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Flight of the Empress: The collapse of antiquity and its modern-day echoes as demonstrated through a piece of historical fiction.

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A creative piece and accompanying exegesis submitted to the University of Huddersfield in fulfilment of the requirements for the degree of MA by Research of Creative Writing

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Abstract

Flight of the Empress: The collapse of antiquity and its modern-day echoes as demonstrated through a piece of historical fiction.

This MA by Research comprises of my creative piece, *Flight of the Empress*, accompanied by a critical exegesis, which examines the themes I chose to cover in my creative piece and my reasoning for choosing them, the creative decisions made in regards to historical figures, how they compare to other works on the same figures, as well as how the piece is an original contribution to the historical fiction genre.

The reflective essay begins with explaining the alternate methods of exploring the subject of societal decline and collapses, the concepts that were not used and why, before outlining the evolution of historical revisionism on the Roman Empire, as well as the works of fiction set around this time and how my piece differs from them. This is followed by a discussion of the role of historical facts in fiction, starting with brief outline of the historical novel form, its criticisms, followed by a defence to those criticisms through a discussion of source bias. The piece then discusses historical fact as it pertains to representation of character by comparing different interpretations of a single person from different authors, followed by a discussion of historical accuracy as it relates to language and a character's personal history.

The exegesis then discusses the issue with retrospectively analysing the decline of the Roman Empire through a modern political lens, before discussing the themes I chose to cover in my creative piece, such as religious intolerance and infighting, with a brief examination of the use of the Roman God Bacchus who appears throughout the piece. The piece concludes with a discussion of the similarities between the popularity of apocalyptic fiction and public/media perceptions of the Roman Empire's decline, a historian's perspective on the subject, and how my piece addresses these thoughts to create a distinct story amongst other works of fiction.

Creative Piece: *Flight of the Empress***Day of exile**

Above the marsh lay the bleached bones of a dead man's hand, fist closed, desperately grasping at roots that had long since abandoned its clutches. Just below the water, the bone gave way to pale sinews and skin, still attached to the ghoulish form hidden within us all. The cursed flesh festered within a withering uniform, the same that my Gothic guard wore.

Our window was closing. My men quietened as we trekked past the watery tomb of the lost soul. Perhaps the elder soldiers knew the drowned warrior.

I caught the image of Justa in my children's carriage behind me. Her little hands clasped on the lip of the window as her plump face hung out.

My captain's mount blocked my view. His earth robes clashed against his black steed as they approached my carriage. I could see his red beard jut out from under his iron helm. The eagle brooch on his chest.

'Do you think the Emperor will notice your absence Augusta?'

'We shall have passed Athens before he rouses from his eunuch's lap Frideger.'

...

The carriages seemed to hide in the shadow of the great ponto docked at port. I saw the tiny face of Flavius squirm in Afra's arms as he gazed up at the wooden vessel.

From our spot in the ship's shadow, I saw a ramp that extended from the ponto's side down to the stone pier by the carriages. Goods were being carried onto the ship by the crew, amongst them soldiers that wore long-sleeved red tunics.

The ship was the last of my concerns, as my eyes darted between the surrounding red-brick homes, afraid that every other was a secret barrack, ready to arrest me for treason against the purple. By now the sun had begun to fall, and the shadows that had crept into the streets left plenty of hidden corners.

'Were you followed Augusta?'

The voice came from outside our coaches. He was a head taller than myself, the hair on his chin looked like an old matron's downy fur. His robes were sky-blue and bright, under which an absurdly white tunic peeked from the cavities of his cloak.

'By no-one. Is the vessel prepared for the voyage to come?'

'Sooner than we hoped Augusta. Plenty of trinkets and wares to ply once we reach Constantinople. My contact has prepared us entrance for seven days. The captain seemed bemused at the haul we carry, though agreed once he saw the payment by your aide from the African province.'

'What we do with his ship and crew will be no issue of his until they return Sophostís.' I moved to gaze on the children's carriage. 'Afra!' The children's dark-skinned nurse appeared in their coach's window. 'Prepare the children to board.' The maid muttered something about her name being Zama as we moved to the ramp. I felt the anxious presence of Sophostís hang on my shoulder as my thoughts drifted to my childhood home.

'Th-this is a dangerous time for a voyage Augusta. There is a reason many won't be doing business for another month.' I paid him no mind as I boarded the vessel.

The deck was vast, typical of a merchant's vessel. The sails drooped around the ship's mast, a mess of cloth, red as blood, frantically tended to by men of all shapes and skins under the glorious thumb of Rome. The stern rose above the rest of the deck, with a hole at the farthest end, presumably for a good pair of eyes to call down orders to the tiller's attendants.

The crew wore simple tunics of dirtied fabric, or trousers seen on barbarians and homeless wanderers. A good number, I cared not to count, went about their businesses as myself and Sophostís walked amongst them.

'Aha! Might I introduce her majesty, the honourable Augusta, to the ship's first hand?' Sophostís gestured to a hole that I assumed led to the bowels of the ship.

From the wooden depths rose a great man. From his chin grew an unkempt mane that put the stubbled whiskers of Sophostís to shame. On the deck now, his head put my aid deep into his shadow. His clothes were robes of pale brown, not like the battered tunics of his brothers.

'Palmus, may I introduce the Western Augusta herself, the most gracious and humble Aelia Galla Placidia.' His arms beckoned to me, as if to reveal a great prize to the shipmate. His coal eyes tracked the imperial purple robes I as Empress garbed myself in. His face contorted where his mouth should have been.

'Thought we were just moving some of her shinies to the east. No one told me we'd be moving the bloody princess.' A heavy Greek accent reached me as I glared daggers up at him.

'F-forgive him Augusta. He is a man of the sea, not accustomed to etiquette and courtesy as we are. He is a fine hand on the waves, ah-I assure you-'

'His use on the sea was never in question Sophostís.' Whatever pointless words he was about to spill ceased. 'It was his loyalty.' A twitch above the first mate's brow betrayed his expressionless features. 'You will refer to me as your Augusta only, understand sailor?' I stepped closer to this bear of a man, who remained as a statue at my advance. 'Call me anything other whilst I rule as authority on this ship, and the ocean's wrath will be the last of your concerns.'

Deathly silence fell upon the deck. The sounds of ropes being tended and groans of floorboards died at my words. This great form of sea-worthy muscle, whose collar I barely met with the top of my head, revealed nothing as I stood inches from him.

It was a few more moments before he smiled, as his shoulders bobbed in time with rumbles of laughter.

'I thought the captain might be on the bottle again when he told me who we were moving.' His tone was now jovial and light. A stark contrast to the man who stood before me moments ago.

'As ya' wish Augusta. I'd only say that it be best if you listened to me when we're out on the waves.' His eyes moved to the prow of the ship. 'Zagra!' The roar to duty brought a young boy no older than twelve, barely able to reach the great man's chest, over to us.

'Yes Palmus, sir?' The giant pushed him to face me.

'The lad makes for a good pair of hands in a pinch,' His eyes tracked the arriving soldiers as they brought grain and goods from the ramp. 'He's all yours Augusta.'

'If he wishes to serve me, he may accompany and assist my own maids in the care of my children.' Zagra's eyes popped wide. Palmus nodded as he turned back to more important duties on deck. The lad squirmed, now alone under my gaze. 'Now! Down the ramp and in the pair of carriages. My maids will instruct you further.' The boy sprinted down the ramp I had come from.

As I turned, two soldiers on deck moved towards me. The first was young, his stride wide and confident as he approached, aware of the fine specimen he held himself as. He knelt as soon as he was within reach of me. His comrade, a little stockier than him, fidgeted as he followed.

'Augusta, on the request of the man known as Sophostís, I, palatinus Sirtus, my subordinate Alexander and our men are to act as your personal guard on your journey to the Eastern capital.' This one knew his manners. I inched closer to examine him as I eyed my aide, who twiddled his thumbs under my glance.

'As long as you act as such, you are to follow the orders of my captain Frideger.' The second man knelt at my feet nodded at this command, but his brother looked up at me, his features scrunched in confusion.

'But Augusta, they are Goths! Are you saying we are to bend over and take orders from barbarian-?'

'I trust you will take no issue on the matter.' I looked down at the centurion. His brother looked to him aghast at his brashness. Sirtus' furrowed brow and bitten lip gave way to a sigh as his features relaxed.

'By your command Augusta.'

As the guards moved to find their new captain, I looked back to Sophostís.

'Make sure all our goods are ready for the journey. I will spend no more time on these shores whilst my brother still draws breath.' As he left to procure the wares, I felt a tug on my robes. The boy Zagra had returned to my side, his face puffed and pink.

'Y-your chil... your children are in your q-quarters Ma'am.'

'Take me there.' He showed me the steps to the ship's bowels. In stark contrast to the deck, the narrow halls of the lower decks were quiet, save for the occasional hand moving bags of grain or valuables, with only a single lantern to illuminate.

The boy halted at the final room in the hall. I could hear Afra whisper in her mother tongue. Egyptian, I think it was.

'Have you made sure they have eaten Afra?' She seemed surprised as I entered the quarters. I pushed her aside to gaze upon the children. Justa lay scrunched up, Flavius in her arms as she snored softly. She must have tired herself out on the journey here.

'Y-yes Augusta.' I gently pried the boy from her deceptively strong grasp.

'Said their evening prayers?'

'To the letter Augusta.'

'And have you loosened his bindings?'

'Enough to wriggle, as you always request Augusta.' I tugged on his robes just a little.

'And have you blown cooling air on them?'

'I-I didn't think it necessary in the current climate A-Augusta-'

'Leave us.' I saw her taken aback by my order.

'A-As you wish Augusta.' Flavius' eyes blinked furiously as he wriggled to escape the cool wind I blew on him. His baby-blues glinted in the faint light of the cabin. So different from Theo's brown orbs.

The creak of wood brought my attention back to the doorway where Zagra still stood. One look was all it took for him to vanish. As I returned young Flavius to the cot, I noticed a shot of purple tucked into his swaddle. It prickled to the touch as I seized it from the fabric. A head of lilac thorns sat on a crown of green pointed leaves.

'A thistle?' When had that fallen into his wraps? We had not stopped on our journey to the port. I discarded the flower to the corner of the chamber as I felt the hull of the ponto shudder. Relief ran through me.

We were finally safe.

...

The first day

I fell before my cross. The urge to empty my stomach crawled up my throat with every beat against the hull.

It had seemed such a simple decision from behind stone walls. I hadn't travelled like this in so long. I had been desperate to escape my brother's grasp. Now we were a pond-skater in a storm, soon to fall into the mouth of a watery grave.

All I could do was pray that we would overcome this test, that we may escape the cold embrace of the storm. Whatever the cost.

'You called Augusta?'

I broke from my prayers as I looked to the entrance of my cabin. It was the youngster Zagra, but not as I remembered him. His smooth features, spoiled by the occasional smudge of filth and oil, were coloured a faint purple that seemed to seep from his skin into the room. His shoulders were relaxed, despite the storm and the wails of Justa and Flavius from their cot. As I saw the lad's crown, I spied a pair of horns that jutted out of the boy's hair.

I fought against every instinct to step back from this thing as it rose.

Its face lit up as it snapped its fingers. 'Ah, you were expecting Neptune.' My jaw clenched at its tone.

'Don't think you can disarm me with wit daemon!'

'Is that what we are now?' There was no malice in its tone, nor anything accusatory.

'It is what you always were.' My scorn fell on the daemon's ears as he bound past me, unshaken by my words.

'By chance would those be your father's words, or the forked tongue of your bishops speaking there?' It asked as it hunched over the Lord's cross I had erected for prayer. 'Well, not that you would remember your father's words now would you Aelia?'

I didn't care that I may destroy the cross gifted by Hormisdas himself, nor how Justa and Flavius might see me after they witnessed my bloody rage. You do not stir the righteous fury of Theodosius's blood without consequence.

That was my intention at least. Until my grasp around the blighted thing's neck met my own hand. The head turned to me as if my hands were not clasped around its throat. It stepped out of my fingers as it moved to the cot.

'My my. A woman of such class, and yet all the manners of a latrine dog.' Its gaze hung on the children. 'Do you know who I am Augusta?' It lifted its hand before I could answer. 'Please, refrain from calling me a daemon your highness. You are an educated lady of the throne. You were taught better.'

'...You were called Bacchus, before the good people of Rome knew any better.' It paid my answer no mind as it gazed over the children in their cot. Their cries for attention had died, as if the presence of the daemon had soothed them. Its eyes landed on Flavius. The thunder of the sky and waves outside seemed to dull.

'This is your son, Flavius Valentinian, is it not?' It already knew. Why ask? 'He doesn't look like himself, does he?' I rushed to the cot-side. What awaited me will haunt me to the day I am delivered to the Lord himself.

Justa looked as she always had, though with a curious look as she gazed up at the daemon.

Flavius wasn't there.

The infant in his place was small, no more than a year if that. Even then, the little one was puny for his age. In place of plump stubby hands, there were withered arms. The skin had the look and texture of sand clung tight around tendons, and bones that my eye found repulsive yet could not find the will to look away from. His sickled fingers clung to the cloth Flavius had been draped in, that did nothing to hide his emaciated ribs and shrivelled belly that still rose and sank. His poor legs limp like dead grain in a drought-ridden field.

If the boy's body was made to bastardise God's form, then the face was a satire of his work. Instead of the fleshy rotund semblance of Flavius, his face was gaunt and wasted, as if his young life was lost years before. His gums receded into a hag's grin, leaving him a toothy beam like those in Rome's catacomb.

The only life in this wretched body was in its eyes. Warm brown orbs gazed up at me. Eyes so much like his father's. I reached into the cot to caress his faded cheek. To touch him one last time.

'Theo...'

Instead I found my hand on Flavius. His face scrunched at my tears that fell onto his face.

'It's alright.' Its whispers sounded like wind upon autumn leaves or hills of sands.

I turned to see the daemon cradle a bundle of fine cloth that shone bright, even in the dim light of the quarters. The daemon smiled softly into the bundle. The gall...

My will crashed further as the daemon turned Theodosius away from my grasp.

'You can't reclaim this life Placidia.' I know not what pained my heart more. This daemon's words or the look of bliss on Theodosius' face as he suckled on its finger.

'What then?' It looked at me, puzzled at my changed tact.

'I beg your pardon Ma'am?'

'What is it you desire of me daemon?' The crash of waves upon the hull returned with force, as if God himself had shaken me to my senses. The soft gurgles and whimpers of Justa and Flavius

returned to wails of sirens. I heard Sophostís barrel down the hall, his voice heavy with gasps of exhaustion and urgency.

'Augusta, we cannot weather the storm for much longer! We must make for land!'

I turned to assure myself the daemon hadn't made for Justa or Flavius, only to find the false-god and Theodosius gone. Vanished into sea air. I dropped to my knees; my strength gone. My mind a haze of thoughts or feelings I hadn't felt in years.

...

You still look warm.

Even now, as I hold you... so cold, you're still warm. Why aren't you warm?

You're still beautiful. You know that, don't you? Even if the world never knew you, if they all see you as an empty shell... That won't be me. That will never be me.

Do y-you... Do you remember how small you were? How frail you looked? They said you wouldn't even survive the week. But you were so strong.

Your father knew that. He knew that... the strength you have... you had. He cried so hard as he first held you. A king shouldn't be brought to his knees by an infant.

Oh, you were so strong.

They're going to take you from me. They going to put you in the ground like...

They're going to bury. I have to bury you.

I di... I didn't even know you that long- No. No, I knew you. I did. I knew you... so well.

The things you were going to do. You had so much to do. The lessons you were going to learn. The things you were going to teach us. Teach me. They were all going to know about you. They were...

But they aren't now, are they?

I... I don't know what to do.

W-what do I do?

...

The second day

'Sophostís and Hatus are quite capable of finding the village themselves Augusta.'

'And I am informing you captain, that I have no intention of following him. I merely intend to step foot on the island. Or do you think me incapable of walking in a straight line?'

'Of course not, my Queen.'

I made my way up the shore, despite my captain's best efforts. I understood he was concerned for my wellbeing as his Augusta, but if he believed he could keep me tied to the ship like a mad slave...

There had been damage to the sail and rigging, but the ponto was still sea-worthy according to Palmus, at least until they made it to the islands of Greece for proper repairs.

The boy Zagra was as shaken by my coldness this morning as I was in the daemon's presence. I thought to apologise to the lad, though I had doubts that someone so above his station should even consider such a thing.

I saw Justa and Flavius further down the beach as they ran to and from meek waves. Or rather, I saw Justa run from the waves whilst Flavius stumbled to keep up on his stumpy legs. I found myself growing irate at the thought of sand getting into their robes. I'd never hear the end of how it irritated them, and how it crept into every crease of their tunics. Their caretakers probably never let them anywhere that hadn't been checked by brown-nosed eunuchs at least a dozen times. Afra seemed not to care as she watched from further down the beach.

It occurred to me that this was the first time the children had been anywhere without being watched. Or at the very least, the first time outside the putrid claws of the court. Even I had forgotten the pleasure of life outside the capital.

For a moment, I allowed my mind to wander, to paint a new canvas of this innocent scene in front of me. Only this time, Theodosius was there. A lad of six, maybe seven years. He held Justa's hand as she tried desperately to run at the foamed whitecaps. He played steed for Flavius as he raced across the sand with the littlest on his back. Maybe he was up the bank, holding a stick over his head as a great general, to call his younger siblings to charge down the beach to smite the sea itself.

I brushed the tears from my face. Again, my thoughts had turned to my lost-born. The delusions of the daemon had opened wounds even I had not realised still festered.

'Guess who Augusta?'

I turned slowly to be greeted by the daemon I thought had been an ill-dream. Its face-splitting grin as wide as it had been the night before, its stance wide and somehow proud of its own repulsive presence. The only change on its person was the fabric sling over its shoulder, in which what appeared to be a bundle of weighty cloths hung from its chest.

'You!'

'Now now, my dear Augusta. You wouldn't want your men thinking you so low as to speak with thin air, would you?' I turned to the ponto to see a few figures that had stopped on the deck to watch me. As the ire from last night returned, I twisted my body to meet the creature.

'Do you wish to make a fool of your 'dear Augusta' daemon?'

'I don't know Placidia. You make it so tempting.' I stowed my rage, the memory of my attempted throttle stung fiercer than my desire to try again.

'You were on the vessel as I last spoke with my captain. Of that I am certain.'

'Ah, that would be the young boy I chose to take the form of. I assumed a boy of his build would not appear daunting.' It stroked its jawline with those effeminate hands it stole. 'Quite a fetching catch, would he not be? I'm sure a lad so young and accustomed to traversing the waves would be quite good with those hands of his-'

'I would rather spare myself the intricacies of your depraved thoughts daemon.' I cut it from its line of thoughts. The baggage on its front sagged forward as it bowed.

'Please accept my most humble of apologies.'

'Your apology may be accepted if you leave me and this world in peace.' Its smile seemed to fall at my words.

'I cannot do that Ma'am. Not as his soul currently suffers.'

The pretender reached into the bundle sat on its chest and plucked out the mummified Theodosius I had thought I imagined.

'My child!'

'Something the matter Augusta?' I turned to meet the voice of Frideger stood on the ponto. I could see Justa and Flavius also stared back at me by the beached hull.

'I thought I spotted Flavius being taken to sea by the tide. It was a mere trick of the light.' The crew seemed to process that answer for a moment before they returned to their duties. I turned to face the daemon; his expression doubtful.

'You are aware that you were facing this way.' It gestured to the cliffside behind its form with one arm, Theodosius' broken body held in its other.

'Why do you plague me with this twisted mockery of my first-born, daemon?' I hissed through gritted teeth. Its ghastly grin continued to fall. The false-idol looked over the shrivelled infant in its arms.

'He left life without proper ceremony. No path to heaven, no home for his spirit. Now it withers as he faces the cruel hammer of time that reduces him to this... thing.' A pit opened in my stomach as I turned my gaze from the two.

'Whatever left him in this form was not by your hand Placidia. To see a youngster in such as state pains my heart as well. If given a chance, I would deliver salvation to this child.' I pulled myself together to face him again. Through a clenched jaw and an inextinguishable fire, I stared this monster down.

'The only deliverance your kind could give my son is into hell!' The daemon's face changed to simmered frustration.

'Placidia. Look at the boy. He cannot commune as I do. He cannot move as I do. He can barely feel as I do. If this isn't hell for a son of the empire, then what is?'

Neither of us moved as we stared into the other's soul-windows, to see which of us would break first. I can only imagine how that appeared to those of the crew.

Then my shoulders sagged, and my head fell.

'If what you claim is true, why do you require me for his passing, daemon?' It looked at me as if I asked if night follows day.

'You are his flesh and blood Augusta. It was only right you would bear witness to his after-passing.'

I heard cries from down the beach. From the direction Sophostís and Hathus had gone, the latter raced towards me. His earth-coloured tunic jostled with the mail-armour on his barrel chest. His wiry brown beard blew over his shoulder as he approached me in huffed breaths.

'What news do you bring Hathus? And why has Sophostís not brought with you his company?'

'M... Monks Augusta!'

'I beg your pardon Hathus?'

'The thinker's been taken Augusta! Monks have taken Sophostís and plan to slit his throat by nightfall!'

...

I found myself indebted to my brooches that pinned my robes as we made our way up the beaten path. In front of me Hathus lead the way. Behind me the centurions Alexander and Sirtus, who discussed the pros and cons of chasing after a man that couldn't even stop a line of thought, followed by Frideger, who wouldn't stop his complaints about Romans never finishing a job without idle chatter.

'Hush your tone lads, or risk giving us away to the same monks that hauled off poor Sophostís.' Warned my captain, bear of a Goth that he was.

'Let them come! I wasn't raised to the guard of the Empress to simply sit on boats and mingle with fishermen.' Sirtus' bellow rattled in my head.

'I would not think the monks so petty as to take another man hostage.' The young Alexander ruminated from down the hill behind me.

'You would be surprised what monks consider to be 'righteous' boy.' Frideger rumbled in amusement as the path levelled out before us. The hills gave way to peaks on the right, met by the blue plains on the left.

With the scent of saltwater, I smelt another odour common to every good ruler. The hint of iron. The smell of blood.

Hathus pointed his pike up at the hilltops. Candlelight lit the crowns of the muddy-green spires.

'We were approaching the lights when the gangly folk jumped us. Three of the blighters almost had me off the cliffside,' He gestured to the sea. I could make out the steep incline of a sheer drop. At the bottom lay three bloodied and broken monks on top the beaten rocks.

A wave crashed upon the bodies that hid them from our sight. When the water retreated a familiar plum figure knelt by the carcasses as it stared up at us. Up at me.

'By the time I beat them back, the others took poor Sophostís and dragged him off up the hill to do with him what they please.' My gaze took me back up the hillside. I could see the far-flung fires being smothered, dying one after another.

'The monks stir from their slumber.' I saw Frideger tighten his grip on his shield. 'If they ever fell into one. They'll be on us like flies on the dead.'

The sound of hymns hung on the morning air above us. The beauty of the holy chants broken by the coarse voices that sang them as we passed beneath the fires. The centurion Sirtus laughed as white rocks emerged from behind the hillside.

'How much damage could such a potly band cause?'

'Has your legion never been plagued by monks lad?' That probe from Frideger held the Roman's tongue.

'But monks only attach themselves to God. Is that not their cause?'

'It's precisely for that reason dear Alex. They carry nothing but their ridiculous garments. No food. No water. No supplies. Why would they when God is all they need?' Frideger chuckled at the thought. 'Until of course they start getting hungry. Then they rob any poor sod they come across.' He continued his tale as the path brought us downhill.

'We were set upon by such goons in the third year of Queen Placidia's rule. We had just broken through the mountains of Pyreneaum, when a band struck us in broad daylight. There mustn't have been a single decent thought between the twenty of them. There were plenty of tight passes they could have ambushed us at, and many ways to block our passage through. Trees, boulders, all were plenty in those hills. They just charged our carriages and came at us with their bare fists. Not even a single rock amongst the idiots.'

'Were they a danger?' Alexander had gone from a trained soldier to an enamoured child.

'Hardly. A bat of a shield or a light nick was all it took to send them packing.' He answered. 'Though one had the nerve to jump into one of the waggons. Turned out it was the Queen's personal quarters whilst she was sat within it!' Sirtus' mood rose for that moment.

'And what did our Augusta do in the presence of such as suitor?'

'Well, he stood there for a moment.' I decided to humour the centurion. 'Then he started spluttering. Apparently months and years without a woman to hold turn men into senseless messes.' Chuckles rose from around me again. 'Then I stabbed out his eye.' The chuckles ceased. I looked back at the legionnaire. 'I am sorry. Am I to believe you would have your Augusta be done with by some horn-filled wretch?' Now it was Sirtus' turn to splutter as his gothic brothers laughed. By now, the white rocks had morphed into the vague shapes of households and farm homes.

'I'll tell you lad.' I heard Frideger say. 'Our lord Athualf had long before told us to heed the orders of his queen. After we found that monk at the doors of her carriage, clawing at his face 'til his dying scream, we saw why.'

...

As we passed a flock of sheep, I noted how all the homes seemed rather meek. Small and unassuming. No sign of a hall or court or anything of the sort. How was anything decided amongst the local folk?

'Who are you?' I turned back to the path we had trodden to see a man in the gateway of one of the houses. Well-built with weathered skin, a clear sign of the hardy life of a farmer. I looked to my followers to question him, only to see confusion on their faces. It hadn't occurred to me that none of them would have learnt Greek.

'Who is your leader?' He stood tall against his door, even if I caught him flinch under my stare.

'Are you with the monks?' Good lord, how slow was this pleb?

'That would depend on your relationship with them.' I humoured the man before I grabbed a handful of my purple robes. 'Who might be in charge here?' I asked once more. I saw his eyes widen as he bowed.

'Pardon me Augusta! I di'n know who I was bad-mouthin'.' I wore the smile of a proper citizen. Good etiquette is its own prize.

'Your presumption will be forgiven if you will answer my queries.' He gestured to the entrance of his modest home.

'Captain.' The Goth joined me by my side. I looked to Hathus. 'Keep your wits about you, and your spears closer.' With those words, Frideger and myself entered our host's dwelling.

The space within was a small courtyard, no more than a few yards across. Such a space felt rather confined for three full-grown citizens. He beckoned me into a room on the far end of the courtyard. The light derived only from a single opening in the far wall and a few candles.

For the man to invite me, a woman, even his Empress, into the home's andron. How dire was this island's plight?

I found myself sat on a seat furnished with furs on the courtyard-side. Our host sat opposite me. His shoulders sagged, as if heavy ladles sank into his back.

'This here home belonged to my grandfather. Right now its Pa's,' There was a pause before he continued. '... He isn' here right now.'

'Does his vacancy relate to the monks on the island?' He nodded. 'When did they arrive?'

'A month ago. Before the last full moon. The first one we found one evening whilst fishin'. Coughin' up the sea like a spout, so thin I migh've mistook him for twigs if he hadn' been breathin'. We took pity on the man, took him into our home atop the hill. He gave us a right earful when he woke up. Tore up the sheet we'd given him, saying we'd taken him from God's hand and his grace or somethin'. My father wouldn' hear a word of it though. Would've chained him to a bed if he could.' A smile found itself on his face. 'Never a doctor, but always acted like one.'

As quickly as it grew, the smile fell as an apple does from a tree. 'After he'd put back on a little weight, he just sort of... wandered off. Spent days in the wild. We knew he 'adn't left. Every other morning the scraps o' bread we left him vanished before the sun came up. Like a bloody cat he was. It mus've been after the ninth day when we started noticin' rowing boats on the same beach we found him on. I'm not gonna lie, I started gettin' real scared for my old man, you know, given what monks ten' to do to his kind.'

'His kind?' Suddenly, his words ceased. 'Whatever is spoken on this island on this day, I promise will not be repeated on the mainland.'

'H-he is Pagan Augusta.'

Total silence followed. Even Frideger knew something unspeakable had been spoken, as he returned to the courtyard.

The pleb bowed furiously, as if to fan me with his head.

'Please, show mercy Augusta! He never speaks o' it. Never told me or anyone here.' He clasped his hands to me as a beggar does to his better. 'He would never make others worship devil-folk. I swear!'

'What is your name?'

'A-Aeneas, Augusta.'

'Aeneas, tell me more of these monks.'

'When they found out he was a devil worshipper, they probed the town for days, quizzin' all of us 'bout our faith. Took our sons an' daughters hostage, demanded we give 'em food and shelter for our sins, or they would be sent for judgement to God himself.' I rubbed my temple to soothe the budding ache.

'Then they are carrying out the law of the empire. The punishment for pagan worship is clear.' Aeneas' head shook.

'They don' care for law Augusta. They don' care about rules or anythin'. They eat our grain and olives on the hill and keep robbin' our homes down here, while they lock away our fam'lies in our own halls. Even if we held our end o' this bloody deal, they'd never do the same.'

'And they have held you and your village ransom in this way since before the full moon?' He nodded. Two weeks and two days? 'When do you believe they will next rob your folk Aeneas?'

'Today for sure, I doubt they'll be here before dusk. They really got a thing for punishment. Even steppin' into the sun seems to send 'em mad.'

'How fortunate you are Aeneas. They have taken a crewmember of mine. And I am rather reluctant to cast him to his fate.' Aeneas' head shot up. Eyes wide like shocked owls.

'Oh, thank you Augusta! Thank you so much! May God guide whatever journey you're on!' I wrenched my hands from his.

'Please, your... thanks are enough.' I moved for the exit as a thought bubbled in my head. 'What kind of old daemon would your forefather worship Aeneas?' He looked up at me, once again terrified to answer my request.

'H-he's a vintner Augusta. He worships the old one, Bacchus.'

...

'The bowmen have arrived Augusta.'

'And the sheets with them?'

'Aye Augusta. Rubbed and garnished with grass and leaves, just as you commanded.'

Good news from Hathus as I stood on the hillside opposed to the colony.

'Excellent. Have them distributed amongst the local huntsman as instructed.'

Over a dozen men had arrived at the behest of Sirtus. A squad of Roman archers supplemented by half a dozen goths. Well trained, cohesive, and ready to do the will of their Augusta.

If only Athaulf had lived to see this.

I spotted the Roman in question approach myself and Frideger. His combat tunic free of loud armour, like his brothers.

'What is your business boy?' Sirtus never flinched under my captain's probes. Tempered nerves. The sign of a great Roman.

'Do you require further briefing of the plan soldier?' He shook his head.

'Your plan was clear to me the first time you told my men Augusta. What still baffles me is the plan itself. How can you be so sure of how they'll act?'

'It is in their nature Sirtus. Trust my experience, and you will see.' Eventually the centurion turned back down the hill. I turned to Frideger.

'Gather the local huntsmen. Make sure they are all aware of what is asked of them.' My captain seemed unsure at my words. 'If a Roman is lost on my schemes, then I wouldn't doubt uncertainty amongst the local hands.' With those words he too left me. I stood at my perch on the hill.

'Wise counsel, my dear Augusta.'

I caught the purple tint of the creature's miasma rise from the corner of my eye. The unmistakable grin atop the youthful body leant into my sights with childlike abandonment.

'Why must you taunt me in the presence of others daemon?' I kept my voice low as I continued to stare over my men and Aeneas' folk. I felt a sigh wash over my face. The smell of wine left in the sun for days came with its breath.

'Can you at least refer to me by name Augusta? One can only take being called a beast so many times before it starts dragging down their spirit.'

'Why should I deny what you are daemon?'

'Oh? And what exactly am I, Placidia?' Irritation finally beat my patience.

'A daemon and trickster. Here to simply rattle me and shake my faith.' Its brow rose in contemplation before a slight smile planted itself on its face.

'To some, perhaps. To others I am but a humble vintner, bringer of wine, festivities and entertainment.' The up-tilt of its lips ingrained itself further across its face. 'To others I am a conqueror from distant lands.' The white tiles in its jaw were on full display, as if there was a punchline waiting behind them.

'Or maybe I am simply the delusions of the Empress hysterical.' My confusion was supplanted by abject horror. 'I mean, Athaulf was a weathered man, and you certainly weren't his first love. Who knows what foul pestilence he had on his seed. And let us not even think on the appetite of dear Constantius.'

'You are a symbol of wine and decadence and nothing more!' It shook its finger at me.

'I can twist the reality that so many cling to.' From the bundle against its chest, it pulled a thistle in bloom. 'I stand with hubris and wrath and all others that would bring man's world to its

knees.' Its fingers wrapped around the flower's stem, bending the crowned bud to breaking point. 'I come to all those who try to elude me.' I heard the soft snap of the plant as it broke in his grasp. The daemon disappeared into the wind like seeds off a dandelion.

'You'll see Augusta.'

As I desperately tried to see to where the creature had fled, I heard Frideger's voice ring through my head.

'The sun falls Augusta. They will be here soon.'

...

The heat of the day had passed over to the cool winds of evening. The dying light broke through the window of the Gynaikon within Aeneas' home. Being on the second level, I could see Aeneas stood at the bottom of the hillside, his hands held behind his back, one of them clenched shut as it hid something.

From over the mount's apex came the hunched figures of the monks. Some of them limped, the marks and scars of madness carved into their flesh. Others were gaunt as sticks, their gait elongated and spindly as if on stilts. Many of monks seemed to shudder under their habits, as if a stiff breeze would cast them down the knoll like a home built on straw. All of them coated in mud, blood, pustules and other caked bile that flaked off their habits and bodies, driven mad by their own twisted love.

Seventeen monks had descended the face of the hill. For a moment they spoke with Aeneas, their hooked digits and barebone limbs flailed with every wild gesture. The monk at the front of the gaggle pulled from his habit a blade, worn and rusted, pointed at Aeneas' jaw. Behind him every fourth brother drew out some implement from their robes. One carried a bread-cutter. Another a blunt knife one might use for spreading honey or fruit. I could have sworn another pulled out a jagged spoon fit for an infant.

Yet Aeneas never flinched. He opened his hand to reveal the silver bell I had gifted him for this moment. Three chimes.

Three young maidens ran out of Aeneas' home. Their stolas discarded. Their bosoms free and bare just like those workers of flesh and sensual pleasure.

As predicted, the monks, deprived and senseless, threw themselves into mania at the mere sight of a woman's skin. Some shook. Others began to climb back up the hill in delirium.

That was the signal.

Many of the goth warriors stepped out from behind the folk's homes and unleashed a volley of spears and arrows. Three were slain before their eyes even rose to meet their attackers. Another barrage from the second storeys of the other homes caught another.

From behind the undergrowth of the woods the plate-less legionaries fired, hidden well amongst the shrubs and trees without their metal armour, and took a pair of monks to the ground before their screams could escape them.

The locals, hidden under their robes of mud and green moss rose from their stations, their gathered tools pierced more of the monks near the sloped earth's foot. A sling took the eye of one clean out. Another three of his brothers fell by him, their own eyes closed forever.

Their numbers more than halved, the survivors fell back up the ridge as they scrambled over one another, dirt and dust tossed up behind them as they clambered over their dead kin's corpses. The blood of their fallen painted the brown earth red. Only the slung monk stayed. His bloody hands full of mud as he desperately dragged himself to join his fleeing comrades. Even from my perch in Aeneas' home, I could hear the pained cries for help. I almost felt pity for him.

Almost.

...

By sundown our eyes were on the hill's peak. My purple robe had been left in Aeneas' home, as the island's winds had rendered it unwieldy. By now the dead had been cast into the Mediterranean's waters as we contemplated our next action.

A cloaked figure stood at the hill's scalp, a small stick held in his palm. Gusts whipped his habit and wiry beard like a flag on this bloody hillside. He called to us in Latin.

'Parley?' I noticed Aeneas tense at the sound of this one's voice.

'That's him Augusta. That's the first one that arrived. The one my father saved, Arrostaíos.' My gaze never flinched from the monk. I stared down the instigator of this island's woes.

'Hathus, Frideger. You will join me.' I turned to Sirtus. 'Have your men suited. This will not last long.'

We reached the hill's crown as the monk moved. His beard fluttered against the wind with his robe as he disappeared from our view. Our guard was raised as we reached the hilltop's peak.

Wide pastures greeted us at the apex, as big as the colony at the bottom of the mound. An old watchtower sat comfortably behind old shrubs. How we had not seen it from the knoll's base was lost on me. Behind this tower a sizeable hall stood. Built of stone-lime, just like the homes below. Worn, but well maintained.

The hall's character was sullied by the emaciated bodies that lay against the cold stone wall. Small and crumpled, no older than the boy Zagra. The bearded one gestured from the hall's other end.

From within the walls came a great hum, just like those on the peaks we had passed. On one side sat monks that partook in this irritant. Other brothers talked with each other. I spied a number of

these recluses in the corner of the hall that shook uncontrollably to themselves. None went near them. Out of shame, sympathy or fear, it was beyond me to say. Upon the sight of a woman's form many gasped and looked away in horror, as if the mere sight of my body was sin. One or two even sprinted out of the chamber, the doors to the hall slammed behind them.

In another corner were the island folk, roped by each soul's ankles and chained to the wall. I saw a bear of a man face the stone wall as his shoulders bobbed as he silently wept. A boy younger than ten looked something between confused and terrified as his elder brother snarled at any passing monks.

Amongst them knelt Sophostís, his tunic mottled and torn along its sleeves, his bright blue cloak tattered. His eyes grew wide at the sight of us. A finger to my lips stopped him in his tracks.

A small monk hobbled over to our host. He hunched in some unseeable pain as he whispered something into Arrostaíos' hood. I caught whispers about healing balms. His holy-father's answer? To strike him across his face with his stick.

'The Lord gifted you a lessson! You will learn it, no matter the form it takes!' His tone bit at the heels of the struck monk, who shook and whimpered as he left, nursing himself like a mauled rat.

Arrostaíos made us kneel where we stood as he crouched to the floor himself.

'What is your... bussinesss on thiss island, outssiderss?'

'I could ask the same of you good brother, are you not aware of what you wrought on the islanders?'

'Their burden iss a minor... ssacrifice in the light of thiss torturouss existence... that our lord tessts uss with.' His fingers traced the sign of the cross on his bare chest. His breath laboured at the touch of his own flesh, as if the sensation of his own skin were euphoric.

'You drove these families out of their homes. Given how half of you seem to struggle with holding themselves up straight, I cannot see how. But this occupation will cease.' His stick dug deep into the floor.

'They don't desserve hiss love! They harbour worshippers of conjurers and trickssters.' His crooked hand pointed to a corner of the hall. I followed his gesture and saw a chained man, past his prime yet still in fine form. Broad shouldered, his great beard grown unkempt in this squalor. He bore a certain resemblance to Aeneas. Unremarkable all things considered.

The daemon that held and caressed him however wasn't.

It sat behind the bearded prisoner, as if to embrace the poor soul in its grasp. Its purple hue gently fluttered off its wretched form and lapped across the chained elder. It looked up from him to me. It smiled softly, waved its hand to me, as to greet an old friend. Arrostaíos seemed oblivious to the truth he never realised he spoke.

'If that is your aim then so be it, but the man you took this morning leaves this hall with me.'

'No!' A voice cried from behind us. A plumper brother stood high, holding a tome high as if it were a foe's head. 'Tha' man speaks in devil's tongue! He does the darkest o' rituals to false prophets!' He declared as he opened the book as if the dark magic inside would pour out at his words. I caught the form of Sophostís attempt to stand, despite the chains placed on him.

'I tried to tell you once already. They are not spells or chants. They are mathematics!' The thinker called. Another monk rose, raced over to Sophostís and struck him in the stomach.

'Liar! Pa were a follower of Mathe-Marteq. Nowt' but lies!' He yelled to his brothers. A chant broke out amongst the monks. Even from this distance, I saw a look of incredulous disbelief in Sophostís' eyes.

'He is a follower o' stars!' Another cried. 'He would worship night lights over the love of the Lord!' The cry became popular amongst the other brothers.

'Night-light! Night-light!'

As I realised the company I had found myself in, I turned to Arrostaíos. His beard parted, revealing a holey smile that missed more than most of its teeth.

'My brothers have... sseen the truth. Knowledge and other false-prophets are... irrelevant when compared to the truth of God.' He clutched his stick as he slowly rose. 'This... place has become a haven for sseekers of the truth. With every new week our kin arrive on these... shores. Soon, we will move to the mainland and sspread his word to every corner of the land. Even the Imperial court itself will fall when they heed his... wissdom.' The sound of distant waves of the ocean echoed outside the walls of the hall.

I was left speechless.

'You would let the Empire fall to ruin?' I clutched my thigh.

'The Emperors'... orderss are nothing compared to the orders of God himself.' A cheer rang through the hall of monks. The strap on my thigh in my grasp, I pulled its contents into my hand.

'I see.' I rose to stand, to look the brother in the eye. He was barely my equal in height, yet he seemed to shrink under my gaze. 'Then this meeting is to be adjourned.'

I pulled my hand with its dagger back. And I stabbed the fool in his bony chest.

A purple cloud shrouded my peripheral as the distant crashes of waves became the stamping of feet outside the old hall. The monks began to race around the room. No aim in mind. No plan in the skulls between them.

I saw the figure of Bacchus approach my victim from behind. Its smile in full blossom. Its soft hands spilt down Arrostaíos shoulders onto his bloodied chest.

And to my horror, the dying monk's eyes widened under its touch.

Its hand gripped the old man's chin and pulled his face to meet its own. There was no scream. No words. Just a quiet gasp as he took in its purple features. The creature stared past the brother's eyes and blew softly onto his face.

The hall burst open as the cries of battle drowned out the monk's screams and the plunge of swords through cloth and flesh. But none of these noises cut through me more than the words the daemon spoke to Arrostaíos.

'You are nothing.'

...

The third day

The morning sea breeze brought no reprieve from last night. Stood at the ponto's prow as the isle grew distant, I could only hope the monks that fled would find more peaceful paths to God. The wish of a fool, if ever I was one. The look Arrostaíos had. His conviction in God over his Empress. Where does such rejection spawn from? And how would one even correct such madness?

A scoff escaped my lips. Athaulf always said I dwelled too much. What would he have thought of my actions on that hilltop?

'Eviscerating those that would disturb the peace? I think he would know for sure you were his Placidia.'

I saw it sat on the wooden prow. Its legs dangled over black-blue waters, as if my presence was lost on the body-snatcher. Its face rose to the sky as the sea breeze kissed its face. Its head turned as its eyes lit up at the sight of me.

'Oh, Augusta. My gaze must have been distracted. How are you after last night?' I swear I saw that creature's brow twist and wriggle at its words. A snarl almost escaped my throat before the daemon raised a finger to my lips.

'What happened last night will never reach Constantinople whilst I still draw breath Bacchus.' The creature gasped as it held its hands to where its heart may sit if it had one.

'Oh, how fortune favours me! She denotes me by name at last!' Its hands rose to its lips and blew a kiss to my face, accompanied by the faintest smell of blood and liquor. I said nothing as my gaze returned to the open waves. 'My, such a lack of courtesy. I humour the Empress and she shoulders me with cold silence.'

'Why did you do that?' From in front of me, purple hands clasped the prow as Bacchus pulled itself into my vision.

'I've done many things Augusta. You should really avoid coyness.'

'Why did you strip the brothers of their sanity? Their goodness?' I found myself stepping back as the daemon pushed itself onto the prow to sit, now at a height enough to look me in the eye.

'You saw how they regarded poor Aeneas' father. Such treatment of a follower is deplorable.' It gestured to me. I'm sure you, as a daughter of God's whipping-sack, understand that better than most.'

'A just punishment for their leader perhaps. The rest were ignorant whelps who knew no better. Alarming yes, but without the spell of Arrostaïos's madness holding them together, they were as much a danger as a bow with no arrow.'

'Well, there are a lot of things one can do with a bow-'

'Why have them fall like waddling toddlers Bacchus?' It adopted a quizzical expression as its legs crossed.

'What if there were a shrine to me there? Remember your lost-born Placidia. A shrine is needed for your son's soul to rest. '

'Interesting that you only say this now, after having left. A prayer to you could simply be a night's heavy session, and I've no doubt a daemon would know where to find prayers.' The playfulness the creature oozed began to dry as its smile fell. 'So I ask again daemon, why did you send your wickedness into those men of God?'

I hadn't noticed the cloud pass overhead. The momentary dimness turned Bacchus' purple miasma grey like smoke. I saw its muscles convulse as its nails scraped the wood of the prow on which it sat.

'Because I willed it Galla. I saw fools who riled me, and I took their minds for myself.'

'Rather spiteful of a god.' The smoke, now black as night, carried the imp as it floated towards me.

'Spiteful?' A thousand creases seemed to grow as the daemon's rile bubbled through its skin. 'Spiteful is knowing the pain of dying for one's faith, only to cast that cruelty on others as you once felt.' Its face was inches from my own as its fists clenched in front of my neck. 'Do you not see the irony Galla? You call us monsters whilst you acted as such!' It took all my strength to hold my post as I felt the powers of hell run through the false idol. My tongue held no such fears.

'And what would you have me do? Allow freedom in life, to be condemned to forever-pain for loving daemons? Yes, our love is cruel, but better to suffer a short life than burn for eternity.' The daemon made distance between us, though not enough to be out of arm's reach. The smile that returned to its face was one absent of cheer, however false it had been before.

'Mind your head Placidia.' Confusion spread as I felt a pressure above my hair.

My head dropped to see stone fly through the face of the daemon, parting like smoke as its form faded.

'Murd'rer!' I turned to the source, off the ponto's starboard. Shouts and screams of cursing came from a small boat, in which sat five furious monks, their arms full of small objects and pebbles desperate to strike the vessel's deck. I heard a crunch to my right as a ship-hand took a missile to the head that sent him to the floor.

I heard the Palmus' roars to action and Frideger's parrot-cries as the whole crew scrambled to find whatever weapons they could to throw back.

All except Sirtus, who I spotted at the ship's steps stare at me, his brow creased in suspicion. Had he heard me converse with Bacchus? Had he seen my uncanny dodge of the stone?

'You're welcome Placidia.'

...

'Will Theo like these Aelia?' I found the floral taste of Athaulf's first-born forever perplexing.

'I don't think so Sinda dear.' I let one of the thistle's prickles stroke her index. Her sharp yelp was all she needed. 'See? We can't have that hurting Theo, can we?' I caressed her dark curls as she suckled her bleeding finger. 'I'm sure your brother will love the others. Now go to him.' She ran back through the city gates as the clap of hooves came from down the road. Under the August sun I recognised him a mile off. With his black locks and bushy mane that spilt from under his helmet, I saw my love charge up the beaten path with his captain in hot pursuit.

'Aelia!' Their nags slowed to a halt as they approached. 'How fares our son?' I picked up my stola's hem as I approached the horses.

'Better than you left him. The nurse says he'll be well by winter's coming.' A hearty roar escaped him as he pulled me into his saddle.

'Finally! Some good news!' I steeled myself as the steeds trotted into under the city's arch.

'What ill news do you fools bring with you then?'

'Well... The Augustus' champion still blocks us through the mountains.' Odd that Frideger answered rather than Athaulf.

'He still pines for me as his bride? Does the general not have better things to occupy his time, such as picking up my brother's wilted slack?' I felt my dear's shoulders slump under my hand.

'Apparently not.' We passed a cart with an old crone dying at its wheels. 'Typical Romans. The moment they're done with you, you're just another body on a spear.' I told myself that I hadn't seen the withered body as I stared at Athaulf's back.

'There wasn't always no honour.' An empty laugh escaped the king as we dust kicked into the afternoon air.

'Doesn't feel like it my dear.'

'Well what must we do?' Silence fell amongst the three of us. 'You aren't considering giving that cretin my hand, are you?'

'... no. Of course not.'

'You are!' The horse stopped as I leapt from the saddle into the street by the basilica.

'Placidia, you know I would never-'

'You know your people will lose their bargaining tool if Constantius has me!' As soon as Frideger had his reins, the king stepped from his steed after me.

'In better days yes but look around you!' He gestured to the townsfolk going about their business. How so many looked starved of a good meal. 'They won't last to autumn's fall if the Augustus continues to starve them!'

'You think that had been lost on me? I am your love, their queen! I act in your stead whilst you ride across the empire sacking homes and steeds for grain! I'm here whilst your son dies!'

The street silenced at my words. Even ever-loyal Frideger seemed desperate to ride from this debacle. When Athaulf's voice returned to him, it was quiet, ready to flow with tears.

'You said Theo had turned for the better.'

'It is August Athaulf. He'll be gone before the heat shows him mercy.' I stopped myself. This grave was already too deep. I shouldn't have spoken. Why had I said that?

I didn't notice Athaulf's callous hands wrap under my own.

...

The fourth day

'Tell them to watch their tongues or risk losing them.'

'And should the Romans refuse?'

'Then an example has to be made. I know not what sort. Clearly a punishment fit for the crime. It would not be wise to lose half our hands for trivial gossip.'

My captain, unlike Sirtus, knew when his lips should stay shut. He left me for his duties as I spied Alexander rise from the lower decks. I strode to the young soldier, who snapped to attention as he saw me approach.

'Alexander, a word in my quarters.' No room for debate, the lad nodded as he followed me down the ship's spine into the lower decks. Reaching my quarters, I gave the young palatinus a glare that could make stone crumble. 'What do you know of Sirtus?'

'Forgive me Augusta, I-I don't quite understand-'

'What were his posts before taking his current duties? Which prefects did he serve under?' My interrogation seemed too much for the lad, judging by the beads of sweat that filled the creases of his forehead. My ire grew sick at the sight. Not even within arm's reach, and I could reduce him to this pool of fluids. Was this what Rome deemed 'fit to serve' these days?

'I-I only j-joined the company of Sirtus in Martius last year!' I turned from him so the legionary would not see the anxiety in me, nor the sweat run down my face. I twisted back to Alexander.

'Your cohort's history. Who did your brothers serve?' I could see the man desperately clutching at the straw of his memories.

'When not quelling rebellions, I know that the company would serve under the Emperor's magistrates. That is the all I know of them Augusta, please believe me!'

The pieces of this fragmented tale dropped into a clearer frame. And it painted a sinister image for the children and me.

And the court wondered why I preferred the Goths...

'We are less than a day from the next island are we not?' Alexander nodded, snapped out of his stupor. 'Then tell the crew to let no course steer us from that land. We make for the island before light escapes us.' I almost hissed at the lad before he bolted from my quarters.

A purple mist seemed to seep through the wooden planks that covered the room. The figure of Bacchus fell from the dwelling's roof next to me, reclined in his own noxious fumes.

'Quite the sore spot you have found yourself in dear Placidia.' He shook with anticipation, as if my life was the next chapter of some tact-less epic. 'How will you approach this? Interrogate the legionaries one by one?' Such action would take too long and rouse enough suspicion to wake the devil. 'Make an example of one to frighten his brothers into your service?' Such needless barbary would only insight further gossip. 'I could always transform into a mighty leopard and rip these poor mortals apart in your stead.' I looked at the purple spirit.

'How would that settle this?'

'It would settle my boredom.'

'Sophostis managed the scribes of Constantius' guard.' The daemon's familiar grin vanished into smoke as I moved through the plum-coloured cloud, back into the bowels of the ship.

'*Sharp as a gladiator's spear as usual, my dear Placidia.*' His voice filled my ears as I left to find my damsel of a thinker.

...

The fifth day

Before my challenge, the man across from me fancied himself a tactical mind. What those tactics were, I had yet to witness.

I had hoped that this venture would distract me from my earlier discussion with Sophostís. We had only ducked into this old bathhouse because I'd thought I saw monks interrogating the crowds outside. But I found that even boredom hadn't dulled the worry that sat inside me.

Justa was beside me, sat in the lap of Zagra. They stared at the board with unnatural focus that followed every move my pieces made.

I had four pieces left to his seven, including our chiefs. They sat directly opposite the other in the middle row. A piece of my own sat comfortably by his chief's right flank, as if it had turned traitor on me. In either corner on my side of the board sat two pairs of my enemy's clay-red minions, one couple in each corner, and another two a row ahead at my chief's left and right, ready to fence my chief in on both sides whilst the others closed in for the kill.

On the far-left side of the board, one square forward of my chief, my gamechanger sat, ready to make his move at my command. I just waited on one spectator.

I spotted his small form by the bath-side. I could see him try and wrestle his plump hand from Afra's grip so he could jump in the steaming water. Afra knew I wouldn't let him in. A sigh of disappointment escaped me. The men in my life always left me at the worst times.

I moved my left-most piece to the top corner, only a few squares away from his chief.

'I see what you are trying my dear.' He plucked the piece on my front-left flank, scooted it across the faint crack in the board, and placed it at his chief's side to cut off my piece's path, a smile etched into his dimpled cheeks 'But I'm afraid that won't be happening.' I doubt he expected my own smile to mirror his.

'I suppose it won't.' My chief in hand, I pushed it right up to his own. My piece on its right and his own on its left boxed him in, the match mine. I called to Afra and Flavius that we were leaving as my opponent began to splutter.

"Wim!" Afra had to scoop him into her arms to get the boy out of the bath house.

'Not here young prince. You saw the colour of that water. It wasn't clean.' Still he wriggled in her arms. The humidity plummeted as the warm bath air gave way to the crisp sea breeze.

"Wim!" This time I turned to him and Afra.

'You will listen to your maid, or you will listen to my lessons again as I force you to walk back to the ship. Is that clear boy?' If his mumbles and whines were any sign as we walked across the port front, not very.

For a port in Rome's great lake, the town was in an awful state. As my eyes were sharp for brothers amongst the islanders, I noted that many of the bleached-white homes we passed were in shambles, scarred by cracks that ran deep into their faces. Many of the beggars in less-than-rags that dotted the old cobble path begged for coin, whilst many more simply sat in the sun, eyes blank as they wasted away by street corners. Cattle handlers by many vendors held tight onto their ware's horns, with not even a rope to restrain their beasts of burden.

This poverty struck me as odd, given we had to part with a substantial load of grain and coin simply to enter the port, enough to make me concerned that we would not make Constantinople. Surely such high taxes were going to something in this armpit of the Mediterranean.

As the mast of the ponto peaked out in the distance, the broken homes gave way to the messy scaffold of a building in care, with a centre chamber twice the size of the houses that surrounded it, and two smaller offshoots at each side. Its sand-coloured brickwork was horribly chipped. Some missed great chunks from their edges, as if broken away by a great hammer. It even appeared that some of the brickwork, especially at the crumbled spire, was gone altogether.

Burly workers stood on the roof of this holy site; their hands full of stone slabs that scratched at their ragged tunics. At the feet of the scaffolds stood another man in faded sky-blue robes. I allowed myself some comfort at the site of this tomb. Even if the island struggled to stay afloat in these trouble times, my heart warmed to know that such houses still held a place in folk's hearts.

'There's somethin' nice about smaller crypts, isn't there ma'am?' The man in blue spoke just slowly enough to irritate me. The tomb was worse for wear and on the small side compared to my own in Ravenna.

'Yes. Modesty and humility will always be great virtues in the eyes of the Lord I feel.' My wisdom seemed to have passed by the man, given his confused expression at my words. 'I can only imagine how hard it must have been to gather the necessary funds in the current climate.'

'Ey. We've had some trouble 'bout that, make no mistake.' He pointed at one of the bricks near the crypt's old wooden door that seemed to be paler than its stacked siblings. 'We've had to use stone and old mortar from the old pagan temple to finish this place off.' Rightly so. Using their monument for our own would steer them from an afterlife of suffering and into the Lord's bosom. 'With all that extra, we should be done building this place by the end of the week.'

'Excuse me?'

'The governor commissioned us to build this in honour of his family. Mind you, It's a real shame to be stuck with a family name like Porcius eh?' I barely heard his words. I was too focused on not letting my jaw hang in public. 'Are you alright ma'am?'

'Its... utter shit.' The robed man's face twisted in shock. 'There are fewer levels in Hell than in the brickwork. The door looks as if it survived Adrianopolis by wallowing in gothic waste and sewage,

so not a soul would dare get close enough to destroy it. And I have no doubt the chamber itself is an absolute mess.' My tirade only served to send the man pink with fury.

'Look, I had no budget for it, the governor gave me no time to design it, and I've only had those two cinaedi,' He pointed up at the men on the mausoleum's roof. 'to help me build the blighted thing, so forgive me, oh-most tasteful mistress!' He gestured to my fine stola, I had left my imperial robe on the ponto for discretion's sake, spat at my feet and marched back to the scaffolding.

I carried on to the ponto, now in a dreadful huff, to re-join the children and their handlers who had continued without me. The smoke of Bacchus floated to my side as I moved through the crowds of plebs.

'If you think your anger is righteous, imagine how my sister will feel when she discovers her lovely shrine was picked apart for such shoddy craftsmanship.' I almost had to agree with Bacchus. A nauseous thought.

'It is not my fault that his poor skills pale to the legacy of Rome's greatest monuments. I shudder to think what the future would think of us if that were all that remained.' The trickster waved his hand at my worries.

'I'm sure it will be forgiven by your precious God dear Placidia. After all, God is all... 'A strange pause found itself stuck on the youthful god's tongue. 'he is supposed to be all-great, is he not?' I stopped to look at this pretender, suspicious of his words.

'What is that supposed to mean?' He shrugged from his cloud.

'A creature with all the power of the cosmos at his fingertips, all the knowledge and love to use that power, yet does nothing? Imagine what that must do to him. To be both all-powerful, yet utterly powerless.'

'That is the burden our creator has placed on himse-'

'And such pain to feel. And if he exists in all mortals, he must feel all the suffering that you carry with you. In every child, man and woman, from the garden of Eden to the harrowing of Hell.'

'What is your point?' He continued to stare at me. No otherworldly grin this time.

'Heed my warnings Galla Placidia: You do not want to meet the man who has experienced all the evil this world has to offer.'

'God is greater than you or I Bacchus. He is greater than all of us.'

'I hope he is.' I left the god to smoulder as I arrived at the ship to find Afra, my children and Zagra stood by the ship's ramp. On the ponto's deck, I saw the shine of a legionary helmet on board. The only guards that were supposed to be on board were my own, so not to draw suspicion from the legionaries whilst I conversed with Sophostís. I looked to my children's minder.

'Until this is resolved, you must not step foot on that ship with my children. Hide by the baths, I will send one of my men to find you.' Her head bobbed deep as she nodded at my command. 'Until that time comes, you will guard my children with your life.'

'Of course Augusta.' I turned next to Zagra, who seemed desperate to scutter from my gaze.

'You will join me boy.' I ascended to ramp of my ship to deal with these cretins, and prayed that none were in the service of my wretched brother.

As our feet met the planks of the deck, I noticed their squatness for legionaries. Their shoulders sagged as they interrogated a thoroughly uninterested Palmus and Sophostís.

'Under what business are the empire's finest on my vessel for?' They turned at my voice like good mutts.

'This vessel is being inspected on be'alf of governor Porcius.' The legionary that wore a helmet stated. His fierce declaration detracted somewhat by the plump cheeks that spilt out of the galea's head-guard.

'Under suspicion of what?' My words seemed humorous to the guardsmen if their laughter were any indication.

'Oo'r you to ques'ion the guard of the great Porcius cive?' Why did everyone on the imperial coast with a phallus conspire to infuriate me on this journey?

'I would hold your tongues when you speak to your Empress trooper.' The fatter one's face practically cried for a fist to land on it.

'Course ma'am. An' I'm Augustine of Hippo himself!' At that moment, the young Zagra emerged from behind my form.

'She speaks truth sir! Her robe is on this very ship!' I looked at this boy, unsure if I should praise his defence or strike him for lidless babble, before I noticed the silence that had fallen on deck.

The guards stared at the boy, before they desperately clambered for the hold's entrance and into the bowels of the ship. Why I felt the urge to follow them to my own quarters was lost on me. I knew my robes were present. I knew my right as empress. They would find the imperial garb, return and beg for forgiveness before they crawled back to their posts.

I found them as they held my robe with reverence, as if to simply hold the garment was to be blessed. They looked to me. They knew who I was. What I could do to them.

Their astounded gaze changed to childlike mania.

'You, my lady, are just what Lord Porcius has been looking for!'

...

It is of common knowledge in the imperial court, that to try and enforce one's own will against the throne carries with it the threat of a painful and humiliating end. One that no law in the Roman world could hope to shelter the poor and foolish soul from.

That is the act of a tyrant or petulant fool. A title that might fit the actions of my brother, who could not make a decision to save the meat that wasted between his legs. But not myself. One should always save such rash actions for traitors and the foolhardy. That is the mantra that I told myself as the portly guards brought me to the villa-domus. On a hillside that overlooked the port below, it sat over the colony as a proud bitch meanders over her pups.

For a governor, the entrance of his home was less than remarkable. The front arch held cracks that surely ran deeper than my untrained eye could tell, and the stones that made up the groundwork of these walls were riddled with chips, brick that had weathered without care, or had been taken from the wall altogether.

The guard in front of our convoy, the one that urgently needed his face struck, opened the door held in place by the will of God alone and gestured for me to enter. The shake of the thin gate as it closed only further shook my trepidation for this meeting.

The atrium that greeted us showed more promise. Pearly-white walls of plaster cast the rest of the room alight in the midday sun. The diametric placement of tiles of earthy-reds and forest-greens surrounded the pool's clean waters beneath the aperture above.

Yet as I glimpsed again around the hall, its faults made themselves seen; faint grey bolts against the plaster betrayed the cracks that wormed through their impeccable shine. Many of the tiles had been replaced by muddy-brown and swampish-murk. The waters, though clean, barely lapped at one's ankles.

'Presenting the Lord Proprætor and destined future ruler of Rome, Spurius Porcius.'

A strong start. Not followed by an adequate answer.

From what I assumed was the triclinium strode the finest robes this side of imperial waters. Royal red draped over tanned leather that clung to the deepest-blue tunic, furnished in silver pins and chains of glinting metals that hung past the ocean hem. A polished gold eagle was pinned to the blood-cloak and blue garments wrapped around the prefect's neck, attached to sleeves that hung at the wrist that revealed rings of silvers, golds and fine greys that garnished his digits.

Yet none of these fine items could hope to hide the man underneath.

The cloak did nothing to conceal the rolls of flesh under his chin, nor could the sleeves hide the stick-likeness of his arms, betrayed by his exposed cuffs and minute hands. Every piece of exposed flesh, as hideous as it already showed itself, was covered in a thin layer of sweat, a fact confirmed by the smell the governor brought with him. The man, not even of my years, sported wisps of hair and a wreath that failed to conceal the bald patch on his scalp.

'Greetings fair lady of Imperial Rome! Words on the high sea of your magnificent presence reached the shores of our most beautiful jewel of the waters, and my soul simply thrust itself from my body at the thought of your grace entering my humble abode.' I caught the gaze of Frideger gawk at the newcomer, who seemed too enthralled in his own presence to notice us.

'As a guest on your isle, the pleasure is all mine Porcius.' Snorted chuckles snuck from my host's lips as I approached. His cheeks felt loose and thick under my greeting pecks.

'Please, you may refer to me as Spurius, Augusta.' I repressed the thoughts of snake tongues as his own chops brushed my face.

'I don't mean to intrude on your land Porcius. My ship meant to pass by, but our supply of grain had run low. Legionaries tend to gorge themselves.'

'Oh, how I know so well. My own Laelius knows the joys of fillings all too well.' My ears caught the sigh of said guard. He gestured to the room he had previously occupied. 'Perhaps this discussion would be best continued over wine Galla?'

Every muscle in my being had been coiled since I entered the home. I nodded and followed him into his food-hall. I gestured for Frideger to stay with the guardsmen as I left the atrium.

Porcius offered me a seat at his paltry wooden counter. Several dull goblets were strewn across the table in various levels of wear. The Propraetor's moist hands clasped at a jug and gestured to me. My head shook as he filled with the darkest red wine one of the more ornate chalices. He moved for a stool across from me at this measly stand.

'How you tolerate the company of barbarians astounds me, most beautiful Augusta.' He spilt from his mouth as he sat down, the faintest of groans escaped the stool as he relaxed.

'Well a use can be found for any tool Porcius.' I informed as the man gulped graphically from the goblet. 'No matter how blunt.'

'Quite right. Wise counsel befitting one so learned and holy as the finest beauty under the sun Augusta.' His compliments couldn't pierce the hide I had built up under years of the court's flattery. 'We have much to discuss.'

...

'So you came to offer your condolences?'

The monk behind me hung his head in solace. His hood that drooped past his face cast an ominous presence in the bronze mirror, a dark jutted nose the only feature I could see. Behind him Frideger stood broad and watchful. On his head now sat an old ceremonial riding helmet. Its tightness clear on my captain's bulging head.

'If there were another way Augusta, I would take it-'

'And yet here you stand.' I glanced down to the bride's arrowhead by my side.

'The grain Porcius supplies will keep my flock fed for a season.' No surprise. The toad had hoarded his island's riches like a dog gathers bones.

'Even your Empress?'

'Even my Empress.' I turned to the brother, his faced hidden from me.

'Bold of you, knowing who I am. What I can do to you.'

'Like Arrostaíos?' I saw Frideger's eyes widen at the fallen monk's name.

'... you are one of his?' I caught the fragrance of oils as the man shook his hood.

'Once. Our paths split long ago, though I had the courtesy to not stab him on my way out.' I saw the glint of my captain's spear in the torchlight.

'And how feel you? That I put the skewer in Arrostaíos' gut.' He remained silent for a good while. I had thought I had beaten his wits when he spoke up.

'I wish no harm on you Augusta. To kill another would be to harm God himself. Just as it would be monstrous to die for him.' My gaze furrowed at this man.

'And what of your fellow brothers? Should they be so kind as to forgive me?'

'They still chase you, do they not?'

I gestured for his leave. The sound of his feet on pebbled ground faded into the evening chorus.

Now only Frideger stood as company. His guard softened in our privacy.

'Are you certain on this Augusta?'

'Have the boat prepared Frideger.' His bronze likeness' eyes widened at my request.

'Augusta-'

'Justa and Flavius will sail for Constantinople. With or without me.'

'If that is your wish Augusta.' He had almost made his exit before he turned back. 'If this is to be where you part from your children-'

'They are in danger as long as they stay on this island Frideger.'

'Of course. My Queen.' His boots met the soil. My peace was restored.

'I hope my anguish pleases you, brother.' I sneered as much as I sobbed at this metal reflection as I cradled my head in my soaked palms.

A hand landed on my shoulder. The bronze mirror turned clay-red as it mixed with purple mist.

'Quite the stumble this voyage of yours has met Placidia.' He grasped the arrowhead on my stand as he started to gather the left of my strands. He split my mane in his grasp into three clumps between his fingers. 'I hear it is quite the crowd gathered to see you this night.' He brought his first strand over the second. 'At least half the port is the word.' He brought them under the third. 'No doubt many in awe of your presence, dear Placidia.'

'Is this to be my fate?' His gaze never left the back of my head as he split the hair unfastened from his clasped hand into more locks. 'To be just a womb for Rome's heirs?' His hands mirrored his earlier action as he wove the various threads of my left into an unkempt plait.

'You are a great wisdom to your church, and the voice for your Gothic people.' His slender digits laced the two plaits together like a fine weave. 'Is that not why your brother wishes your throat slit?' Soft hands caressed each strand as they ran through his fingers like eastern silk.

'How do folk find comfort in you?' He hummed as I felt his hands move further down my back to my hair's ends. I saw Bacchus hold his hand out for the ivory bead on the stand.

His hands emptied, my hair now a woven plait that reached the base of my spine. I felt the prickle of vegetation as I ran my fingers through his work. Of course, it was a thistle.

'You would be surprised, should you ever give my followers the time of day.'

'You know my answer Bacchus.' I felt a sigh brush my plait as the plum reflection of Bacchus faded.

'*Watch your back Augusta.*' As the last trace of purple vanished from the room, I heard the cry of the fat guardsman. Laelius I think.

'Com' on Princess! The ceremony's 'bout to start!'

...

I saw no end to the sea of onlookers from under the slate roof. The monk seemed more in awe at the size of his audience than I did. I paid him no mind. My gaze fixed solely on the swine that rooted himself in front of me.

My mind found the idea of Porcius' decadence reaching new heights absurd. And yet, he had surpassed himself. His wrists had found themselves adorned with too many circlets, each lathered in silvers and golds, flickered with shining stones. In place of his blue tunic hung a bronze cuirass, chiselled and heroic in shape as it sat on his stretched paunch. Over his blood-red cloak hung a pallium of patchwork purple. The evident stitches only insulted me further.

'Never, in these lands and waters, has such a momentous occasion been blessed upon us!' A smile spread over Porcius' thick cheeks. From behind the man draped in debauchery came servants, each with a plate covered in trinkets and minerals of immeasurable worth. Some sparkled like starlight. Others shone gold like fire. A total of ten men stood behind Porcius, arms full to spillage in wealth. I smiled. Athulf had brought me five times this plunder.

The pig turned to speak with the servants behind him. He carried something in his clasped hands as he turned.

For the first time, Porcius had taken my breath.

In his hands sat a necklace. Its chains were silver, connected to a thin bronze plate, on which sat the golden image of a leopard stretched out, its fangs bared.

I knew this jewel well, for it had once sat on the collar of my old guardian, Serena.

'A gift from your own blood my dearest Galla. I'm sure nothing would please her more than for you to be its keeper.' Nothing I ever did pleased that woman.

I reached out to touch this gift, as if to feel her presence within it, before the unexpected clatter of shields and swords brought my effort to an end.

Twelve legionnaires arrived through the arched gate, parting the sea of plebs. At their helm stood Sirtus, garbed in plate and helmet, his spatha in one grasp and his shield in the other, flanked by Alexander.

Sirtus strode forward towards the slated canopy, with all the strength and assurance of Ravenna herself behind him. He raised his sword to Porcius.

'Step away from the Augusta and meet your fate with some honour.' The pig, who could now only squeak, shuffled from the stage into the throng of his servants.

'Aelia Galla Placidia, you are charged with treason by the order of Emperor Honorius himself.' After my discussion with Sophostís, I couldn't say this was a total surprise.

What I did not expect was the break in formation of Alexander. Before neither Sirtus, myself or even perhaps the lad himself knew, his body stood between his brother and me.

'This was not our mission Sirtus! Why do you stand to kill the Empress?'

'It was always our task Alex. Now cease this insolence before I take your head myself!' To his credit, the younger soldier stood his ground. His knuckles turned a pale white as they gripped around his own spatha.

'It was never mine.'

Their brothers in arms remained frozen, unsure at which of their brothers they would point their weapons. The crowd of plebs around us dared not leave. Cries of panic escaped from behind that crowd as I assumed they fled for the port. Porcius' guards simply held their spears, as none dared to press their luck or blades. All were still, waiting for the gauntlet to be dropped.

I don't think anyone expected it to be dropped by the gathered crowd.

'Monks! Monks!'

The swell of plebs rushed into the courtyard, taking up whatever space they could fill as robed habits swarmed in after them. Some armed with wooden clubs, others with simple rocks and their bare hands.

'Death on the Empress! Death on her!' By now Sirtus had turned from me, batting plebs and monks aside with sword and shield. Alexander had pushed through the throngs that now bit and spat at one another to reach the stage. I needed no spur as we made for the nearest exit, a broken portion of the wall that faced the port-town. I spotted several plebs take to Porcius. They proclaimed that judgement from God had been cast upon the union, the purple of his cloak soaked with a thousand reds as Alexander shielded me from clubs and hands. We broke past the wall as he swatted one of Porcius' guards with the flat of his Spatha.

'Now do you believe me of terror-by-monk soldier?'

'You'll hear no doubts from me!' He cried over the masses as he shoved me from the worst of the crowd. 'Frideger arrived on board and told us to prepare!' God bless that man.

'And my children?'

'That Afra woman brought them as soon as Frideger returned-'

'Then you know our journey!' I tried to ignore the encroaching purple that coloured the corners of my sight as we fled down the hillside. I felt a sting and the prick of cold metal on my neck for a moment before something shoved me into a tumble. Grass and dirt filled my mouth as I ground to a stop. I reckoned I must have fallen at least halfway down as my vision returned to the broken domus.

Sirtus was knelt on bloodied grass. Scratches and cuts covered what skin could be seen, his armour was dented on all sides. His helmet had long since fallen off in the riot, his eyes cried for death as he looked on his sword-brother who stood between us. I saw the grass at Alexander's feet had turned ruby as his breaths became haggard. Sirtus had caught him under the arm, and the younger of the two looked ready to drop his spatha at any moment.

'I told you to watch your back Galla. Now you may watch your men die in front of you.' I didn't want to believe the voice as Alexander's head turned slightly over his shoulder. The eye I saw held many things. Uncertainty. Fury. Terror. Each swam with the other as one message struggled to surface above all the others.

Run.

I ignored the violet hue of the night as my feet ran for the port.

...

Now came the moment of truth.

I flinched as they put him at my love's feet, this tiny mass of wriggling cloth. By now my maids had moved me from the birthing stool back to the hard bed. He knelt down, his beard brushed the

swath as he held our new-born high. The midwife had said that the boy was small. Unacceptable. If the child was of ill-health, the decision would likely be to end his suffering now. That was if the king did not accept him first.

I remember it well, as all present waited for our king's verdict. A feeling I couldn't describe bubbled from within me. Something between fear and trepidation, perhaps anxiety. Like waiting for the reaction of a parent to your finger painting as a child.

It was a while before he smiled. And that laugh. My whole body finally relaxed as the king's roars of joy echoed through the palace. Fortune was on our side. We had a prince!

So why had this feeling not abated?

'Aha! You are a spirited one my son!' He rose as the bundle wriggled in his grasp. His smile only grew as he approached the bed. With the care of a doe and its fawn, he placed the swaths in my arms. What was this... I don't remember this.

'He is a fine one, is he not dear Galla?'

I pushed away the folds of cloth that concealed my boy's head, to see his plump pink face-

Wha- What was this?

Why is his head shrivelled? Why can I see his gums? Are those even gums?

Where- Where are his hands? What are these claws?

Where is my son!?

...

The sixth day

'Something on your mind Galla?'

Bacchus had placed himself on the balcony of the room gifted by this new island's governor. From here I could see ships gently rock on the harbour waves a street away. Below us ran a path of vendors, where merchants plied their trinkets from every corner of imperial land.

Silks of the east draped over more than one stall. Others plied metals and stones of all God's colours. I spied another dealer that traded animals from his menagerie. The pinguinus the merchant held by a rope gnawed on the finger of a child that had tried to pet it. One man's tent was strewn with crosses and flasks as he peddled their healing charms.

The false-god's eye took in each new sight with childlike glee or insatiable hunger that still unnerved me.

'Was it Gaius' words on your presence causing an uproar?' The nerve of the man. Forcing me to veil myself so that my face couldn't be seen. It had come with its uses though. Only an hour ago a

flock of monks had passed me, screaming for my head when I was within arm's reach. The sooner I was in Constantinople, the better.

'Well, let us not forget that you found yourself amid an assassination attempt the moment you landed in Porcius' lands. Or the island whose convent found themselves in pieces at your arrival. Or the power-play between you and your brother in sweet old Ravenna. Or the fact that yourself and Athualf schemed to supplant said brother in your fierce time together.'

'Are you finished?'

'I only state your life as facts. Any time you attempted to steer fate's course; chaos seemed to ripple in its wake.'

'I am a daughter of Rome and a voice of God. Nothing more.' Bacchus' giggled.

'Of course, dear Placidia. As much as that gothic governor Gaius is.' I rested against the balcony banner; content to watch the plebs do as plebs do.

I noticed how the seller of jewel-infused trinkets seemed to garner the most attention from the passers-by. The seller was a giant of a man, a good head over his patrons. His voice boomed over his competitors, proclaimed his wares to have divine properties, a far cry from their trivial origins. The chatter of a man desperate to seek his fortunes in tall tales.

One of those tales mentioned Bacchus.

'By my beardless chin!' The trickster, like a man possessed, leapt from the balcony in a cloud of purple smoke. His trail made him easy to spot as he darted between the oblivious onlookers before he appeared over the vendor's shoulder. His digits fingered the locks of the man's beard as I caught the merchant's eyes widen.

He planted a kiss upon the man's cheek, whispered something into his ear, before he vanished once more into his smoulder. I saw the man caress the spot where his face had been kissed, then return to his punters with renewed vigour, as the purple cloud returned to my balcony.

'What lies did you whisper?' My words halted at the form that greeted me.

Bacchus' body seemed taller somehow, almost level with my own. The slender shoulders had broadened. The lean muscles of his shoulders and arms had bulged, and along his jaw, faint prickles of hair sprouted stubble.

'Does such a proud pagan in this land surprise you Placidia?'

I stared at the changeling in front of me. He turned his own gaze to himself, as if to decipher every inch of his new body.

'Perhaps a little more would be to your liking?'

As if tortured by some higher power, his form twitched and twisted. His biceps continued to swell into balls of sprung muscle. The prickles on his chin blossomed into a fine mane, greater than a mortal could ever hope to grow. The cloth that had adorned him as a youth sprang to cover his shoulders and chest, the bundle that carried the spirit of poor Theo now hid behind a wall of violet silk.

'A fine specimen, would you not agree dear Placidia?' His soft voice of yester-moment had been replaced by a warrior's roar. 'I understand such changes can be startling for mortals to witness, but you of all people know the power that belief in God can achieve.'

I barely heard his boasts as I fled from the balcony, out of the room and into the streets below.

...

'We are to leave this rock of cretin as soon as possible.' Confused glances were shared between my men as I arrived on the ponto.

'But Augusta, less than half of the grain for bartering in the capital has been loaded-'

'Hathus, this island will be the end for all of us should we choose to damn ourselves here!' Now Frideger chose to interrupt me.

'Augusta, you know that I would follow you 'til I am delivered to the Lord, but this island has been nothing but hospitable to us.'

'I'd take this town over the last any day of the year.' Palmus called from up in the ponto's rigging as he adjusted the joint of the sails to their devoted ropes.

'Do you wish to be food for the fish below sailor?'

'Just some perspective Augusta.' I returned to address my guard.

'This island is set upon by a swarm of pagans. To stay any longer would mean to be cast under their spell.'

'Surely this is a problem for the island's governor Augusta.'

'He could find no proof of their worshipping of false idols. Apparently, the fools that scratch this rock were tired of routing out evil, so Governor Gaius sought their approval, not their loyalty.'

I was ready to order the ship to set sail when it occurred to me how barebones the manpower on deck was. Not even the numbers for a skeleton crew. Where was Zagra, or Sophostís?

I thrust myself at Frideger, his armour tightly gripped in my clenched fists. 'Where are Flavius and Justa?' I was inches from his face. 'Where are my children!?'

As if by the grace of God himself, the young ship-hand arrived at the ramp's lip on the peer. Under his arm was freckled Justa, who leant against her guardian, her eyes barely open as she slipped in and out of dreams.

Yet Flavius remained no-where in sight. I bolted down the ramp, primed to claw my spawn from the boy. I grabbed him by his throat.

'Where is my son?!'

'H-he... he wanted to see the animals of the circus up c-close Augusta. I-I thought we should be g-going back, but Afra said 'his majesty's wish shouldn't be left unfulfilled', then just walked off with him t-to see the handlers.' My anger found itself in wedlocked with confusion. What did loyal Afra want with my son? I let the back of my hand kiss the boy's face.

'Pray that you see the morning.' I knelt to his side to my little girl.

'Justa, mummy must go to find Flavius.' Her hazel orbs flickered at my words. 'I need you to be a strong girl and put yourself to sleep. Can you do that for mummy?'

'Is Flavi' safe?' I turned to Frideger, who had scrambled down the ramp to me.

'Muster every sorry excuse for a soldier on the island captain. Search every home, every vendor. God be damned, every brothel if you must!' I had already made haste inland before my guard could answer.

...

I cursed my rashness as I stumbled over yet another cobble. The cool night air kept my senses about me as my calls went unanswered into the darkness.

The sun had long since abandoned my search. That left me to hold my lamp of oil in one palm, whilst I fingered the walls of houses with the other. To make my troubles worse, the moon had elected to blanket itself in cloud tonight, with not even a glint of its light to aid me. The lamp barely lit as far as my feet as I ventured down the throat of the abyss that had engulfed the street. At first I had tried to tell myself that I was alone. That there were no monks here at this hour, that their searches had taken them elsewhere. That they weren't around an invisible corner, ready with whatever instrument of death they had to club or skewer me to death with.

I hadn't realised how right I was. I was hauntingly alone. By now I had stepped away from the comfort of slabs and stones. Even the echo of my footsteps seemed to die. Only the touch of earth under my sandallia convinced me I hadn't walked into Hell.

This strategy of aimless wander seemed fruitless, but as I attempted to find walls to claw to again, I discovered that even they had abandoned me. An uneasy sensation rooted itself in the pores of my skin. I felt naked, even though I had robed thick for my search.

As I tried to steady the flame in my hand, I finally knew of the sensation I felt before. The wind I had tried to ignore was not the far-flung rumble of a sea-born storm. It was warm, like breath. A very close breath.

A furry body brushed against my own. I spun to cast its form in light but failed to catch a single hair. Another brush, this time more forceful. I struggled to centre myself as I felt a swipe at my robes. I yelped at the touch, so blinded by fear I didn't see the strike. Something trickled down my hip. I dropped the lamp to the wet spot on my waist to see a torn patch of my tunic as a blot of red spread from the tear.

The light finally caught a glimpsed of my assailant, a flash of wired fur. The flame caused the creature to flinch, then retreat into the darkness from which it struck. I brought my light higher, the cat-like creature finally in my sights, frozen in the flame.

It was a leopard.

A matted blanket of golds and browns covered its back, punctuated by black rosettes that hid the white fur of its belly. Four coiled legs dug into the ground where it stood.

This one was indeed a small specimen of its kind. The puffed white fur on its cheeks no doubt a charm to any youngster that gazed at its marvellous coat. Such musings bought some comfort in this moment.

Until I spied the purple flicker in its eyes.

Now I couldn't tear my eyes from his form as it crouched on the ground, coiled like an angered serpent. A thousand panicked thoughts fled from my mind as he leapt at me and smashed me against the cobble, the flames of the lamp now spilt on to the paved earth. I laid there, waiting for the hard grip of his jaw to clasp around my throat.

Yet nothing followed. The leopard was nowhere to be seen, its snarls and roars now distant. The oil burned at my side. Its fires roasted my face as I stared up to the clouded night. It was not until I saw Sophostís knelt over me that my mind began to move again, as the thinker gazed over me in frantic concern.

I rose to a seated stupor as the burn of my wound punished me for the act. Sophostís' hand gently rested on my back as he held my body against his own. I heard the tear of cloth from behind my head as something pressed into the seeping tear in my flesh.

'Neptune's trident, what n'the world 'fell you Augusta?' I pulled myself to my feet.

'Where have you been? Were you not aware of our agreement with the islanders?'

'Forgive m'late...ness. Only recently, I left a'symposium I had been invited to upon... a'chance meeting. You'll be surprised... uurrghwhat folk talk whe- talk 'bout when fine wine and other pleasures are concccerned.' He laughed to himself as I tried to shake him from this drunken state.

'This voyage teeters on the tip of a gladius as it is Sophostís! I will not have you or any of my men condemn my future!' The sweat of my palms and the oil of the lantern turned my fingers to eels.

'You seem... troubled this night 'Gusta. Well, heh, more than most others, ha!'

'Afra. She has not returned to the vessel with Flavius yet. The ship-boy let them out of his sight, and now she wanders to pastures unknown with my son.' The tears hadn't fallen from my face yet as Sophostís stared at me. 'I can't lose another Sophostís.' It was a while before he gathered the nerve to place a hand of comfort on my shoulder.

'Whilst 'quainting myself with the locals, I overheard the ramblings of one of the more... traditional- well, old fellows. He talked at... length- like, so long- how he and his lover- lovely boy, you'd love'em- had travelled from Antioch to escape the... ttttterrible thralls of the faithful. He told me how others like him had travelled across the Empire to attend the island in honour of the old ones.'

'What does this matter to the business of my son Sophostís?'

'There was... talk amongst others of attendance to this occasion. He spoke of bringing infants to the ceremony- nothing too bad, ya know, teach the young'ens an' all- I believe that maid of yours kept her beliefs from you, caught wind of the ritual and decided to bring young Flavius with her.' Afra? A pagan? How I had failed Afra as her master, that she could not speak to me about her suffering...

'What are you taking the words of heathens so earnestly for Sophostís?'

'Perhaps it would be best to... return to the ponto Augusta. The monks- I mean, if there are monks around- might try-' I drew my finger at Sophostís.

'If you know where this worship is, you will take me there.' The man seemed to sober at that order.

'I... I don't know how they would act if a Christian, even their Empress, were to intrude on them Placidia-'

'I am their Augusta Sophostís. They will heed me. Their false-gods be damned.'

Silence permeated the darkness once again. Against the flames of the oil, Sophostís shoulders sank.

'I cannot promise what will happen there Augusta.'

'So be it.'

He seemed sure of his destination, despite the fact he carried neither torch nor lamp. Slowly, he led me from streets of cobblestone to paths of loamy soil. Though I feared another attack from the darkness, it was fruitless to try and watch for the daemon with so little light.

'They fear the prying eyes.' The glow of orange on the cheek of Sophostís caught my attention. Ahead of us, a pyre flickered in a distant clearing. Sophostís beckoned for me to edge closer. As the wind changed towards us, the roasted smell of burnt timber brushed the hairs of my nostrils.

I froze to the loamy ground. Voices had called out to us.

And what did Sophostís do? He stepped out of the brush and into the open light!

'Sisters, brothers! Your choice to start without me hurts me so.' A herd of men and women welcomed him with embraces and kisses. An elderly woman let out a hearty laugh at his entrance.

'Dear Sophostís, we were beginning to think you wouldn't show!' She caught me outside the glade, like a rabbit under a fox's hungry eyes. 'And what beauty of Venus is that?' Like a fool, my mind froze at the old goddess's name. My fear began to climb as Sophostís nudged me from my new-favourite spot into the clearing.

'She is a dear friend of my house,' His finger pointed at the matron. 'Only a friend. She comes from the capital; her son Flavius had been brought here by Afra, perhaps in a hastened stupor. Once news reached her, she grew fraught with concern for her.' The woman had the gall to show me sympathy, as she moved to my hands in a pitiful gesture of compassion.

'Oh, bless her bleeding heart. If she's curious to see such a sight as our rites, then we will do her justice by uniting blood.' She gestured to a crowd of heathens that idly conversed amongst themselves next to the flame. I pulled myself and Sophostís to a small break in the rabble.

What would Athaulf think of me here?

'Forgive me for putting this upon you Augusta. I knew not how to dissuade you from this course of action. I intended to return the prince once the rite had passed, then exile myself from your presence. I knew you wouldn't stand for having a pagan as an advisor.'

A nudge from Sophostís brought my attention to the chalice filled with a dark wine in his hand. I looked at him, disgust clear on my features.

'They will suspect you if you do not take the rite-wine.' It weighed like lead to accept the goblet, just as it tasted like poison to swallow it. It was red wine, pungent and bitter, with a taste like poppies, along with another which escaped me. With the liquid came chunks of something soft. I bit down on one as the wine passed down my gullet. Soft to the tongue, yet firm as my teeth cut through it.

My confusion found itself extinguished as a small child ran at me from behind the pyre.

'Flavius!' I bolted from my spot to embrace him. He seemed unharmed, the only change on his person was the band of woven thistles atop his head. Behind him, crouched amongst a huddle of heathens, I saw Afra.

Before I had time to probe her on the false-gods she loved, the orange of the flame gave way to stark white as the fire burst into a great pillar. Chants rose from the assembled crowd, answers to the flame's roar.

I ushered Flavius into the undergrowth outside this hallowed ground. I was ready to join him before I found myself drawn back to the flames. From this white mess of heat and ash came flickers of purple wisps, as the blaze called forth a sound like the bellow of a man.

A great form, twisted and hunched, rose from the pillars of smoke and fire. Soaring plumes spun into a pair of horns that twisted into the heavens atop a head of fire with a great beard of brimstone, attached to the most chiselled contortions of rippled muscles I had ever seen in my life.

'Your love has only grown fonder in my absence!' Flashes of light from absent thunderclouds blinded us, as the sensual voice wove a spell upon us. **'Rot in solitude no more! I have returned from the pits of my family's dwellings. Behold! Love as only the gods can give you!'**

From this declaration, a purple miasma seeped from the pyre. It swallowed the gathered pagans, Sophostis among them, before it coursed through my nostrils. My eyes watered as the smell of old sulphur mixed with the earthy soil.

The madness had only just begun.

Bacchus cried in agony, the heat of the flames at his feet turned his gut from his familiar purple to burning white. An eruption of purple flames thrust the surrounded mob back from the daemon yet scorched none. The gathered mob began their own sinful change, their garments pulled off by one another as they groped at each other, wild beasts free of their carnal chains.

From the remnants of Bacchus' torn groin, the stolen young form I best recognised him by emerged like a chick from an egg in his gut, caked in ooze and ash like a new-born of the fire. His great wide eyes caught me, before he smiled down on me from his perch in the god's gut.

'If it isn't the majesty and beauty, Galla Placidia, fairest child of Theodosius the Great at my feet! For your company, your iron will, and your mercy, our bargain is fulfilled!' His arms tore into his chest, ripped flesh from skin, bone from blood as he pulled his heart from his body, holding it from the flames as winds tore the heat from his still beating organ. I saw a face, caked in bile and blood. Its contours etched into my mind when I buried him all those years ago.

My son, Theodosius, was born again from the flesh of this daemon.

The orchestra of erotica, roars of burnt titans and manic laughter of the gods brought me to my knees. What had I done to deserve this Hell!?

Yet from the pyre a light remained. So white and pure compared to the horrors that surrounded it. My gut told me the truth. I crawled to the flames. I grew so close I heard him call. I felt if I could reach out and grasp it, then this ungodly orgy was a price I would pay. Nothing could hold my hand back as I plunged it into the flame to reach for this light. As my fingers wrapped around the white spark, everything grew silent.

At last, I had met God.

A moment passed. Nothing was spoken. I waited longer. The silence still deafened me. As I pulled my hand from the pyre, its flesh somehow free of scorches or blisters, sound returned to my

world. The roars of the fire and its master. The foetus that wailed in his grasp. My legs clambered at the scorched Earth as I turned and ran out of this hellhole.

Only to stop at this sight of a monk, staring in stunned silence at the depraved scene around me. Had he seen me? Had the other brothers emerging from the forest seen me?

I had my answer when one, dagger in hand, ran for the closest coupling halfway into each other, and stabbed the receiver in his back. As I crawled from the clearing my arms dug into Flavius as they yanked him from his spot behind the bushes, as the screams turned painful.

A hue of purple lit our path as I dragged myself and Flavius through dew-coated shrub. A root caught my foot, sent me to the ground as my face kissed the pine and soil. As I rose, I noticed the feet of a figure before me, his feet garbed in fine red leather. The edges of a brown robe trailed across the ground. My eyes bolted up to his face. An unkempt mane covered the sunken pale flesh of his face. His eyes hollow as when he had told me to watch over his people. Our people. A hole in his side was blotted red. The same spot where his end had met him.

'My love...' His gaze was one of contempt. Of disappointment.

Back on my feet, I pulled Flavius to me as I ran through the darkness, the gaze of my dead love burnt into my head as we fled. I could feel the soft earth sap my strength. By now our flight had been reduced to a desperate crawl. Again, I found myself planted amongst thistle flowers that sprouted across the floor. As I picked myself from the leaf litter, another voice rose from behind me.

'If only your father could see you now.' My heart should have stopped long ago. Rather than to hear that voice again.

The body that greeted me was a woman, older than me by a few years. The fine stola draped over her was in ruins, riddled with tears and stab-holes. Her face was a sight of deathly spite and rage. Marks of torn flesh clung to her collar and neck, on which sat the necklace I now wore as my own.

She lunged at me, pushing me into the ground with one claw as the other curled at the chain around my neck.

'You took everything! You ordered your dogs to feast on Rome's corpse! You watched as they hung me like game!'

I sank into the soft earth. Its cold grain embraced me as the ghost pushed me into the ground. Dirt fell into my mouth and drowned my screams as the devil beckoned me to his side.

In my clouded haze I reached for something, anything to grasp. The deathly cold skin of Serena's neck the only option, I gripped it like a bear does a doe. I felt every sinew under her skin twist and stretch as she struggled with her own fury.

'You won't take him from me!' I forced my hands to this spirit's windpipe as I rose from my grave of leaves and earth. My vision swam in violet, the wound on my hip burned. I forced myself onto

the form of my guardian and gave her the same courtesy she had tried to give me. I felt the tug of Flavius on my arm as I felt the struggle for revenge leave her.

'Augusta.'

I saw Flavius by my side, his eyes wide with fear and wet from tears. Frideger knelt before me, his hand on my shoulder as the rest of my guard stood behind him.

My eyes turned to the spot where I had just ended Serena's life a second time. She had vanished. Replaced by the dark skin and soft face of Afra.

'What in God's name happened?' I swallowed the bile that had risen in my throat.

'M-monks. The monks came.' Immediately murmurs broke from the assembled soldiers. I rose to my feet. My stola hid the tremble that had taken root. 'Kill them. Kill them all.' No one moved. 'Am I not Augusta!?' My fury split my throat further.

My captain rose, gestured at his men, mumbled something gothic as they strode off in the direction my flight took us.

I fell to my knees as I clutched my son. My eyes never left Afra's as I sobbed, whilst the distant screams echoed in the dawn chorus.

...

The seventh day

'Are we there?' I ignored Justa's wriggles as I adjusted the belt over her robes.

'You're dressed in your best aren't you?' I rose to my feet and petted her head. 'Go now. Flavius is waiting on deck.' She looked at me, another moment of trepidation before she left our quarters. Zagra waited outside for her whilst he stared at me with the good eye he had left, the hole of the other still staining his wrappings red. I glared as Justa took his hand and dragged him on to the deck.

I turned to the cot in which my children had stayed on this trip. In their place lay the form of Bacchus, returned to the stolen body of Zagra. Yet the state he was in now bore little resemblance.

The body, once plump with youth, now laid emaciated and stricken in a crippled pose, with his feet bent as if he had suffered a great fall. As with his twiggy arms, the muscles in his legs wasted to reveal two sticks of bone bent like old iron.

His torso was nothing to speak of, as there was barely a torso on him. Flesh like parchment clung to the cord that ran up his back, each nook and dint in the bone clear to see, aside from fleshy tubes that traced a path from his shrunken hips to his impeccable ribs. Impeccable, as one could see the perfect curvature of each bone as they protruded from his sternum. The bundle of cloth that before nudged and ruffled now hung off his emaciated body like a pauper's hole-ridden blanket. About

the only source of true flesh on this husk was a sack, sat below his ribcage that twitched with every heartbeat.

The skin on his head had become taut on his withered face, the folds or creases evicted from where once they had been welcome. The mop atop his head that still clung to his scalp appeared now like dried reed. His youthful lips had become thin and barely covered his teeth, which were now long and hooked as his gums had receded into his mouth. His nose had likewise lost all flesh, where now only a nook of cartilage jutted out below his eyes, which were closed and sunken like the rest of his features.

Yet the grin that clung to him had yet to waste away like the rest of him. If anything, the nature of his plight allowed me to see more of his yellow whites than ever before. His head lay against the cot's lip to support him. His face seemed so peaceful in this form; as if in some far-off land of dreams. A fate far too pleasant for such a creature. A snort escaped my nostrils as I adorned myself with the imperial robe once again.

'A fitting end to a creature of avarice.' I muttered to myself, about to step past the entrance of my quarters. The scabbed wound he had given me ached with his mere presence.

'You learnt nothing Placidia?'

The eyes of Bacchus had opened. He gazed up at me through eyes that lay deep in his gnarled skull.

'Avarice... never my guilt.' His lips did not move, yet I heard him as if he spoke clear. His head twitched as I gazed upon his ruined form. 'Augusta... shocked?'

'Like the plague, you still fester.' A half-hearted chuckle sounded from his corpse.

'Augusta... played well. Bacchus lost. Bacchus rest.' His shrunken clawed hands struggled to finger the ragged blanket at his lap. They rose as if carried by strings, as the blanket covered his body like swaddle bands on an infant.

'You are beaten daemon. Your followers are gone. Your ploy to seduce me with my child's salvation failed miserably. You have nothing.' The crunch of old bones rang in my ears as he turned to look up at me again.

'I have you.' A wave under his blanket rose to his neck for me to see the satchel he constantly carried on his ghastly person. 'So angry, So... always right.' His twig-hands struggled to lift the container to his toothy grin. Its contents spilled onto his features and pooled in whatever sunken hole the wine fell into. Barely a drop made it past his teeth as streams ran down his chin. 'Not like monks. Fun... but break on their own.' His body convulsed as a purplish-red geyser erupted from his maws, the splatter of guts and blood gushed onto the wooden floor of my quarters. I stood tall over this wretch. His eyes strained to bring themselves to look up at me. 'Die as a martyr. Kill as a follower. Either way, a monster we make.' His eyes betrayed no lie as his gaze never left my own. 'I am patron of monsters.' His cheeks stretched further as I held my dagger that shook with fury. 'Just like God.'

I knew exactly where to stick my blade.

I plunged it into the rag that covered Bacchus, to pierce the meat-bag that hung under his ribs as all my vision swam in violet hues. No blood spurted from the wound. Only a plum stain grew where my dagger had entered him. Bacchus' eyes never left me as his body seemed to shrink and twist further as wine seeped out from under his blanket.

'So, *this is your choice.*' No resistance. I pulled back and sank into him again.

'Silence!'

'Oh, *how glad I am you finally stick yourself inside me Galla.*' His face melted under purple tears.

'Shut up!' Again and Again. His form crumpled further into the rag he had draped himself in.

'*Do what you must to me princess. Fill me with your sins. Fill me 'til I burst from your dirty needs.*' His mouth was the last thing to melt into nothing. Only his stained, hole-ridden blanket remained. '*Until next we meet Galla.*'

I sat in this beggar's rags as I tried desperately to control my haggard breaths of anguish, the urge to roar almost unbearable. As I stood, I brought my hand to the wetness I felt on my cheek. It smelled like crushed grapes as I looked at my palm, where a pool of red wine now sat. The puddle rose higher with every breath. It continued to fill as it poured out of the cracks of my palms, on to my stola and into my wound from that night that had opened in my anguish.

'Are you alright Augusta?' I turned to the sound of Frideger's echoes from the belly of the ship. When I looked back to the cot, there was no blanket or cloth from Bacchus' person. Just a cot riddled with stab holes.

'Only the sea air Captain.' I called back as I left my quarters and made for the ship's deck.

Flavius and Justa were under the arms of Hathus. The ponto's sails were lifted. I could hear Frideger behind me besmirch his men's inability to tend to their queen's health as we slowed into port. I felt the eye of Zagra stare from the rigging above as I approached the bow of ship to gaze at a home I once knew.

The great walls of Constantinople that were once crumbled stood stronger than ever, their yellow brick pristine and insurmountable. It had been a life ago since I had arrived at these walls as but a mere infant in my mother's grasp, unsure of her fate behind such a monument to imperial might. Now, as I arrived by boat as a burglar enters their victim's home, I knew her plight. I felt footsteps approach from behind me.

'Are you certain they will hail us Augusta?' I turned back to the wall. Its greatness hung over me.

'They will.'

Exegesis

Introduction

I knew that I wanted one the project's main themes to be the shifts or collapses of societies, spurred by my own thoughts on issues such as climate change, divisions in classes, races, religions and nations during the Anthropocene. The research and creative pieces are intended to contextualise these issues, to allow a reader to understand the problems of the modern world through the lens of fiction.

It was during my preliminary research that I realised that the decline of societies, the focus of my piece, can be found in countless historical examples, most famously in the fall of the Roman empire in the fifth century A.D. More accurately, the dramatic shift in power in the Western Roman Empire (WRE).

Pullman of *The Federalist* states that 'Comparing the "Decline and Fall of the Roman Empire" with the rise and now decline of the British and now American empires has been something of an intellectual parlor game for now more than 200 years.' (Pullman, 2018, para. 1). Historically, much emphasis has been placed on the new external threats that the empire faced, and how they brought a perceived end to Roman civilisation. In his book *The Fall of Rome*, Bryan Ward-Perkins notes how historian William Robertson stated in 1770,

In less than a century after the barbarian nations settled in their new conquests, almost all the effects of the knowledge and civility, which the Romans had spread through Europe, disappeared. Not only the arts of elegance... but many of the useful arts, without which life can scarcely be contemplated as comfortable, were neglected or lost. (2005, p. 2)

This quote from an 18th century historian can be considered the traditional view of the WRE's fall in modern history; the image of a world brought to ruin and many of its greatest achievements lost, and many works of fiction have been based around this perspective and time. Stories such as 1959's *The Lantern Bearers* by Rosemary Sutcliff, 2011's *Legionary* by Gordon Doherty, and 2007's *The Fall of Rome* by Michael Curtis Ford, all cover a period of 100 years surrounding the disintegration of the WRE, often covering the perspectives of the invaders, or lands that the WRE has lost such as the British Isles in the case of *The Lantern Bearers*.

In the last several decades however, a new wave of historical revisionism, pioneered by individuals such as Peter Brown, have framed this period of Roman history as a transition point between the largely unified world of southern Europe in Antiquity, and the various factions and kingdoms that came to dominate the Middle Ages. With this new perspective came a re-examination of the reasons for the WRE's decline, such as issues of internal leadership, attempts to maintain and consolidate the powers of the Emperor, and the poor management of the movement of Germanic groups of people, especially in the early 5th century.

Interestingly, many of these narratives cover times before or after this specific period; *Legionary* is set primarily in the Eastern Roman Empire and in the late 4th century, whilst Sutcliff and Ford's stories are set in the mid-to-late 5th century. This is how I have chosen to differentiate my piece from other similar works: a piece of heterobiographical fiction, that is to say a biographical piece not written by the subject in question, set in the 420's that covers internal problems the WRE had to face at this time.

Historical Fiction

I found the form of historical fiction the most suited for expressing my themes. Many works in the genre choose to draw parallels between past and present subjects. *Waverley* by Sir Walter Scott in 1815, arguably the first recognisable historical novel, can be interpreted as a reaction to the fear of civil war in Britain in the late 17th and early 18th century (Kelly, 2014), and Charles Dickens' *Barnaby Rudge* documents the anti-Catholic Gordon riots of 1780, contrasted with the Chartist movement riots around the time of writing (Gerry, 2013), both of these authors separated by several decades from their fictional sources.

There are valid criticisms of the historical fiction genre. Alessandro Manzoni's essay on the form makes note that the facts of history can often be muddled with the fiction created by the author (1984, p. 64). This kind of creative liberty can be found in many works of the genre. 2017's *Twilight Empress* by Faith Justice for example details the birth of Placidia's first-born child Theodosius (2017, pp. 124-129), historical information that is unknown to us. What do these inclusions add to historical fact, outside of creating distinct pieces of literature? A flaw with this view is how it presumes historical 'fact' to be objective, a point I will expand on when discussing sources.

Use of Sources

Balanced sources from the fifth century are thin on the ground. On the subject of Roman writing on the invading peoples of the fifth century, Bryan Ward-Perkins comments that accounts of events could vary wildly depending on the authors, some embellishing the reality of conflicts for dramatic effect, whilst in other regions the situation might have been downplayed (2005, pp. 22-23).

An example of this can be found in Orosius' work *History against the Pagans*, in which the Christian apologist implied that the 410 sacking of Rome by Christian Visigoths was not as damaging to the city as the burning by Emperor Nero in the first century A.D (Ward-Perkins, 2005, p. 21). In the context of the period, with the sacking of the historical capital within two decades of the suppression of old Greco-Roman gods by Theodosius I, it was in Orosius' interests to downplay the 410 sacking in defence of the Christian faith of the day, distorting the reality for future historians who wished to understand the period. Writers and orators of the time would have likely been forced to fall on one side or another, either praising or slandering these invaders depending on what province they were in. The conquest of Italy by Odoacer in the late 5th century was likely shorter than the 30-plus years of instability Gaul faced at the beginning of the century.

Secondary sources are not exempt from this issue either. Zosimus, as a pagan historian from the late 5th/early 6th century, would have condemned the Theodosian dynasty's treatment of old Greco/Roman worship, with this critical approach also spanning the political actions of the day as well (Zosimus, 1814). The difference in time, approximately fifty years after the height of internal strife within the WRE, would have only further hindered analysis of the past.

One would hope then that tertiary sources would provide the distance necessary to view the events of the past impartially, but even this can be problematic. Gibbon's conclusion on Rome was written around the time Britain became a major colonial power, so it is possible that comparisons and similarities between Britain and the WRE were drawn where there were none. This continues into modern sources. As stated in the introduction, Ward-Perkins notes how modern academic discussions on the WRE in the 5th century can be separated into 2 broad groups: the classic position from the 18th to mid-20th century that describes the fall as violent and turbulent, and late 20th century revisionists that depict the new Germanic tribes in a more sympathetic light (2005, pp. 3-10). The fact that such discourse continues today demonstrates how emotionally invested historians still are with the Roman world, which casts further doubt on the objectivity of truth that Manzoni states historical fact must adhere to (1984, p. 64).

Galla Placidia's character as presented in other authors' fiction

Many figures from Roman history have been afforded solid characterisation, but Galla Placidia's has remained elusive to the wider public, which allows writers more freedom for interpretation. *Twilight Empress* depicts Galla Placidia as an intelligent woman deeply concerned for those around her, as demonstrated in the novel's depiction of the 410 sack of Rome (2017, pg. 2). 2016's *The Journals of Empress Galla Placidia* by Naomi Feigelson Chase depict her as frustrated by her position in the imperial court, wishing for greater freedom under her guardian (2016, pg. 28), whilst portraying her piety as a means to survive under her cousin Theodosius of the East (2016, pg. 73) amongst other differences.

Notes or works discussing Placidia's personality are scarce in comparison to other Romans. It can be inferred from Zosimus' writings that, due to her hand in the death of her guardian Serena (Zosimus, 1814) she resented her guardian in some form, though the reason as to why is more obscure, and her interference with the papal elections of the bishop of Rome in the late 410's suggest she wielded great influence on religious matters of the day, but other aspects of her character have remained difficult to find.

In this regard, Joyce Salisbury's 2015 work, *Rome's Christian Empress: Galla Placidia rules at the twilight of the empire*, has been useful for my purposes, as Salisbury attempts to characterise the empress by understanding social norms of aristocratic Roman women of the day, as well as the decisions of key figures that Placidia was around. For example, Salisbury attributes the Visigoth king Athaulf's decision to shift from conquering the Empire to restoring it to its former glory to her influence over him (2015, pp. 93), suggesting that she was charismatic and had at least a measure of diplomacy. In a similar manner, Salisbury's account of the death of a court magician by the orders of

Placidia on grounds of pagan worship (2015, pp. 130-131) suggests a hostile attitude to non-Christians. From sources such as this, I have attempted to characterise the Empress as ambitious, devout to her faith to the point of murder, diplomatic and persuasive enough to try turn events in her favour, as well as being traumatised by the deaths of those closest to her.

The aspects of Placidia I have chosen to focus on in my piece can be found in other works on the Empress. To make comparisons to the pieces by Chase and Justice, a common theme found in our works was the genuine affection Placidia had for Athaulf, her first husband, whilst portraying her relationship with Constantius as comparatively loveless. Similarly, the attitude of Placidia toward her Gothic allies in my piece is sympathetic, very much like Justice's interpretation of the character around the same time.

By contrast, my choice to emphasise the Christian aspect of her character varies from others. Chase depicts her religious beliefs as a means to survive in Eastern courts (2016. p. 73). The reason behind Placidia's choice to flee the WRE in other works is due to her being exiled, whilst in my piece it is the fear of assassination by her brother that forces her to leave. My choice to focus my narrative on her voyage to Constantinople is one of few that attempts to depict the journey in detail. *Twilight Empress* depicts an excerpt of the journey over several pages (2017. pgs. 227-229), whilst Chase's piece does not discuss Placidia's journey, only her exile.

It should be noted that how each author chooses to characterise Placidia does not negate others. I have chosen to focus my piece on this brief, yet turbulent journey in her life. Authors such as Justice and Chase act almost as biographies for the character, detailing vast chunks of the figure's life. This likely stems from what our respective pieces aim to achieve: Justice details the impact of Placidia on the people around her, and her subsequent effect on the larger Roman world. In my piece, the opposite can be observed; the larger Roman world can be seen by how Placidia interacts with the islanders, and what effect this has on her. There is historical precedent for all traits our writings show, and there is nothing to suggest that all were not aspects of her character. As I have stated previously, an objective understanding of history is problematic, if not virtually impossible, to obtain.

Artistic License and Historical Accuracy

An issue I faced was the use of specific words that would not have been in the Roman vocabulary in the late WRE. Originally, I intended to use Latin terminology to describe elements of the Roman world as a way of distinguishing my work from others. As I began writing the piece however, I found that words used in the original first draft of the piece such as 'chortle' and 'hound' have their origins after the end of the Roman Empire, with the former being supposedly coined by Lewis Carroll in his 1871 work *Through the Looking Glass* ("Chortle", 2020), whilst the latter seems to derive from the Old English word 'Hund' ("Hound", 2020) used to describe dogs.

The primary purpose of the piece was to explore the varied reasons for the decline of the WRE, rather than an exploration of Roman-Latin vocabulary. *Twilight Empress* sidesteps this issue almost entirely by choosing to use modern vocabulary, although character's names have been left in their original form. I decided to concede more accurate terminology for their modern equivalent. This

principle is only abandoned for Roman language that is more widely recognised or obvious to readers, or when a term frequently used to describe something specific is clearly defined, such as the title of 'Augusta' when people are referring to Placidia.

One of the reasons that Galla Placidia was chosen as the protagonist of the piece was because her exact history is often omitted from many books on the Roman world at the time, allowing more creative liberties with events. Her official history has still however clashed with elements of the piece.

One such instance where artistic license was needed to preserve the narrative was the exact route that Placidia is believed to have taken to Constantinople. Joyce E. Salisbury in her book on the topic of Placidia's life states that her ship attempted to hug the Italian coastline of the Adriatic Sea before making for the Greek peninsula (2015, pg. 133), but gives no source to suggest this was her exact route. My piece has her boat caught in a storm that sends her along the eastern Adriatic coast, forcing her onto the islands where the narrative take place.

Details such as this are changed throughout the piece. Whilst her journey to the Roman province of Hispania is likely to have occurred as Salisbury suggests (2015, pgs.97-100), an attack from a hillside group of monks was not documented. This scenario is the product of my understanding of early monasticism in late antiquity as described by Catherine Nixey in *The Darkening Age*, noting the extreme ascetic lifestyle these early monks adopted, living off very little food and water (2017, pgs. 201-202). The monk encounter mentioned is based on the presumption that some of these monks, desperate to supply their lifestyle, may have attacked travellers.

Probably the biggest artistic license taken is the fact that Placidia's son Theodosius, according to Salisbury at least, was baptised before his death. Although Salisbury gives no direct source for this event, though the increasing number of infant baptisms during the fifth century makes this a possibility (2015. Pgs. 106-107), this was an aspect I chose to ignore so Placidia had reason to interact with Bacchus in the narrative.

With changes such as these in mind, and the comparative lack of historical information on Placidia, one might begin to wonder; why write about these figures if details of their life are distorted or outright ignored anyway? The answer will vary between authors, but for me, part of the interest in heterobiographies comes from the unfolding of events that are documented, but their details have been lost to time.

Justice portrays such events in *Twilight Princess*, one example being the death of Sigeric, the short-lived successor of Athulf. Instead of being murdered by his own successor, Wallia, Justice attributes Sigeric's death to an assassination by Placidia herself (2017, pgs. 159-161). Examples of historic fiction like this take the facts known to historians and alters them into a deeply personal moment in Placidia's life, giving the reader a window into the life and world of the historical character. This can also be seen in my piece. As stated previously, the historical fact of Placidia's ship staying close to the Adriatic coast is altered to fit the fiction of her interacting with the islanders and the old god Bacchus. In other words, the truth of one fact is sacrificed to demonstrate truths of the WRE. The

fact that Placidia, a devout Christian, would likely have denied interacting with, much less receiving assistance from an old pagan god, further blurs the line between historical fact and fiction.

It is also worth considering our perceptions of history and its characters when discussing choices for perspective. As Lucia Boldrini states: 'The words of the dying over the living have a power in their finality... There is a certain authority that comes from history, the past, what has been and can no longer be changed.' (2012, pg. 3) For my piece, the evoking of 'authority' by focusing on the fall of Rome is an attempt to bring attention to the themes of the piece. On a related note, there is certainly an irony in Placidia's duty to the continued survival of the WRE, with the knowledge that its collapse would occur barely a generation after her death, portraying her actions as ultimately futile.

Themes

Though the themes demonstrated are intended to act as loose analogies for issues in the twenty-first century, contextualising and portraying causes for the WRE's decline is incredibly difficult, especially given the conflicting reasons historians have given. Alexander Demandt in 1984 compiled a list of factors that historians have advocated that supposedly contributed to the fall of Rome. That number came to 210 (appendix), some of which are direct contradictions, such as centralisation and decentralisation both being listed.

Another concern that arose during research was interpreting the causes of decline through a modern political lens. Personal ideological biases will affect perspectives when studying historical events, and can be informative to an extent, but can equally create issues. A relatively high-profile example of this can be seen in historian Niall Ferguson's response to the Paris terror attacks in November 2015, drawing direct comparisons between the disintegration of the Roman Empire, and the issues that face modern Europe in the 21st century (Colgan, 2015).

This analysis of both the past and present leaves much to be desired, and glosses over a lot of contextual information, such as the situation of the gothic people and the Roman response to them in the period leading up to the 410 Sack of Rome that Ferguson mentions (Baker, pp. 374-406), and ignores the survival of the Eastern Roman empire, which was very much a continuation of Roman culture and rule, for several hundred years as a major regional power. Academics, such as Andrew Gilett, have even noted the discourse surrounding Ferguson's statement from other historians, criticising his appeal to evoke antiquity to judge modern political discourse (2017).

It is with this perspective in mind that before I continue further, I would like to clarify that the piece is not attempting to make predictions for the Anthropocene. Adrian Goldsworthy notes in his work *The Fall of the West*:

Many people feel that they can see clear similarities between Ancient Rome and the modern world... Yet the conclusions people draw from these perceived parallels vary immensely and, inevitably, have a lot to do with their own political beliefs. (2009, p. 5).

Fiction's attempts to emulate the real world can never fully succeed. That is not to say however that parallels cannot be drawn, and that it is possible to glean information from past events, as this creative piece has attempted to do.

The first island that Placidia visits sees her deal with a group of Christian monks that are in conflict with local villagers, some of which the monks decry as demon-worshippers due to their pagan faith. Religion and identity are a primary theme of the first island that occur at other points in the narrative, most frequently in the discussions between Placidia and the old Roman god Bacchus, but also during the events of the second island, both as Porcius plans to usurp the imperial throne, and as Placidia's guard split between loyalty to the emperor and herself, and further revisited on the third island, as Placidia interacts with a group of Bacchus' worshippers.

The subject of spiritual tolerance of different faiths in the late WRE is a contentious one, as sources on religion are often biased. As Stephen Mitchell notes: 'No writers of the period undertook to provide a balanced and non-partisan account of the rise of Christianity in relation to pagan polytheism.' (2014, p. 17).

In respect to Christian-on-pagan violence, Nixey notes how the most devoted Christians of the period may have felt morally justified in their actions against their polytheistic counterparts:

To turn on, hound and hunt your fellows... was not to harm them. No, Chrysostom reiterated, it was to save them. To turn another soul back from sin was the greatest thing that a Christian could do. (2017, p. 208)

This sentiment is reflected by Placidia in the piece, stating as such when Bacchus calls her out on the violence against his worshippers. Amongst the most well-known examples include the destruction of the temple of Serapis in 389 A.D. as instrumented by Theophilus of Alexandria (Gibbon, 1999, p.581), as well as the death of the renowned philosopher Hypatia as orchestrated by Cyril of Alexandria ("Church Fathers", 2019). Nixey also notes the damage caused by monks to pagan objects of worship around the time of the fourth century orator Libanius:

Syrian monks – fearless, rootless, fanatical – became infamous both for their intensity and for the violence with which they attacked temples, statues and monuments – and even, it was said, any priests who opposed them. (2017, p. 107)

The idea behind these attacks was to deprive heathens of places to shelter and worship, as well as to demoralise religious opponents. Acts like this can be observed in the 21st century, as with ISIL's destruction of cultural heritage sites. This rejection of institutional authority over its spiritual counterpart can disrupt communities, or in the most extreme cases, result in the rejection of government control in favour of religion. Alternatively, the issue of factionalism and identity politics within the WRE, the question of individual regions desire for self-determination and their role within a larger state, can also be interpreted as a reflection of the current issues of national sovereignty that the European Union faces in the wake of the UK's decision to leave the EU in 2016.

The second island visited has the local governor attempt to force Placidia into wedlock to legitimise his claim as emperor. This was not uncommon throughout Roman history; the multiple declared emperors following the death of Pertinax in 193 (Goldsworthy, 2009, pp. 57-58) and the 'third century crisis' as it has come to be known (Goldsworthy, 2009, pp. 138-139) are just a few examples, and the fifth century was no exception.

Honorius, Western emperor during the first quarter of the fifth century, was forced to contend with multiple challengers to the imperial throne in his lifetime, such as the usurper Constantine from Britain in the early part of the fifth century (Baker, 2006, p. 386) and the Roman senator Attalus in 409 (Goldsworthy, 2009, p.300). This division in the empire along the lines of leadership is similarly reflected in the piece. The loyalty of Placidia's Roman soldiers is torn between herself and her brother Honorius. Factionalism within the Late Roman military was an ever-present threat that produced leaders of mixed competency.

The issue of repeated rebellions is the financial burden this put on the empire. Adrian Goldsworthy notes that civil wars within the Roman Empire were financially costly to all parties involved, as often Roman emperors bought the loyalty of their troops with donations of money and grain (2009, pp. 408-409). It was noted by Ammianus, a prominent Late-Roman soldier and historian, how Constantius promised the riches of war against the Sarmatians for their continued loyalty to him (Marceilinus, 2020).

It is implied in the piece that Porcius has accrued the wealth to back his takeover through harsh taxation, based off the emergence of the more privileged *honestiores* class that began to develop in the 2nd century A. D., *honestiores* being a term used to describe wealthier citizens of the Roman Empire (Krause, 2020), and how they began pushing the burden of higher taxes on to the general population, mainly *coloni* farmers under serfdom ("*Colonus*", 2019).

The image of the wealthy governor in his aesthetically pleasing-yet-decaying villa home, contrasted with the much poorer folk of the island under his rule, is an image meant to evoke modern sentiments of rich individuals and institutions exploiting those under them for personal gain, especially given the wealth gap between the richest and poorest citizens in the United Kingdom in the 21st century ("*Household Income Equality*", 2019).

The theme of the third island is focused on the protagonist herself, to demonstrate the lengths that the emperors of the late Roman world would go to preserve their positions and power, which I have chosen to compare to the bailout of banks in the wake of the 2008 financial crisis in the United Kingdom (Mathiason, 2008). Goldsworthy notes that in the wake of the Third Century Crisis:

The ever-present fear of assassination and civil war had profoundly changed the way an emperor ruled. None felt secure enough to delegate as much power to their subordinates as had been enjoyed by senatorial legates in the first and second centuries... The bureaucratic machine created in the late third and fourth centuries was intended to make emperors more secure and give them greater control. (2009, pp. 266-267)

It appeared that the empire began prioritising the power and survival of the emperor over that of the provinces of the Roman Empire and its ability to respond to external threats. Similar to religious tension and identity, this theme of the preservation of the imperial house appears several times throughout the piece; Placidia has the monks of the first island killed when she realises that the monks believe in God's authority over their empress, she worries her brother Honorius intends to kill her, fears that are confirmed when her Roman guards attempt to kill her on grounds of treason, and, when faced with the gathered pagans of the third island, she has them all executed, even characters that had previously been close to her. This violent desire for self-preservation I feel strikes a chord with resentment towards government intervention during the previously mentioned banking crisis, such as the steps that were made to secure at least some banks, institutions who had behaved irresponsibly in the years leading to the recession, and gave the impression to the general public that the government was more concerned with upkeeping failed ventures than taking steps to prevent such a thing happening again.

The purpose of Bacchus

When originally conceiving the piece, I had the idea to contrast elements of late antiquity with the older classical era. This evolved into the idea of a pagan god guiding a young Roman through the declining WRE, before it became interactions between the pagan god Bacchus and the Christian empress Placidia.

The choice of Bacchus, also named Dionysus depending on the context, might seem bizarre on first viewing, given his association with self-indulgence and hedonism. His place in antiquity however is varied, providing several readings that my version of the character draws on. In Euripides *The Bacchae*, he is portrayed as a conqueror of foreign lands, the son of a god returning to Thebes to exact justice and punishment for his mother's honour (1979), an aspect my interpretation reflects in both what he says to Placidia and how he feels on the treatment of his followers in my piece.

Another reading of Bacchus is described in Park McGinty's *Interpretation and Dionysos*, in which the author describes Freidrich Neitzche's *The Birth of Tragedy*, which presents the cults of Dionysus and Apollo as diametrically opposed, the latter representing the order of society, the former being an aspect of the unpredictability and chaos of human nature (1978, pp. 1-2). As a means of representing the decline and ruin of the WRE, Bacchus handily represents the failings of those trying to maintain control of a collapsing world, as his existence seems to be a figment of Placidia's imagination, yet still sends crowds into a frenzy if his presence is hinted at, such as with the monks on the first island, the wedding on the second, and the ritual on the third. This power is not unprecedented in mythology either; Mark P. O. Morford and Robert J. Lenardson state when discussing the relationship between Pentheus and Dionysus in *The Bacchae*, 'Dionysus is after all the god of mob fury and religious ecstasy and everything in between.' (1999, p. 220)

The more important, if subtle reason for the god's portrayal are the parallels Bacchus represents with Christianity, the late Roman period and the modern world. Academics have long since noted similarities between ritual worship of the cult of Dionysus and Christianity: him being the son of

gods and the mortal Semele, him being reborn after his body is destroyed as Fritz Graf and Sarah Iles Johnston describe (2013, p. 67), and the significance of blood and wine during ritualistic sacrifices (Henrichs, 1978, p. 148) to name a few. These similarities became more apparent as Christian authors translated the god's older myths, such as Nonnus' writings comparing the resurrection of Ampelos by Dionysus to that of Lazarus by Jesus (Friesen, 2015, pp. 242).

From these similarities, comparisons can be made based on Placidia's interactions with Bacchus. From a narrative perspective, Placidia's execution of Bacchus and his worshippers restores her faith in the Christian God as a kind of spiritual rebirth. From a more historical perspective, her rejection of the old Greco-Roman Gods can also be read as a point of transition from the Old Roman Empire to the Europe of Late Antiquity, a kind of severing of old ties that are reborn into the new world.

And from a meta perspective, the fact that elements of Bacchus' portrayal differ greatly to the Christianity Placidia worships, yet still share other traits, reflects how we in the twenty-first century relate to Antiquity; separated by over a thousand years, and the rise and declines of numerous societies, our relation to the Roman world is tenuous, almost unrecognisable. And yet, we can still find similarities and ties with this chapter of European history.

Conclusion

Why are we so obsessed with the end of civilisations? Why do writers imagine countless ways we as a species can destroy ourselves? I suspect it is for the same reason many draw comparisons between their nations in times of crisis and the WRE; we fear the end, and we are desperate to understand how and why it happens, in order to stop it for ourselves. As I stated at the beginning of this piece, humanity faces a multitude of issues as we push further into the Anthropocene. For many, these changes feel as if they signify an end to an era. In some regard, they do. As we continue into the 21st century, many have, and many more will, draw links between issues such as climate change and immigration and their equivalent in the WRE.

But whilst the topic is discussed amongst academics or weaponised by journalists and politicians as projections of their own anxieties, the fall of empires in popular culture seems to devolve to a few key factors, such as the fall of a tyrannical ruler. But history is seldom so simple. Goldsworthy notes in his conclusion in *The Fall of the West*.

Perhaps we should imagine the Late Roman Empire as a retired athlete... At times the muscle will still function well and with the memory of former training. Yet, as the neglect continues, the body becomes less and less capable of resisting disease or recovering from injury. (2010, pp. 414-415)

Goldsworthy suggests a long-term decline brought about by numerous factors. The themes of intolerance, infighting and self-preservation on each island are an attempt to reflect this. On their own, Placidia can face each threat, but is forced into reacting more harshly with each new situation,

resulting in destruction in the process, sacrificing the historical fact of the journey to help make my point clear.

This is why I feel my piece occupies a unique niche in fiction; to discuss the vague concept of the decline of Rome, and present it in a digestible form, or at least, an aspect of its decline, and create a narrative to see and understand it, as opposed to just reporting historical events like a textbook. After all, if objective history is unattainable, who is to say otherwise?

Appendix

Appendix A: Demandt's '210 Reasons why Rome Fell'

Abolition of gods, abolition of rights, absence of character, absolutism, agrarian question, agrarian slavery, anarchy, anti-Germanism, apathy, aristocracy, asceticism, attacks by Germans, attacks by Huns, attacks by nomads on horseback.

Backwardness in science, bankruptcy, barbarization, bastardization, blockage of land by large landholders, blood poisoning, bolshevization, bread and circuses, bureaucracy, Byzantinism.

Capitalism, change of capitals, caste system, celibacy, centralization, childlessness, Christianity, citizenship (granting of), civil war, climatic deterioration, communism, complacency, concatenation of misfortunes, conservatism, corruption, cosmopolitanism, crisis of legitimacy, culinary excess, cultural neurosis.

Decentralization, decline of Nordic character, decline of the cities, decline of the Italic population, deforestation, degeneration, degeneration of intellect, demoralization, depletion of mineral resources, despotism, destruction of environment, destruction of peasantry, destruction of political process, destruction of Roman influence, devastation, differences in wealth, disarmament, disillusion with state, division of empire, division of labour.

Earthquakes, egoism, egoism of the state, emancipation of slaves, enervation, epidemics, equal rights (granting of), eradication of the best, escapism, ethnic dissolution, excessive aging of population, excessive civilization, excessive culture, excessive foreign infiltration, excessive freedom, excessive urbanization, expansion, exploitation.

Fear of life, female emancipation, feudalization, fiscalism, gladiatorial system, gluttony, gout, hedonism, Hellenization, heresy, homosexuality, hothouse culture, hubris, hyperthermia.

Immoderate greatness, imperialism, impotence, impoverishment, imprudent policy toward buffer states, inadequate educational system, indifference, individualism, indoctrination, inertia, inflation, intellectualism, integration (weakness of), irrationality, Jewish influence.

Lack of leadership, lack of male dignity, lack of military recruits, lack of orderly imperial succession, lack of qualified workers, lack of rainfall, lack of religiousness, lack of seriousness, large landed properties, lead-poisoning, lethargy, levelling (cultural), levelling (social), loss of army discipline, loss of authority, loss of energy, loss of instincts, loss of population, luxury.

Malaria, marriages of convenience, mercenary system, mercury damage, militarism, monetary economy, monetary greed, money (shortage of), moral decline, moral idealism, moral materialism, mystery religions, nationalism of Rome's subjects, negative selection.

Orientalization, outflow of gold, over-refinement, pacifism, paralysis of will, paralysation, parasitism, particularism, pauperism, plagues, pleasure-seeking, plutocracy, polytheism, population pressure, precociousness, professional army, proletarianization, prosperity, prostitution, psychoses, public baths.

Racial degeneration, racial discrimination, racial suicide, rationalism, refusal of military service, religious struggles and schisms, rentier mentality, resignation, restriction to profession, restriction to the land, rhetoric, rise of uneducated masses, romantic attitudes to peace, ruin of middle class, rule of the world.

Semi-education, sensuality, servility, sexuality, shamelessness, shifting of trade routes, slavery, Slavic attacks, socialism (of the state), social tensions, soil erosion, soil exhaustion, spiritual barbarism, stagnation, stoicism, stress, structural weakness, superstition.

Taxation, pressure of terrorism, tiredness of life, totalitarianism, treason, tristesse, two-front war, underdevelopment, useless diet, usurpation of all powers by the state, vaingloriousness, villa economy, vulgarization.

(210 Reasons Rome fell, 2008)

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