

THE QUARRY

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Harēna

Harēna (Latin)

Sand

Sandy desert, waste

A sanded place, ground marked off for combat, amphitheatre or arena.

Dearest Aemilius,

The wine here is most comparable to your family's orchards. Who would have believed that grapes from Syria would taste as good as grapes from Rome? The Roman army too is thriving in the desert and we expect that soon the Emperor Shapur will fall in battle, his desert empire ripe for harvest! Won't you come to

Dura Europos to taste glory, Aemilius, like Alexander the Great? And then perhaps we will drink like him too!

Domitius.

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They heard the Parthians before they saw them. Their deep rumbling made the Roman cavalymen whisper to their gods and their horses nicker nervously to one another. Aemilius expelled a shaky breath and willed his hands to steady as his brown stallion flung his head backwards and shuffled his hooves. He ignored the stares of the men around him, their eyes transfixed on the blood and ink staining his arms and iron scale armour. Though, at their commander's signal, their staring was cut off and the meagre force charged into the open wasteland.

Swarming across the endless sand were thousands and thousands of Parthians. Both man and horse were draped in robes of armour, the metal shimmering like a mirage.

You promised me glory, Aemilius thought as he blinked sand out of his eyes.

'You assured me domination of the barbarians,' Aemilius whispered as hundreds of pounding hooves rattled his bones.

'I had imagined an emperor's welcome in the streets of Rome!' Aemilius raged as he was submerged into the shimmering army.

Arrows shot all around his head and buried into his legs.

His sword clashed and pierced through armour.

He swung from side to side to avoid the bucking hooves of riderless horses.

Aemilius wrenched the reins, narrowly avoiding a collision with another Roman, but steered himself into the path of a galloping Parthian, his arrow poised to release directly into Aemilius' head...

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Aemilius exhaled deeply into the hot darkness. The blackness felt solid. He shifted uncomfortably in the large, empty bath, his back scraping against the rough rocks and the water sloshing gently at his movement. Cupping his hands in the water, Aemilius brought the perpetually warm liquid to his face. Massaging

the water into his dry skin, he tried to ignore how bony his cheeks and chin had become, and he swore that his eyes had never been this sunken. Some of the water trickled into his mouth and Aemilius pulled it around his tongue and from cheek to cheek. With an aggressive *ptt*, he spat it out over his shoulder, but it was never enough to dislodge the grains sticking to his gums, wedged between his teeth and clinging to the back of his throat.

‘I confess that I have not found the same adventure that you...’ Aemilius rehearsed, his voice trailing off into the darkness. Letting his head fall backwards, Aemilius imagined the bath at his family’s villa with its painting of Vesta on the ceiling; the plump goddess with pale skin lounging above the water, her red lips a shy smile and robe enticingly askew. As a boy, Aemilius used to sink his body below the surface, the rippling water making him feel like they were swimming together; a boy the guest of a goddess.

But this dark bathhouse was not Rome.

Aemilius felt bile rise to his throat. He swallowed it as he rose out of the water. His worn muscles trembled as he dressed his wet body in his faded red tunic, iron scale armour and leather sandals. Fitting his sword into his weathered belt, Aemilius reached down again but felt only rough stone. He shook his head, he’d lost his grandfather’s silver clasp days ago, and he’d already searched the bathhouse. With a pain in his stomach, Aemilius thought of the tiny treasure; five people on a ship with several oars reaching the bottom of the hull, the bow rearing back like the neck of a gigantic sea-monster.

‘Wishing you a safe tide for your journey to Dura, and a safe tide home,’ his father had said as he fastened it to Aemilius’ tunic. Aemilius had simply smiled past the obvious incongruity that he would be riding to Dura Europos, not sailing.

Home. Aemilius’ stomach churned at the prospect as he calculated, for the hundredth time, how long it would take him to saddle his horse and ride north along the Euphrates until he reached Cappadocia, and then west, and west and west; following the coastline all the way past Cyprus and Greece, and then into Gaul before turning south into the alps and *home*. Aemilius closed his eyes and conjured an image of the Italian countryside stretching out before him, of endless

fields turned golden by the sun; a paradise for his eyes after the harsh glare of the desert.

'I confess I will not miss the desert's...' Aemilius began as he willed himself to remain calm, and walked out of the bathhouse.

The desert sun dried his skin the instant he walked under its searing rays. A cacophony barrelled towards him, shouts and cries of barbarians and Greeks as they scurried about the stone-walled city, brandishing papyri or hauling food to sell or worshipping to their gods; foreign gods with bulbous bodies and bunches of round hair. Aemilius cringed as the shouting between an older Greek man and a younger barbarian crashed into him, the pair gesturing wildly to one another.

'I have the grapes and the wine, you want wine? For some oil you'll get some wine...no, no spices won't do, for some oil you'll get some wine...Wine from here is good...for oil you'll get some barley *and* some wine...'

'I confess that I prefer Homer to...' Aemilius started, remembering a boyhood spent repeatedly reciting and copying sentence after sentence of *The Odyssey* under the strict instruction of a permanently bristled Athenian, a boyhood spent with – Aemilius shook off the memory and wandered away, eyes scouring the sand and hand reaching for the fabric at his neck. Had it been months, not days since he'd lost it? Of all the places for the clasp to be lost, out of all the men in his family to hold it in their possession –

Aemilius gulped, guilt thick like sickness.

A flash of white caught his eye and Aemilius froze, gaping at a figure standing in the middle of the small amphitheatre. Draped in a blinding white robe, the man pointed an accusing finger at Aemilius, eyes glaring.

'No, not you again,' Aemilius whispered, but he was unable to turn away from Elpidephorus, the tragic-actor. Whipping a hand behind his back, the actor pulled out a long, shining blade. Aemilius blinked rapidly, trying to – but it was too late. Elpidephorus turned the blade towards himself and plunged the shining metal into his stomach, over and over and over again. Aemilius heaved as he watched the actor's blood stain his robe and spill onto the sand, tasting that metallic tang on his tongue.

The actor vanished.

Aemilius gasped for breath.

‘W-Why? You’re d-dead,’ he rasped, ‘I buried you in the desert.’

Sweat dripped off Aemilius’ face and he felt his tunic wet against his skin again. He braced his hands on his knees as his head fell, eyes cast again upon the sand.

How long had it been since he’d lost it?

Aemilius shook his head. Forcing himself to cut off his eye’s hopeless searching, he drew his gaze upwards and saw Domitius’ quarters, a large stone building, loom above him. A coldness swirled in the pit of his stomach that even the desert could not thaw.

‘It’s time for your confession, Domitius,’ Aemilius breathed.

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Domitius stood hunched-over at the window of his private room, hands braced on the hip-high wall and gazing out at the rushing Euphrates; an apt station for The Commander of the River Bank. Aemilius stared at his – he shook his head and raised his knuckle.

Knock, knock, knock.

Domitius swung around and skittered to the side, eyes wide.

‘Aemilius?’ He asked, voice shaky.

The cavalryman nodded. He noticed ink stains on Domitius’ fingers and tunic.

‘I-I was not expecting you,’ he said warily.

‘I sent a message,’ Aemilius lied.

Domitius pursed his lips, trying to decipher Aemilius’ steady expression.

‘I must have lost it,’ Domitius replied, gesturing to the room around him. Aemilius briefly scanned the papyrus cluttering every desk and chest, some spilling onto the floor. After a pause, Domitius approached him and tentatively wrapped Aemilius in a loose embrace. Aemilius kept his arms hanging by his

side. Domitius lingered for a few seconds before inching away, their faces so close that Aemilius could see grains of sand in the lines below his eyes.

‘Wine?’ Domitius asked, glancing to a clay orange jug sitting on a table, its spout barely visible above the mountain of papyri.

Aemilius nodded.

Domitius continued to scrutinize his gaze as he took a few steps backwards to the table and pulled out the jug and two matching cups, causing more papyri to tumble to the floor. As Domitius poured the dark liquid, Aemilius thought of Caecilius, his younger brother, meticulously tending to the family orchard; one hundred and eighteen rows of the sweetest, plump grapes – grapes that Aemilius had been banned from harvesting nine years ago. He smiled as he felt a familiar pain in his right hand. Aemilius had yet to see a man as livid as Caecilius had been when he discovered that not all of the grapes would become wine. How many times his brother had punched his thieving hand, Aemilius could not remember, but he had spent the afternoon soaking it, as purple and blotchy as the grapes, in the cool of the garden fountain; the sweet taste still on his tongue.

But this was not sweet, and the orange cup made the wine look black.

‘What are you doing here?’ Domitius asked, voice light as he placed the jug back on the table. Aemilius took a long breath.

‘I was here for victory,’ he replied.

Domitius’ cautious gaze stiffened and he looked quickly down at the papyri, eyes scanning their contents so rapidly that Aemilius doubted he read a single word.

‘I was here to dominate the desert like Rome’s forbearers – like you promised we would.’

Domitius searched for a pen, dipping the point of the reed into the pot of ink so forcefully that he knocked it over. Hissing, he grabbed handfuls of papyrus and attempted to stem the stain, the blackness spreading all over his hands as he worked.

‘I lied about the messenger. But you also lied in your letters to me.’

Domitius swallowed nervously and shook his head. Aemilius was unsure if he was denying his claims or trying to shake his words away.

‘You were aware that Emperor Shapur was laying waste to every Roman city he encountered; burning them to the ground and taking whoever was left as prisoners.’

The stain now contained, Domitius plucked pieces of papyrus at random and signed them.

‘Had you always known that we would never return to receive cheers like victors – that we would never have glory?’ Aemilius raised his voice, stilling Domitius’ writing. He looked up to the cavalryman, brow furrowed.

‘Glory *is* in death, Aemilius – we will receive an applause worthy of emperors when we arrive at the Elysian plain,’ Domitius replied, and then looked back down to the papyri. A tremble ran through Aemilius’ body, causing wine to spill over his fingers. Blood running hot, he tried to compose anger into a courteous reply.

‘I confess that I shall not be receiving that applause with you, Domitius.’

Domitius looked up to him again, eyes narrowed, and Aemilius wondered for a brief moment if he could sense its rehearsal. Even so.

‘I have no taste for glory, only for good wine, and plan to be riding north shortly.’

The men stared at each other. Aemilius felt his heart pound in his chest and took another breath.

‘Our family will drink to you, and I hope that Elysium is all that you’ve desired – I am not enough of a warrior for us to meet again.’ Placing the cup on top of a stack of tax records, Aemilius turned on his heel, footsteps light as he headed for the door. He reached again for where the silver clasp should have been pinned, for the curl of the sea-monster’s neck, feeling nauseous at the thought of his father’s expression when he would return without it.

‘The die is cast, Aemilius,’ Domitius said, voice almost echoing in the stone room. Aemilius paused, the flicker of rage reigniting in his chest. He strode back to Domitius and seized him by the robe at his neck.

‘How dare you even *think* of Caesar?! Though even he misjudged how many friends he possessed!’

Domitius cringed, smudging Aemilius’ arms and armour with ink as he tried to push him away.

‘A-Aemilius,’ Domitius gasped, ‘the d-die is c-cast,’ he spluttered, clutching a crumpled piece of papyrus. Aemilius snatched it out of his grip and read:

Their army stretches further than the desert itself.

Aemilius felt his muscles turn to liquid.

‘The P-Parthians will lay siege s-soon,’ Domitius whispered as Aemilius stared at the message.

‘There is no time to ride north, Aemilius; nor south nor west nor east,’ Domitius gripped Aemilius’ shoulders and pulled himself upwards, ‘there is only *away*.’

Aemilius could no longer swallow his rage.

‘You have condemned me to death!’ he roared, lunging forward and drawing his sword. Domitius pleaded incoherently and held up his hands as he scuttled backwards, knocking the table.

Crash!

The rough, clay jug and the cups fell off the table and smashed into pieces, wine pooling on the stone floor and soaking papyrus.

Aemilius gripped one of Domitius’ writhing arms and pricked his side with the sword.

‘P-Please A-Aemilius, l-let us s-sail to E-Elysium t-together!’

Anger burned through Aemilius’ veins, a searing harsher than the desert sun.

‘The die is cast, Brutus,’ Aemilius whispered, staring into Domitius’ wide, terrified eyes. Face slackening, great heaves wracked Domitius’ body but his scream was cut short into blabbering chokes as Aemilius’ sword pierced his stomach. He convulsed violently and Aemilius felt sticky blood cascade over his

hand. Domitius frantically attempted to pry Aemilius' fingers off the handle. Legs weakening and choking mute, Domitius fell. His twitching muscles stilled.

Between long, heavy gasps, Aemilius felt his white-hot rage evaporate as he stared at the stranger splayed on the stone floor, eyes still open. Hands trembling, he backed away, almost slipping in the pool of blood around him, and ran out of the stone house. Heartbeat pounding in his ears, Aemilius was deaf to the panicked chaos of people fleeing a city about to be besieged.

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The Parthian's grip on the bow and arrow were deadly still. He seemed blind to the carnage of arrows, bodies and blood; seeing only the Roman cavalryman. Aemilius felt his blood run cold, a numbness washing over him like water.

'The die is cast,' he whispered, and closed his eyes.