

CHAPTER I

...uri, vinciri, verberari, ferroque necari patior
...to endure being burned, bound, beaten, and slain by the sword

The first light of dawn pierced the crack in the mud-brick wall and illuminated the tiny room. Alexandros slipped out of bed and dressed in anticipation of the day that lay ahead.

“Alexandros,” his father called as he walked into the cool morning light.

“Good morning, Father.”

“Excited about your journey to the market?”

“Yes. But don’t worry; I will get a good deal for the goats.”

This was to be his second trip to the market in Tricca by himself, which was a half day’s walk from their small farm.

“I know you will do well, but I fear you going that far by yourself. I could get your uncle to accompany you.”

“I will be fine, Father. I’m nearly sixteen. It’s time for me to take on more of your burden.”

Alexandros did not mention what they both knew: his father was ill. He was tall, thin, and walked hunched over with much difficulty. He attempted to hide his condition from the family, but it was obvious to everyone.

“You best leave right after breakfast. Come in as soon as you finish your chores, and give the dogs extra,” his father told him. “It will be a long walk for them too.”

Alexandros hurried into the little barn, released the dogs, and fed them. Then he gave hay and water to the young goats. When he returned to the house, the table was covered with bread, yogurt, cheese, and honey, and, as soon as his sisters had finished milking the goats, fresh warm

milk. After they had finished breakfast, Alexandros received a lunch of bread and cheese for the journey. With a final hug from his mother, he returned to the barn and let the goats loose. The dogs herded them into a bunch and waited for their commands.

“Remember, Alexandros, to the market and back. Don’t stray off the trail and beware of strangers selling goods on the edge of Tricca,” his father said.

“Don’t worry. I will come directly back with the money. I know how much we need it.”

“And one other thing, if you find out who that young girl is, I will try to meet with her parents to arrange a dowry.”

“How do you know about her?” Alexandros asked. “I told no one.”

“I have my ways.” He smiled. “It’s time you had a wife. Now go along. You want to be back before dark.”

Alexandros hugged his father then whistled to the dogs. They sprang up and began to move the small herd of goats along the road. He hurried to catch up, glancing back at his village of Gomphoi one last time.

It was a good day to be alive. A gentle breeze rippled across the tops of the grain like waves on the sea. The sun was warm, the sky a soft blue, and clouds billowed along the horizon. He was lost in thought and whistling softly to himself when a familiar voice rang out from behind him.

“Wait for me!”

“Good morning, Georgios.”

Georgios was his best friend who lived on the neighboring farm. He was a year younger than Alexandros.

“I wish I could go with you,” Georgios said.

“You’re too young,” Alexandros replied. “And besides, I’m mad at you!”

“For what?”

“I told you about that girl I saw in Tricca in confidence, and you told my father.”

“I had to. You’re too much of a coward. How else would you ever get her?”

“I am not a coward! But you still can’t come to Tricca. Maybe I will bring you next year.

Best hurry back before your mother gets worried.”

“You can tell me all about it tonight!” he yelled as he ran back toward Gomphoi. “Especially that girl!”

Alexandros went on alone and soon came to a group of trees that followed a small, dried-up creek. On the other side was the vast plain of Thessaly that stretched to the Peneios River. Tricca, the largest town in the region, was just across it. The flatlands seemed like an endless sea of grain with an occasional grove of trees dotting the landscape. The plains ran to the sea in the east and were abruptly stopped by mountains in the west.

He had walked for several hours when his belly began to growl, and he decided to stop for lunch. The five goats had discovered a patch of green grass and were nibbling away while the dogs eyed them and waited for signals from their master. The youth sat beneath a tree as he ate his lunch. He thought back to the festival of Artemis last fall when, for the first time, his father had passed on to him the honor of performing the blood sacrifice.

His father, one of the most respected men in the community, had been selected many years earlier to make the annual offering to the goddess. Alexandros had assisted in the rites several times and had begged his father to allow him to wield the knife. Finally, his father had agreed.

But the youth could not do it. When Alexandros looked into the eyes of the goat, he could not bring himself to slit its throat. Instead, he had collapsed on the ground with tears streaming down his cheeks. Unseen by the spectators, his father had taken the knife, made the cut, and then covered his son's hands with blood. Alexandros was more determined than ever to prove he was a man. Next time he would draw the knife.

Alexandros held out a few breadcrumbs in his hand and sprinkled them on the ground as an offering to Hera, his family goddess. He had a special request for her—to see that girl at the market again. She was the prettiest girl he had ever seen. This time, if she was there, he would smile and maybe even talk to her. He wouldn't return to Tricca until next spring, so he had to find out who she was today.

He finished his lunch, took a long drink of cool water, stood up, and stretched. The goats and dogs had also found a bit of shade to rest, but it was time to move on. He called to the dogs. They rose and began to move the goats. Alexandros had almost caught up to them when something spooked the small herd and they scattered.

The youth grasped his heavy stick with both hands and scanned the surroundings. He whistled commands to the dogs and strained to listen for any sounds. There was a thumping noise in the distance. Several men on horses burst out from the tree line in the distance and were headed toward him. As he turned to search for the herd, which was nowhere in sight, more riders came from the opposite direction.

Alexandros turned and began to run as fast as he could, but the riders advanced on him. As he looked back at them, he tripped and hit the ground hard then gasped for breath and struggled to get up. Before he could regain his footing, a net entangled his arms and legs.

Two men grabbed him and pinned his arms.

“Let me go!” he screamed, but they replied in an unintelligible language.

They tied a rope around his body, attached the other end to a horse, and headed west. He tried to free himself, but it was useless. Soon they arrived at a road where a cart was waiting. The back was enclosed with iron bars. His captors threw him into the cage that held several other men. He lay on the floor, casting his eyes around at them. A few had the hope of youth etched on their faces, but the majority were wrinkled and tanned from many years in the fields. No one acknowledged him as they sat in silence staring off into the distance. He tried to speak to them, but the guards yelled and thrust a wooden pole into the cage. He winced and drew himself into a tiny ball, too afraid to move.

The road was rutted, and the cart bounced hard as they moved out of the rolling countryside and into the mountains. Along the way, a few other carts joined the caravan. As dusk began to fall, they came to a halt. The occupants were pulled out one by one and shackled to trees. Armed guards paced around them. Few slept.

Alexandros tried not to think about his family, but it was difficult. He pictured his father and mother in their kitchen sick with worry, unable to search for him until morning. He scratched up some dirt and squeezed it in his hands, determined not to cry. He tried to work on the leg iron, but could not free himself. He didn't think the night would ever end.

At first light, some soldiers threw hunks of bread on the ground near the prisoners. The other men fought over the food, but Alexandros was too scared to eat. Then a young boy passed around water. Guards pulled the prisoners to their feet and herded them onto the carts once more, and their journey continued.

By midday, Alexandros had seen four prisoners faint from the sun. Others cried out for water and were hit by the guards. The youth noticed the older man next to him hadn't moved for a long time, but his attempt to tell the guards was met with a blow from a club. They stopped again at dusk and repeated the routine.

By midafternoon the next day, Alexandros caught his first glimpse of something he had only heard tales of—the sea. It was so flat and vast; there seemed no end. His father had told stories of how one would fall off the edge of the world into eternity if you traveled too far on the sea. Alexandros thought it beautiful yet frightening. The caravan passed through a village near the water where the people averted their eyes and scurried out of sight.

They came to a halt on the dock. Alexandros' mind reeled as he gazed in wonder at what must have been the ship Odysseus sailed in on his adventurous return from the Trojan War. The prisoners were dragged out of the cage and pushed across the dock and up a wooden plank onto the ship. They were then forced to climb down a ladder into the hold. When one boy balked at the feat, he was pushed in. His scream was interrupted by a loud thud, and then all was silent. As Alexandros descended the ladder, he saw the motionless remains of the boy illuminated by the shaft of light that entered the small hatch. No one bothered to help the boy or even move his body.

A putrid stench rose from the bowels of the ship as Alexandros descended ever lower. It took some time for his eyes to grow accustomed to the dimly lit interior. He could see people everywhere, and yet more were being forced in. He searched for a place to sit before being pushed from behind by the next man. He lost his balance and fell on someone who swore and pushed him off. He was shoved by another and another until he finally came to rest on the hard

planks of the floor. He pulled his knees under his chin, shivering with fear. The heat was overwhelming, and the movement of the ship made him queasy.

It only grew worse when the hatch was closed and darkness enveloped the interior. Alexandros thought of the underworld and believed it was no worse than this. As the ship began to move, he could hear the moans and cries in the dark of fellow prisoners. People vomited, yelled, cursed the gods, beseeched the gods, screamed, and pleaded. The youth was never sure if he was awake or asleep, or whether this was reality or a nightmare. He couldn't tell how long they had been sailing. Time stood still. He threw up what little remained in his stomach and held in his urine until he felt his sides would give way. Alexandros grew used to the smell, but not the sounds of suffering from those around him.

After a while, Alexandros reached out to the gods and offered a vow to Hera, his family protector, to sacrifice a fine goat to her should she help him return home, though he couldn't help but wonder why she seemed to have abandoned him. Thoughts of his family filled him with strength and concern.

A sudden jolt signaled their arrival at a dock. Sounds of men working filled the darkness and the occupants became restless. They shoved one another and stumbled in the dark trying to find the ladder. Someone stepped on Alexandros. He grimaced in pain while he attempted to push the large individual away.

Alexandros blinked as the morning sun flooded the interior from the open hatch and tried to avert his eyes from the contorted and bloated corpses of those who had not survived. Guards were yelling from above. He joined the line of prisoners who were ascending the ladder. Wherever they were going had to be better than where they were.

When he emerged onto the deck, Alexandros was dragged down the gangplank and loaded into another wheeled cage. The dock was crowded with people coming and going, but none paid any attention to Alexandros or his fellow prisoners. Several soldiers escorted them into the unknown city, which was even noisier and more bustling than the docks. Despite his fear, he was enthralled by the vast number of buildings and countless people. There were more people on one street than in his entire village. They headed straight toward a large structure on the outskirts of the city.

Alexandros stared in awe at the building, which rose into the sky and had numerous doors along its oval exterior. Pillars separated the arched doorways on the ground floor; columns divided the openings on the second. He was pulled out of the cart and herded into one of the many entrances that revealed a long cavernous tunnel lit by a few lamps on the walls. Prison cells lined both sides of the hallway. Most were crammed with forlorn-looking people, but he noticed that some had only one occupant. These men appeared very different from the others. They were large, well-muscled, and wore tunics of fine cloth. A few even smiled at him as he passed. His leg irons were removed, and he was pushed into a cell.

There were four others in the tiny cell; two older, gray-haired men, a youth around his age, and a boy who appeared about ten years old. The boy was huddled in a corner and had his head buried in his knees.

“Are you Greek?” one of the older men asked.

Alexandros nodded.

“What’s your crime?”

“Crime? I was on my way to the market with some goats when Roman soldiers grabbed me. I

committed no crime.”

“Sure you did, the crime of being caught!”

“How is that a crime?” Alexandros asked in bewilderment.

“The Romans need meat for the slaughter.”

“What do you mean? What is this place?”

“Hades, and we’re about to enter Tartarus.”

“Tartarus? My father says that is only for those who offend the gods and I’ve always made my offerings to them.”

“Ahh, but these are Roman gods, the rulers of the world! We offend them by existing.”

“I don’t understand.”

“You will soon enough, boy. When the sun is high, you’ll understand.” The old man slumped to the floor and Alexandros could see he didn’t want to talk any more.

Alexandros lay on the hard, cold floor, drifting in and out of sleep. At one point, young men came around the cells with water and some kind of gruel. The youth drank some water and forced down a bit of the vile concoction. He tried to think of what he could have done that was so bad as to deserve this. Why did the Romans have different gods? Maybe if he could find someone who understood him and explain it was all a mistake, then everything would be alright. He had spoken to the young man with the water but was met with bewilderment. None in his cell would speak to him again.

Alexandros was awakened when someone began to shout and hit the bars of the cells. He looked around at the other occupants of his cell who were more frightened than ever.

“What is it?”

“The boatman approaches!” one of the old men cried out in fear.

“The boatman? I don’t understand. What boatman? What’s going on?”

“Charon!”

“Charon? But he ferries shades across the Styx. He can’t be in this place,” Alexandros told them.

“He’s right!” another shouted. “We’ve already crossed the Styx!”

The cell door opened. Several large men with wooden clubs stood outside. One pointed to the young boy and Alexandros. Both were grabbed by the guards and dragged from the cell.

Alexandros protested, and the boy screamed.

They were led along another tunnel. Alexandros could see a shaft of sunlight that pierced the muted light of the interior through the cracks of a door and was reminded of his bedroom. The door flung open, and Alexandros was blinded by the bright noonday sunshine as they stepped outside once more.

They were no longer in the streets of the city.

Alexandros looked around in awe. They were walking on sand in a massive oval-shaped space surrounded by a crowd of people seated on benches. The murmur of the vast number of spectators sounded like a swarm of bees that had been disturbed by the stick of a mischievous boy. Never had the youth seen so many people. Not even at the festival of Zeus when his entire village, and those of two neighboring towns, would gather to celebrate.

Three prisoners had been brought out: Alexandros, the young boy, and a man in his twenties. The young boy was dragged, and two burly attendants had to force the man along, but Alexandros walked on his own and gazed at the spectacle. His father had once traveled to Delphi

to witness the oracle, and the youth had sat mesmerized at his retelling of the adventure, especially his description of the temple of Apollo, the theater, and stadium which flooded back to him as he took in this wondrous structure. He was too preoccupied to notice the three stakes driven into the ground in a row along the center of the arena, or that each had a length of chain attached to it. He barely noticed as they fastened his leg to the one on the left. The young boy was hitched to the center post and the man to the one on the far right.

The crowd was restless. They moved around, talked, laughed, shouted, and threw objects, but were oblivious to the three chained prisoners. Alexandros turned to look behind him when he heard the door through which they had been brought open again and saw a man enter carrying three swords. He walked to the prisoners and dropped one sword near each, then retreated into the safety of the tunnel as a rat scurries for cover at the approach of a man. The youth turned his attention back to the crowd. He was staring intently at first one person then another when a roar like the thunder of Zeus shook the foundations of the arena. He couldn't understand why the crowd had erupted until a deep guttural roar came from behind the prisoners. Alexandros slowly turned around.

The youth would never have believed anyone could be so big. The man was almost seven feet tall with massive arms and legs and a chest that was made even larger by the breastplate he wore. Greaves covered his shins, and bronze armor protected his lower arms. The iron helmet that sat on his head glistened in the sun; a tall horsehair plume adorned the top. He held a trident in his right hand. Every time this giant of a man thrust his arms into the air and roared, the crowd went wild. They shouted and stamped their feet.

The giant strode around the arena, close to the crowd, with his arms above his head and

thought how much he would miss the adulation of the crowd, the pleasure of victory, and the thrill of the kill. The people began a rhythmic chant of “*Gigas! Gigas!*” This was his last appearance in the arena, and he was going to enjoy every moment of it. He would have preferred to finish with a real match rather than executing prisoners, which was more like swatting flies, but he would still make a show of it.

And besides, this way he was able to wear his armor. As a retiarius, he had always fought with a trident and net, but no helmet. His only armor had been a shoulder shield. The Giant’s immense size was but one of the elements that had made him so famous, and the Master had decided it would be a shame to cover his handsome features with a helmet. But today he could wear his Trojan armor that had been specially commissioned by a wealthy fan just for him. The breast plate carried scenes of the Trojan War. His favorite depicted the Trojans as they stormed the Greek camp and pushed them back to the sea. The Giant fancied himself another Hector with his bronze helmet and tall horsetail plume that danced in the air every time he tossed his head. Today he was a Trojan. Oh, how he hated Greeks.

After walking twice around the arena, the Giant stopped and turned to face the prisoners, a broad smile on his face. He cast his gaze at each in turn. The man glared at him, the boy lay curled up on the ground, and Alexandros began to feel sick. The Giant focused on the boy and in a few strides loomed over him. The boy lifted his head from the protection of his hands and looked up at the Giant. He was trembling so violently that he could barely breathe. Alexandros could see a growing spot on the front of the boy’s tunic.

The Giant raised his trident. The boy jumped up and began to run away, only to scream in pain when he reached the end of the chain that grasped his ankle. A trickle of blood ran across

his foot. He reached down to rub his injury, tears flowing down his cheeks. The Giant bent down, grasped the chain, and snapped it toward him. Alexandros heard the crack of the bone as the boy's ankle shattered. He screamed and dropped to the ground. The Giant picked up the sword and moved within striking distance of him. The massive man loomed over the helpless boy who fell silent. Fear trumped pain, and he attempted to crawl away. With a mighty blow, the Giant brought the sword down and struck the broken leg below the knee, severing the limb.

Never had Alexandros heard such a scream as pierced the arena. The boy grasped the stump of his leg with one hand while he pulled himself with the other toward the door. The Giant grabbed the chain which held the severed leg, raised it over his head, and spun the appendage in the air. The shouts of the spectators and pounding of feet on the wooden bleachers were deafening. Blood drops from the severed leg splattered on Alexandros' face; he vomited.

The Giant dropped the chain and thrust his arms in the air. He turned toward the man who brandished a sword. Perhaps he would make a fight of it for the crowd. As the Giant moved in closer, the man jabbed with the sword. He easily sidestepped the maneuver. Much to the chagrin of the man, the Giant was quick and agile. Now the Giant moved in close and baited the man, who thrust the sword again. The crowd gasped as it appeared to slice deep into the Giant's left side just below the breast plate, but the razor-sharp blade had passed harmlessly between his left arm and rib cage. As the man retreated, the Giant brought the trident's handle down across the sword and knocked the weapon from his hand.

He recovered the sword and lunged at the Giant once more. The Giant twisted his body to avoid the blow and, with his opponent off balance, brought the handle of the trident down hard on his back, plunging him face-first into the sand. He turned his back on the prone opponent and

raised his arms. This was the move the crowd expected from him; exposing his naked back to a down, but still dangerous, opponent. It had helped make him famous as a gladiator and a star of the arena.

As the deafening noise filled the arena, the young man lay on the sand gasping for breath. He could see the immense shadow just ahead. He had dropped his sword and groped the sand for it, but by the time he found it and regained his composure, the Giant faced him once more. He struggled to his feet and retreated to the end of his chain, but the Giant followed. The man had served two years in the army and was proficient with a sword, but had never fought a man with a long-handled trident.

The man rushed his opponent. The Giant thrust the points of the trident under the man's chin and lowered the handle into the sand. The young man's momentum raised him off the ground, suspended by the points of the trident stuck in his throat. His feet dangled comically in the air. The sword fell from his hand, and he grabbed fruitlessly at the points driven deep in his neck. The Giant knew precisely where to place the trident so that the blow would be fatal, but the death slow. The young man gasped as blood squirted from his nose and mouth. His chest heaved as he struggled to breathe.

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From the edge of the arena, Lucanus shook his head. He nudged the Master with his arm. "You should hurry him up. There's still many to go. At this rate, we'll be here all afternoon."

"Leave him be," the Master said. "This is his time. Let him enjoy it. See how the crowd loves him?"

"He is a favorite. Are you really going to free him after today?"

“This is his last performance in the arena.”

“But why are...” Lucanus stopped short before he felt the Master’s hand across his face. He, and everyone else, knew why the Master was giving the Giant his freedom, but none dared speak the reason.

The Master was the lanista, a former gladiator who had won his freedom in the arena, become wealthy, and now owned a stable of gladiators that included the Giant. He was still muscular after several years out of the arena. He cared for his charges but was brutal to those who disobeyed. Lucanus had once seen him slice off the head of a gladiator who refused to fight his friend. And then the Master killed his friend. He struck fear in those around him.

Lucanus was the Master’s assistant. Blind in one eye and with a gimpy leg that caused him to walk with a pronounced limp, the Master kept him for his ability to spot new talent. Together they scoured the slave markets for the next great gladiator. The Master valued Lucanus’ opinion and rewarded him handsomely when he was correct. After all, Lucanus had chosen the Nightman from a crew headed for the mines, and now he was the next in line for greatness after the Giant retired. However, Lucanus also knew he was but a whisper from the slave market himself if he disappointed.

Lucanus, born the son of a slave and her master, had been treated kindly by his owner. When he was fifteen, a beautiful girl was brought into the household as the owner’s pet and Lucanus, young and handsome, fell in love with her. He had been severely beaten when the owner caught him making love to the girl. Sold to the owner of a school of gladiators, Lucanus did anything and everything to survive, and he was always assigned the worst jobs.

It was only after the school was bought by the Master that Lucanus’ uncanny talent to spot

aspiring combatants was recognized. From that point, his life became much more tolerable and, after successfully selecting three winning gladiators for the Master, he ascended to the role of the Master's trusted adviser. Lucanus had grown bolder as time passed and was one of the few who could speak honestly to the Master without being beaten, or worse, though even he feared the Master's wrath.

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After a few minutes, when the crowd had tired of the spectacle, the Giant released his grip on the trident and let the young man fall to the ground. The Giant now turned his attention to Alexandros. As he approached, the youth began to tremble uncontrollably. His knees grew weak and his bowels voided. The Giant motioned to the sword that lay near the youth's feet, but he feared being unable to rise if he knelt to pick it up. Tentatively, he reached for the handle. The Giant stood watching his every move, the smile still on his lips.

The crowd began to laugh as they could see the sword shaking in the hand of this unkempt, dirty youth. They found his fear amusing, as did the Giant. Gladiators were trained to face death without fear. The youth could see him laughing under his helmet as he made a pathetic jab at the Giant, who stepped out of the way and then clubbed the youth on the back with the trident. Alexandros hit the ground hard. Everything went black before he could see again. The Giant raised his arms and turned his back on Alexandros. This was the best day of his life.

The sword entered his lower right side at a steep upward angle, sliced through a kidney, intestines, the esophagus and left lung, but stopped short of the heart. It was a fatal blow, but death would not be quick. Most spectators didn't see the blow delivered and continued to cheer for the Giant as though everything was fine. Even the Master and Lucanus saw nothing amiss. They became aware that something was wrong when the trident dropped from the Giant's right hand and hit the ground with a thud. Then, arms still raised, he fell onto his knees.

Alexandros, who stood directly behind the Giant, could hear his labored wheezing as he gasped for breath. His monolithic chest rose and fell with great effort. He would not give up life easily. After what seemed an eternity, he fell face down into the sand. A cloud of dust rose around the gargantuan man. The horsehair plume on his helmet continued to quiver long after his body became motionless. Blood oozed from the wound and flowed from his mouth and nose as his life drained into the sand. As the mighty Hector had fallen, so did the Giant. A deafening silence enveloped the arena.