

Split Loyalties

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A Roman and a Visigoth. An abomination in the eyes of many. Battle lines had been drawn, even in the literal sense. How this fitted with the look in Licinia's eyes last night, Sigeric could not know. He was a Visigothic warrior, while she was a Roman slave, taken prisoner by his tribe. They should have been enemies, shouldn't they?

Yet here they stood, Licinia's own people, ranged in battle formation across the grassy plains from where Sigeric and his comrades stood, golden chi-rhos emblazoned across their blood-red shields, intent on nothing less than the destruction of his people. It seemed strange that people of the same Roman blood could show such purity in the case of some, such as Licinia, and such violence in the case of others.

Sigeric tried to brood on this question to quell his other thoughts; thoughts that engulfed him with fear. Fear of what would happen in the coming hours of this day. He looked around him at the loose ranks of Visigothic warriors that spread in every direction. To his left was a thickly bearded man with lines of experience mixed with scars of battle, and an expression that played jailor to any emotions that may have been locked within him. On his right was a shaking youth; his breathing fast and shallow and his trousers stinking of piss.

Sigeric felt somewhere in between. His heart thumped uncontrollably – surely something felt by any warrior before their first battle, he reassured himself. He flexed the fingers of his right hand in which he clutched his bow, and pulled nervously at his quiver strap, then at the leather fastening of his conical helmet.

He thought back to Licinia, forcing himself to hide his dread behind a veneer of courage; courage of the kind that Licinia had shown when Sigeric's village had been burned by a Roman cohort. She could have run. After all, she was a prisoner. But when she had seen Sigeric lying on the ground, injured, Licinia had pulled him to safety and over the following days, nursed him back to health. Nobody had forced her to do that. She could have thrown herself at the feet of her Roman countrymen and declared them her saviours, and yet she had taken pity on him and put all thoughts of her own welfare aside. Her strength had saved his life and from that day, their bond had grown. Her Roman birth was irrelevant to her place as his soulmate.

The others would never understand their connection. Not his family. Not the people of his village. But she wasn't like most Romans. Licinia didn't think herself better than the Visigoths, even though many of them believed themselves to be of higher standing than her, a Roman slave. If anyone found out they would both be shunned; cast out at best, but the love they shared was something Sigeric would and could never sacrifice.

Yet now after having his life saved by one Roman, he would likely die today at the hands of another. The thought gripped his heart like a vice. He had only seen seventeen summers, yet whether he would live to see the sunset over the trees behind where he stood was fully in the hands of God. The very same God who the Romans worshipped. Who would this great being show loyalty to? Nothing could be guaranteed.

Mercifully, before Sigeric could dwell too much on that despairing thought, a distraction presented itself. Beyond the heads of the three or four ranks in front of him, Sigeric glimpsed a horseman riding back towards the army from the centre of the field; an aged but imposing frame encased in a blaze of golden armour with a billowing cloak of scarlet. King Theodoric himself. Sigeric braced himself for news of how the parley with the Roman General had gone.

The King pulled up a short distance from the front rank, some metres to Sigeric's right, with his mounted bodyguards in their black armour taking position around him.

'Well,' declared the King. 'I'm sure it will come as no surprise to you all that the Romans will not agree to our modest and reasonable terms; terms that allow us the basic rights of living in sanctuary and having crops to farm without the threat of Roman blades. So today, we fight. Today we make our ancestors proud. Today is a day to write our names into

the earth in blood, Roman blood, and to claim what is rightfully ours. They deny us our lands. They burn our villages. They defile our women. They insult the memory of our kin. So, I say to you all, fight for freedom and show no mercy!

A huge roar went up as ten thousand Visigothic voices unleashed their fury.

For Sigeric, amid all the noise, the last few moments before the storm were private ones. He shut his eyes, steeling himself, battling to shut out any link between Licinia and the army standing against them, and to focus on what he must do for his people.

As he opened his eyes again, he saw King Theodoric turn his horse to face the Romans.

‘Archers!’ the King bellowed.

Heart racing, Sigeric took an arrow from his quiver and placed it on his bow.

‘Fire!’ shouted Theodoric.

Sigeric loosed his arrow, together with each of his comrades. He strained his eyes against the glare of the morning sun to follow their course as they sailed toward the enemy. In response, the Roman legionaries hastily arranged themselves into a fortified formation, with each unit reorganising into a faceless square of shields. As far as he could see, a handful of Romans had fallen, but that was all.

He heard the blare of the enemy trumpets, and the front ranks of legionaries moved apart to let more men, dressed in brown tunics, march forward.

‘Reload!’ commanded King Theodoric.

Sigeric raced to load another shaft, his heart still thumping. As he drew his bow, he saw that the enemy were following suit.

‘Fire!’ shouted the King again.

Sigeric and his comrades loosed their second wave, but at that very moment a volley of Roman shafts flew towards them, mingling in the air with the flurry of Visigothic arrows in a deadly, but somehow beautiful arc, each appearing to hang for a moment, suspended in the air like thousands of death-dealing splinters.

A terrible realisation hit Sigeric with the force of a wild bull. He had no shield. None of the archers did. He was defenceless with mere moments to save himself. Those around him must have had the same, panic-fuelled thought. He had barely noticed himself begin to run, but before Sigeric knew what had happened the whole army had accelerated into a spontaneous, bellowing charge.

Sigeric threw down his bow and unsheathed his sword as he hurled himself forward towards the enemy. Men’s screams filled the air. Hundreds fell all around him as the hail of arrows thudded down. They had no choice but to charge onward.

Clearly, King Theodoric knew he stood no chance of regaining control over his warriors, and at that moment Sigeric saw him gallop forward, flanked by his mounted bodyguard, moving to the head of the stampeding mass of men. Over his own panting and the thumping of his heart, Sigeric was only half aware of the remainder of the Visigothic cavalry moving past him and his running comrades on their left flank, all driving headlong at the stationary Romans.

Breathing hard, Sigeric’s heart was in his mouth and the noise all around him was deafening as thousands of boots and hooves thundered forward so that when the Roman horns sounded, Sigeric heard them only as a distant echo amid the chaos. On the opposite side of the field, Sigeric saw the front ranks of the legionaries calmly form into a single line from separate units.

He felt his body begin to tire long before he was anywhere near the Romans. In his fear of the arrows he had run at a full sprint and had quickly found himself near the front but now other, more experienced warriors began to pass him; archers like himself, running alongside swordsmen carrying shields peppered with arrows.

He made eye contact with the older man who had stood beside him in the ranks and as he passed Sigeric, the disparaging look in the veteran warrior's eyes made Sigeric push his body even harder. No matter what the connection was between his lover and his enemy, he couldn't allow himself to look weak.

Mustn't look weak. He thought. Mustn't look weak. Mustn't look cowardly. I have to do my family proud. But what of Licinia?

He drove the thought from his mind and forced more speed from his limbs as he sprinted onward, bellowing now, screaming to be heard over the hammering, howling charge, letting himself be consumed by fury and adrenaline, driving back to the front. Yet, as the Visigoths charged the final metres before the armies clashed, seconds seemed to slow. Sigeric picked his target, and in that lengthened moment Sigeric could make out every detail of his opponent's features; the fresh face of a youth with boyish, panic-stricken eyes and a chin yet to have spent much time near a shaving blade. Not too different from Sigeric himself in many ways. Then the strange, hanging lull was gone and Sigeric hurled himself at the Roman.

With the impact, the legionary slipped and fell on his back, only to be replaced at the front by the man behind him, who parried Sigeric's flailing sword blow before the weapon could get near the scrabbling rookie. The second man thrust his Spatha forward, but Sigeric deflected the blow with his own, larger sword while pulling out his dagger with his other hand before burying it into the man's neck.

As he pushed the dying man's body off his blade, Sigeric was again faced with the youth, who was on his feet again, but neither had any room to move as more and more warriors piled into the carnage from behind Sigeric. All he could do was push forward amid the crush while looking the fearful boy in the eye and roaring in his face; all the aggression coming from Sigeric while his defensive Roman foe blocked with his large shield.

The youth took a pace backwards, giving Sigeric a moment of extra breathing space.

Covered in sweat, Sigeric tried to bludgeon his way through, attempting to batter down the Roman ranks with not a thought in his head now other than to kill or be killed, but his efforts were to no further avail.

The Roman horns sounded again, clearer to Sigeric's mind this time and to his astonishment, the enemy line, after holding well against the Visigothic onslaught now retreated, stepping back in an ordered mass. The unexpected move caught the Visigoths off guard, and a gap of three or four paces opened up before they gave chase.

Exhausted by the effort of first sprinting forward and then fighting, Sigeric was quickly swallowed up by the mass of fresher warriors and he found himself pushed back within the ranks. The Roman horns sounded a third time, and now the legionaries simultaneously halted their retreat, still facing the Visigoths. Some metres ahead of him Sigeric saw the two front ranks clash together; the momentum of the Visigothic warriors carrying them straight into the Romans who impaled them on their short but deadly blades. Hundreds fell in an instant, taken by surprise by the sudden counter-attack, but still the warriors kept on going, so much so that by the time Sigeric was close to the front line again, the enemy line appeared to be buckling.

Yet the legionaries' Spathas were still cutting down Sigeric's comrades as fast as any Roman blood could be spilt by Visigothic blades. Through it all, Sigeric could see King Theodoric up on his horse, shouting words of encouragement to his men and although he couldn't hear what he was saying, the sight of his King passionately roaring his challenge while swinging his sword around his head like a man possessed was awe-inspiring.

The man in front of Sigeric fell in an explosion of blood; his neck ripped open. Sigeric leapt forward before the Roman had a chance to pull back his blade and he thrust his dagger over the top of the Roman's large shield, slicing through his eye and killing him instantly.

‘Behind!’ Look behind! Behind!’

Instinctively, Sigeric glanced over his shoulder. He felt a sharp pain in his thigh and collapsed to his knees; the open-necked corpse of his felled comrade staring blindly up at him. The Roman stabbed down at Sigeric, but mercifully the weapon was parried away by the blade of another warrior who stepped over Sigeric to take his place at the front of the line. Scrabbling on his hands and knees, trying to get to his feet while fighting the searing pain in his leg and being buffeted about by those all around him, Sigeric’s heart sank when he saw the severity of the deep gash. The wound gaped like the laughing mouth of death, mocking his attempts to stay alive.

His only chance was to crawl to the back of the line. If he stayed, there was a real danger of him being crushed as the other warriors pushed on blindly. Sigeric hauled himself backwards while being kicked and trampled again and again as he pulled his body onward, raking his fingers deep into the grassy soil in search of grip.

As he reached the rear of the army, he found the strength to slowly and painfully pull himself to his feet. He felt faint. He was losing a lot of blood, so he took off his tunic, exposing his torso, and wrapped it around his leg to help bind the wound.

And then they came. Wheeling around behind the Visigothic army appeared a massed division of Roman cavalry with their billowing golden cloaks and their long, menacing spears. They must have been shielded from view by the legionaries; their envelopment manoeuvre unnoticed in the chaos of the Visigothic charge.

For a moment Sigeric stood, rooted to the ground at the horror before him, but he quickly regained himself and with the dregs of strength he could muster, shouted ‘Horses! Horses!’

Hearing that dreaded word, many other warriors in the rear ranks turned to face the new threat, though by now the horses were nearly on them. Thinking quickly, Sigeric belted his dagger and sword, then picked up a bow that had been thrown down by an archer in the initial charge. He hastily threw a quiver over his shoulder, taking out an arrow ready to fire. His first shot hit an auxiliary in the arm, wounding him. The second hit another in the neck, his shining armour and green tabard quickly turning scarlet. He reached for another arrow but found that there were no more.

A horseman sliced his sword down towards Sigeric, but the Visigoth threw himself to the ground, shutting his eyes and pulling himself tightly into a ball as the great beasts thundered past, expecting wholeheartedly to be crushed to death. Yet the amazing moment came when he heard the last rider pass him. After a few seconds, Sigeric dared to open his eyes, dared to stand.

He turned to look at the continuing battle behind him. His calls to his comrades had all been in vain. The Visigothic army was quickly becoming enveloped by that of the Romans, creating a killing zone in the middle. As the Romans advanced from both sides, the battle was turning into a massacre.

Licina! Sigeric’s heart was in his mouth as he came to a terrible realisation. Surely it was only a matter of time now before the Romans attacked the camp, which was barely half a mile behind where Sigeric now stood, shielded from sight by the thick line of trees. When they did, they wouldn’t stop to find out if Licinia was Roman or Visigoth. She would be put to the sword with the rest. He had to get to her first.

Feeling more weakened every minute but fighting forward with every ounce of adrenaline, Sigeric ran to the trees. He threw down his arrow and empty quiver, lacking the energy to carry them and hurried on through the undergrowth, picking himself up time and again as his ailing leg gave way from underneath him. He began to hear screaming. He smelt smoke. He ran harder, ignoring the terrible pain. As he spied the camp on the far side of the trees, he was horrified to see that it was engulfed by flames and was infested with Romans; each running with bloodied swords, laughing and egging each other on as they chased, raped and slaughtered the camp followers, pillaging whatever they could get their villainous hands on.

Clearly, another band of Romans had made it around the flank of the Visigothic army unchecked, so distracted had King Theodoric's men been by their own crazed charge. Sigeric realised he had stopped, standing by the edge of the trees, paralysed by the destruction before him. Suddenly a familiar voice pierced deep into his consciousness with a blood-curdling cry. It could only be Licinia.

Hearing her again, he forced himself towards the camp at a hurried limp. That was the limit of his capabilities now. Even so, moving desperately between the burning tents and the panicking people, he soon found her, lying on the ground, spread-eagled with her grey dress pulled up to expose her lower body, with her face heavily blooded. She looked exhausted, as the legionary humped at her. Sigeric called out as he ran towards them, causing the man to look up. In the moment of distraction, Licinia snatched the sword from the man's belt and buried it in his neck. The man's eyes bulged in shock as blood spurted from the wound. Running in from the Roman's left, Sigeric kicked the writhing body off from where it pinned Licinia to the ground.

A look of pure relief and elation spread across Licinia's beautiful face as she saw that it was Sigeric. He helped her to her feet as she replaced her long dress. He tenderly wiped the blood from her face. How he wanted to kiss her, but now was not the time.

'I was sure you'd be dead,' she said.

'We're not out of this yet,' he said, and he tried to run, but his leg buckled from underneath him and Licinia only just stopped him from collapsing once more. She gasped when she saw the gash in his leg.

'It's nothing,' he lied. 'Let's go.'

He had no idea where they should go and it seemed neither did she, but just keeping away from being seen by anyone was their only concern now. Yet it seemed that every direction led to more Romans ransacking the burning camp, and Sigeric was becoming weaker and weaker with the blood loss, despite the tunic tied tightly around it. So much had already seeped through the hastily bound bandage.

They made for the trees, seeking their protection, but there was a shout from behind, and

Sigeric knew they'd been spotted, though the two Romans who gave chase were still some distance behind them. Sigeric fought the pain and with an arm over Licinia's shoulders, hobbled as fast as he could towards the wooded greenery ahead.

A bolt of excruciating pain thumped into the back of Sigeric's left shoulder. He bellowed in pain, and as he did, he tripped and although Licinia tried to catch him, he fell crashing to the ground again.

He tried to focus as he looked up at her terrified face, but he felt like he was drowning within his own body and the more he tried to swim back towards consciousness, the darker his world became until he was swallowed into an all-consuming blackness.

Rocking. Bumpy rocking, but rocking all the same. When Sigeric opened his eyes. He looked into Licinia's face as she sat over him. His first instinct was to smile, but he found her expression fearful and forlorn. That was when he noticed his hands were tied, as were hers. Looking around them, he saw that they were far from alone in this. A cart full of slaves, bound for wherever their fate took them.

Night had almost fallen as the last rays of the dying sun flickered on the horizon.

Although Sigeric's hands had been bound, his wounds had not, save for the tunic that remained uselessly tied around his thigh wound. He was still losing blood, and he found himself gasping for breath.

'Licinia,' he found the strength to say. 'They're taking me.'

'They're taking all of us,' said Licinia in a tone laced with despair. 'We're their slaves now.'

'No, not the Romans. The angels. They're taking me. They're taking me to God.'

'No, you can't give up! You're going to live. Just...'

Her panicked words trailed off. He saw an undefinable mix of emotions wash over her face before her features set into a mask of desolation and tears overcame her.

'Just hold on,' she said. 'Hold on. We'll...'

He watched as she thought frantically, searching for encouraging words to say.

'We'll be taken to a city,' she said. 'Or a town or village. It doesn't matter where but they'll have physicians who can treat you. Please, Sigeric! Just hold on.'

Sigeric smiled at Licinia. How sweet and pure she was.

'God is calling me Licinia. He must have another task for me. I must not offend him.' All he could manage was a broken whisper now, as he felt the energy slowly, unabatedly draining out of him.

'No!' wailed Licinia defiantly, causing others around to look over at them. 'Your place is here, with me. I need you more than he does. What task can be so great that our love must be sacrificed?'

Sigeric forced his mouth into a smile once again, hoping it would comfort her.

‘Love is never sacrificed,’ he said. ‘My love for you is eternal. Death is no boundary for a love like ours. One day we will be together again, in heaven. It will be perfect.’

‘No, stay with me,’ Licinia pleaded.

‘I wish I could,’ said Sigeric. ‘But how can my mind fight for life when my body begs for death? I am not leaving you. I’m simply leaving this world for another.’ It was taking all the energy he had left for him to say these words, and he was forcibly pushing them out as if each breath was his last, as he knew it might be.

‘I will wait for you,’ he said. ‘But I cannot resist the call of the Almighty. No man can resist that, but I will wait for you. I will wait.’

‘I can’t let you go. I, I can’t,’ her lip quivered as the tears streamed down her face.

‘You must, and you can. You must let me go, but we will see each other again. You lose me in body, but never in soul.’

He saw Licinia swallow hard, closing her eyes for a moment.

‘Then go to him,’ she wept. ‘Go to him and be at peace.’

‘We will be one again,’ he said hoarsely, summoning his last embers of strength. Even with her hands bound, Licinia leaned down to kiss him. As their lips touched, even in his semi-conscious state, Sigeric pined to embrace her one last time, but the rope around his wrists denied him the chance. Then, with that as his last thought, his soul slipped into the dark clouds of death.

After a moment, he opened his eyes again and felt himself drifting upwards. Below, he saw the cart, creaking onward down a muddy track, full of people, and in the centre was Licinia, beautiful Licinia, kneeling over what Sigeric recognised to be his own body.

Licinia gave a cry of pain and sorrow, looking to the sky, cursing the heavens for her loss, unaware that Sigeric was right there, striving, fighting, aching to reach her.

‘Is this justice, God?’ she cried. ‘Is this what you want?’

Looking down at Sigeric’s body she closed his eyelids.

‘Until we meet again my love,’ she managed to say. ‘Forgive the actions of my people. They don’t know what evil they cause. But I’ll make your spirit proud and nurture your memory. I couldn’t save you, but I hope this is enough.’

Her pain tore at Sigeric’s soul and he tried to swim against whatever was pulling him toward the heavens, fighting to be with her for just a few more moments, but he was powerless against its strength. He would soon be in heaven, but away from Licinia, it felt like exile.