

The Quest

Gaul was a horrible place for someone of Marcus Morsanus' position and stature. He sat on a rock, sliding the whetstone over his sword, hearing a metallic *shing* with each stroke. He shifted his leg, his sandal resting on the head of another one of the barbarians he killed, just like the rest of them that had tried to kill him. The more time he spent here, the wearier he grew of it, barely three days out of the Empire and already he mused the idea of returning. He sighed, and sheathed his sword, tossing the whetstone to himself a few times before sliding it into a pouch on his belt. Though he wasn't content with stalking through the empty fields, trudging through the dense pockets of forest, and slaying every barbarian simpleton who had the balls to assault a fully armed and armored centurion with stone axes and blades, arrows whose stone heads barely left a scratch on his shining lorica segmentata and, if they were lucky, leather armor that did little to stop his iron blade. He must trudge onward however, it was ill-fitting of one of Rome's top legion generals to give up on his orders after only a few days. There would never be an end to the ridicule if he was to return empty handed on the most important assignment of his life. No, he would stick this out. Even if it were to kill him.

The axe swiped through the air with a manic gleam, accompanied by the bloodlust roar of the barbarian who swung it. Marcus ducked under the shining blade, helmet knocked from the top of his head. He brought his sword around inside the swing range of the barbarian, hacking the side torso, just below the ribs carving through the soft, tender flesh. Blood spurted from the open wound, red rivulets dripped down from the gaping hole, the barbarian fell to his knees, yelling in pain before flipping face down into the dusty grass, not dead yet, but on his way. Marcus stabbed his blade into the back of the brute's neck, severing the spine and ending his wretched life, then sheathed his sword, and sat down on a nearby rock. He stared out at the many other barbarian bodies he had slain before the last one. Blood was splashed across his chest plate, and his helmet, dented and torn asunder, lie in the dust in front of him. He put his head in his hands, and attempted to catch his breath.

He returned his gaze back to the horizon. "Caesar be damned, the gods have abandoned this place." His voice nothing more than a muttering to himself. Seven weeks in

this place, seven weeks amongst these *savages*. Caesar had given him this assignment, him alone, and there was great honor in it, but why would he send one of his top generals out on a random assignment to find an *item*, through Gaul? He stood, still staring at the somewhat desolate landscape, and sighed, wondering if the locals had anything that they held valuable. Kneeling to examine the bodies, he noticed the various runes they held signifying them of the same clan that had been attacking him these past weeks. He stood, after the final body yielded nothing of value, or importance, their weapons, taken from soldiers killed from raids on the outer edges of the Empire, had poor upkeep, not matching his properly maintained equipment. He sighed again, staring out North toward Germania outside of the Roman borders, toward his goal, and continued onward, sandals slapping against the rough ground tossing dust into the air with every step.

Dusk, a sky as red as blood overhead, a pack weighing him down, wearing him out, he stopped, dropping his pack into the dirt, stretching his shoulders out with a grunt, an unhappy grimace on his face. Just like on any campaign carrying the pack for this long strains the muscles in the shoulders and lower back. He stood staring into the slowly lowering sun that turned the sky from the bright cerulean to a deep inky midnight with shades of crimson and orange in between. He stared at the horizon, the point where the sun met the land as Apollo drug the fiery orb below the point of sight to herald in Diana's rule of the sky. He mustn't dawdle. He bent to retrieve his pack from the ground and continued onward into the cooling dusk, his thoughts going back to what he was searching for in the first place. He was told the name of the object, and where it would be, a trinket or treasure he knew not what these "Scrolls of Alexander" would be, or where they were exactly, told only that they were outside the Roman borders in Germania and that Caesar wanted it, for knowledge or for military gains he did not know. It was not a soldier's place to question his orders, only to follow them. *But still*, he thought absently staring at the bleak landscape of northern Gaul. *What could be out here that's of any importance to Caesar in all his power?* Apollo pulled his orb underneath the far off mountains, replacing the crimson glow with an inky darkness, lit only by the ivory glow of Diana's moon. Sun or moon however, there was nothing around save for a few trees and the ever present mountains in the distance. They nearly taunted his very being as he trudged onward toward an unknown destination never getting smaller, staying the same size, taunting him. Another sigh escaped his lips, something that was becoming a habit in the past few weeks, and then dropped his pack again. He had hoped that he would have been able to find some civilized house that he could have spent the night in, perhaps have a warm meal for once, maybe even some pleasurable company. But no, he was doomed to cold rations and a bedroll for the night, just as he had the rest of his miserable time in this horrible place. He had begun to feel the pangs of homesickness around the second week. He missed his home, his wife. She would probably be worried, just

as she had one his longer campaigns expanding the Empire. He had always returned to her though, no matter how long it took, he always came back. *Maybe I'll skip the rations tonight...* As he spent longer and longer out here his appetite waned, there might come a day when he just stopped eating altogether, then slowly wasted away in this miserable plain. The thoughts pervaded through mind as he slowly drifted to sleep.

The morning came crisp and cold as the edge of a sharpened sword, cutting deep within his flesh to chill him to his very bones, how long had he been out here now? He couldn't remember, lost count of days after the first three months. He had made up his pack not long ago and had started out again toward his goal, his packed provisions ran out long ago. He made a small meal out of plants he had gathered in the patches of forest he's trail blazed through, or animals he had caught. At least he had fresh meat again.

Three weeks of endless marching, not able to bring an army, nor even a few men with him. He was to be sent alone into this gods forsaken land. A forest lay ahead, trees towered above him, such forests took over a lot of the northern landscape dotted with plenty of open plains in between, they grew thicker the farther North you went, better to set up ambushes for travelers. There was never a way to go around, you had to go through them, perfect for an attack. He hesitated, paranoia growing like a cold spot at the base of his skull. The truth was, it *was* a perfect place to attack someone, even in the heart of Rome forest paths were used to attack, and steal valuables and other items from those unfortunate enough to pass by. He had no way to know what lie in this forest, trees blocked his vision. He didn't even know if the scrolls even existed! Why should he be wasting his time away from his home searching for something that may not even exist? Months he had spent wandering through Gaul taking something on blind faith. Enough, he had had enough of this horrid place. He turned and began walking back the way he came.

He barely made it forty feet before he stopped again. He was a centurion, shouldn't he be able to handle himself in some simple forest populated by untrained savages? *Of course you can!* The angry thought bounced through his head as he stood a little straighter up, almost as if Caesar himself were watching him. *You are the best this world has, how many barbarians have you taken down? How many have fallen to your sword? How many were sent into Pluto's cold land?* He smiled wickedly. *Too many to count...* So why was it he was afraid to enter such a simple forest? He screwed a determined look on his face, cinched his pack closer to him, and walked with an unmistakable air of defiance on his face, though he kept his sword ready just in case.

The forest was dark, and thick, he had trouble muscling his way through the tangled brush, cuts appeared over his bare legs and arms, scratches and dents on his lorica segmentata, he loosened his grip on his sword, grabbing at a nearby bush to pull it out of his way, noting the blood running down his forearm. Campaigns were full of small wounds, but

would this technically count as a campaign? Is a general still a general without his army? He brought his hand back to his sword and pushed into the clearing ahead. He dropped his pack, blinking in the brighter light. Now would be a good time to rest if any, make a light lunch perhaps out of the rations he'd been eating for weeks. He took a drag from his water skin, thoughts lodged deep inside his--Pain! Flashing into his shoulder, through his neck, tail feathers of an arrow in the way of his vision. He yelled out, grabbing the arrow and snapping it off halfway up the shaft, just as another pinged off his shoulder armor. Roars came from the woods surrounding him as five or six barbarians charged from the brush, swords and hammers held above their heads. He unsheathed his sword with a flash of iron and a metallic *shing*, they surrounded him, but they left themselves open with their foolish charge. He moved his other arm to grab his shield, pain flashed through his wound, and a warm wetness that drained down his torso, and soaked through his tunic. He gritted his teeth, but brought his shield forward despite the pain. The first blow came from his right, the fool brought the hammer down onto Marcus' shield, a glancing blow, but still knocking it aside as Marcus' sword was brought into the brute's ribcage, cleaving through muscle and bone and organ. It cried out in pain and fell, twitching slightly as blood stained the grass a deep crimson. Marcus sheathed his sword, grabbing the plumbatae attached to the back of his shield. He flung three of them, dispatching two more of the brutes, one batted away by a primitive shield. Marcus lashed out with his shield, simultaneously knocking the creature off his feet, and sending pain like shards of glass through his wound. He stomped down on the brute's head, twisting it sideways with the slightly muted *snap* of broken bone, and quickly unsheathed his sword. The last one was more cautious, keeping its distance while twirling the axes it held in both hands. It muttered something at Marcus, some curse or threat in its native language perhaps, and flung one of the axes out. It caught his lower torso armor, blasting away the iron strips but leaving the leather underneath intact. Its plan failed, the savage tried the berserker tactic, charging Marcus, other axe held high in the air, lungs expelling every ounce of air they held in a brutal bloodlust scream. Marcus leaned back on one leg, and struck forward with his sword, cleaving upward through throat, starting between the clavicles and slicing up into the jaw. There was a slight gurgle, and the creature fell in a heap, blood spouting through its torn throat. Marcus fell to one knee, eyes clenched, his hand on the half arrow shaft sprouting from his shoulder. He gritted his teeth, and pulled, yanking the shaft free from its resting place above his clavicle. He immediately reached into his pack, grabbed his spare tunic and jammed it under his shoulder piece, applying pressure to the stem the flow of blood leaking from the torn hole in his shoulder. A slight moan made him turn back to one of the fallen barbarians. Plumbata jutting from its partially collapsed chest, it tried to crawl away one armed, taking wheezing breaths, emitting a slight moan every so often. Marcus stood, glaring down at the broken creature below him.

In a way he pitied it, not knowing of civilization, not knowing how to speak properly, not even knowing the common decency of being a real person. He stalked over to the ailing creature as it spit half-winded curses at him, venom coating its voice and breaking language barriers with its hatred. Marcus reached down, and yanked the plumbata from his chest heralding in a shriek of pain from the creature. He reattached the plumbata to the shield, then picked his sword up from where he cast it aside. "Perhaps the underworld will teach you how to be civil." He brought the sword down into the creature's throat, cutting off all screams, and bringing an end to its wretched life.

It was getting harder to breathe, harder to push through the dense foliage and brush. The tunic he had hastily shoved over the wound was soaked with blood. Pain worked its way down his shoulder like a burning fire slowly spreading down into his chest, and out to his neck and arm. Fatigue tugged behind his eyes, he shook it off like a bad thought, gritting his teeth against the numbing feeling at the top of his shoulder. He looked down at his broken armor, mouth a grim frown of unhappiness. It wouldn't be cheap to fix it, but if Caesar was paying half as much as he said money wouldn't be a problem anymore. He could buy new armor, he could probably buy his way out of The Legion, as if he would ever want that. He squinted ahead in the gloom. What was that? Someone rested against a tree, another one of those savage barbarians lay against the tree slumbering, bow lay across its lap. Maybe the one that wounded him, maybe not either way, he pulled a knife from his belt, the brute wouldn't make it through his slumber. Marcus was quiet as he could be, but stealth in a forest was not simple. He dropped his shield carefully and crept upon the sleeping figure. With a single fluid movement Marcus reached down and slit its throat, blood immediately slid down from the cut, and it slumped slightly, the only indication he ever done anything. Creature or not, it had a good idea. Marcus fell into another tree, as fatigue washed over him, leaning against it.

Marcus' back hit the tree and a grunt escaped his lips accompanied with a slight spray of blood. He laughed, a short bitter laugh that devolved into a cough. Blood dripped from his chin, staining the lorica segmentata that shone in the dim sunlight streaming through the tree branches. Too much blood had soaked into the tunic stuffed under his left pauldron, he had a spare in his pack, well another spare. The wound was tender as the tunic pulled away and out. It hadn't closed yet, fibers caught on the exposed and bloody flesh. He'd cauterize it as soon as he got his second wind. He leaned his head back against the tree, closing his eyes, letting the pain slowly snake its way through his veins like fire. How did it end up this way? How did he end up here? A smoky room, a darkness, massive secrecy. His chin dipped into his chest plate as he slid into unconsciousness.

"Yes my lord Caesar," Morsanus knelt on one knee, helmet tucked under one arm, sword planted in the ground.

“You will go into Gaul, and head North,” Caesar paced around Morsanus as if he were inspecting him. “Just inside Germania, perhaps a half day’s hike past the borders. There you will find a cemetery, inside will be the final resting place of Alexander Macedonia. I am interested in him, or more likely interested in what he holds, the scrolls of his final conquests. You will bring these scrolls to me, these Scrolls of Alexander, and I will reward you with whatever your heart desires, riches beyond your wildest dreams, women more beautiful than you can ever imagine, whatever you can think will be yours.”

“Yes my lord.” He wondered what he wanted with them, he had no idea, but it wasn’t a place to question Caesar.

“Now go.”

He followed suit rather quickly.

Weeks later he awoke. Mustn’t fall asleep. He could die very easily from that. He chucked a rock at the head of the dead barbarian he had slain before he sat down. He gave another rough chuckle. Bastard hadn’t know what hit him at least. He shook his head to clear away the cloudiness. Fire, needed a fire to cauterize the wound in his shoulder. Funny, it didn’t hurt as bad as it did before. Maybe it was closing on its own. That would be good. Still, a fire would be good. He gathered sticks and branches around him, and pulled a tinderbox from his pack, and lit a small fire. Leaning back against the tree, he smirked and slid back into sleep as the fire grew hotter.

He awoke, dusk had come again, he must have slept for a few hours. He pushed himself to his feet, the wound on his shoulder felt better, the healing taking effect already. He pulled the bloodstained tunic from his armor and tucked it in his pack. Pausing only to stare back at the bodies that lay behind him, he continued on, feeling somehow lighter. Many more months passed without any kind of clues, nothing to point him in the right direction toward his goal. Nothing gave him hope that he would ever return to his wife, his memories of her, ever present in his mind, tugged at his heart with each weary step he took toward Germania.

I’m sorry Gaia, I will return to you as soon as I can.

Blearily he traveled on, strangely unbothered by barbarians this far north. The last ones he had seen were in the forest when he received his injury. By all accounts he should have been grateful. They had become a bothersome thorn in his side for the few months he walked the plains, causing him barely any injury other than vague annoyance. In the beginning he had welcomed them as a test of his skills, something to keep him razor sharp for when he returned to his post. As time went on, however, he had began to see them as a grievance, something to slow him down as his patience waned. Those little groups he did see paid him no attention, perhaps they were more intelligent than the other groups and saw him for the threat that he was. He shook his head absently. How long must he suffer here?

Caesar, impatient of little results from Morsanus sent out a second group. Weeks passed along their travels, fighting barbarians, searching out the scrolls. They couldn't help but wonder what became of the previous "party," what had become of the General Morsanus, perhaps he became lost in Gaul, or maybe the scrolls were deeper into Germania than Caesar had predicted. Maybe he was back in Rome now, living it up on *their* pay. It was the youngest of the group, Julian Paleus, nephew of Marcus Morsanus who stumbled across his body leaning against that fateful tree, across from the last barbarian he had ever killed, nearby a small group of the brutes they supposed he had slain as well.

Decomposition made impossible to tell what had killed either of them, they suspected the brute injured Morsanus, and then was killed. That left the general to bleed out, alone in this uncivilized Hell hole. They never found the scrolls, nobody ever did. But they say some nights in the portion of northern France that was once Gaul, sometimes a Roman centurion can be seen, endlessly searching for the Scrolls of Alexander to please his great emperor Caesar, and bring honor to his family.