

The hawk circled silently and broodingly over the desert sands, so high he was a mere speck against the cloudless blue sky, peering down at the scene below.

The Persian army marched in stately procession, just as it had for a hundred leagues or more, raising a dust cloud that could be seen by Alexandria's garrison from a distance of two days' march. The fierce, leathery Arabs of the camel corps, robes billowing behind them, were followed in close order by the lumbering beasts of the elephant brigade, each bearing a platform carrying five armored lancers. Five thousand elite Parthian archers rode next, mounted on identical white stallions and bearing saddle quivers containing a hundred barbed reed missiles fashioned by the most skilled weaponsmakers of the Mesopotamian armories; they were succeeded by another five thousand Armenian horse troops, whose skills with the bow, less developed than those of the Parthians, were supplemented by heavier, ashwood shafts and poison-tipped barbs.

Fifty thousand regular infantry marched implacably behind in the dust and filth of the enormous bestiary. These men were resigned to the wretched road over which they traveled, inured to the suffocating heat and dust by seven years of campaigning, from the Persian Gulf to the Aegean Sea, from the frigid Caucasus to the Syrian desert. Fresh from a monumental victory at Pydna, the men were laden with plunder and cocksure in their strength. Their general was no mere tribal headman of roaming Bedouins, nor even a royal satrap of ancient noble family. Leading the massive invasion force was none other than Antiochus IV Epiphanes, King of Kings and Brother of the Planets, descendant of Darius the Great, heir to the vast Seleucid Empire and monarch of Lesser and Greater Armenia. Only forty-seven years of age, he was in the prime of life, ruler of a domain that extended to the distant birthplace of the rising sun and the frigid shadows of the Scythian north. And Antiochus was leading his men to the greatest prize of all, the opulent city of Alexandria, the seat of Egypt's boy-king Ptolemy, whose agents had for days been accosting the Great King on the march, pleading for mercy. Each soldier's share of the plunder from this one city alone would allow him to retire with incalculable wealth, households filled with slaves, and the silks and artworks of generations.

Antiochus encountered no opposing army as his forces entered the fertile Nile delta. Even at several hours' distance from his objective he could see that the entire population of the floodplain had retreated behind Alexandria's walls, its portals sealed tight, even the forward trenches and defensive works abandoned. *A pity to besiege it*, the King thought to himself. *With elephants and engines the gates will fall*

*within hours. Siege merely increases the men's thirst for plunder, limits their restraint once the walls finally crumble. The boy Ptolemy deserves his fate, for employing such incompetent advisors.*

In the final miles before arriving at the city, the men's excitement grew visibly, and the army's lumbering pace picked up. Even the King felt the glow of anticipation at the thought of this additional jewel in his crown. Brushing off the chattering and importuning of his captains and advisors, who were already pressing him with plans for the coming siege, he galloped forward to be alone with his thoughts, to savor a few moments of calm. Peering far ahead, he spied three mounted figures just visible down the deserted road. Although they were too distant to be recognizable, Antiochus could still guess who they were, and he sighed in exasperation at the thought of being forced once again to listen to the disgraceful begging and fawning of Ptolemy's ambassadors. He glanced back at his corps of camel drivers, their eyes glittering fiercely behind the swaths of wrappings masking their faces. The restless Bedouins had been uncharacteristically patient on the long, uneventful march. He would give them a chance to stretch their legs.

Spurring his horse forward into a sprint, he loosed the shrill war cry of the Arabs. Instantly the lead camel drivers began furiously whipping their mounts, sending them into ungainly runs, all knobby knees and flailing heads, and then the entire corps followed suit. The furious sprint of the thousand beasts straining to catch the King's lead set up a deafening thunder as they approached the trio of figures. Smiling to himself, the King spurred his horse again and pounded even more furiously, the hot wind in his face raising water in his eyes, making it difficult to distinguish the three riders he was rapidly approaching. *Not to worry*, he thought. *After I catch them I shall permit the Arabs to chase them down with their lances. Let them play a round of that barbarous game with which they amuse themselves in camp—that foul sport with the headless carcass and the goalposts...*

Looking up, the King spied the hawk circling lazily overhead—an opportunistic creature, waiting for a sign of weakness or exposure among small life, for death to occur on which he might feed. The King smiled. *Best reserve your place in line at Alexandria, evil bird*, he thought. *The pickings there will be much more to your liking than a mere three skinny diplomats, even if there is anything left after the Arabs have their sport.* He pushed away thoughts of the hawk and focused on the trio ahead. Something was amiss—he was approaching them far too quickly. The King knew his horse was the fastest steed in the army, yet it would be impossible to catch up with mounted quarry this quickly. Still sprinting, he wiped his eyes with his sleeve and peered again at the men. Oddly, they were not fleeing. They stood as still as mileposts, facing him calmly. The lead man was not even armed and wore only a white ceremonial robe, although the two flanking him were handsomely equipped with newly polished bronze cavalry shields and bore beautifully-cast breastplates and helmets, with lances butted into the leather holsters in the vertical rest position. One of the men had a pennant draped dispiritedly from the point of his lance. The king squinted at the dusty fabric of the banner as it hung limply in the oppressive air, and he swore under his breath. An eagle.

*A Roman eagle.*

The exasperated King skidded to a stop only steps from the motionless riders, and the camel corps behind him did the same, though not as smoothly. The evil-tempered beasts reared and bellowed, angry at being made to run in the first place, even angrier at being forced to stop. The King's horse skittered and danced, eyes rolling nervously at the snorting and spitting animals towering over its rear, and the King struggled to control his mount. The three smaller Roman ponies facing him stood as motionless as their riders, staring in seeming disdain at the undisciplined display before them.

With not a little trouble the King forced his horse to stand, and he glared for a moment at the trio of silent Romans, considering what to make of this incongruous welcome. Resolving to force the encounter, he held up his right hand in the universal gesture of welcome and boldly announced himself.

"Greetings, Romans!" he intoned in measured Greek, the common language of the civilized lands of the eastern Mediterranean. "Behold the conquering army of Antiochus IV Epiphanes, King of Kings and ruler of these lands. Welcome to all men of good intent. State your business."

For a long moment the lead Roman, the one in robes, remained staring in silence. He was tanned and somewhat tired-looking, or perhaps merely world-weary, just approaching the paunchiness of prosperous middle age, but with the steely gaze and erect bearing of a military man. He neglected even to remove his own hand from the reins—a grave insult to the King, who had offered his peace first. Without a word, the Roman slowly dismounted and strode imperiously forward to a spot precisely between his own pony and Antiochus' white charger, where he stopped, looked into the King's eyes, and pulled out a papyrus scroll he had been carrying under his arm.

The enormous army had by this time caught up to their position and rumbled to a puzzled halt, and the cloud of dust wafted stifflingly over the King and the three Romans. The Persian generals eyed the Romans contemptuously, and the camels continued to bray fiercely, spoiling to continue with the march to the city they could see and smell in the distance. Still the three Romans did not budge, and the King realized that in order to continue, he would have to either read the scroll or physically remove these men from his path. The sound of swords sliding from leather holsters behind him told him the opinion of his officers. Incredibly, the two Roman soldiers drew their own short cavalry swords from their holsters in response. *By the gods!* the King thought. *Do they intend to take on my whole army?* Still, a voice inside him warned him to be prudent.

The man identified himself. "Gaius Popillius Laenas," he declared in brazen, monotone Latin, which, although the King spoke it well, he received as a second insult, as a failure to recognize his status by speaking to him in the common language of these parts. "My rank is senator of Rome. I bear a senatorial decree, which I request you read. Your response thereto will determine how I, and the Roman Senate, will reciprocate your greeting, and whether we are to consider you friend or foe." With that, he pursed his lips, held out the scroll, and fell silent.

A murmur of outrage could be heard behind the King. He glanced behind at his captains, affixing a confident smile on his face and lifting his chin, as if to tell them to humor him in this jest. They glared, but the King nodded amiably and they retreated several paces on their mounts. Then swinging his leg over his horse's haunches, he dropped athletically to the ground, strode to where Popilius stood waiting for him, and seized the scroll, feigning an amused expression. Upon reading it, however, he was unable to disguise his astonishment and outrage.

"How dare you present me with this, insolent jackals!" he sputtered, his face reddening. "Forego the attack on Alexandria and depart Egypt? By what right do you order this, by what authority—!"

"Your response, if you please, Majesty," Popilius interrupted him, his expression cold, his gray eyes burning into the King's. "Alexandria is under the protection of Rome. The Senate awaits your response."

Antiochus stared at his adversary for a moment and then burst out laughing. "The Senate awaits my response? Your Senate is three weeks' sail across the Mediterranean! It sends a junior senator and two tribunes here to insult my army and demand my response? I haven't time for this nonsense, but I am not so ill-bred as to insult your illustrious Senate with the same rudeness as you have shown me. My counselors will draft something appropriate—"

But Popilius interrupted Antiochus by calmly turning his back, and the King's speech faded into astonished silence. The Senator strode to the lead tribune, seized the lance bearing the pennant, and returned, holding it vertically before him. The restless Arabs tensed and edged forward, but the King nodded them off. Popilius planted the butt end of the lance in the dirt, the eagle fluttering lightly over his head, and then calmly, deliberately, paced one revolution around the King, tracing a circle in the dirt that enclosed the monarch. He then stepped back outside the circle, handed the lance back to the tribune, and crossed his arms.

"No," Popilius said simply. "Your counselors will do nothing of the sort. You yourself will give me your response before you step out of the ring."

Antiochus caught his breath. He stared at the determined Roman, then down at the line in the sand, and back up at the Roman. The entire army of beasts and men, sixty thousand strong, stood at his back. A defenseless city, bursting with wealth, stood within his very sight. The King was an intelligent man and knew how to weigh his gains against his risks.

And he knew he had been beaten.

"I shall accede to the Senate's request," he said quietly.

With that, the Roman stepped into the ring and gravely shook the King's hand. He then turned and mounted his horse, and without a single look back, the three riders trotted calmly back to the city walls.

Antiochus returned with his enormous army to Syria and, to the end of his life, never overcame the disgrace of this display of cowardice. Indeed his shame and his resulting hatred for Rome were passed

on, like a disease or a curse, to his own daughter Laodice, who herself swore she would never be put in a position to be so humiliated. And so she wasn't, though her methods of avoiding such compromise were ineffectual and controversial at best. In reality, it was left to her own eldest son, King Mithridates, to regain the family honor for the scandalous treatment received at Rome's hands. But that is a matter not to be discussed quickly, nor dismissed lightly.

All this detail, for an event that occurred over a century ago. How would I know such things? Because I have studied Polybius' history of Rome to understand my enemy; I have paced the deserted battlefields like a conscientious commander; I have analyzed Roman speeches and Roman foreign policy like a competent administrator. But more important: Because I am Pharnaces, son of King Mithridates the Great of Pontus, who was the grandson of that disgraced monarch Antiochus. Because my father was Rome's most fearsome enemy, scourge of its greatest generals and destroyer of countless legions, a dagger in Rome's side for forty years, a terror who was beaten in battle but never defeated in spirit.

And because like his grandfather, Mithridates was also driven by a desire to conquer and unify, to create a magnificent empire of all the Hellenistic lands; and like his mother, Laodice, Mithridates was cursed by a fatal fear and a hatred for Rome. It was a hatred that would confine him and encompass him, much like that circle drawn in the sand years before, a hatred that would shape his very destiny—and mine, as well.