

*This book is dedicated to Ashley Oosthuizen,
whose debt I can never repay.*

The Shepherd

A Bronze Age Tale

Prelude

“Come on, Ralla, hurry up!” exhorted the younger brother, impatience and excitement each vying for supremacy within his little person who stood off center of the footpath outside their earthen home, looking back expectantly. Twilight would settle into darkness soon. The short chirps of crickets could be heard all around providing the music in which a myriad of fireflies danced along on their curvy courses. “Ra-lla!” the young boy whined out once more just as his sister’s frame entered into the yellow light emanating outwards from their front door.

She came out at a run, looking towards him with a mooning smile as she quite quickly covered the ground between them. His little body turned, at first very slowly and then at a faster pace as she passed right by him without even slowing down, giving him a playful bopping on the head as she did so. “Better hurry up, Agarus!” she called back over her shoulder tauntingly. “You don’t want to be late!”

Throughout the nearby woods similar scenes played out as one’s, two’s, three’s and sometimes even in four’s did the village’s children come, meandering their way towards its center in a fast-rising tide. Through the unmarked but intimately well-known trails they came forward out of the growing darkness, carried both by laughter and the pitter-patter of little feet against the well-worn ground.

Ralla and her brother Agarus were amongst the very last to spill forth from the numerous earthen tributaries which emptied out into the sudden clearing at the village center. Ralla suddenly stopped upon entering the circle, seeing that most of the other’s had already arrived. Agarus, running up from behind her only a moment later, did not expect the opening to be thus blocked and so collided into his sister from behind causing them both to tumble out into the silver lit sand. A few of the other children nearest to them who saw the pair’s inglorious entrance let out a quick guffaw as Ralla ignominiously began to brush the sand off herself, standing back up as she did so. Agarus, no worse for wear but also suffering from the same sandy coating himself, imitated his sister’s response, though without any of the felt embarrassment. He was still too young to suffer from that emotion yet.

“Where are we going to sit, Ralla?” questioned Agarus sincerely, looking up into his sister's face with an adorably bedraggled expression. His imitation had not been very efficient.

“Mm,” she started to hum as her head tossed back and forth in search of an answer to his very pertinently pressing question.

“Ralla!”, “Ralla!” a friendly voice called out from nearby, gesticulating with one arm in a happily frantic waving motion. As Ralla looked over to see from where the voice called she recognized Bodi sitting amongst a group of the other's, gesturing for her to come over.

“Right over there!” she answered back to her brother triumphantly while taking a hold of his hand and leading him across with her.

“I didn't think you'd make it!” cheered Bodi as Ralla and Agarus arrived to sit down and join them.

“I told her to hurry up,” Agarus whined out accusingly while directing a stinky eye over towards his older sister. “Then she left me behind in the woods alone and told me to keep up!” His last imputation had kicked up a bit of steam within the youngster who, despite not yet having ever felt shame before, had no such ignorance regarding anger or frustration. It was hard being a little brother sometimes.

“Oh, be quiet, Agarus!” snapped back Ralla with a mix of both scorn and the well-worn haughtiness of an older-sister. “I didn't leave you behind!” She paused for a moment in quick recollection. “In fact,” she went on, “you pushed me down into the sand when we got here!”

Bodi laughed as some of the others there began to turn and offer up their smiles and hello's.

“No I didn't!” cried out Agarus with all the indignation that a four-year-old could possibly muster. “I didn't see her, Bodi,” he defended himself emphatically. “I just ran into her is all,” he finished, in simple innocence.

“Hush now I said,” quipped Ralla. “Can't you see that it's about to start?”

“Shhhh’s,” commenced passing up from amongst the throng of little heads throughout the crowd, beginning first with the eldest one’s and then quickly cascading down the ages. The smallest amongst them had to be gently prodded into silence a few moments later as they had simply begun to imitate and repeat back the “shhh’s” that they had heard and seen from everybody else.

“Well now,” entered in the comforting and familiar voice of the old patriarch as silence got itself underway. He sat there perched upon a rock beneath the night sky like some antiquated owl. “Let’s see here,” he paused in brief rumination before continuing on. “Have I ever told you children the story about the shepherd?” he asked them, swinging his loving gaze from left to right towards the gaggle of little ones who had so recently gathered about his feet.

“No, Grandpa!” shouted out the youngest one, followed by two and then three littlest one’s in rapid succession.

“Only the one time,” answered another who was a few years older.

“We want to hear it again!” came the same reply in unison from the oldest pair who, together with all the rest, were spread lying and sitting about on the ground in front of him in eager anticipation. Sparks crackled and shot upwards from the embering camp fire, sporadically illuminating the enveloping darkness as the storyteller thus prepared himself to speak.

“Alright then,” the old owl let out with customary ease. “Listen to me now then my children,” his regalement started. “This tale I tell you now must be well remembered,” his eyes searched the faces which were all staring intently right back at him, “everything in it is as true as each of you is alive right now.” He paused for effect, looking about them as the silence lingered on for another moment. “And even more miraculous than that truth,” he began anew, “is that it was all brought about by a mere shepherd, just a boy, no older than you are now, Bodi,” finished the elder, looking out towards the middling child as he concluded speaking thus. The others all passed quick glances towards him, including Ralla, who gave him a little nudging on the side as well.

“Mm-hmph,” sounded the old one, clearing his throat to begin as the littlest ones once more jostled and jumbled themselves closer together for a better position.

“It was during the time of great war,” he started out serious and morose, looking about his audience as he did so, the youngest of which were already lost by captivity. “There was a terrible suffering of the people throughout the land,” the speaker continued on with eyes widened and arms spreading out. “Armies with their soldiers ravaged and ransacked freely, afflicting everyone, man and beast alike with their violent and savage destructions,” the wizened old elder brooded ominously. “The Gods, it seemed, had abandoned our people for a time, children.” He drew off once more, gazing into the flickering flames of the nearby fire before adding ponderously. “Or perhaps, it was *we* who had abandoned them.”

The Shepherd

Ch. 1

Wooden wagon wheels creaked and groaned beneath their heavy loads as the dust-filled road filled with the clanging and clattering sounds of marching soldiers. The afternoon sun loomed high in an otherwise cloudless azure sky, bellowing down a fiery heat like the breath of some great dragon. Slow and steady then did the immensely armored serpent slide as it traversed itself across the land in pursuit of its own head.

“Bollocks it’s bloody hot t’day idden it?” jettisoned out one of the helmeted mercenaries to the comrade trudging alongside himself halfway down the line.

“Hmph?” Grumbled back the other soldier stiffly, looking up one-eyed and half-cocked, as one who is walking under a heavy burden is apt to do.

“Eye said it’s right bloody hot t’day idn’t?” the first man reiterated more loudly, looking over sideways towards the other as he did so. “Like Persipinese cunt eye’d say,” he finished with a restrained laugh as he reshifted the heavy kit worn about his back.

“Aye, strenuous day it is,” replied the other soldier laconically, returning his gaze back down towards the Earth as one step followed the other in a ceaseless repetition. Somewhere off in the distant front could be heard the low thumps of the war drums keeping a cadence.

“I’d give ten sequesties to be back in Pharsalus right now,” carried on the first man with unprovoked fondness. “The women, the weather, the food, ah,” he let go a sigh of happy remembrance before continuing on, “it’s enough to make a man want to put down roots and raise a flock I’d say,” he concluded in earnest, keeping his face turned towards the other while he did so.

“It shan’t be too many hours longer,” spoke back the second of the two, more out of cordiality than a willingness to speak.

“I had a misses there you know,” told the first and much larger of the two men. He was a lumbering sort of fellow, both uncanny tall and full of girth. “My misses there,” he continued on unabatedly, “she told me I’d regret leaving her pretty person to go off marching with you lot,” he finished with a laugh, shaking his head in hindsight.

“Humph,” came the short reply with just enough hint of amusement for the first to continue on talking.

“Well she was right I’d say, gold and plunder be damned,” he lamented. “All it’s been since signing on is march, march, march, always just march but never no rhyme or reason to it all. Titan’s balls it’s hot out!” he complained loudly in exaggerated exasperation, wiping away the sweat from off of his own brow.

“They’ll be gold and plunder a plenty,” retorted the second soldier back knowingly. “After the fighting’s done.”

“You’ve been with this outfit before then av ya?” Returned the living giant out of curiosity.

'Aye,' answered the second. He himself was a shorter, humorless type of man. Both squat as well as brutish with thick forearms and an intemperate demeanor. A perpetual half scowl seemed dressed to his countenance, even when not marching with a full load under the hot summer's sun.

"This is my third campaign with the general," he stated flatly, "I've land and a farm back East from the first two," he told prior to carrying on, "and after this last one, gods be praised, I'll have enough to live out the remainder of my days in peace, with my family," he ended with a heavy emphasis.

"Land and a farm back East he says," whistled back the first of the two men with a good natured approbation, as if to say, 'well look at this high and mighty fellow!' "Alright then," he stated, "I'm happy to hear that I am," continued the friendly stranger with a ready smile.

"Wife and little one's too then?" questioned the huge man further.

"Indeed," replied the scowler who was becoming more willing to engage as familiarity increased.

"I've a wife as well as two daughters," he paused in a moment of fond recollection. "My wife was pregnant with our third when last I left out," his story continued. "She will have been with child by now," figured the father, a hint of worry and concern creeping into his otherwise stern voice. "A boy I hope," he finished stoutly, looking up and over full for the first time at the person marching next to him, a slight smile creeping into the corners of his square mouth.

"No worries friend!" comforted the first back cheerfully. "She'll be right as rain she will," he reasoned convincingly, "yew made all the proper prayers and sacrifices did yew not?"

"Yes, yes of course I did," flew back the quick and obvious answer.

"Well see there?" replied the first with a confident ease, his assuredness rubbing off onto the other. "You've got nothing to worry about then!"

The morose soldier's smile widened.

"The gods clearly favor you my friend. My friend..?" he let hang.

"Yusri," answered back the shorter of the two men.

"Yusri is it? Right fine name I'd say," complimented back the first with niceness. "They call me Grieves myself."

"Grieves?" Yusri reiterated.

"Eye, that's the one," he confirmed. "I never really did care for it myself, on account of its much too easy to pick a pun." He gave examples, "always it's 'what's grieving you today Grieves?' or 'sorry to Grieves you but - .'"

Yusri chuckled slightly.

"Why then did your people name you thus?" he questioned back a little curiously.

"Not rightly sure I suppose," came the shrugging reply. "Perhaps it was that they wasn't too pleased by my person!" he finished, letting out an uproarious laugh as he admired his own perceived wit.

Yusri shook his head in amusement as the two marched on, squeezed both between the mass of men and beasts to their front and the other similar mass that was constantly pushing up from the rear. Clouds of dust hung about them like fog on a windless morning. The piles of excrement from all of the pack animals had to be near constantly stepped over and avoided.

"Third campaign tho is it?" asked Grieves nonchalantly after a few moments had passed. "Yew mustuv been in some real right uns then," he questioned further. "Eye'v urd stories eye av."

A glint of soldier's pride gleaned off from the eyes of Yusri as he replied in the affirmative that it was so.

“There were some red days,” he began, “that’s why I don’t so much mind the marching.” He shifted back to his front before adding gloomily, “the marching’s the easy part.”

Grievess searched the man next to him under an inquisitive stare.

“Were you at Aventum?” he decided to ask.

“I was,” retorted Yusri.

“Gods alive!” exclaimed Grievess with an unrestrained adulation. “Eye’ve ear stumbled upon a lucky star eye av.”

Yusri stayed silent while Grievess prattled.

“Was eye urd it that no great many made it out that day unscathed,” recounted Grievess, recording what he had heard from others not there to one who actually was. “An yet ere yew are, a right champion e is!” congratulated Grievess with a jovial acclamation.

“It was a day of unrestrained slaughter and bloodshed,” Yusri remonstrated back coldly, an involuntary angst taking sudden grip of his heart as he did so. “I was almost cut down more times than I can remember,” he continued on through the intense trepidation, “countless others fell in death and agony all around me,” his chest space tightened even further as memory flashed back that day’s horrid abyss of deadly mayhem into the forefront of his mind. “We held the line,” was all that he ended with after a moment’s silence in which he breathed out heavily, shaking free the foul remembrance by force.

“My apologies friend Yusri,” soothed Grievess gingerly, “eye meant no harm by it.”

Quiet reigned supreme as the previous instant’s severity lingered in advance of passing.

“Is it true that the general’s never lost a battle?” Grievess salvoed out next, switching the topic of conversation.

“Aye, it’s true,” Yusri answered back plainly enough, his usual laconic manner restored.

“Long may it continue,” responded Grieves solemnly as he made a sign to the Gods.

“Long may it continue,” repeated Yusri with an equal reverence while imitating the same sign.

“Any idea where we’re headed to now then?” Grieves inquired after with sore shoulders and a pair of burning feet.

Over there,” Yusri pointed off into the distance close to where the plain ended near the mouth of a deep mountain valley. A fat river ran lazily along the backside cutting its course down towards the lowlands from whence they’d come. Already could be seen the columns front breaking off from the road and beginning to spread out into the grassy plain to set up camp.

“Thank the gods,” answered Grieves in happy relief.

Ch. 2

A pack of mounted scouts galloped wildly across the outcropped terrain, hair and manes both pulled taut by the winds' swift passing. Their horses' hooves made fly rock, turf and gravel with one foul swoop as the black riders rode in reckless abandon enroute to the far side of the mountain's valley where the great army had not yet penetrated. Last year they came to observe. This year was to be their invasion.

The forward patrol spotted something. It was a most curious sight to behold and one which appeared all the stranger as distance decreased. Yet from the time they had first laid eyes upon the apparent enigma and subsequently began their approach, it had made no attempt to either hide nor flee.

As they reached the wall of white wool which formed the outskirts of the kernel they checked their horses speed into a canter before forcing themselves a path through the cacophony of bah's and alarmed bleats. It was a flock of hundreds and yet when they finally reared up and pulled harshly their stallions to a still it was but a mere boy who wore the cloak of shepherd. A very strange scene to behold indeed.

"You, boy!" called down the group's captain harshly from atop his slickened steed, next near to shouting. "What is the meaning of this foolish madness?"

"The old ones must have seen us coming and run off," one of his men answered him, looking about as he did so, "they didn't want to lose the flock and so they forced the boy to stay."

"They would have known that it was lost already," countered another, "so why lose the boy then too?"

Such was all that occurred within the same few moments of the horsemen stopping next to the Juniper tree in whose shade the boy was bathing. He seemed oblivious to their arrival as he stood up, blinking on account of the sun's brightness.

"Hullo there," he greeted them openly in a rustic dialect through squinted eyes that were further sheltered by a small hand outstretched above both his brow. His tilted head showed up without guile into the faces of both men and mount alike, the latter of which were still foaming at the mouth and pawing impatiently their restless hooves upon the dry earth.

The angrily astonished captain gripped hard his horse's whip before lashing it down hot upon the impertinent youth whose cry of pain and reflexive leap backwards each coincided. The other's input was ignored as the captain maintained his fierce vigil over the freshly terrified child. "Where are your people thus and why have they left you alone here?" he barked again with temper flaring.

The young shepherd boy remained with his hand held fast to the spot of stinging impact. The corners of both his eyes had already sprang forth small streams which ran in dirty trails down the cheeks of his dusty face. "I have no people sir and I am not alone here," he sniveled back, full of fright and demure.

"Speak sense boy!" roared the captain, raising high his hand and whip once more in preparation to strike.

"I have no people sir and I am not alone here!" the sheep herder cried out again despairingly, cowering like a trapped prey before the baying hounds.

"The boy is a fool," commented the rider nearest to the captain.

"I say we kill the boy and send the sheep back into camp," chimed in another with lackadaisical indifference.

"Aye," agreed a third, "we still have to clear the mountain pass before nightfall," he said, looking up towards the unchecked approaches, "we've no time to waste on a peasant with no breasts," he concluded, grinning round to the others.

"Now now, don't be so quick to judge Finnigan," jested another of the scouts to the group at idle, "we all know Timon fancies a good buggering of the youth every now and again," he finished, looking over expectantly at the butt of the joke's witticism.

"Yah yah," came the accented rebuttal right on que, "that's very funny coming from the man who learned to fuck by using goats." The rest, aside from the captain and boy, laughed heartily.

At the onset of laughter the captain broke free his ire-filled glare and turned himself back around to face the others.

"And which one of you rapacious and rapining fools is going to lead these many sheep back into the camp that's so many leagues away?" he interrogated, "you Rickimer?"

Another rider who was drawing wine from out of his goatskin burst into fresh mirth, spewing purple mist throughout the air. He was not the only one to be tickled by such a fancy.

"Silence!" the captain interjected loudly to his men, "damn children," he scolded them, taking command. "Matrius," he looked over to whom he spoke, "you will take the shepherd with his flock back into camp."

"The rest of us," he turned back to the other's, "will continue on to reconnoiter the forward passes as ordered."

"Yes captain," submitted the chosen man to his dictated task, looking across towards his new charge as he did so. "And what of the boy once camp is reached?"

"Do as you like," retorted the captain with brisque flippantry, not even deigning to look over, "only be sure to give my compliments to the general for all the fresh mutton," he directed by a final glance.

"Yes captain," affirmed Matrius. "Your compliments to the general, will do sir."

"Alright then the rest of you villainous bastards," rallied the captain to his remaining troops.

"Try not to let any wander away on the way back now shepherd Matrius," Finnigan playfully derided as he and his mount prepared to make haste.

"Try not to bugger n'e of'm either!" added another cheekily for good measure.

"Leave off!" The captain shouted, slapping down the whip onto his charger's rear to restart the hunt. The other riders quickly circled and then dug deep their horses hindquarters into the ground ahead of pushing off in pursuit up towards the mountain passes. Matrius sat atop his own steed and watched them go a little distant before he turned and gave consideration to his own assignment in detail for the first time.

The little shepherd boy was sitting crouched beneath the same Juniper tree whose shade he had been caught resting watching silently the retreating horsemen go.

"Gather your flock shepherd," spoke Matrius calmly after a few moments ponderance, "some've begun to run astray."

A small bunch of the animals had in fact been scared away by the recent commotion and were now loitering about the nearby hill which formed a base to the mountain slope.

"Did you hear what I said?" the horseman asked, growing slightly vexed.

The youth turned his attention to the lone scout remaining with a wary perplexion. "Yessir," he answered plainly with an adjoining nod of deference.

"Off with you then," commanded Matrius, "and be quick about it," he bespoke in mild threat, "or you will find my whip to be as thick as the captains and no less studded," he finished, flashing the same type of whip as had been used to injure him previous.

The young sprout sprung up quickly from his stance and immediately set about regathering the flock without a sound, swiftly scurrying about in order to bring his large collection back into a single muster.

Matrius retrieved from his pouch a cuff of bread and proceeded to eat and drink in observant silence until the boy completed his task.

"Come here shepherd," Matrius instructed him after the herd was corralled.

The boy did as he was told, approaching with cautious apprehension and keeping a firm eye on the rider's whip as he did so. Matrius, noticing the cause for concern, provided some small reassurance. "Don't worry," he calmed ineffectually, "I'll not beat you without a reason."

Thus did the youth slowly shirk alongside the horseman's mount looking both downcast and afraid. "Take this," Matrius then ordered him as he handed off his remaining chunk of loaf.

"It will be a long walk back to camp," he instructed him as the latter began to eat in hunger, "you must take in enough food and drink now to keep your strength up," he watched him as he spoke. "I'll not play the part of shepherd should you decide to fall out half way," informed the scout with a sour haughtiness while peering at the herd.

The subject of regard ate quickly and quietly beneath the scouts steady gaze until Matrius handed over his goatskin as well. "Now drink," he ordered him, "and then we'll make ready."

The skin was dutifully accepted and the shepherd did as he was told, drinking to quench his thirst. "Careful boy," Matrius chided him crossly after many swallows, "that's wine not water."

Hearing this the sheep herder ceased his suckling and politely handed back up the leathern pouch before wiping an arm across his mouth and belching loudly.

Matrius spied the young youth curiously while resecuring the wineskin back onto his mount. "Enough waiting then," he started abruptly, "you're going to bring your flock with me back into our camp, is that understood?" inquired the horseman directly.

"Yessir," the shepherd boy repeated once more with a simple compliance.

"Good then, let's go," Matrius began, nudging his mount into walking.

"Hulloo!" called out the shepherd boy unexpectedly, taking Matrius slightly off guard. It sounded almost like an owl trying to say hello. "Hulloo!" he repeated again to the flock at large whose ears at once pricked up to the apparently familiar wailing.

Matrius watched while the boy repeated his call and to his own surprise a part of the circular gathering which was closest to the camp began to break free from their orbital animus and peel off in that direction.

Once gotten underway, Matrius made his way to the back of the herd from where the shepherd boy led them and began to walk his horse beside him.

"What did you mean when you told the captain earlier that you weren't alone here?" he scrutinized.

"The sheep," the boy answered plainly.

"The sheep?" Matrius questioned back, not understanding.

"Yessir," the young lad confirmed, "the sheep are with me."

"So you really are a fool then?" Matrius said to him, staring low as he did so.

"All things are possible," the shepherd boy replied after a few moment's pause.

“Hulloo,” he then called out again. Its use seemed to bring the flock back on center whenever parts of the wings began to spread.

“What is your name shepherd?” probed Matrius further with a mild interest.

“My name is Pan, Pan Shepherd,” he answered whilst still looking up and walking alongside.

“Pan?” Matrius queried, “what peculiar names you bumpkins have,” he said out loud though mostly to himself.

“What about your parents? Your family?” he paused before proceeding, “who looks after you?”

“Looks after me?” copied back Pan with strangeness. He was starting to look around with a sort of dimmed confusion on his face.

“Yes boy,” Matrius stoked hotly. “Where are your people thus?” he reiterated again for the second time.

Immediately Pan responded by proclaiming rather more loudly than the situation warranted, “I have no people sir and I am not alone here!”

“You make jest with me peasant?” Matrius checked him angrily.

“Hulloo!” suddenly cried out the shepherd, his shout mingling with the added sound of humor as it carried towards the flock. “Hulloo!” He repeated a second time just a moment later, this rendition being even louder than the first and with an accompanying saunter as pair.

At this fresh outrage Matrius reached out his left leg and kicked Pan hard directly in the shoulder causing him to fall down. It did not however have the desired effect.

“Hulloo!” he garbled out once more from his prostrated position on the ground, resulting in himself getting all the more lost into laughter.

The furiously stunned scout required a few more seconds of perturbed thought to figure out the youth's sudden caprice until it finally dawned on him. The little shepherd boy was drunk.

"Gods alive," Matrius derided scoldingly under his breath.

"You've never drank wine before?" he called down incredulously from atop his horse, the tone gone from that of threatening to that of surprised disappointment.

"No sir!" came the cackled response as the boy's giggling continued on unabated whilst stumbling side to side and trying to regain himself back on solid ground. "Hullo!" he called again on shaky legs between the near ceaseless cascades of laughter.

"Pan!" the horseman shouted from above as the young shepherd boy continued to wave and wobble unsteadily. He had gone from being loud and animated to right after becoming still and silent.

"Get co.." just as Matrius began to speak, Pan opened up his mouth and let fly a stream of purple vomit that fell into the middle of the trail. The sickly child stood there for an instant longer and then opened up his oral cavity for a second time to let loose another gastric river that was sent splashing down descendant into the first before his eyes glazed over and he fell to the ground sideways, moaning incoherently.

"Sons of Disc!" Matrius cursed aloud once more, unable to yet accept his rotten luck. 'Why does everything have to be so damned difficult?' he asked himself in upset exasperation whilst looking low at the incapacitated youth who was now wallowing pathetically in the dirt.

Matrius jumped off of his horse and yanked the young shepherd up by his woolen garment.

"Look at me!" he shouted, attempting the use of noise to force his way through the intoxicated inebriation. The boy's body responded more like that of a rag doll than a person, it being unable to hold neither firm nor form.

The flock meanwhile continued on its way and was now fast dispersing without the constant attention and shepherding of the now hammered Pan.

“Look at me I said!” Matrius yelled again, slapping the boy across his face hard enough to awaken a flash of dazed eyes which lost their luster almost as soon as the focus was gained.

Matrius let fall the lifeless body back into the dust with disgust. ‘How ridiculous,’ he thought to himself. ‘Now what am I to do?’

As he looked through his mind in search of an answer, one became readily apparent.

“Come here you little bastard,” spoke Matrius roughly as he pulled up young Pan like one does a pup by its collar.

He next climbed back aboard his mount and stuck the sauced up shepherd in between his own legs propped up against himself.

The boy slept heavily as his sheep increasingly became a gaggle instead of flock with each passing second.

“Haa!” Matrius called out when he kicked his horse into gear and began moving at a trot back towards the mutton herd. Something had to be done and soon in order to induce all the animals back together again.

Matrius looked down at the passed out Pan to make sure that he was really a slumber before he cleared his throat and attempted with much embarrassment to imitate what he had seen and heard prior.

“Huhlew!” he called out awkwardly and with faulty tone. Not a single lamb responded in the slightest.

“Furies slay me!” Matrius swore under his breath, the warmth of shame creeping up from his core and causing himself to feel even more heat than what nature was already providing in abundance.

He sighed heavily and then prepared himself to try again. “Hullee!” he countered, different from the first. It wasn’t correct, but it was coming closer. “Hullee, hullo, hullo,” whispered the horseman repeatedly as minutes passed by trying desperately to get the sound just right ahead of making another go towards the flock at large.

“Hullo!” Matrius then let fly without restraint and was at once rewarded by the sight of innumerable ears pricking up from the call. “That’s more like it,” he said aloud as his calm and confidence, both so recently on the ebb tide, now began to flood back in.

“Hullo!” he repeated, each effort becoming more and more natural until eventually the sheep could not tell any difference between them. “Hullo!” he continued on until the flock was once again just as it had been until the little shepherd boy had gotten himself lost into drink. ‘Little wretch,’ Matrius thought to himself, though without much of the earlier conviction he had once felt. Now with an even keel restored his feelings of scorn and frustration had dissipated quickly so that he was soon returned to his naturally neutral demeanor.

Thus did Matrius continue to accompany the large flock in a slow but steady movement back down towards the camp below. The caravan traveled for some hours like that as it descended its way out of the mountains and into the valley. Eventually when the sprawling encampment was well within sight and the sun low amongst the clouds, Pan Shepherd himself began to rouse once more.

“Oh,” he groaned piteously in his place, still leaning back against the rock that was Matrius’ chest.

“Is that you shepherd?” the horseman poked with some amusement once he heard the mewing start, “now you wish to rejoin us a?” Matrius interrogated with an easy spite, “lazy dog,” he saddled on lightheartedly.

The boy made no attempt to answer. He was feeling crippled by the splitting headache of alcohol induced dehydration.

Matrius, knowing all too well the effects in which the young youth now suffered patted his back heavily and told him that, “the pain in your head will soon cease once water is taken.”

“Do you have any?” croaked Pan with hopefulness.

“I do not,” the scout disappointed him mightily.

“I,” Pan’s voice broke and then cracked from the dryness of his own mouth before he began anew. “I do not remember how I got here,” he said through squinted eyes and thick saliva.

“You had your first drink today at my expense,” Matrius reminded him without much kindness. “Then you became ill and lost all manner of sense so that I was forced to carry you.”

“Why?” asked the sheep herder blankly.

“Why what?” questioned Matrius back the same.

“Why did you carry me?” doubled down Pan.

The bemused Matrius was at first taken aback but by-and-by he told him.

“What?” he first queried, “you wanted that I leave a perfectly good lad like you to the buzzards?” he paused in wait, “Pah,” he continued after no remark was made, “I think not,” he said in conclusion, “you’ll fetch a fair price at the meat market anyhow.”

Pan did not understand the connotation.

“I do not remem...,” as Pan began to speak he suddenly became like the small green lizards that lived off the coast and which can be put to sleep by gently covering their eyes and then pushing in lightly on their belly. They always awaken a short time later after being lain on their backs and when they do find themselves awake it is quite unnaturally upside down! So like the lizard then did Pan too almost leap from his half conscious position, opening his eyes at once fully to the waning sun whilst at the same time crying out “my she...,” but even before he had finished the words his sight had shown him clear as day that there was indeed no mystery. His sheep were right there where they were supposed to be, casually strolling closer to the enlarging camp in the not so distant.

“What has happened?” Pan asked again with growing alarm and unease, trying to slip himself out of his seat atop Matrius' horse.

Matrius let him slide off whence he stumbled back to his feet and began glancing around like a cat searching for mice. “Don’t be stupid,” he said, looking down sharply. “You drank too much wine and became unconscious,” charged the horseman with mid-ranged accusation. “Now that you’re awake again however you will finish leading these many sheep back into camp for me,” he ordered, gesturing across in that direction.

Looking around Pan Shepherd could see clearly that he was now far away from either home or choice. Thus was he forced into meekly surrendering to Matrius' will and so once more took to the position of walking in line behind his bleating herd while feeling miserable.

“How did you keep them all together?” Pan asked Matrius after a few minutes spent traveling with no speech.

“I copied you,” he told him, looking over with a grin.

Pan nodded in acknowledgement ahead of speaking further, “what will happen to them now?” he next wanted to know.

“We will eat them of course,” Matrius answered obviously.

“Eat them?” Pan bewailed loudly and in a panic, “but who?”

Matrius pondered the boy curiously once more prior to making up his final mind and rebutting him sharply, “the army you little fool.”

Ch. 3

Dusk was onset when Matrius' caravan of meat and wool finally arrived themselves at the camp's front entrance. The little sheep herder who walked alongside them had by now for hours been dragged to the bottom under the crushing weight of fatiguing despair. "Hullooo," he still crooned dryly whenever necessary, though only sporadically and with a half hearted conviction. Matrius by comparison was in very high spirits indeed after having almost completed his orders and now being soon set to collect his rewards by way of both the cooks and the slavers.

As the flock with its escorts reached the newly built wooden palisades right outside the main entranceway a scribe who was on assigned duty there took quick notice of their approach.

"Well now," he whistled impressively, catching the attention of some others nearby. "It looks like fresh meat's what's on for supper tonight then boys!" he called back well pleased over his shoulder as the first lamb in the pack of hundreds reached him.

"Fine work by your lot today it seems scout," complimented the one who had started scribbling in keeping tally of each bypassing sheep. "What troupe are you with?" he next asked without taking sight off his records.

"Captain Faroh's squadron," Matrius responded with the correct esteem from atop his well worn stallion.

"Captain Faroh," the scribe repeated whilst still looking downwards at his work of pressing marks and notches into the soft clay tablet, "and where are they now may I ask?" inquired the same author who now gazed up for a moment in order to better hear his reply.

"They continued reconnoitering the forward passes," informed Matrius, "Captain Faroh charged me with bringing in these provisions while they continued making their runs."

"Very good," replied the scribe whilst staring down in fixation upon his earthen template and making fresh impressions upon it. "Very good indeed," he reiterated, no doubt made happy by the sheer amount of unexpected supplies that were being delivered on his watch.

As this interaction proceeded Pan Shepherd could only stand there mutely, being both too despondent and weak to speak.

“Okay,” the record keeper piped in once more, “actually sorry, my apologies,” he corrected himself, “may I ask you for your name?” he probed further, “for the accounting purposes.”

“My name is Matrius,” the scout spoke freely but with the first few flurries of impatience blowing in.

“Matrius,” the scribe repeated without facing up though still nodding his head in the affirmative, “I’ve got it all now,” he told him, “you’re free to go,” waved on the bureaucrat with a bookworm’s authority, “these men will take it all from here,” he ended, giving a last thankful looking off to the scout before turning away and calling over to some of his associates on hand.

“Let’s go,” Matrius directed curtly towards Pan who himself was in the midst of a profound anguish watching his entire life being taken away from him without so much as a word. He could hardly contain the misery which boiled up to readily apparent even throughout his weakened state.

“I said move,” Matrius broke in forcefully a second time, flashing a grim countenance and his horse’s whip as a sign of what was to come should the young Pan Shepherd continue with any further disregard.

Pan accepted his admonishment with a bowed head and obedience. Large tears swelled both eyes full before he wiped a hand across them and walked quietly over.

“Give me your hands,” Matrius next ordered him upon his arrival, forcing Pan into blind submission.

Matrius then took hold of his request and tied them each together with a length of slackened rope hide so that soon he wound up tethered to both man and beast alike. “Wouldn’t want to lose you now,” he accentuated with a mocking humor whilst clapping on the last knot.

Pan could only watch in tearful silence as he was being held fast. After the restraint was completed he was then dutifully informed by pleased demeanor to, “follow me,” and with that

cryptic expression alone leading the way Matrius then put his horse back into walking so that both he and his new bound prize quickly swelled into the now swollen complex.

The young prisoner was thus forced to keep up or else be dragged and so despite his enfeebled condition he continued to fall forward one foot after the other towards a destination unknown.

He walked atop planks of bare wood laid over skinny rails of ground which on either side had already become deep and sticky with the gunk and grime of ten thousand men and animals. He saw women with flamboyantly colored garments and bright hair sitting and standing outside of various cloth built establishments wearing broken smiles that were supposed to appear pretty to all those who passed them by. Pan had never himself seen so many people in that crowded and confined a space before and so for a little while he quite completely forgot about his ill health and total loss. His fresh mind had completely escaped into the dizzying array of wondrous new sights and sounds that were abounding all around him.

They passed on their way through narrow alleys of tents and ramshackle workshops that were propped up with loose wood and spare parts. Each and all were jam packed full with bronze clad men who both looked and smelled atrocious to the little shepherd boy that was only used to fresh air and open spaces. Everywhere he looked were seen cooking pots, stacked weapons and large groups of horridly barbarous men babbling, laughing and sometimes even fighting with one another. The smells of shit, mud and food were almost too overpowering for the light-headedly famished and exhausted young shepherd to stand.

As the pair were making their way through a clearing in the encampment which had a great white and splotched gray tabernacle with soldiers standing guard outside around its front, Matrius stopped his horse abruptly causing Pan to awaken from out his daze. He saw his captor give salute to a group of importantly dressed horsemen who were just then entering in from the other side of the bounds.

“General!” Matrius snapped to with obvious deference towards the leader of the bunch after the latter had taken his notice. First he flew up his right knuckle to forehead and then after bent his neck deep in homage.

“Ah,” came the deeply taut voice from that who was formed finest of all figures there while atop his resplendently red stallion, “you are one of Faroh’s men,” he said approvingly and with confidence. “Tell me,” he wanted to know, “where is your captain now?” asked the general, looking around searchingly. “I have still not received any word or reports from his quarter.”

Matrius looked to Pan as though he had just been transfixed from a man into some sort of talking statue while he answered with his monotonous reply. “General,” he stated formally and with immense respect, “my captain sent me along with this shepherd boy and his flock back into the encampment,” he paused for a small period before carrying on, “the rest of the men continued up to reconnoiter the forward passes and should be returned back here by nightfall.” He then relayed the message that he was instructed to pass along earlier as well, “I was charged in addition by Captain Faroh to give his compliments to you sir on account of all the mutton,” Matrius loyally reported.

“Did he now?” replied back the piqued general with a freshly purchased goodwill, “and how much did the good captain send us?” fished the commander pryingly.

Matrius looked across to Pan for the first time during this brief encounter and saw that he too was staring intently right back at him. “I,” Matrius started and then broke off under the commanders piercing gaze to begin a new, “er,” he stuttered quickly but continued on catching himself timely enough, “there were too many to count General,” was the firmly forced reply finally proffered, “hundreds though I’m sure,” pinned the scout on further gratuitously.

The general's eyes seemed to shine right through them both as he conspicuously looked from one and then the other. “Hundreds you say?” he questioned deeper, seeking for an exaggeration.

“Yes General,” Matrius confirmed with wide-eyed affirmation, “without a doubt.”

The general looked again to the destitute young boy made captive at the back of Matrius’ mount. “With only this single boy as guard?” he interrogated deeper, directing a suspiciously uncertain brow outwards in Pan’s direction.

“Yes General,” Matrius confirmed again with the highest esteem.

“Explain how,” dictated the general with supreme authority, like a tiger’s growl, “quickly.”

Matrius immediately and obediently obeyed, recounting the trip in its entirety to the general with his attending staff present. As the expounding wound further and story of Pan’s drinking wine and then getting drunk was told even the general himself simpered slightly above imperceptive at its telling.

After Matrius had finished giving his recounting, the general turned eyes back onto young Pan, “you, shepherd,” his iron voice followed right after, “how could you keep so many sheep by yourself?”

Pan stared back thoughtfully while his ruminating mind searched out for an answer. “I don’t rightly know sir,” came the worn-down and parched response handed out a few seconds later, “I kept them and they kept me I suppose,” ended the rustics tale sadly.

“You couldn’t have watched over so many sheep alone,” the keen-eyed general accused him, “so who helped you?” he demanded to know, “where are your people?” scented the commander ravenously like how a zealot hunts rats.

Upon the last inquisition Pan Shepherd instinctively replied, “I have no people sir and I am not alone here.”

“What do you mean that you are not alone here?” shot back the general with his penetrating curiosity directly across Pan’s bows.

“The boy is a fool,” broke in Matrius swiftly who already knew well what the upcoming answer would be, “he has a special way with the sheep your grace but in all else is as simple as a mule,” Faroh’s horseman blurted out.

The general stared at Pan for a short while longer in advance of turning away back to Matrius and speaking with him directly.

“Be sure to give my compliments to your captain as well,” the general honored, tipping his head slightly after the fact, “we never do fail to find satisfaction in his dealings,” he stringed along the

comment further as both he and his entourage made move to end their impromptu rendezvous and head back towards the tabernacle.

Before the general broke free his heavy gaze from them completely however, young Pan Shepherd erupted into a passionate cry and fell down onto his knees within the sticky black mud to begin wringing his tied together hands in fervent plea.

“Please sir!” he cried over to the commander and chief with a pitiful wailing and the gnashing of teeth, “Do not let them take away my sheep from me!”

Matrius flew back a withering stare at the now groveling Pan Shepherd and immediately jerked the leathern binding hard so that the boy was flung over sideways with half his face landing down in mud. Still he begged on.

“Please sir, please!” Pan cried hopelessly, “do not let my lambs be eaten!” It was a deplorable scene and one in which the general did not at all appear eager to acquiesce to.

“The boy really is a fool,” smarted the general aloud to some rattling laughter outside of his cabal. He gave another look back towards Matrius in acknowledgement to the apparent fact proved.

Matrius moved to kick the boy hard. “Tell me,” the general broke in ahead of the strike, his resonant voice cutting seamlessly through all of the shepherd boy’s pleafull lamentations, “where are you taking him?”

“To the slavers General,” recorded Matrius, bowing his head and with one hand still on the jerkin.

“He’s unlikely to fetch a very high price now,” lessoned the commander knowingly, “not in his present condition.”

Matrius looked back to the broken down, exhausted and mud-soaked youth with some consideration of that fact before the general again opened his mouth to speak.

“Since you wish to sell him anyway however,” he said with a well seasoned nonchalance, “then one of my officers here will accord you the proper sum for his worth.”

“General?” double checked the flabbergasted Matrius incredulously.

“He will make a very fine slave no doubt,” elucidated the towering warlord with surety, “the simple ones always do.”

Ch. 4

Having thus been unexpectedly freed from one master the young Pan Shepherd was then immediately yolked onto another. The boy’s lips still quivered like a bowstring as he was being led away by the two footbound attendants that were duly assigned with having his vile filth removed.

“Move faster dog,” sneered venomously the first escort who was leading the group’s way through a maze of men, carts and animals. He wedged open the crowd by his passing and it stayed that way because of the reeking, crusty young youth following closely behind who none would dare touch with anything more than just their eyes. Upon the third man’s clearance however the trio’s wake was immediately made buried back into the endless sea of movement which ceaselessly churned about them on all sides.

“I can smell the foul wretch from here,” opined the rear guard forwards disdainfully, “it’s burning my nostrils.”

Pointed as their barbs may be however, the insults only echoed past harmlessly. The fatigue and dehydration coupled with his abject loss had left young Pan in a state of almost total discombobulation.

“The river will help to wash off some of his stink,” joked back the wedge jarringly as he continued to unceremoniously push and shove his way between the thickened masses, “it will do nothing for his looks though!” he laughed behind insultingly.

As they left the densely packed center area towards a more sparsely filled outskirts the jostling and jumbings gradually decreased. A few minutes more saw them reach the rear of the camp that was nested itself along a soft crook in the wide channel which flowed by ever peaceful like a brook stream. In the water could still be seen all manner of persons bathing, washing or simply fetching it out for their own needs.

The young shepherd was himself led across to a spot on the riverbank near many others and ordered to disrobe by his two guards in preparation of being forced into bathe despite his own nakedness.

“Hurry up!” berated unkindly a one towards the tepidly moving Pan who still had enough sense leftover to feel ashamed at his own exposure.

While slowly entering into the river he at first felt apprehensive and disliked firmly how its silty bottom pushed up goosily between his toes wherever he stepped. Then however his overwhelming thirst soon took over so that in another moment he had submerged himself completely and began to drink down deep gulps till satiation. The water was cold but largely fresh having only just recently descended from the mountain highlands in whose entrance an army now sat encamped.

“Hurry up you louse!” shouted out one of the two escorts who had accompanied him for his cleansing from amongst the shore after a few minutes had passed, “can’t you see it’s almost darkness?”

Pan heard their growing exasperations loudly enough and so dunked himself once more in final rejuvenation before heading back unto the riverbank to where his embittered chaperones were impatiently awaiting for his arrival.

“Took you long enough!” scoffed down the wedge with a cockamaimey hands-on-hips stance as Pan came out of the water wet and naked reaching instinctively for his muddily heaped clothes in which to cover himself.

“No you fool!” shouted out the other who had clasped in his hand a linen garment which he’d been carrying with him. “Let those rags alone and put this on,” he commanded, rudely handing over a blue tunic made of good quality.

Pan decidedly let lie his mud soaked and filthy wet ensemble opting instead to put on the freshly proffered tunic which fitted him more like a vestment than anything else. The material was like nothing he’d ever felt before. Once redressed he was then scurried along hurriedly for a second time back in the direction in which they’d come. On this trip however young Pan was made to push and prod his way through the crowds just like everyone else after having lost his natural repellant of stink and filth from inside the river’s bottom.

Those three traversed themselves along that way for sometime enroute to the great hive’s busy center. Everywhere they passed along their trail small fires were being started and attended to combat the swallowing darkness. A communal glow soon permeated the city of tents as shadows flickered and danced anew with every wind blown wisp. Eventually they reached a sort of shallow den which was rowed off with long wooden tables that were propped up by pitch poles held firmly down in the dirt.

Here the smells of hot food in the air were almost too overpowering for the young shepherd to stand who at once felt his famished state more acutely than anything else surrounding.

“Gods I’m starved,” commented the first man hungrily to the other, stating Pan’s sentiments exactly.

“And I,” the latter agreed wholeheartedly.

“You keep eyes on the welp then while I fetch us some food,” minded the one attendant to his partner.

“I’ll do it,” confirmed the half distracted watchman who was already looking around for their refreshments, “I’ll see to the drinks as well.”

Both nodded in accord before pulling apart to set about retrieving their specified procurements. One of the two men disappeared into the mass of moving people nearby while the other remaining instructed Pan to sit down and stay there. Stay for how long Pan didn't know, he only knew that his stomach would continue devouring itself further without any food. Still they waited there by the half filled tables being served by tavern wenches and old whores. Bitter drinks arrived and more until Pan Shepherd finally recognized a man coming back through the crowd carrying three bowls in his hands and a loaf of bread tucked under one arm.

"Long lines tonight?" questioned the stay behind fellow to the one who had gone upon his return arrival.

"Backed up all the way to the shit houses," came his acknowledgement, "must mean the food's good tho," he finished with a surmising smile before looking downwards at the young shepherd.

"Here you go worm," he lambasted unprovokingly, plopping on the table in front of him a wooden bowl that was filled almost to brim with some sort of meaty brown stew. Lamb no doubt, "take it."

Pan did not await for additional instruction or confirmation before engaging straight away in the devourment of his dish after having been made ravenous by hunger. The possible sources for the meal were pushed far from his mind.

"Hungry dog he is," ridiculed the drinks man who was already on his second tankard while watching him eat. "Smells decent enough though," he observed for himself while receiving his own portions worth and a rip of bread.

"Aye," the stew bringer confirmed with a glance prior to drinking, "and I'm as hungry as a wolf!" he jokingly exclaimed before howling aloud in imitation and immediately commencing to eat upon his own victuals.

"I've been thinking," illuminated the companion sitting nearest to Pan after the pair had spent a few minutes ingesting greedily without any words.

"Gods have mercy," poked back the other with a benign smirk on his face in between bites.

"I'm serious Tarwin," came the defensive parry with a drunkards vigil.

"Alright," Tarwin bit during chewing, "thinking about what then?"

The freshly minted and presented caricature of moroseness started breaking up before even his mouth propped itself open to speak, "whores mostly," he jestingly guffawed, displaying meat gristle between his teeth.

"I figured as much," Tarwin depreciated with a mild mannered disapproval, shaking his head sideways as he spit the hook out, "what else is new?" he asked rhetorically, returning himself back to eating.

"Do you remember that raven haired beauty that I told you about from last night?" followed up the libertine to his comrade full of conviction, zeal and another overturned cup.

"I could hardly forget her if I tried," Tarwin responded back lacklusterly, tearing off another piece of bread and scooping it down into his last remaining bit of stew as he did so, "you've barely stopped mentioning her."

"Tits out to here," the whoremongerer recalled again fondly, holding his arms up and out in front of his chest for example, "what was her again name though?" he pondered in memembrance but was still unable to grasp it, "ah it's no matter," the addled purveyor relented after a shortened spell, "she was delicious though I'll say that," his blissful memory enchanted once more.

"So you keep saying," remonstrated back grinningly the well-informed Tarwin who was by now hearing deja-vu for the umpteenth time.

"I know," his counterpart abruptly let on after having just surmised an obvious stratagem, "why don't you come out with me tonight and meet her for yourself?" he pushed over half-drunkenly across the table, looking slightly belligerent. "I could introduce you!" plied the merchant with vigor as he attempted his trade.

“You know Korballa,” Tarwin humorously tried to edify, “if you keep spending all your money on whores you’ll never save enough for a horse,” he poked some fun while making his point, “you’re getting all the wrong mounts,” punned along the impromptu instructor smilingly, “and their not even yours after you pay for them!” launched even more of his derisive ridicule, “only rented by the hour or the ride,” Tarwins flourish of joke-filled criticisms ended whereby he then pushed away his empty bowl atop the table and enjoyed himself another libation.

“Well I don’t see you prancing around on the backs of any mounts yet either Tarwin,” Korballa threw back slightly stung, his wits still clearly enabled.

“Only because I too often let myself get talked into going out whoring with you!” exclaimed the false sanctimone gleefully.

Korballa laughed, regaining his ease, “Ah I see,” entered the friendly rejoinder, “blame me will you?” he accused amusingly, “I don’t remember ever putting a blade to your neck though,” the pupil now preached.

“A blade no, but a cock? Maybe,” Tarwin ruefully refuted.

“Those whores tents are too small,” well reasoned the lecherous vagabond knowingly.

“Too small by far,” his licentious counterpart agreed, who, despite feigning an earlier coyness, was well acquainted with the tent's dimensions.

“Still though,” Korballa reminded him with a grin, “we’ve never crossed swords yet!”

Pan sat there mute and unmoved after having finished with his supper listening intently to the two men speak. Try as he might however since his thirst and hunger had both now been slated an overwhelming tiredness was fast taking over.

“Besides,” Korballa announced further, prolonging his discord, “theres nothing else to do in this camp besides eat or fuck anyway,” the issue was stated plaintively enough. “This whole campaign hasn't seen my sword leave its scabbard one time in fighting,” the sodden soldier truthfully revealed as he patted down descendantly upon his weapon's scabbard.

"That's your cock," Tarwin reported in response to Korballa's purposefully misplaced hand.

The apt identified culprit fell into a fit of laughter, "my other sword I mean!" he corrected himself wide with grin.

Bellowings ensued while Pan's confusion only widened.

"There's not that many people left to conquer I suppose," Tarwin shrugged off disappointingly after the two inebriates had regained their composure, "just look at where we've come to now," he lamented, waving an arm around to make his point, "it's the edge of the damned world," the critic impugned, "nothing left out here but savages and dung heaps most likely."

"Some men tell tales about humongous hordes of barbarians and evil spirits living beyond these mountains," Korballa warned warily in their direction, making a cautionary sign to the gods as an assurance.

"Aren't you a little old to be believing in ghost stories?" Tarwin loosely chided, continuing to speak, "and besides," he went on, "we'll find out soon enough," the gossip let it be known, "the general's sending a division through the passes tomorrow."

"Tomorrow?" Korballa restated the news with a raised interest.

"Those were the orders passed along this afternoon," Tarwin dug in, he had heard the issuance himself, "that must be why the general was questioning captain Faroh's scout earlier," he conjectured, "to make sure the routes were all cleared beforehand."

"Makes sense to me," acknowledged Korballa with an over pronounced nod that betrayed his high degree of inebriation, "well I hope there *are* a great many hordes of them," he challenged boldly, mired deep in liquid courage, "big wealthy hordes so I can grow rich and fat off all the plunder," the soaked sod boasted greedily.

"Assuming you lived of course," interloped Tarwin with sober-minded snideness into Korballa's pleasantries.

Pan shepherd heard all this and more until fatigue finally won over and he fell asleep there with his head lain flat upon the table.

“Wake up!” pierced loud and obnoxiously the shout from Korballa after some time had passed. “Wake up I said,” the drunkard reiterated more loudly less than a second later, slapping Pan’s head stingingly with the reverse side of his hand.

The young Pan Shepherd was thus rudely yanked from out of his slumber and made once more to regain his feet and follow blindly. His two guides made a noisy way through the encampment which was by now permeated by mostly sleep and silence. Pan could hear them both talking plainly enough but he was too exhausted and sleep ridden to care. Instead he only looked up, observing for himself the crescent moon and the endless heavens which radiate outwards in all directions like a million diamonds inside of a black lit canopy.

“Here it is,” informed Korballa to the accompanying pair once some indiscriminate spot had been reached inside of the grounds.

“Go inside and sleep there,” Tarwin commanded, pointing over to one of the tents nearby.

Pan looked to where he was directed but didn’t yet move from having felt a natural disinclination about entering such an unknown space in the darkness.

“Hurry up boy!” Korballa snarled threateningly, ready to be done with this unwanted nuisance once and for all.

Pan briskly moved away from the danger, glancing back just once more before bending himself low enough to enter into the lightless domain. Once inside however he began carefully feeling his way around the blackness before quickly making the discovery that many other people were sleeping there as well.

“Let’s go,” Pan heard Korballa dictate as the two friends were preparing themselves to leave.

“This is the last time I go out with you again like this,” he heard Tarwin give notice as they started to depart, “so do not ask me again.”

“Sure brother,” the intoxicated Korballa replied in good faith, “but that’s what you said the last time!”

Each man thus laughed and made his merry on the way to their sordid destination whilst leaving behind young Pan Shepherd to fall swiftly back into the realm of dreams.

Ch. 5

“Hey,” arrived sweetly a faint whisper into the dreamscape, “hey you,” rang in softly once more. “It's time to wake up now,” the voice told him, its owner tugging down gently onto his blue tunic.

Pan's mind creaked and groaned like a wooden ship at sea as it brought itself back slowly into the light of day. Once come about however the newly awakened Pan found himself made unexpectant company to a small girl even younger than he was. She was standing in front of him staring conspicuously with radiant orbs of emerald whilst too possessing yellowed hair that shone like gold's reflection. He sat up as though still dreaming, wiping away the excess sleep from out of his eyes. The tent was now empty except for them two.

“Who are you?” Pan questioned her blinkingly, his wits still not yet fully intact.

“I'm Beocca,” she innocently introduced.

“Well, and so what are you doing *here*?” followed up the shepherd boy with keenness.

Beocca giggled, “I'm here to wake you up silly.”

“Wake me up for what?” Pan dove deeper still.

The little messenger was for a short time confounded by this last response, “for work of course,” she stated obviously, hesitating for a moment until curiosity got the better of her, “say,” she let on, “are you really stupid or something?” the young girl prodded without any scorn or malice prior to explaining her notion’s meaning, “the ones who sent me to fetch you said that you were.”

Pan searched over her countenance thoroughly but found nothing in it to incite alarm, “all things are possible,” came his ambiguous reply shaded with a natural smile.

“I guess,” Beocca figured uncertainly, not being either much convinced nor satisfied by his puzzling innuendo, “well then,” challenged after the youthful maiden towards her wayward errand, “so are you going to get up now or aren’t you?” she directed to know until his noncommittal response drove her into submitting further, “you’ll get in trouble if you..”

“Listen,” Pan interrupted her, standing up abruptly, “do you know who is in charge here?” he interested curiously.

“Here?” Beocca misunderstood him, looking around the tent with incomprehension.

“Not here,” Pan reorganized her thinking, “inside the camp,” the shepherd boy clarified with outstretched arms moved encompassingly to show his meaning.

“Hm,” the small girl pondered in thought with a hand on her chin whilst still looking down descendently until she placed it, “his name is General Ballista,” Beocca helpfully enriched him.

“General Ballista,” Pan repeated aloud, storing the name in value. “Could you please take me to see him?” he next wondered at her.

Beocca’s expression turned grave as she informed the shepherd with much alarm, “but you’re not allowed to see him, “ she reasoned to herself assuredly, even appending on as extra, “and neither am I!”

“It’s okay,” Pan reassured her nimbly, “just tell them that I forced you.”

This rebuttal almost stunned Beocca into silence who now really did feel as though she must be dealing with a fool.

“What are you talking about?” inflamed the shocked victim of this obscene antagonism back with an unruly passion.

“I have something very important to tell him,” Pan persuaded on further despite her mounted opposition, “you must take me to see him.”

Little Beocca was very much disturbed at this most recent course of events which carried her far out and beyond the bounds of anything aforementioned in her earlier instructions of waking up the slave boy. Barring a more developed judgment however and under his directing pressure as well, she finally herself relented and so agreed to take him.

“What do you need to tell him about so badly anyways?” Beocca requested to know while they were still coursing their way through the burgeoning encampment on that very warm summer's day morning.

“That he’s putting his army into danger,” opined the sheep herder knowingly and with a convincing conviction.

“Danger?” Beocca’s ears shot up at the news, “but how do you know?” she interested concerningly, looking back over towards him.

“My sheep,” Pan returned her answer simple enough, returning a glance as they stepped further along the board bound trail.

“Your sheep?” Beocca repeated, clearly having misheard him.

“Yes,” reannounced the shepherd boy much to her confusion, “my sheep showed me and then the two men from last night confirmed it.”

‘He’s as crazy as a loon,’ Beocca thought to herself whilst shaking her head in pity, ‘poor fool,’ she concluded inwardly after having decided to refrain from the seeking of any further particulars.

A few minutes more spent walking along their way saw that great and gray tabernacle from the previous day come into view.

“He lives in there,” Beocca told him, stopping where she stood and pointing out and over towards the same spectacle that Pan was currently studying from across the yard.

The next moment his mind flashed lightning.

“What does General Ballista look like?” he angled at her, searching for an explanation.

“He looks big and scary to me,” Beocca gestured at him with a spurned nose and upturned face discerning clear disfavor.

Pan quickly cast aside that unhelpful news and sought for more, “is his skin dark with teeth like ivory?” He next tried inquiring of her by using more descriptive means.

“Hmm, I think so,” the young girl proffered after having been made ambivalent by the shepherd boy’s capricious nature.

“And does he ride a red horse?” Pan followed after.

“Yes,” Beocca thought about it until remembering, “that’s it over there,” she directed his notice towards a groomsmen who was brushing the same pedigreed stallion that Pan had seen the bespoken one mounted upon yesterday.

“I know this man,” reported the shepherd to his overwhelmed guide, “I’ve spoken with him once already.”

Beocca found herself steadfastly dumbfounded by the unmitigated madness in which she now bore herself witness. Without knowing what to say next but still desperately wanting to know more the petite miss did thus breathlessly impart, “so what will you do now?”

Pan responded straight away, "I'll go see him again of course," he told her before adding sincerely, "thank you for bringing me by the way," his friendly sentiments ensued with pupils staring, "my name's Pan by the way."

With those thanks, introduction, and a quickfast smile as her only artifacts, Pan Shepherd turned hastily away and began making his direct approach towards the clothen rotunda as the stunned Beocca could only stand there watching in disconcerted disbelief.

The young shepherd thus began hurriedly scurrying his way across the muddy flats from where they had been situated enroute to where the main entrance way was now located. The two guards on watch there were entangled in speaking amongst themselves and so did not notice his quick approach coming up from their rear. Pan didn't even break stride as he streamlined past the first sentinel and carried himself to within just as the second one took any notice.

That surprised alarmant instantly broke off his conversings and snatched in earnest at the blue bound intruder who had just managed to slip inside his goal. Despite the change in light being sharp and contrasting, Pan was still able to make out towards the enclosure's far end a group of gentry who were all stood standing around with their backs facing to him.

"General Ballista!" Pan Shepherd howled like a banshee while being accosted by the guard, "General Ballista sir I have something to tell you!" the rapscallinous rebel proclaimed with vigor and vim towards the shadowy group in meeting.

"You fucking sod," bitterly castigated the sentry who had taken his hold as he made way to injure him out of the tabernacle.

"Stop!" came all at once a lion's roar from out of the pack of hyenas. A man there stood up loud and forceful who had until then been seated across from the rest at some heavy wooden table that was tucked out of view. 'Beocca was right,' Pan's mind managed the thought, 'he is scary.'

General Ballista stared odiously at the cause of commotion as he made to open with his initial remarks.

“You’re the slave I had purchased for me yesterday,” the general recognized with a disgusted disdain, “just how much of a gods damned fool are you?” he approbated with an appalled condemnation prior to looking at the one who held him there with an almost equal repugnance and dictating directly, “remove this boy from out of my tent at once and have him severely beaten.”

Pan did not wait for those orders to be followed through however, continuing instead to carry on with his yelling unabated even when the guardsman made moves to expel him, “my people!” the shepherd boy shouted out with a violent volition, “my people here!” he cried aloud once more in the last ditch effort.

The general’s eye’s glared hard like sun off snow at the miniscule trespasser who was being dragged away from in front of his person. “Wait,” he directed hostilely at that same lookout which had so recently failed in his own duty, causing him to immediately lose hold, “now step back,” moreover ordered the viciously incensed Ballista who had himself been made violently vindictive at this unacceptable breach in process and decorum.

“Very well then,” the general beckoned with a practiced grace like that of a wisened aristocrat after having resettled himself from his location opposite the slave boy, “Speak now then little one and hope that when you are done I do not have you castrated and made a eunuch.”

Pan Shepherd took stock of his situation, swallowing deeply as he readied himself to address the assembled council at large, “you should not send your soldiers through the passes sir,” he started, prognosticating knowingly and in simple terms towards the general with his attending staff present, “many men are lying in wait for you there on the other side.”

The entire atmosphere changed in an instant. Heads looked peculiarly sideways and a few whispers dropped low off the lips of some as well before the good general did re-intervene, his next words bathed in a sort of perplexed ferocity, “and how do you know what I am to do with my army boy?” he demanded reason.

“The men told me,” informed the sheep herder with all due regard and humility, like a defendant does when facing their interrogator’s scrutiny.

“Which men?” growled the white knuckled commander, holding back a full gale.

“The two who took me away from here yesterday,” Pan expounded as innocent as a lamb, “one of them gave me this tunic,” he appended on helpfully for show whilst grabbing a handful of the blue cloth and presenting it out to him.

A pair of men who were just then standing towards the very back of the tabernacle with eyes half closed from nursing severe hangovers and a general lack of sleep almost fell over sideways when their ears caught wind of the news. They were simultaneously cured of their immediate ailment whilst at the same time being reinfected by another, fear. Each glanced at the other in silent horror while a few of their compatriots nearby who remembered that day’s previous orders followed suit, putting increased distance between they and themselves to prevent any semblance of blame for the failure.

General Ballista nodded in assiduity ahead of challenging his interloper head on, “those routes have all been cleared boy,” he retorted loudly and in open defiance, “my scouts have already confirmed it.”

“Your scouts are wrong,” Pan Shepherd shot back, throwing down the gauntlet boldly yet without ever having changed his simple veneer. It was dichotomous to a d. “You’ll lose many men if you go that way today general,” foretold the sheep herder towards the surprised crowd of stunned onlookers. Such wanton insolence as was on display at present had been, up to this point, both undreamed and unheard of.

General Ballista resisted his immediate urge to strike Pan dead where he stood, “tell me,” he lured with a false politeness that hid a spider’s web of malcontent, “how can you be so sure?”

“My sheep,” Pan Shepherd conveyed without reluctance to the general’s imposition exciting even more attention from all those angry and bewildered spectators present. You could have heard a pin drop in so focused and palpable a scene.

“Your sheep?” came the general’s own surprised and flummoxing search for clarity.

“Yes sir,” settled the rustics reply with certainty, his small voice bouncing around the shade filled room towards those straining ears of the expectant throng, “my sheep showed me,” he cemented firmly to an eruption of bedlam.