

## Song of Mars

The others called our commander The Rogue, said he tried to upend the whole world. He cracked, they said, became nothing more than a crazy fool, whose diversion from the natural order was profane, and so the gods abandoned him.

But I think he served the gods.

When I joined up with The Rogue, he was feared and trusted by all. His sword was never dry, and the scars on every limb of his body were his testament. Hard faced, he never smiled or frowned. Like a stone from the deep of the mountains, where he was born. There was coldness, determination, and he never flinched.

And the Empire spread out under his feet like spilling blood. We marched in his train, the guilt of death staining our hands and feet. Those we went to slaughter sent tribal chieftains to his tent to lie, begging for peace. He would nod and retreat, waiting until they broke their promises, failed to pay tribute. Then he rose and we followed, marching to drum beats and the Song of Mars. A dirge, it reverberated in the bones of clenched fingers and tingled as perspiration sliding down from beneath an iron helm, over cheeks, cool on hot. A chant in harmony, then discord, finally a provisional unison. Mind and heart became one, a pounding haze.

We forgot the child, the woman, the elder. Everyone was the same, all enemies. Fire and blood, blood and fire, marching, thirst, groaning limbs and stifled souls. Back at home, the emperor and his court lay against cushions, fed by slaves, speaking of peace and higher law, the supremacy of our divine might, our system of justice, with its guarantees and stipulations. But on the frontier we enforced through massacre, and the barbarians understood, because of The Rogue.

The tribes of the borderlands often grew restless, forgetting the benefit they received as our slaves, and shirking magnanimous inclusion into our world of peace and law, rebelled. But The Rogue and his army, we brought them back into submission.

The philosophers tell us that long ago water and wind clove the mountains, and lush valleys were born. These farmlands nurture our people, who eat and drink, satisfied. Life from death. The sculpting of the Rogue was likewise imperceptible and thorough. Thirty years I walked with my captain, dipping my blade in the sorrow and destruction of the vanquished. I thought only to kill, to subdue, following orders. And I believed that I served peace. But the tale was incongruent, and the dissonance troubled The Rogue, who was dutiful, sought to please not only the emperor, but the gods as well. He wanted peace.

At first I thought he'd been broken, malignantly transformed. It would not have been the first time that an officer became a monster. Normally we were efficient, lining up rebels and their families in the center of the village on their knees. Then we'd walk behind and drive steel into the base of each skull. In just seconds, the threat was removed, wiped from the earth, clean.

But on the day of his rebellion, our captain held the captives under guard and commanded us to dig a deep pit in the earth at the center of their home. Once complete, he ordered the villagers to be stripped naked and thrown in together. Warriors and mothers, children and elders,

all were humiliated in this manner, huddled into the hole that would become both judgment and salvation.

A bench was brought to the edge of the pit, and The Rogue sat down to contemplate. We all sat around the edge, watching the poor wretches. Our captain commanded that we gaze in silence, without mockery or insult. We were merely to observe. Some of the captives tried to cover their nakedness, others tried to shield their loved ones. Some stood erect, defiant.

“Do you want peace?”

The voice of The Rogue boomed, and the enemy cowered. Some nodded, but most looked to the leaders, the defiant ones who refused to bow.

“Who should lead your people when we go? Who can protect peace?”

Every time it was the same. One of the grand champions, a tall, rippling, brazen fool would loom higher than the rest, would look down upon his fellow villagers and command their humility. They would point, mumble, and indicate their master, the great warrior, the arrogant one. And The Rogue would have the man pulled out of the pit, and then sever his head from his body. Then, holding the bloody crown high, he would beg the villagers for another.

“This man would have kept the peace? No. He would rouse you to war, again. Who can keep the peace?”

Then the village would turn inward, and The Rogue was patient, would let them talk, see them nourished. But he left them naked, exposed to heat and cold. All the while he watched little conversations, and commanded his officers watch when the villagers broke into groups. He hoped we'd learn, too, but most of us were blind.

Inevitably the village would pare off into the like-minded. Most of the women went with the children, tending to their needs. The humbled - the elders and infirm - pulled away and spoke

in whispers, afraid to challenge the will of the warriors, who formed another group, loud and full of swagger. These men led because they were strong, just as our Empire ruled the world, and none gainsaid them. Perhaps no one, those in the pit or we who watched, thought that any but those strong men should rule. But The Rogue had changed his mind.

Once the hearty men of the village separated unto themselves, The Rogue pulled the weaklings and the females and children from the pit and clothed them, commanded them to watch the spectacle. Then he turned the warriors against one another, declaring that the winner could help him keep the peace. Some few strong men stood aside, unwilling to shed the blood of their kinsmen, and these were added to the number of the frail. Then the brash, arrogant men who remained turned swords upon brothers and fathers and neighbors, killing for power, but they failed the test. When only two of the men remained, panting and sweating, covered in the gore of their kinsmen, The Rogue commanded them to stop, and took back their weapons. Then he turned to the delicate survivors, ominous.

“One among you will rule, and I let you choose. Who can keep the peace?”

Then the hobbled and blind, the sickly and old, the woman and child would huddle - humbly, wisely - and choose the person who could keep the peace. During the months of his revolt against the world, The Rogue saw all sizes and shapes considered and chosen, even women. Once selected, the new leader was brought back to the pit, given the first decision of his or her young reign.

“You must decide who will die and who can be spared. Choose.”

Some, loosed from the strong by The Rogue, yet followed in their path. These ordered that both be killed. And so they were.

Other crafty ones sought to use mercy as a tool to bind the pardoned to themselves, and chose one or the other to be slain. And so they were.

And some pardoned both men, keeping the one as a balance to the other, considering it wise to keep men of strength. And so it was.

The Rogue continued this practice in each of the villages we subdued, and there was peace at last, for half a generation. Shortly thereafter a coalition was struck among those who had been chosen according to wisdom and those lands which had once been bathed in blood and rebellion became havens of abundance and tranquility.

The one who brought them together was a tall, kindly blind man, chosen that first day of The Rogue's rebellion. Like our captain, he considered possibilities, and the people called him The Seer. Showing mercy, The Seer pardoned both surviving warriors from the pit, and used their vigor to refashion his village as a beacon of produce and efficiency. And his leadership among the peacemakers bought lucrative trade agreements with the Empire that benefitted everyone. Pleased with his solution, The Rogue returned to the capital, and was restful at last.

But the Emperor hated what our captain had done, and many others did, too. Who wishes a woman to rule? Who would let the blind or lame, the gentle or compassionate? No, they said, rulers must be strong, merciless. It is the sword arm that justifies power, not the careful hand sowing seed or the tender one wiping tears.

And so, one by one, the leaders chosen by the people began to perish - this one by poison, another stabbed in her bed, still another dashed upon the rocks at the foot of a mountain. The Seer sent a messenger to my captain, pleading with him to come and protect. So The Rogue went to beseech his Emperor, who was clothed in a silk purple gown, wearing a golden tiara, attended by pampered slaves. My captain bowed and asked permission to go and see the defiler purged.

Our deified ruler, who inherited the throne of his warlike father, who hid behind praetorians and eunuchs, cheerfully granted the request. The Rogue did not blink or hesitate, but travelled the hard road through the shadowed vale, for duty, in spite of duty, and I followed him there.

When we arrived, The Seer greeted my captain and took his arm, leaning upon his strength, for his frailty was nearly total. Guiding The Rogue away from me, deep into the forest, they sat beside a mighty waterfall that roared, and its clamor lulled The Seer's conscience, muffled the piercing of The Rogue's hope and the easy acquiescence of his broken heart.

Those powerful, airborne waters crashed deep, and blood splattered and poured into the natural flow, which darkened, its beauty marred by guilt. But then the stain was washed away. Downstream, things meandered as they did above, as if there had never been a leap of faith over the fearful precipice. And The Seer turned away, his eyes glazed, and did not see.