

My earliest memory is of a storm, a relentless tempest that battered my birth town of Naissus. It gathered at dusk as I lay in my bed. Through the cracks in the shutters I watched the black clouds clawing across the dusk sky as if to tear down the day. Night arrived and the winds grew fiercer, howling like a pack of lost wolves, the rain lashing like a torturer's whip. When the thunder came, I trembled like the timbers of our modest home.

I shivered under my blanket, watching as the shutters strained against the storm's wrath. Then with a furious gust, they were blown open. The icy gale searched through my room, tearing the blanket from me as the rain flayed the floorboards. I gawped at the open window, then glanced to the door leading downstairs and to safety. My parents often told me I was bold – too bold – and reckless. And so it was that night, for I found myself slipping from my bed, stepping towards the flapping shutters, shielding my eyes from the forked lightning that tore the dark asunder.

Chill rain soaked my nightshirt as I grasped the sill then stretched to stand on my toes. I felt the breath catch in my throat when I saw what the storm had done to the town: the swollen river had burst its banks and now murky water tumbled through the streets in dark torrents. The pained lowing of trapped cattle sounded from nearby, and the broken corpses of others bobbed and tumbled through the deluge. I saw crying families huddled atop tumbled wagons and market stalls. Across the narrow streets I saw faces gazing out from broken shutters, eyes wide with panic.

Every soul in this ancient market town cowered. Even the imperial garrison on the walls ran, hoisting their shields and taking shelter in the turrets. But I saw something that has stayed with me to the end: a lone, silhouetted figure standing tall and motionless on the battlements, as if bemused by the storm's wrath. A legionary. He wore a sodden crimson cloak and rested his weight on his spear. While his comrades sought shelter, he remained. The squall raged around him, the rain battering on his helm and lashing over his face and shoulders. The lightning came once again and I saw his youthful features, gazing from his post and off into the northern countryside, unblinking. Through each clap of thunder, every streak of lightning, he did not flinch. I noticed his spear hand, and how white his knuckles were. He reminded me of the tall statue of Mars by the northern gates. The God of War stood like that too, spear grasped firmly.

That was when I noticed that there was something else in the clenched fist of the legionary's other hand. I could not see what it was that he held, but when I saw him lift it, whisper to and kiss it, I knew it was his source of strength as much as the spear. The reckless streak in me took hold again and I strained to get a better look, leaning further and further from the window until the rain soaked my face and my flaxen hair was plastered to my forehead. The legionary uncoiled his fingers at last. The thing sparkled in his palm. A Christian Chi-Rho, I realised – an amulet just like the one my mother wore. My strained gaze flicked from the spear to the amulet and back again. One a symbol of Mars and the other of the Christ-God. It made me wonder: on a battlefield – like those my legionary father oft fought upon back in those days – which would be more powerful?

Just then, a cry sounded from the Temple of Jove, downhill from my home where the rushing waters were deepest. People waded from the temple in panic, splashing from the grand marble entrance, into the flood. A groan of timber and thick crack of masonry rang out, before a column crumbled to the endless rush of churning water. The screaming of one man was cut short as the capital of the column dashed him like ripe fruit, the crimson stain of his blood washing into the flood.

I stared at the spot, horrified but unable to look away. At that moment, the wind whipped up as if to tear the town from the land and it pulled me from my precarious perch on the sill too. I toppled forward, a boyish cry forming in my lungs.

But hands snatched me back from the window, bolting the shutters closed once more. Mother.

‘Constantine!’ she cried, going on to berate me for my foolishness. Soon though, her tone softened. As she held me to her rose-scented bosom, drying me with a rag, I traced a finger over the silver amulet dangling from her neck – just like the soldier’s. It was more common for the women of Naissus to be seen worshipping the Christian God, which made the legionary’s choice even more intriguing. The men, and particularly the garrison, tended to follow the old gods. Indeed, Father kept a small shrine to Mars in our home.

‘You told me Christians do not make war,’ I said. ‘But outside, I saw a man on the walls, a soldier...’

She stopped drying me and held me at arm’s length. Her eyes, azure like mine, affixed me. I thought I had spoken out of turn until she sighed and said: ‘Men are men, be they Christians or otherwise, and men make war.’

I frowned. Father had often told me that I would grow to one day be a soldier like him. I had listened in awe to his prayers to Mars. Likewise, I had been spellbound by Mother’s Christian tales. ‘What brings a man to war?’ I asked, then my frown deepened. ‘What brings a man to choose his god?’

She smiled weakly and brushed a droplet of water from my cheek with her thumb. ‘That is for each of us to find out, Constantine. Our choices in this life define us. That is the journey we each must make.’

She kissed me and laid me down. Soon, the storm faded and I drifted off to sleep. My dreams were riven with the image of the legionary on the walls and one echoing question: where might my journey take me?

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