

Dirge

Chapter One

by Virgil Clarke

The ground is hard and cold, the wind blows bringing with it the hollowness of the dying summer, when the haunts and their shadows shed melancholy like a plague. Small game peck at the ground in hopes of finding some nourishment on this chilled desolate field. Small fowl skitter across the ground squawking for their young, a look of hopelessness in their wide black eyes.

The sun rises in the east; covered in a haze. The fireball looks like a blood stain, dripped and splattered by the gods themselves. A breeze whips mist and smoke across ground and sky obscuring the distant mountains, moans trickle across the field like wandering banshees. Fire burns through a grove of trees on the west side of the field, the trees dance to their licks.

This field is a scene of desolation and broken dreams where warriors clashed and died only a day before, now only the bodies of the wounded and the dead lay across it, while others walk through the blood and gore searching for anything of value. Horses wander the field looking for their master, some stagger whinnying in pain; spears and arrows protrude from their flanks and necks.

On a small grassy rise in the middle of the killing field two warriors clad in leather and bronze drink deeply from a animal bladder; their shields and spears lay on the ground next to them. The taller of the two, Captain Terfell, with his long black hair and piercing green eyes,

surveys the carnage, the other; much smaller than him but more stout and robust takes a deep breath and sighs, “What a disaster.”

Terfell looks down at the man, “Yeah Corden,” he says dryly, “this one could have gone smoother, but we showed the patriarchs that we will fight to the end. They lost two battalions and half of a third. The god of war spared us, so that we might fight those bastards another day.”

Corden looks up at his captain removing his war helm. The helm is a work of art, decorated with succulent beauties and scenes of paradise and glory. Terfell’s is much the same except for the plumed feather that indicates rank. “Captain was this really a victory? I feel more like a survivor than a conqueror.”

The captain’s eyes linger on the young lieutenant and then at the rising sun, and he answers absent-mindedly, “Does it really matter?”

Corden looks at the ground, his brown hair falls in his face. He is young and not yet seasoned in the art of war, he wants to cry and run, but his physical build, his wit and overall demeanor will not allow it.

“Where are those Thesian soldiers? I heard them wrecking havoc on the right.” The lieutenant raises his head and smiles.

“They are tending to their wounded, not one of them died today.” He pauses, looking at the sun, an angry red eye. He continues, “They show no fear in battle...truly amazing.”

Thesian soldiers walk a tree line on the far east side of the battlefield. Their golden armor

and silver spear tips shining in the early morning light, some near by sit on the ground, others lay on their backs, the wounded are being wrapped and cared for. A small group of four Thesians talk under an apple tree, they hold their golden helmets in their hands as they jab at one another, laughing in mocking tones, “Telsa, you fool, you don’t run from the enemy when you’re attacking!” Another breaks in, “Yeah! Your ass is probably what scared these ingrate patriarchs.”

“Yes.” Says the third, “Those men were weak under our spears and blades, their arrows couldn’t even pierce our armor.”

The fourth paces, he is Marcus the archer, a young slender man from Kravis, near the golden shores of Agatheia. The people of Kravis were allies with the Thesians and supplied them with boats for their war machine. He wraps his blue cloak around him and says in a cracked dried voice, “Damn this weather, can the seasons not make their minds up, I hate fighting in this cold.”

The first known as Gathos looks at the second and says with thick laughter in his voice, “Mica, do you hear this? That’s an archer for you. They’re always quivering in the cold trying to hold on to their arrows.” A laugh echoes throughout the small group; they are happy and joyous for they live to see the new day arrive, even though it runs with blood.

A hooded Thesian draped in royal blue holds a golden helmet plumed red in one hand and a battle ax in the other. He walks the killing field. The mists of early morning swirl around him. He drops to one knee and lays the helmet on the ground then pulls the hood from his head

and surveys the carnage. His name is Dirge and he is far from home.

“Home. How long has it been?” It is like a dream that dances before his eyes as he watches the scavengers, both beast and man plunder the dead. The warrior stands up grabbing his equipment, his legs ache, but as his mind wonders he realizes he hurts like hell. He whistles for Whitecloud his horse in hopes that he will hear him, unless of course he lies dead and broken, but he has seen no white horse on the field dead or alive.

Dirge walks kicking dirt and rubble in his path; “Why in the gods’ names have we come here?” He knows the answer and it angers him, he feels that he should not have had to leave, for it was a bitter parting, one he remembers all too well. He shakes his head forcing the memories back, he looks up, the suns bloody hue fades, bright golden white light spreads across the rolling hills and dark fields. Dirge yells out, “Papulis come here.” Not far behind him was a silver armored thesian with a spear in hand, young and agile, he was the Thesian pathfinder.

“Yes, commander, what is it?” Dirge turns and looks at him. His silver helmet, gauntlets, shin armor and chest plate reflects the new day’s sun, he puts his hand over his eyes, “You’re too damn bright in the morning.” Papulis laughs.

“My apologies, but you saw to it that my armor and I didn’t see any fighting.” There is a hint of sarcasm in his voice. Dirge notices this and remarks in a calm, but annoyed voice.

“Your job in this shit ball battle was to find us a proper escape route in case things didn’t swing in our favor. You were our back door. I couldn’t have you killed out there.” He points at the field, and turns away. “Not one Thesian died today, that’s a blessing.”

Papulis looks at his leader realizing the sincerity of his words and perhaps for the first time also realizing how dearly he loves his troops. What drives this man? Was it guilt? It’s not

like he broke anybody's arm in coming here. He never promised anyone that they would see their homes again. "Blessings are a gift; a grace from the gods. We survived this day because we were meant to."

Dirge looks at the young pathfinder and smiles, "You're right, but foolhardy. It was our loyalty and trust in one another that got us through this . . ." He stops in mid sentence and looks around then looks at Papulis pointing his finger at him, "Have you seen Whitecloud?"

"Yeah, he's over there in that grove of trees eating grass. Hey! Why are you here and he's clear over there." Papulis snickers and Dirge looks annoyed.

He breathes with a sigh, "That damn horse thinks of nothing but his belly, before the battle he did nothing but graze and while we were walking he would not even raise his head. He was too busy nibbling on anything that passed by him." He sighs, sweat running down his forehead, then continues, "then when we broke the Patriarchs' infantry line I get knocked out of my saddle and Whitecloud bolts."

Papulis laughs as he watches Dirge turn and walk away swinging ax and helmet as he strides in the direction of the grove of trees.