

Taking the Gatehouse

The cold wind smelled of blood. It billowed across Ithacus' face and dripped up his sleeves like long, icy fingers reaching, grasping, clawing, groping for his soul. His eyes watered in the dry gust, as if they remembered the grief that had flowed through them only a month ago. The land was flat, covered in matte browns and grays like cold stone, but Ithacus knew the truth – they were frozen marshes. The only solid ground was the jut of stone at the marsh's center: The Rock of Clytius. And on that ugly protrusion stood a simple stone wall and a squat tower, full of blood waiting to be shed. Thin plumes of smoke rose from their comfortable breakfast fires, which Ithacus would soon take joy in stamping out.

"Captain," Dux Gregorus' voice called, ripping through Ithacus' ears like blades through a curtain.

"Lord," Ithacus replied, for lord he was. Gregorus stood a head taller than most men, and his salt-and-pepper beard was evidence enough of his age and experience in leadership and combat. He was wrapped in a brown cloak, but beneath, Ithacus knew he wore a steel breastplate, heavy mail, pauldrons and vambraces. When the time came to rush the gate, a shining helm would cover that great head, decorated with the wings of eagles fashioned from bronze. The other men were far below, scattered among the rocks at the edge of the marsh and huddled in woolen blankets around fires. The horses had been sent back into the forest, for their might would be of no service on the trek across the half-frozen mud.

"How is your confidence?"

Ithacus nodded as another gust sliced through his wool surcoat and rattled his mail. "Near absolute, lord. It's vulnerable. Telemus just doesn't know it yet."

"The privy?"

Ithacus crossed his arms. "The drain is one way in." He pointed toward the little jut of rock upon which the castle stood. "But if we can pull enough resistance to the gate, then we may be able to bring ladders around the rear, nearer the keep."

"Under cover of darkness."

"Of course."

"Which of these approaches should we utilize then, Captain?"

"Why, all of them, lord. There is no reason to leave any vulnerability unexploited. The privy is one vulnerability, but the gate itself can be breached, and if the walls can be taken, then we should take them as well, to maximize direct contact with the defenders and also destroy their confidence and cohesion. And if we find more vulnerabilities along the way, we ought to exploit those, too, if we can."

Gregorus smiled and looked out across the near-endless ice-encrusted mud, his eyes narrow. "I know what this means to you."

Ithacus' jaw tightened, and he took a deep breath as he gazed across the dull, gray valley. The sight of his daughter's mangled body flashed into his head like the stab of pain in a forgotten wound. The curled hands, the face frozen in wide-eyed terror and agony, the pool of blood. Eight years old, a pale, slender candle stamped out by a muddy boot in the dark. And Etoneus standing there with his red sword and heavy brow. His hair was straight and fair like a lady's, but the empty eyes in that pale face were cold as a wolf's.

"There is no excuse for such barbarism," Gregorus said hoarsely through his teeth. His eyes were cold and hard now, looking across the ice at that accursed rock. "My son. Your daughter. And today, a reckoning."

Ithacus nodded and wiped his face dry. "He'll be easy to spot. I cut him across that ugly face on his way out. It'll be a big, red scar over his right eye."

"Your reward will not go unnoticed," Gregorus nodded as he laid a hand on Ithacus' shoulder and shook him gently. "When we breach, Etoneus will die."

Ithacus jerked a nod and sniffled. "So he will."

As Ithacus turned to descend, Gregorus spoke one last time, stopping Ithacus' feet. "And Ithacus. It will be an honor to see you named Dux of the Rock."

"If the gods be willing, lord."

"If the gods be willing," Gregorus said with a smile.

As Ithacus picked his way down the rocks, that voice echoed in his head.

"That should teach you not to tread on Nothan land, mongrel," Etoneus had croaked, grinning at Ithacus. Ithacus remembered slashing at him like mad, his own voice strange to his ears, more like a beast than a man. And though steel rang against steel, Etoneus reeled away when Ithacus' sword collided with his face. The coward had staggered away and out the door, into the light of the burning town. Ithacus gave chase, gaining fast, until a horse bowled into him from an alley. It was only Arius, one of Ithacus' own men, who apologized and tried to help him, but by the time Ithacus regained his footing, Etoneus was gone, hidden in the fray and confusion of a night raid and the golden glow of fires in the night.

"Are we ready, sir?" Arius asked along the edge of the marsh. He was a young man, only twenty, and his beard was thin on his face, but he had a good heart. Young still, but already a strong soul and a good man.

Ithacus nodded. "We're ready."

They started out across the ice, keeping to the hardest and thickest path. Footing was firmest where the ground mounded and the hardy grasses grew, but those places were only little islands in a sea of mud and murky water crowned with ice. The residents of the Rock knew the way best, but Ithacus was familiar enough. There were only a few places where the mud crunched underfoot, giving way to softer, wetter stuff underneath. Thanks to the sparse rain, the path was mostly above the ice, covered instead in thin frost. All carried swords and daggers. Some carried bows or spears. A few brought axes and mauls and spades for the siege works. But all carried grit and rage in their hearts, and conviction. And with good tactics, fit men, and passable weapons, that was all a battle needed.

At the rear, a great ash log was dragged across the mud, leaving a black mark like the tail line of a great snake. It was dragged by great ropes rope, wrapped in wool and draped on the shoulders of thirty of the strongest men. It was a chore, but the great log would serve its purpose like nothing else in the days to come. The iron carrying handles were packed by other men, and the tail end of the log, opposite the ropes, was capped with an iron blade. Its edge was made fiercer by its great teeth, biting to either side, perpendicular to the primary edge. The edge would run vertically against the lips of the double gate, and the teeth would bite into the wood of each gate, holding the blade in place during impact. This would concentrate the impact at the very center of the gate, placing maximum strain on the hardwood beams securing the gate. With any goodwill from the gods, the ram would crack the bars of the gate and let the attackers into the fort. But there were a great many things the defenders could do from the gatehouse and the walls to stop the men holding the ram. That would be most of the battle: taking the gatehouse. But the more avenues of attack were exploited, the fewer men Telemus could spare to defend said gatehouse. With the gods behind them, as Ithacus hoped, Ithacus would draw defenders away from the gate and ensure its breach. But everything hung on the gatehouse.

“Captain,” a voice called nearby when they were nearly to the Rock itself. “They’re opening the gate, sir!”

Ithacus turned his eyes there, and indeed, he saw the distant gate hanging open. But below, near the path leading to the marsh, he saw a tiny figure. “They’ve sent a runner. Let him pass.”

“Should we stop?” another young man asked.

“Gods, no,” Ithacus laughed. “Keep moving. We stop only to parley with the messenger.”

The messenger did arrive shortly, trotting across the path. Ithacus took mental note of the winding track the boy took, bobbing around the softer ground. He was barely fifteen years old, and his cheeks were red when he arrived to stand before Ithacus and Gregorus. When the boy said nothing for a few breaths, Ithacus did speak.

“What is it, boy? Speak!”

“My lord, Dux Telemus Nothan of Remedium, keeper of the Rock of Clytius, wishes to know your business in his lands.”

“Your lord knows our business already, boy, or he wouldn’t have dug himself into that hole you call a fort,” Gregorus scoffed. “But before I give you an answer, I’ll first give you a choice: run from this place and save your own life, or you can take my message back to your master and die with him.”

The poor lad looked at Ithacus and swallowed before turning his eyes back to Dux Gregorus.

“In either case,” Gregorus said. “Our business here is simple. We have come to hold Telemus and his man Etoneus to account. They have done us wrong, and now, they will face justice.”

“He said you’d say that,” the boy said, shifting uneasily on his feet. “In which case, I was to tell you that Mon Severus doesn’t take your view of things, or he’d have lent men to your cause.”

“Mon Severus doesn’t concern himself with such trivial matters as your lord,” Gregorus said, baring his teeth. “Severus knows I can handle this myself. Why should he waste the time of his own army when they can be about grander matters? Why waste his manpower when I can take this fort myself?”

“Well,” the boy said, glancing about at the many armed men. “M’lord said to say that, in any case.”

“And my offer to you, boy?” Gregorus asked. “What say you? Flee with your life, or stay and share your lord’s fate.”

The boy glanced around again, looking long at Ithacus, and then hung his head. Without another word, he trudged along past Ithacus, toward the rocky edge of the marsh, and away from the Rock.

“Ho, lad,” Ithacus called. And the boy half turned to eye him. “Lend me your aid in our conquest, and you will be rewarded with lands and property. I am to be the new Dux, if Mon Severus will have me, and as such, these lands will be mine to do with as I will. And I would happily grant you great lands to help win me this seat.”

“You’ll not break your promise?”

“You have no assurances but my word, boy,” Ithacus shrugged. “It’s the way of things. Your choice.”

“If you win, I’ll come and see you, lord,” the boy said. “There’s... There’s a door on the western side, hidden in the rocks. If you’ve got the key, the door takes you into the hallway under the keep.”

“If your word proves true,” Ithacus said. “Then when I win, come and visit me, and I’ll see to it you own the best farmland under my charge.”

The boy nodded slowly, lazily, and stared at the ground. And as he turned and left, Ithacus nodded. It’s a hard thing, betrayal, even if done for the proper side.

“And where, one wonders, is this key?” Gregorus said, his eyebrow raised.

“On Telemus’ person, as likely as not,” Ithacus guessed.

“Or Etoneus’.”

Ithacus met his eye. “Possibly. In any case, I think we have even more reason to exploit the privy drain. If we can gain that key, then we’ll have yet another point of entry.”

Gregorus didn’t speak again until their feet were nearly on the Rock itself. “An escape hole, I think. For whoever built the place.”

“I can’t but agree. The only reason a man would build a vulnerability like that into a stronghold is fear.”

“The irony of cowardice is that its efforts to avoid injury often bring the most harm.”

At last, they reached the Rock, and Ithacus’ men began to fan out along the edge of the marsh, on the firmer ground of the slope. A thump in the ground drew Ithacus’ eye, and he saw an arrow wobbling in the dirt twenty paces uphill. It was a gentle slope on

this side, so bow range was less steep. Still, this arrow was a final warning. One that would go unheeded.

“There’s our welcome letter, boys,” Ithacus said, pointing to the little thing. “We’ve come all this way for one purpose: pull Telemus and his boar out of that godsforsaken rock and make them pay. They’ll pay for our wives! They’ll pay for our sons, our daughters, for all that they have stolen from us. This war, this feud, the killing, it ends here – one way or the other.”

The men roared in reply, shaking axes, spears, halberds, swords, shields, and their voices stung Ithacus’ ears. Four hundred men to Telemus’ fifty – no more than that would fit into the little stone thumb jutting out of this wet and muddy crag.

Four hundred men. Athena had not been the first child slaughtered in a Nothan raid, and if Ithacus failed today, she would not be the last. Ithacus had no delusions of Gregorus’ reputation. He and his kin were imperfect like the rest. But at least when their men killed women and children, it was always punished and *never* a part of the plan. For Telemus Nothan, it was an everyday part of combat.

“Make camp here,” Ithacus said, waving an arm at the earthy shelf at the edge of the marsh. “Arius, you and I will work on that intelligence from the runner boy. There’s a door on the far side of the island, and we’re going to find it.”

Arius stood up from his camp bundle and nodded. “Aye, sir.”

“The rest of you, remain at camp until I order otherwise. We parley in the morning, and then when Telemus spits in our faces, we kill them all.”

Several dozen of the dirtiest and toughest men shook their fists at that, growling and cheering darkly as the sun passed behind gloomy clouds in the west. It was to be a cold, starless night.

Ithacus set his tent up with the others, unadorned and ordinary, threw his pack inside, and walked back toward the Rock. He threw his wool blanket over a flat boulder and sat atop it. In the fading light, he could see little black shapes atop the walls – Telemus’ men. There, Ithacus produced his little stone pipe and a bundle of leaf and began to push the shredded leaves inside, his eyes never leaving the shapes on that wall. Was Etoneus there, staring back at him, that same lethal hate in his heart, too? Was Athena’s blood still caked under those filthy fingernails? Ithacus’ teeth ground at the thought. So there he sat, glowering up at those walls, and in his heart, he felt his daughter’s killer staring back. But the black heart upon that wall would soon beat its last.

At Ithacus’ word, Arius ran back to camp to fetch an ember and returned with a split twig bound with twine, a red coal clutched between its wooden teeth. Ithacus thanked Arius, held the coal against the leaf in his pipe and puffed it until it came to life, and then he tossed the coal away. It was best to be near a proper fire, but Ithacus’ gaze would not allow it. His eyes returned to the darkening wall now, its eastern side black as night in the dusk, and the first light of distant torches glowing faintly as bright golden dots twinkling in the dark. By the time Ithacus’ leaf was spent, the sun was gone, replaced by the gathering stars, all of them wandering nearer the earth to behold the bloody spectacle about to be unleashed upon the rock in this frozen marsh. They would not be disappointed.

At Ithacus' word, he moved westward, to his left, around the fort. In the starlight, Ithacus and Arius moved from stone to stone, each two-thirds the height of a man or smaller. The whole slope was littered with stones great and small. Ithacus saw it in his mind: a small army of slaves, digging great stones out of the rocky hill in the middle of the marsh and rolling them away to make way for the fort's flat foundation. He quietly spat upon a stone as he passed it, cursing to the gods the day that this fort was built. He stopped at the next and crouched, his whole body hidden apart from his left eye, peering around the stone up at the fort. His ears strained for the sound of running feet and the rattle of armor. Had they been discovered? But like the other times he'd stopped, he heard nothing but the wind and Arius' breathing. Up at the fort, he heard a loud voice laughing. Was it Etoneus, so sure of himself that he reveled on the eve of his demise? Ithacus' lip curled in the dark, his fingers stung by the cold of the stone. He tightened his cloak around himself and pressed on, moving north on the western side of the fort.

"Sir," Arius whispered in the dark.

"Quietly," Ithacus hissed.

"Sorry, sir," Arius answered, his voice almost inaudible now. Perfect. "But how are we to find this door in the dark?"

"It's not perfect darkness, lad. We can see a bit. If there's a door here, then it'll be near the fort, and either bare or covered in small stones."

"Wouldn't large stones hide it better?"

Ithacus' mouth twisted into a crooked grin in the dark. "A large stone would block the escapees inside. No, they will be small stones."

They swept the entire western side to no avail, then swept again, nearer the fort, back toward the south. On the third sweep, even nearer, Ithacus could hear Arius' nervousness they were now at the very edge of bow range from the fort. It was an exceptional archer, one with an eagle's eyes and the strength of a pack horse, that could shoot a man at this distance, but it was not impossible. Ithacus took Arius by the shoulder and put his beard on Arius' ear.

"After this sweep," Ithacus whispered. "You return to camp. There's no point in—"

Creeeeaak.

Ithacus froze on his feet, and Arius went rigid under his hand.

"Keep still, lad," Ithacus said. And he leaned onto his rear foot. A quiet creak sounded under his lead foot. When he leaned forward again, the earth creaked again. Arius let out a laugh, and Ithacus threw a hand over the boy's face and dug his fingers deep into his shoulder. Arius writhed in Ithacus' hands and groped at Ithacus' arms in vain.

"Quiet!" Ithacus hissed into Arius' ear. "You'll call them down on us."

Ithacus rifled around his own clothing, and then had Arius do the same, and when they found nothing else suitable to mark the stone, Ithacus drew his knife and scraped its point across the stone over and over again, carving a line into the chalky stone. When he felt the point in the dark, it was as round and smooth. But he wiped it off on his trousers and sheathed it. With a little work, it would sharpen up again. And even if the knife didn't

survive, it hardly mattered. If Ithacus prevailed, then he'd soon be able to buy nearly any knife his heart desired. And if he did not, then he likely would never need a knife again.

But he raised his eyes toward those walls again, and he spoke under his breath. "The gods have shown me the way, Etoneus. Enjoy your final hours, for they will be short."

Finding Gregorus asleep, Ithacus lay down in his own tent and rested. And in the morning, he found Gregorus with the men, around one of several morning fires. The lord was wrapped in a fur-trimmed cloak, looking snug in the icy wind. The other men were merely faces and hands peeking out of wool cloaks of their own, warming hands at the fire or roasting sausages over the flames. Gregorus welcomed Ithacus at his side, and Ithacus sat.

"Anything?" Gregorus rumbled.

"The boy spoke true," Ithacus murmured, keeping his eyes on the fire. "There is a door."

"You marked it?"

"Of course I—pardon me. Yes, lord. I marked it. It's a stone the size of a hog, with a fresh line marked on its western side, pointing at the ground."

"The door is there? A trap door, then?"

"Yes, lord."

"Have you opened it?"

"No, sir."

"Why not?" Gregorus demanded, turning on his stony seat to face him. "We need to know that it—"

"The spot is near the fort," Ithacus said quickly. "Easily seen, easily heard. Uncovering it would reveal to the defenders that we have the door. Even if we laid the gravel back atop it, it may leave a new color on the surface. We must wait. Watch for our opportunity. We will need the cover of darkness to hide the breachers from the eyes of the defenders on the walls, but we will also need noise to hide the sound of hammers and axes."

Gregorus grinned. "Ramming the gate."

"Precisely. With the defenders raining hell on us from the walls and gatehouse, it could take days to breach the gate. If we had more time and a proper ram shelter, the gate wouldn't stand a chance. As it is, this handheld ram and our shields will have to do."

"Which is why we need you to breach the fort from other angles."

"Yes. I will enter with a few choice men through the privy and the escape tunnel, and we will incite panic and chaos within. That should weaken the defenses enough for you to breach the gate. With the defenders distracted and the gods behind us, the gate should fall quickly, as you said, yes? Are you sure the gate will break so quickly?"

"I've been inside this Rock Telemus is so fond of," Gregorus said with some amusement. "The fort relies greatly on the marshes and the gatehouse for its defense, so little expense has been laid into the gate itself. It'll hold under assault, but only because of that gatehouse."

"Then we take the gatehouse," Ithacus growled. And the two men smiled.

By afternoon, the carrying handles had been pounded into the log's sides and wrapped in wool. The wool was secured with pitch glue and lashed on, leaving handholds to either side while minimizing the bruising the rammers would take slamming their bodies into their carrying handles. By evening, the log had been moved around to the path leading to the fort's gate. Then, Gregorus and his men waited for nightfall. The archers would have little light to shoot by, which was not much consolation, but more than none.

Gregorus laid a hand on Ithacus' shoulder in the failing light. "May the gods walk with you and speed your blade, my friend. I pray vengeance and victory are swift."

"May the gods strengthen and protect you, lord. Come morning, my fate will be sealed. We will see what the gods have decided."

Ithacus, Arius, and ten men passed into the dark, moving along the southern and then western ends of the fort. There were pickaxes and axes among them, in addition to their swords, daggers and fighting axes. No spears, no polearms, and only two small recurve bows between them. The tight confines of the tunnel and the privy would permit little else.

They moved from stone to stone in a line, their hoods drawn up and their cloaks wrapped about them. In the dark, they would be seen as stones themselves when they stood still, crouched among the boulders in the dark. Ithacus arrived at a stone he saw and thought was right, only to find it lacked his mark. Mark or not, he could feel with his hands that it was not the same. So, he moved on. His men began to whisper anxiously after the sixth stone, but Ithacus remained calm.

Shouts rang out from the fort, and Ithacus saw his hooded soldiers gazing up at the walls. A moment later, a dull *boom* resounded in the dark, and the shouts from the fort grew louder. The ram. Ithacus motioned for his men to split up, and they did. Ithacus checked another rock, then two, then ten. The battering ram boomed over and over high above their heads, and soon, the noise would stop. Gregorus' first crop of rammers would be filled with arrows until the log had to be dragged away by its chain, or else they would exhaust themselves. Either way, Ithacus' chances to find this stone were numbered. He laid his hands on a stone, biting cold against his fingertips, and he felt along its western face for his mark, but the rock was round there, like an old lord's fat belly, and he knew it was wrong. The stone he'd marked had been flat on the western face. With his men dispersed, he made the mistake of allowing himself to feel it, that emotion he had banished for so long: fear. If he could not find the door now, then the breach could be delayed by hours or days. And if Gregorus lost too many men now, another attack on the gate might never happen. Ithacus' hands and heart began to shake. He shut his eyes and leaned on the stone a moment, willing the feeling to subside.

A shrill trill of whistles met his ears, and Ithacus whirled around toward the sound. It was the call of a green-tipped sparrow, a bird never seen or heard at night – and exactly the call used by Ithacus' men. They had found it. Ithacus picked his way toward the sound, repeated at intervals, until he found himself in a throng of ten panting men. Arius turned out to be the one, and Ithacus clapped him on the shoulder.

“Once we take this godsforsaken rock box,” Ithacus said to Arius, taking the first risk of sound, talking above a whisper and eliciting quiet laughter from his men. “You’ll be the first to taste the liquor stores, my lad.”

“I’m sure Telemus has some stiff stuff in his chambers up top,” another man laughed as he clapped Arius on the back.

“Now, lads,” Ithacus said, raising his spade. “To work!”

Hoping the noise of combat and the shouting of the defenders was enough cover, Ithacus and his men scraped away the gravel, revealing wood grain beneath. Good hardwood, streaked with age, weather and the grinding of stones, met their fingers, as well as rough, half-rusted iron. They hacked and scraped and pried for what felt like days, with Ithacus often glancing over his shoulder to look for torchlit faces peering down at them from the walls. No such faces ever greeted him. Then, a crunchy, crackling sound as the first plank gave way. Then another plank went. Then a third, at which time the youngest and skinniest of Ithacus’ men slipped down to grope around for a latch. Reuel son of Torel was his name, a lad from up north near Bel Ibina. After a few moments, there was a dull *clack* as the latch turned, and then the door was thrown open. Ithacus sent six men inside with orders to wait at the inner door, and took Arius and four other men uphill to the privy.

“Gods, the smell!” one said.

“What have they been eating? Rotted fish?”

“Quiet!” Ithacus hissed. “Or I’ll put a handful of it down your measly throats!”

Ithacus refreshed all their minds on the inner workings of a privy like this one, and then he pressed in first. The iron grate was pried away, and Ithacus climbed inside, squeezing his two shoulders through the narrow opening and into the passage beyond. Up on his elbows, his back scraped against the rough bricks above as he pulled himself forward on his arms, crawling like a wet worm. Behind, he heard echoes of his men retching. Arius actually vomited halfway up the drain, adding another aroma to what lay here already.

The dark might have been the worst part – the complete, perfect, blinding, eye-aching, eternal dark. How far had Ithacus crawled already? How much farther to go? Was it even an actual privy drain, or a well-stocked decoy? Would he keep climbing for hours until he reached a dead end? But no, those thoughts drifted into and then out of his mind like rowboats drifting past a riverside hut. Ithacus knew the truth. There couldn’t be refuse and muck this far in if it were a decoy. It was the real thing, and it couldn’t be eternally long.

Sure enough, he began to see a dim light ahead, and then he emerged into it. It was a vertical shaft lined with bricks, not quite wide enough to stretch his arms out to either side. Voices echoed down from above, but faintly. This privy led to the private suite at the top of the fort – not a place where the fighting or the dirty common soldiers would gather. It was a luxury feature, this shaft. It belonged in a lordly keep, not a small fort like this one. These shafts had to be made wide to prevent those maintaining it from getting stranded below. Wide enough to shimmy up. And shimmy, they did, starting with Ithacus.

With some difficulty due to slippery shoes covered in... mud, as Ithacus decided to call it, Ithacus started up the shaft. He pressed his feet out left and right, as well as his hands, and pushed up. His hands stung and burned against the moist, gritty bricks, and his shoes slid against the sides occasionally, but at last, he reached the warmer top of the shaft. Ithacus slid the wooden seat off the shaft and reached his hands up, shimmying with his feet twice, then thrice, to get his shoulders up and through the hole. He emerged into a doored privy just large enough for one to sit, and then opened the door into the larger chamber, his dagger now naked in his half-numb hand.

The room was red, and dimly lit with but two candles – one on either end of the room. As the door opened, the stifling heat struck Ithacus' in the face and made his fingers ache. There were rugs on the floor and a bed by the wall, with tall posts and heavy, crimson curtains. Telemus fancied himself a lord after all, then. There was a table with bottles, and several chests and cabinets scattered about. After a quick look about the room, Ithacus ran back to the privy and stuck his head back down into the shaft.

"We're clear!" he hissed, hearing his voice echo up to his own ears. Over the next little while, Ithacus stood in the privy and helped pull the other five men up and through the hole until all six were now gathered in Telemus' personal chambers, covered in enough human waste to wrinkle even a fly's hairy nose.

"Gods above, what a smell," one whispered.

"I'd kill to get a bath, I tell ya."

"That's exactly what we're here to do, Dorus."

"Oh, shut your gob, Macarius!"

"Shut up," Ithacus jabbed, unable to hide his own smirk. "We're here for one purpose and one only: bringing down the defenders. We make a stir, sow a little chaos, take the gatehouse, and kill the leadership – Telemus and Etoneus especially."

"What's first, then, sir?" Arius said quietly.

"First, we—"

A low creak halted Ithacus' voice, and he and all his men crouched low on the rug. Gods, what had he been thinking standing about in the middle of the room like a bloody fool? The door eased open, letting bright yellow torchlight into a slice of the room to Ithacus' left, and then closed again, as a young woman passed inside. When she turned into the room, her eyes narrowed as they adjusted to the candlelight – much dimmer than Telemus' fine fighting torches – and then widened as her eyes met Ithacus'. But no one ever heard her scream.

Ithacus pulled her close by one sleeve and wrapped her up against his chest, throwing a hand over her mouth and driving his long, steel blade up into her ribs. Liver on the first stroke, then heart and lungs on the next. Her voice vibrated against his hand, and she thrashed in his arms. The feel of hot fluid soaking into the fabric of Ithacus' trousers and shirt was eerily soothing after the cold climb up the brick drain of the privy, and then she slowly went limp as her lifeblood pooled on the floor. Ithacus dragged her into a corner and dropped her, then returned to his men.

"Someone will come looking for her," he said quickly. "We need to move."

“She...” Arius said, his eyes wide. The other men were staring too. “That was a girl, sir.”

“A girl whose scream would have brought the entire fort into this room, ending our incursion before it began. This is combat, boy, not a dance floor. Decisions are made fast and hard, and the mission comes first. Now, you lot wait here, and I’ll bring you word.”

Ithacus eased the door open just a crack. The door opened onto a railed balcony that connected with the defensive wall. There were wooden stairs to either side, leading to the bailey below. The floors beneath this room must be the barracks and the rest of the rooms of the fort’s keep. There were about ten men scattered here and there on the walls, with a dozen more directly above the stone gatehouse.

“I’ll have no one disturbing me, you hear?” a voice bellowed from the stairs, with a rich man’s lilt. No common soldier, that one. “I’ll come join you when I’ve finished my business upstairs.”

A replying voice used an inuendo-laden tone, which set the first speaker laughing. “Right you are, sir, right you are!”

“Telemus,” another voice called to the man on the stairs. And the voice made the hairs on Ithacus’ arms stand on end. *Etoneus*. The rest of what Etoneus said was lost in the noise, but Telemus replied.

“Quite right, Etoneus, quite right. But we’ll be ready for them. Have the men sleep in shifts. They won’t be gone for long.”

Ithacus eased the door shut and moved into the room. “We’ve got company: it’s Telemus himself. Keep quiet and out of sight until you see me make a move!”

They were hidden by the time the door opened, and a tall, fat man bumped into the room.

“They’ve run off, Cinda darling,” he sighed. “Now, we’ve got a reprieve long enough to—oh, gods, that smell!”

Telemus put a hand over his delicate, shaved mouth and staggered to put a hand on the door. “Are you ill, girl? What in Soren’s name has happened to—”

He stopped, then, as his eyes adjusted to the dark and he saw Cinda lying contorted in the corner of the room, a glistening puddle forming around her pale shape.

“Cry out, and you die,” Ithacus said from between Telemus and the door. At the same moment, he snatched Telemus’ own dagger from its scabbard. “You’re outnumbered, Telemus son of Tierel.”

Telemus went still, very still. He didn’t even move to look at Ithacus over his shoulder. He had plenty to look at in front, after all, with Ithacus’ five men melting out of the room to surround Telemus with steel bared in their hands.

“This explains the smell. Nothing else could raise a stench like inbred southerners.”

Ithacus set the point of his own reddened dagger against Telemus’ spine, and the big man gasped and got to his tiptoes.

“The only reason you’re still alive,” Ithacus whispered. “Is because Gregorus wants to kill you himself. You’ll be gagged and tied like a prize sow until the morning. Then, you’ll be cut like one.”

“You’re outnumbered. You cannot win.”

Ithacus shrugged. “We shall see. Bind him.”

There was nothing else for Telemus to do now but submit. He presented his hands, then lay down for the bonds on his mouth and feet. Before the gag went on, though, he spoke again.

“You’ll never survive this,” he boasted. “When Severus hears of what’s happened here, he’ll raze this whole fort to the ground and then burn all your little towns. There will be nothing left.”

Ithacus smiled. “Gag the swine. Macarius, you stay and guard him. But keep your wits about you. He is as cunning as he is corpulent.”

Macarius nodded, but his face remained blank. Ithacus sighed.

“He might be fat, but he’s smart, too, so keep sharp.”

That brightened Macarius’ eyes. “Ah! Quite right. Yes, sir!”

Arius helped the men drag Telemus into the privy, where his elbow was lashed to the iron half-ring jammed into the wall. These rich swine needed rungs to stand up from their own dung holes. Once the men gathered at the door, Ithacus laid his hand on the latch and then turned to them.

“We emerge,” he said quietly, calmly. “We move right, along the wall, cutting down every man in our path. We take the gatehouse and barricade ourselves inside. They’ll have plenty of tools for that – it’s a gatehouse. And we signal Gregorus to ram the gate again.”

“Sir,” Dorus said. “What if Dux Gregorus can’t reach us in time? What if the Nothan men get into the gatehouse?”

Ithacus held his gaze. “We buy Gregorus as much time as we can, soldier. It’s not our job to take the fort – just the gatehouse.”

With that, Ithacus threw open the door and he and his men burst out. And there, standing at the top of the steps, one foot up, one foot down, with a great red scar over his right eye and long, shining locks hanging about his shoulders on either side of his ugly, shaved face, was Etoneus. Here to put his ear to his master’s door and listen to his time with that Cinda girl, likely as not. But whatever the reason, he now stood between them and the gatehouse.

Ithacus drew out his sword, then, and waved his dagger to one side. “Go left! I’ll take this one!”

Etoneus spat an expletive as he yanked on his own sword and rushed forward. Ithacus caught Etoneus’ clumsy downstroke with his sword and closed with his dagger, swiping it quickly across Etoneus’ side. Etoneus grunted and shoved Ithacus back, feinting high and then slashing low, clipping the front of Ithacus’ thigh just under Ithacus’ block. He skipped backward and moved around Etoneus, keeping himself between Etoneus and the door. As Etoneus opened his mouth to shout, Ithacus pressed forward again, slashing and thrusting at Etoneus’ head, face, hands, chest – anything that would

take Etoneus' focus off of rousing the fort and on Ithacus' flying blades. As he pressed Etoneus back, while Etoneus kept Ithacus' steel from his own flesh, Ithacus' strokes kept him always retreating, and when he tried to move to one side of the other, Ithacus was there to cut him off and herd him back toward the steps. The frequent glances over the shoulder told Ithacus that the stairs were making Etoneus nervous. Good news. Nervousness breeds distraction, and distraction breeds mistakes.

Finally, Etoneus slashed left, right, opening space, then thrust. Ithacus parried it up and lunged forward, his point aimed at Etoneus' heart, but the tall man hopped back and away from Ithacus' sword, landing his heels right at the edge of the top step. Ithacus charged in, pressed Etoneus' sword up with both blades, and planted a heel kick in the center of Etoneus' chest.

For a single breathless moment, Etoneus just hung in the air, his mouth open, and his eyes so wide it seemed his glistening eyeballs would come tumbling out. Veins popped out of his neck and face, purple in the bright torchlight, and his sword spun free of his hand. Then, the man screamed, a shrill, piercing, terror-laced sound that echoed in the bailey and rang off the stone and stabbed at Ithacus' eardrums. Etoneus rolled backward down the stairs, shattering the thin wooden railings, his clothing tearing at the broken wood, and the pale white of his inner flesh shining in the torchlight, the wounds of his fall being still too fresh for blood. The wood crackled and snapped with the impacts, and soon, the big man would reach the floor of the bailey. But Ithacus would not be there to see it.

He turned and sprinted along the path his men had taken, his right leg refusing to fully cooperate. He found himself limping from the sword wound Etoneus had dealt him. He jumped from the wooden platform down onto the stone path. Shouts were erupting from the bailey now.

"Etoneus!"

"Up there!"

"Stop him!"

"Bloody hell, they're inside!"

"To the wall!"

Ithacus stepped around a groaning wall defender clutching a chest wound. Another with a gaping belly raised a blade to Ithacus only to have his sword parried and then go tumbling to the ground far below as Ithacus ran on. Two arrows snapped against the stone just ahead of Ithacus as he rounded the first corner, and several more came zipping past him as he ran toward the front of the fort.

Gods above, he panted to himself. Whose plan was this? This is bloody suicide.

He rounded the second corner and slipped in a pool of blood, slamming into the front crenels. Pain blossomed across his left shoulder, and something plucked in his neck like a harp string. An arrow hit his sleeve, feeling like a slap on the arm, but the shaft went through and through. Another skewered itself on his belly, like a nose piercing. He took it in his dagger hand and yanked it through and through, and then ran on toward the gatehouse.

There was a door open on the side of the gatehouse, with a golden glow within. He saw men there, standing with wide stances and making big hand motions. On top of the gatehouse were men with bows and spears.

“Captain!” the men in the gatehouse cried. It was then that Ithacus recognized Arius standing in the door. Arius emerged from the door, spun with a recurve bow in hand, and sent a shaft up to the nearest Bowman atop the gatehouse. The man reeled back with a cry, an arrow now protruding from his shoulder, just missing the breastplate. Ithacus covered the last few steps with the best speed his limping leg could muster and jumped headfirst into the gatehouse. He landed with a heavy *thump*, and his sword blade clattered against the stone. Gods above, he’d have a hell of a time grinding that one out. But it had to wait.

“Captain,” two men said urgently as they pulled him to his feet. Others shut and barred the door.

“All accounted for?” Ithacus gasped, his chest tight from the jump.

Arius nodded, breathless. “All accounted for, sir. No casualties so far. No wounded... well, apart from you, sir.”

Ithacus huffed out a chuckle, which elicited several from his men. He patted himself down and took stock of his injuries. His left shoulder was angry from the impact against the crenels. He had a deep cut on his right arm from a passing arrow, and a wound straight through the front of his belly. It was only skin deep though, gods be praised. Ithacus might have to battle infection after this, but if the winds turned right, he’d be fine. Then there was the sword cut on his right thigh from Etoneus.

“Open the doors,” Ithacus grunted as he leaned against a wall.

Arius eyed him a moment. “Sir?”

“I said open the bloody doors. We’ve got to signal Gregorus to ram again, and we have to hold as much of the wall as we can. Arius, you and I will take two men and clear the top of the gatehouse. Dorus, you keep your bow trained on the right side. Tyrus, you take the left. We move now. Open in three, two, one. Go!”

The doors were unbarred. Arius stepped out first and loosed an arrow down into the bailey, then dropped low as several shafts came up in reply. Ithacus was out next and passed up the ladder. He slashed at the nearest legs he saw, and the sword bit through the boots and gnawed on bone. A moment later, he was atop the gatehouse, and he saw Reuel coming up the opposite ladder. Ithacus saw now that the man whose heels he had cut was the one with an arrow sticking out of his shoulder. He ran the man clean through and then reckoned with the other two. The first one drew sword and engaged Reuel, so Ithacus went for the second, who was holding a long spear. Ithacus parried the spear once, twice, as he closed in, until the point could no longer be brought to bear. And by the time the spearman drew sword, Ithacus’ blade was already in his belly. He pushed the man off the sword and down onto the dirt path leading to the gate below.

“We have the gatehouse!” Ithacus cried. “Back inside, back inside!”

Under a hail of arrows, Ithacus, Reuel and Arius made it back inside the gatehouse. They pushed the doors half-closed, the archers still at the ready, but Arius sat

on the floor. Ithacus opened his mouth to scold the lazy youth until he saw a black shaft between Arius' ribs. Ithacus dropped to his knees in front of Arius and touched the arrow.

"It's low, lad," Ithacus said mildly. "You'll pull through. We'd best leave it in until a healer can see you afterwards. Till then, I'll make it more manageable."

Ithacus grasped the arrow and snapped it off, while Arius screamed and gripped Ithacus' wrists like death itself. Keeping the shaft in plugged the wound like a cork in a bottle, but the full length of the arrow tended to catch on doors and arms and legs and everything else, aggravating the wound. In the end, only about as much length as a man's thumb was left sticking out of Arius' side. Ithacus patted Arius' cheek firmly.

"Chin up, lad. It's just an arrow."

Arius attempted a smile, then, his brow wet with the sweat of work and pain.

"They're coming!"

Ithacus leapt up and looked out of Dorus' door. Sure enough, four men bearing shields were surging along the wall, and seven more were coming down the other side. The fight begins again.

"Hold the doors!" Ithacus cried. "Shoot those men! Time, lads. Pay for more time! Pay with arrows, pay with steel, pay with teeth and fists and blood. Fight. Fight!"

For his part, Ithacus took a white cloth and put an arm out of one of the slit windows at the front of the gatehouse and waved his arm like mad.

"Look up here, Gregorus, damn you," he grunted as he swung his arm. "Look!"

Dorus and Tyrus loosed arrows. Uriel stood behind them with a spear, running back and forth as he was needed, which thankfully, was rare.

When Ithacus' left arm grew tired, he swung his right. He had switched again to his left when one of his men shouted, "Captain, look! The ram is coming!"

Ithacus yanked his arm back inside then, and made room for his face to look through the slit in the stone. And sure enough, men were rushing near, bearing a log. Gregorus had come! Ithacus rushed to the doors, snatching up Arius' bow and quiver. He joined Dorus at the left-hand door and leaned out. An arrow lodged in the wooden door jamb behind his head, but he loosed his own shaft, which found its mark in the offending archer. The next time he leaned out, his arrow missed, and an answering arrow slapped the side of his head, pulling his hair. Fiery pain erupted on the side of his head, and he dropped back inside the doorway and checked the wound with the palm of his hand. He cursed under his breath when he saw the dripping blood. What had he expected of a head wound?

The whole gatehouse shook with a loud *boom* below. Gregorus. Ithacus exchanged a smile with his men, then. Even Arius grinned along with them.

"Hold the wall, men," Ithacus said. "Just hold. If we keep up our end, Gregorus can hold up his. And together, we'll take this fort."

The ram kept pounding, but the defenders took to the walls less and less, until Ithacus and Dorus took to just sitting by the door and watching the wall and listening to the pounding below. Reuel sang songs occasionally through the night, and in the dark hours before sunrise, a boom met with a loud *crrrrack*. The next sounded with a *crunch*. And the next burst the gate open, and the din of battle erupted below. Arrows flew, steel

rang against steel and stone, shields thudded and clattered, spears snapped. And then the sounds diminished. Words like *yield* and *surrender* were shouted. Ithacus heard swords and daggers clatter down on the stone. And then finally, he heard Gregorus shouting.

“Ithacus!” the Dux yelled. “Ithacus, come down! Ithacus! The fort is ours!”

Ithacus hazarded a peek, then, and what he saw straightened his back and raised his chin. Down below, he saw dozens of Nothan defenders hacked to bits and lying in a great smattering of blood and damaged armor. Weapons lay scattered about the ground like toys left behind from a children’s squabble. Five of the defenders were kneeling, bound, on one side of the bailey, in front of the tables near the great hearth fire on the side of the keep. One of the captured defenders was bleeding across his face from an open head wound, and one other was lying on his side. Ithacus raised his sword high, and Gregorus raised his own in reply.

Arius was carried down the steps, and at Ithacus’ word, men were sent into Telemus’ chambers to fetch the whiskey. A little of it was dribbled into Arius’ mouth and he coughed, setting all the other men to laughing. Gregorus had Telemus dragged out, whipped like a dog, and then he flashed steel across the fat lord’s throat and left him to quiver and bleed on the cold, wet ground.

Ithacus was limping toward the steps to go back up to the lordly chambers above for a drink of his own when a ruined and bloody shape caught his eye. A body lay there at the bottom of the steps, weakly gasping out its final breaths. The limbs were twisted and mangled. The fine, ladylike hair, light brown and fair, was matted with blood. The clothes were battered and torn. The heavy brow was swollen from impacts, and the mouth was bleeding, dripping to the side down to the pavers.

Etoneus.

Ithacus stood staring for a long moment, watching Etoneus’ chest twitch with weak gasps. He saw Etoneus’ mouth moving, mouthing words weakly. *Please*, he was saying. *Mercy*.

“Mercy,” Ithacus said slowly. Behind him, Gregorus and his men laughed at something in the distance. “Like the mercy you showed those children. Like the mercy you showed my daughter. That mercy?”

Etoneus’ eyes widened, and even in his ruined state, he began to visibly shake under Ithacus’ gaze. Ithacus limped one step closer, then two. Blood was running down his right leg, from the small wound Etoneus had won against him. Ithacus knelt down beside the dying man and laid a hand on the cold pommel of the dagger on his belt. Then, he leaned close, close enough to whisper. Close enough to feel what little warmth Etoneus had left radiating from his bleeding head onto Ithacus’ face. Close enough to smell the sweat, the blood, the dirt... and the fear.

“Her name was Athena,” Ithacus whispered, and Etoneus shuddered.