's alone know where the boy gets this crazy and wild imagination of his," she would say, again and again during that week's visit- now so long ago. She had been the only family member to return to this area after so many years of separation. She and her brothers left for more prosperous fortunes in northern Greece, a better life perhaps in the city or finding more prosperous farmlands to make their own.

What Sophia found as “a better life” was a husband, five screaming children, plus crowded and polluted towns and villages. The Romans had drained so much of the country's resources, the art and wealth of Greece from the past five hundred years of occupation. Now, her country was a shadow of the former glory that Greece was ages ago, when the world was new and not as yet held as a captive slave to an empire.

His Aunt Sophia also was the first person to utter the word, “Athens.” It was named after the goddess of war and wisdom, Athena. After his aunt had left him alone with Jesperian, this enticed Novos' eager mind. Athens was all that Novos could think about and talk about for months. His meager reading skills were barely scratched.

His aunt did Novos one more favor. She left with him a small clay tablet with letters of the Greek alphabet, plus the Latin alphabet as well. Sophia had the sense to know that in the Roman world, he would have to eventually speak and read this foreign language, as hard as it may presently be for Novos to accomplish. There was just enough space on the clay tablet for him to attempt his own words, images and ideas. He started with the spelling of his own name on the tablet, soon adding essential words that would expand his vocabulary, making his imagination grow.

This was a profound step for Novos. To actually see his stories develop into words, mostly spelled poorly and hardly clear enough to be read. But he knew what his stories and jumbled words meant. He knew their meaning, that was all that was important. At times he felt that his hands could not keep up with his mind. And when the words didn't come to him in forms of letters, Novos would draw stick figures of whatever his thoughts would form. This stayed with him until he could figure out what letters were needed in order to spell his ideas correctly. Indeed, he was quite eager to learn.

He took the ideas his Aunt Sophia told him about- these far away places, and came up with even more exotic stories. Stories of traveling to Athens and finding a great company of lords in the city to sing songs to. Or, maybe becoming a famous military leader, preparing to take on the enemy at any time, whoever they may be. Or, perhaps being a great poet or thinker- reading and dreaming of new worlds.

Any grand palace would be fine with him, as long as it was far, far away from the boredom of Zankinthis. Maybe, he would be a lord himself and become a rich man. The mind of this nine year old was running away with him- faster and more vivid than ever before. The only thing that kept him from forgetting his head sometimes was the fact that it was attached to his shoulders.

The knowledge he was discovering daily was a new world, opening up to him slowly like a flower of exotic beauty. The more it opened to the sun the more interesting it was, the hungrier he became to learn.

And what was this place called “Rome?” Novos pondered. He had heard it defiled ever since he could remember his own name. First from his own father, cursing Rome for raping their land of its wealth and the grain supply that the province held in reserve. This grain surplus was often needed in times of drought, but the strong hand of the Roman legions would march through, taking whatever they wanted- grain, wine, olives, fruit and slaves. The very best that Greece had to offer was either plundered, stolen, raped or devoured by the Romans.

Jesperian would often say that he was glad that he had no daughters, for the Roman soldiers would take young girls that they fancied from the villages and towns for themselves. No questions, no permission granted, nor required. It was legal kidnapping- legal rape allowed by the power of Rome. Anyone who would interfere with this would be simply cut down.

It was impossible for Novos to comprehend such a place as this “Rome.” It seemed too fantastical, too inhumane for a place where people actually lived. As his aunt had said, “they were rulers of the entire world, without question.” “*What does that exactly mean?*” Novos thought. “*How can someone actually own another place when it wasn't theirs to begin with, let alone the people who live there?*”

The Romans certainly didn't buy them. I have never heard about anything agreed upon being bought or sold to them. So... how can that be?"

The system of an empire with all its power and greed was unbeknownst to Novos, as was the crueler, more base and carnal side of the world around him. He was much too young to discover his own sexuality and there had been no one around him interested in explaining *what that was* to a young boy, especially not Jesperian. Strong emotions were foreign to him, only witnessing his father's grief, his father's eyes when he spoke of his dead wife and Novos witnessing the farm animals mating. It seemed as well that the greater world of hate and cruelty around him had not as yet touched his simple life.

And these Romans were supposed to believe in the same gods that his family did, or so he had been told. If that was true, then why did his gods not protect his family and his people from the cruelty of these Roman invaders? *"I just don't understand,"* he would say to himself. *"If I could someday just see this place called 'Rome', and talk to the people there then somehow, maybe I could understand."* These questions would go round and around in this young boy's head, along with the lengthy and varied music and stories that he would make up each and every day when he was out in his personal world of nature, lost in his own creative imagination.

The closest he ever got to these Romans in person was once out in the wheat fields. He could see a garrison of Roman soldiers marching across the horizon, en route to the coast. They carried blazing red banners, wore red plumes and tunics covered with silver and bronze armor. A frightening sight for young Novos, being out alone in the hot sun. Terrifying Novos and a complete feeling of helplessness. Of course, he realized this was no game to play. To act out an attack against two hundred men of skill and spears with his own "magical stick" would be suicide. Calling upon the invisible dragons and wild serpents to come down from the clouds in the sky and help defend this land from the barbarian invaders would be a better idea.

He entertained himself throughout the remainder of the long summer months, taking time each morning to ask his father how to spell words, or what this or what that word meant.

Jesperian was no teacher and was seldom, if ever in the mood to assist a young and eager mind like his son's. Novos would simply make up his own explanation for words that he could not find the meaning of. And the alphabet on the top of his favorite toy, the clay tablet from his aunt would often assist him in his pronouncement and spelling of words. What little rain was needed, it seemed for this dry field to sprout green and begin to prosper.

The question for Novos, at such an early age was where to go now? His desire to know more, to see more and to learn more was becoming an obsession for him. The simple stories and songs he made up were simply not enough for him anymore.

He continued to play out his games and silliness with his sheep and goats, who were a miserable audience for Novos. But through all of these games, he would ponder even greater questions about himself and where his life could one day lead him. Where could he go after Zankinthis? Would his father ever think of leaving this small corner of the world? How would he find that special something for him to do with his life? And especially, when would all of this happen? The idea of leaving his father was a difficult question to overcome, but he knew that someday it would need to be confronted. Jesperian, for all his strengths and attempts to support Novos was slowly killing himself and over time did very little to assist in the upkeep of the farm, the fields and orchards around their home.

Once, he nearly broke his leg by falling off a ladder. Drunk of course, when the olives needed to be harvested. Novos often wondered if he might easily come home someday from being out with the flocks and find his poor father sprawled on the floor, or out on the dirt road, dead from some mistake in judgment or some foolish accident. It was a losing game, thought Novos. And there were no winners.

By the end of the month named after Caesar Augustus, the flock of sheep and goats tended by Novos for so long were ready to be sold. They had matured enough and the sheep had been shorn for their wool. The majority would be taken to the marketplace and should receive a good price. After all, they had been well fed, made sure that they were never sickly or infected with parasites or disease, as well as being entertained by the greatest unknown performer on the Peloponnesian plain.

Jesperian decided finally that he should be the one to drive the cart to the town's marketplace. Novos was much too young for such an ordeal and responsibility. Certainly not able to handle money and the appropriate haggling involved with the merchants and the butchers for such livestock.

It was important for Novos to never get too attached to certain animals. This was their livelihood, and they were never to be considered pets of any kind. These creatures were part of his daily chores, and just another member of Novos' expanding audience. His stories would often include them, but always as token players to the scene. This kept him from becoming saddened when they were taken away to be killed- no tears. The few remaining would populate the herd for next season, and then the cycle would begin again.

Jesperian was actually preparing himself days in advance for the journey to market by making sure that he drank less, ate better meals and slept only at night. This harvest season would include many difficult maneuvers on his farm, and could be the best they've had in years. Things seemed as if their lives might come around again to be where they should be, still as a family.

During this time of the late summer, the dry landscape around the village of Zankinthois was being inhabited by unwelcome foreigners- Macedonians and Thracians who were strangers to this southern land. They were nomads. Transients who had no permanent home any longer, did farm work only where needed and managed to keep alive any way that they could. Recent bands of these vagrants had been sighted throughout the Peloponnesian and throughout the southern half of Greece. Times being desperate as they were, the fear they created was because these men were somehow connected with pirates, from Pamphylia and Cyprus, along the Anatolian coast to the east. But Novos continued to tend his flock, quite measurably diminished by being sold at marketplace, but steadfast nonetheless with his mighty shepherd's crook.

Jesperian left before dawn on market day, the oxcart loaded up with the surplus livestock, tied in securely and destined for slaughter or sale. His father kissed Novos on his forehead before he left, something he rarely ever did any more. He patted him on the cheek, smiled at him and then grabbed his bag of silver coins and accounting tablets. The journey was not far, just a few miles over the rolling hills. But far enough that Novos would have to stay behind and guard the house, the farm and the remainder of the flock. "He was a big boy now, able to manage being alone for the day," said Jesperian to himself with a smile of pride.

What his father failed to notice was that his son had been doing this all along. But he had been too drunk to ever really notice before. Indeed, it was a large job for such a boy, but Novos was feeling more and more grown-up all the time. Besides, nothing bad could possibly happen with his trusty magical golden stick for protection.

The clear dawn sky beckoned favorable tidings of fortune for Jesperian as he set off, far happier than Novos had ever seen him before. Maybe the prospect of a fortune by the day's end had set him off on the right foot. Maybe this was a new start for his father.

"What shall we do today?" Novos asked the young ones that remained in his flock. "Shall we venture down to the sea once more, or hike up the hills a bit to see the harvest of the fruit trees? Or maybe dine on the tender shoots of the pond grass?" Novos decided that since no one was at home today, that it was best to stay close by and keep a watchful eye on things. The sea would always be there, he thought- we could battle with the green nemesis of the deep another day.

2. Present day Turkey.

He took his small companions up to the highest hill overlooking his home of mud bricks and peered across the rolling wheat fields towards the ever deepening blue of the Ionian Sea. How bright the morning sun was today, almost blinding him without any hat for protection. The air here smelled sweet- his favorite blend of summer grasses, salt air and the rich aroma of the earth. *“This is why I love my country so much”* he thought. *“No matter where I’ll ever go in my life, I shall never forget this scent... never.”*

The sweet fragrances surrounding him and the quiet of the morning, without his father to worry about gave Novos new and different songs to create for the diminished audience attending him. Those select few who chewed their cud and rested quietly under a lone olive tree, high on a hill. He had ample view of the farm and his small house- no sign of any trouble today.

“Sight of morning sky so bright, with not one cloud to make into a serpent’s tail or lion crouching. Sing a song of morning sky, like bluebird’s wings or secret pools of ocean deep in restful measure beckoning. I am here to greet the day! I am Novos, who the gods have chosen to protect my land from hidden ghosts and demons creeping. I am Novos, hear my song, oh universe of stars and moons and wild winds blowing. Bless my land, for it is good. Bless my land, from the far off hills to the rocky coast below. For I am Novos, lord of this land!!!”

His song carried out upon the cool morning breeze, swept up from the sea far below. It was carried out to the fields around him and filled the small plain that swept back down to his home. Such a sweet tune to carry on the soft breeze, such a simple interpretation of his existence here. Too bad that it was not heard by a truly interested audience.

But it was.

The departure of Jesperian was watched carefully from afar by several pairs of eyes that hid in the wheat fields that early dawn, not seen by either Novos nor his father. They had spent the night there and laid quiet for several hours, moving silently at first like phantoms through the brush and thistles. Watching, waiting for an opportunity like this one. Coiled up, ready to strike with their poison.

“A vacant house was one thing, but a young boy alone with no protection with a small flock was much, much better. Wait, see if there are any hazards unknown. Wait... Watch...”

Novos stared out from atop the hill, across to the brilliant blue of the Ionian Sea. He sat down finally, with all his small companions still resting under the shade of an olive tree and proceeded to have a cool drink from his water bag. In a moment’s lapse he laid back on the soft dry wheat shafts and closed his eyes, just for a second of rest.

That was all the time it took for two pair of rough hands to grab the boy and swing a sack over his head, tying it with a rope. His muffled screams barely disturbed the flock of yearlings, who paused to chew their cud and relish the taste of the wild grasses once more. All was dark within the dirty sack over Novos’ head, the stench making him begin to choke. A cold shiver of terror unlike anything he had ever know ran down his spine.

“What a lovely day, my slender boy,” said a harsh foreign voice. “And what a lovely way you have with singing your sweet songs. Almost as sweet as that face of yours!” A chorus of cackles burst out from the thick underbrush- voices in the shadows, voices from the bowels of the Earth.

“Take this boy down to his house,” another one shouted, speaking some Greek dialect. “We’ll have him tell us where their silver is. If he don’t tell us right, we’ll kill all his little white friends here!” Rough laughter erupted in the mid day heat- demons sprouting from Hades fire.

Novos was pushed and prodded down the hill, a leather belt strapped around his mouth, muffling his constant screams for help. But there was no one to hear him. When he fell, he was pulled up by the neck and kicked forward down the dirt path once more. The rocks and gullies he had passed underfoot so often all these years did not guide his way. The mindless flock of simple lambs followed this fiasco before them, never knowing what awful fate might be in store for them. They followed their master

like any other day, escorted by a band of thieves and murderers that controlled his every move.

“He should fetch a good price as a house slave. Such strong arms and hands,” squelched one of them in a whinny voice, holding Novos firmly. “Maybe we could sell him to a rich merchant who would favor such sweet young flesh. A great price for such a gem!”

The roar of their crude laughter terrified Novos. He was so naive that these words held no meaning to the boy at all. They would not dare think of eating him, *would they?*

“Just get him to that miserable shack down there,” said another with a powerful deep voice. “We’ll see about his flesh later. Now, all I want are his coins and silver!”

The rough sack and rope were pulled off from around his head when they dragged the boy into the front door of his simple house. Novos was held at knife point by two of them, one on either side, both a fraction away from puncturing his neck. Novos’ eyes darted around him, the leather strap still wrapped over his mouth, not knowing what to say or do. He tried to be calm, but this was beyond horrific. He had never been attacked. Now he feared for his life. If his father had left any thing of value in the house, then maybe by the gods, just maybe he could save himself.

“Alright boy, where are them valuables? Don’t stall now, speak up! Give me the silver, or by Zeus’ thunder, I’ll cut you and your young friends outside into little bits for the crows to eat!” the deep voiced one shouted. He seemed to be the leader of this vicious pack of dogs. He had the look of a truly wicked man. A scar down the left side of his face from a knife fight, showing through his coarse black stubble. Cold, black and soulless eyes and a thick mustache seemed to match his words. “I want money, ya hear me? All of it now!” he bellowed. He smelt of filth and the stench of the road.

Novos knew perfectly well that his father took all the coins to market hours before. Tears streamed down his bruised face, choking with the idea of being killed. His eyes focused at each of these terrifying men, hoping beyond any hope that just one of them would show him mercy. “*This is not happening...*” he kept saying to himself, over and over.

“I shall give you whatever I can find,” was all that Novos could utter through the strap across his mouth. His bands were removed slowly and he took a few timid steps towards the shelf where his father always kept his box of coins. “I don’t know how much is there... My father left this morning, just a few hours ago- with every coin we had.” He was shaking with fear as he had never known before.

“Ahhh, yes,” said the thin and whinny voiced one. “We watched him leave. So early to be traveling today. Maybe we could occupy this boy with some fun here while we just wait...” He groped at Novos, trying to fondle him, feeling his lean muscles. The bastard pulled at Novos’ shirt, ripping his sleeve, tearing at his shoulder.

Vile laughter continued, as if they were out to take much more than silver. Thoughts of corrupt violations had never been introduced to the boy before now. It seemed to Novos there was more to lose than his own life. He felt like his sheep, being taken away to slaughter.

Novos reached the box of wood where Jesperian had kept all the valuables. A strong box on the highest shelf, barely reachable. It was heavy and very well made. Yes, almost heavy enough to use as a weapon.

The crew of cutthroats helped themselves to food and wine left in the house, stealing as well any personal items that suited their fancy, breaking anything they wanted to. Scattering clothes and belongings, looking for anything of value. Smashing the shutters, pottery and wine jugs. Slicing up the mattress, pouring out shelves and boxes, destroying all things sacred and worthless with the same disregard.

The only one watching the boy was the deep voiced one, the tall evil bastard with the scar. As the rest of the mangy crew were distracted with looting his home, Novos walked slowly before this gargantuan slob of a man, calculating a last moment scheme to escape.

“Well, give it to me, swine!” he said in a callous voice. The others continued to sack the entire house as Novos slowly reached out with the box in his hand. In a moment's desperation, he threw it directly at the scarred man's face. Novos blinded him for a second, just enough time for the boy to spring towards the door, his chance to escape.

Novos screamed for someone, anyone to help him, but the rest of the crew fell on him in a heartbeat. Novos was sobbing, begging for mercy as they dragged him back inside, across the dirt floor by his neck.

“So, you wanna play rough, do you?” the bastard croaked, rubbing his face where the box had hit him. “Let's see what else you have.”

He swung the back of his right hand across Novos' small face, sending him across the room, landing against the far wall. The others kicked and punched him as his crumpled body fell, until he could move no more. Rolling in agony, bleeding and in pain- pleading, begging for them to stop.

“The damn box is *empty!*” cried the leader as he picked it up, hurling it at the small boy. “Where is the money here!!! Give it to me!!!” He seized the boy by the neck once more. Throttling him, his massive hands strangling him for an answer.

“I told you already, my father took all the money we had this morning, leaving for the marketplace with our sheep!” he garbled, trying to breathe. Novos began spitting up blood. It oozed from his nose, his lips and torn cheek. “Take whatever you want, but please, please don't kill me!!!”

“Oh, we won't kill you, my little friend. You're much too pretty for that. I'm sure you'll fetch a good price on the block. We're gonna have to make up for the lack of funds around here by getting a damn good price for that pretty ass of yours, my boy... Take him outside! Gather what you can, then kill all them wretched animals out there... *All of them!!!*”

Novos silently swore to himself that he would somehow seek revenge a thousand time over on these cruel men, these demons from hell. He had never tasted his own blood, nor had he ever known what hate was before. What a bitter poison it was.

“*Nooooo!!*” he cried as they threw him out the door, falling on his broken face, caked with dirt and blood. Once more, the sack was thrown over his small head. He could hear the muffled cries and screams of the young lambs he had tended so carefully, like the sound of babies being put to the knife, sliced and gutted mercilessly, one after another. These demons made awful noises of glee at such a massacre as if it were some celebration, cutting down every one of them that they could grab.

The blood sport continued as they butchered any creature they could find. The old mule in the stables, the geese and chickens in the yard, even a mother sow and her offspring of seven. A nightmare of vicious sounds encircled Novos' head, crashing with excruciating pain that ran throughout his body. His entire world turned upside down in a matter of a few desperate minutes. It was more than his young mind could fathom. “*This is not happening!!! Gods in Heaven, this is not happening!!!*”

Through the mayhem all around, the scarred one giving orders found the remains of an oil lamp and candles that Jesperian used daily to say his prayers and meditations to the gods and to his dear wife. Without thought, he splattered the oil around the room, making one final survey for anything of value. Smashing the lamps against the wall, he muttered his last insult. “I'll teach 'em to cheat me out of silver when I ask for it!”

The small house filled with black smoke. Straw mattresses became a blazing fury, catching the window shutters and the wooden shelves around the small room on fire. Flames reached even higher, licking the heat of the mid-day sky, as if this was some awful sacrifice to an angry god of misery. Novos could smell the smoke and hear the crackle of the flames consuming his home, knowing by the shrill voices around him that his whole world was doomed, completely doomed. No song or magical word or stick of gold could save him now. Nothing could repel these most real and murderous creatures. No spirit of goodness could change the outcome, no power of heaven or earth could help him now.

“Oh, gods of my father!” he cried. “Hear me, hear my prayer! Oh, mother, most sacred and pure Nicomedia in heaven. Rescue me... Please, *please stop this madness!!!*” His cries to heaven were drowned out by the anger and confusion of the mob, crazed by the blood sport and their hatred of life. Their joy of destroying the innocent.

His eyes would never see the full chaos around him- a dark and reddened field of blood running in front of his destroyed boyhood home. The house where he was born, now ablaze in utter destruction. The simple animals in his care, all dead. What terrified animal that was not killed had run away, only to stagger about in confusion, bleating for comfort from the dead- for their master to return.

Novos was pummeled and tossed in a demented frenzy from one man to another, faster and with more brutality, molested and fondled with increasing madness, all the while fighting them as best he could. Beaten, he felt his mind going blank. The weight of a club smashing against his head, the warm flow of his own blood running down his face- stinging his eyes. The sounds of the men, the fire and the cries from the last bit of what used to be his home fading into deadened silence.

Maybe the gods took pity on the young boy. Before any more insults could be done to him, Novos fell unconscious.

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