Prologue

"With so much gentleness" - Livy

She hunted by night.

Her paws padded lightly on the ground as she sought her prey. The moon shone down. Her moon. She bathed in its light, as she had so many nights before.

She was alone. A wolf was not meant to live without a pack, but she had made do. She had survived. She was herself. She was enough.

She had found a mate briefly, a lone wolf with fire in his eyes. But her litter had not survived, and he had left her shortly after mating. She was left with full teats and sorrow in her bones.

She waded through the shallow waters. The great river had overflowed, rare for this time of year. She did not mind. The new marshes created a trap for her prey. Without a pack, she could not bring down the larger deer that she had gorged herself on in the before times.

Instead, she dined on smaller creatures: beavers, otters, voles. They were harder to chase down but easier to kill once they were cornered. She had to spend more time

hunting: one kill did not feed her for days the way a large deer might. But she had nearly starved trying to hunt the larger animals on her own. So she adapted.

She did not interfere with the strange man-folk who moved in small packs and ranged from elaborate dwellings. They were dangerous. Their natural defenses were weak, and there was a time long ago when her ancestors would have dined on them without questioning. But they were resourceful, these creatures, and they had evolved the use of sharp things that could rip her apart with more prowess than her own teeth. These sharp silver claws were almost as long as the torsos of these creatures and could be swung with great strength. It was best not to risk contact with the man-folk.

She padded through the water, smelling. Scent was her guide, animal sweat mingling with lichen and moss, a map of her narrow world. But the river smelled strange that night. She could not quite identify it, but it might be food. She stalked toward it, curious.

They were drowning the man-cubs.

Three large man-folk carried an unnatural wooden thing, all angles and sharp corners, into the river's currents. They pulled two small cubs from it and dropped them into the water. Making loud noises to one another, they left.

"*You must act.*"

The voice came from behind her. The wolf did not comprehend words, but intentions could be known. She felt a deep, powerful current of intent flow through her, compelling her toward the man-cubs.

The world was made of *numina*. In every blade of grass, every droplet of water in the raging river, every mote of dust in the air, a small spirit lived. She knew this intuitively, as a natural creature who lived in the world herself.

But some gods were not small. She turned. A giant

wolf loomed over her, a wolf she immediately knew to be a goddess.

"You wish me to save the man-cubs?"

"I do not make wishes. I instruct."

Instruct was a foreign concept to the she-wolf. Wolves did not instruct each other. She struggled to comprehend. The image of her former pack leader arose. When the pack leader wished something to happen, he intuited it to the others. They followed, for what else would one do in response to the intentions of the leader? Perhaps this "instruct" intention was similar to a pack leader's desires.

She did not need to follow the intention of a god. So many of them permeated the world, such that to follow any one god's intention would be to immediately contradict another's. The gods of her prey might instruct her not to eat, and she would starve.

But this goddess was shaped like her. She wondered if it was a glamour, for the goddess used concepts foreign to her. A man-god in disguise, perhaps? Gods could manifest in many forms. Some were tricksters and did not have her best interests in mind.

She probed further.

"*Do you wish these cubs for your own use?"*

"Time is shortening. You must move fast. Meaning will come when the twins are saved."

Another foreign word, *twins*. She did not understand this one at all, though the concept of "litter" rose in her mind as she pondered it.

The man-cubs were drowning. If she did not rescue them now, there would be no time to understand later. She leaped into action.

She passed the overturned wooden thing, strange to her. It was garishly colored, unlike any bark she had ever seen, and shaped in a large blocky pattern that did not

occur in any woods she knew. It reeked of the man-folk. Their dwellings were similar but larger.

Past the wooden heap, she found the two cubs lying in the shallow water. She felt something stir in her gut, separate from hunger pangs. Pity for the cubs. They were howling in terror and panic. They were going to die, far too young, especially for the man-folk. It was the way of the world. Not all cubs survived. They were good for little beyond a small meal to preserve her.

But the goddess's urgency still filled her, and compulsion drove her to follow the goddess's intent. She growled and nipped at one of the cubs, hauling it from the water. She dropped it among the reeds on dry ground, then returned for the other. When both were safely ashore, she sat beside them, considering.

"*You did well.*" The goddess's intent refilled her. *"It falls to me to clean up my half-brother's messes. As always."*

A mess left by a god? She did not understand. *"Your kin is also a god. Why does he create messes?"*

A harsh barking sound came from the goddess. "*I only know that these two are destined, and they have been abandoned by their father Ares. He is never interested in the seeds of his own actions."*

A father disinterested in his own cubs did not strike the wolf as unusual, but sorrow filled her anyway. Many common things were tragedies. Frequency did not dilute pain.

"*Do you wish me to raise these cubs?*"

"*Keep them alive for now. Other events are set in motion today. They will not long be your responsibility."*

She bowed her head to the goddess. For a moment, she had dared to hope that her own barren womb's failures might be replaced by these cubs. But such was not her fate. She was a conduit for greater things. She put her

faith in the goddess's intention and hoped that she was not in the presence of a trickster. Trusting gods was a difficult thing.

The goddess disappeared, leaving her with the *numina* of the river valley and two mewling cubs.

Now what? She still had a small amount of milk available to feed them from her lost brood. Was it right to give it to them? Wasting some of her own food to keep the foreign cubs alive?

Her urge to please the goddess overcame her hesitation. Shaking her head and growling softly, she lay beside the cubs and allowed them to crawl up to her teats. They suckled greedily.

FAUSTULUS STORMED INTO THE NIGHT, tears streaming down his face. His feet found the ground unconsciously, through routine, as he dwelled on his loss.

Another stillborn. His darling Laurentia lay with the midwife, recovering. He had stayed as long as he could stomach it, but he was useless in that domain. And Faustulus could not abide uselessness.

He despaired as he stomped across his property and beyond it. Despaired for the health of his wife. Despaired for the lives of the three children promised to him, all taken cruelly before he was given a chance to meet them. But he also despaired for himself and his future. Without children to help herd the sheep, how would he maintain his trade? How would he feed and support Laurentia? How would he even feed himself? It was becoming increasingly clear that Laurentia could not bear children.

They faced a future of meager sustenance, with no prospects of improvement. No future generation into

which he could pour his hopes and dreams. His line would end with him.

He had always envisioned himself a father. He had pictured babes in his arms, toddlers running at Laurentia's skirts, teenagers swinging axes to create firewood to warm the hearth. He had pictured giving lectures on moral and good behavior, and playing games on the cottage floor, and play wrestling, and even shouting matches, tears, anger, but always soothed later with love.

All that was stolen from him and his wife. Laurentia's wails were physical, he knew, but he heard the emotional loss buried within them. His heart tore for her, for himself, for their lost children, for their barren future.

An owl hooted as his wandering led him deeper into the woods. He felt the trees close in around him, their branches clawing at the sky, narrowing the window to the heavens as he strode deeper and deeper into the woods. He should not be out here at night, he knew. He should be home with Laurentia. But she did not need him. He had nothing better to do but wander in hopelessness.

He remembered Laurentia on their wedding day. How beautiful she looked. How blessed he felt that such a lovely woman would agree to be his wife. His wife, to spend her life with him. How he had promised a great future to her, a future built on the children she would provide him.

He kept walking aimlessly until the woods began to thin around him. He emerged on the banks of the Tiber, reeds replacing trees as he entered the river's flood plain. The great river had overflowed its banks and was swamping the entire area. He had heard stories of his neighbors who had lost tremendous amounts of their crops to the spreading water. He wondered how they would survive the winter. A reminder that as bad as things were, others had it worse. Hardships multiplied.

As he drew near the stagnant water, he heard a sound in the darkness. Like…like a baby crying. He stopped in his tracks. Was he haunted by the ghost of his stillborn child? Perhaps he was losing his mind.

He followed the sound along the outskirts of the swamp. On the edge of the still water, he found a sight that made him sure he had given up all control of his sanity.

Two babes sat suckling at the teats of a she-wolf. The wolf growled at him, but strangely, he did not feel afraid. He approached, extending one hand to calm her. *Fool man*, he thought. *You're as like to get your hand bitten off as calm a wolf.* Still, he kept moving.

The wolf bared her teeth. He kneeled and looked her in the eye. He felt a soothing calm come over him that he could not explain. "Shh," he said. "It's okay. I'll take it from here."

The wolf stood to face him. The babes began to cry. He wondered which one had let out the initial cry that had drawn his attention.

The wolf snapped at his outstretched hand, but he did not withdraw it. "We're friends," he said. "Don't worry. I'll take care of them. This is their destiny." Destiny? He did not believe in destiny. What was he saying?

The wolf dipped her head and stepped backward. He moved closer, close enough to gather the babes into his arms. The she-wolf whimpered and retreated farther. She circled around herself and finally slunk away. He felt bad for her, strangely. As if they were her children and he was stealing them. But that was preposterous. A wolf could not care for human children. He felt a pang of guilt, which he dismissed as quickly as it came. Daft to feel bad for a wolf.

He was fated to find these children, on this, the most miserable night of his life. He knew it was the work of the gods, somehow. What was he saying? He was not a believer

in the gods, a fact he hid from all but his most private thoughts.

But now he could not deny their designs, their work in this miracle. How else could this be explained, if not divine intervention? Faith filled him for the first time in his life.

He held the two babes in his arms and rocked them. They were here to teach, to raise, to shower with love, affection and care. They were a gift.

And he would not spoil it.

PART I

The Twins (754BC–753BC)

Other Places:

Circa 1200–1150BC: Bronze Age Collapse
Circa 1100BC: Iron Age begins
1046BC: Zhou Dynasty established
890BC: *The Iliad* and *Odyssey* created by Homer
814BC: Foundation of Carthage
776BC: First Olympic Games
771BC: Chinese Spring and Autumn periods begin

Chapter 1

"The years of manhood" - Livy

The sun was just cresting the horizon, but Remus was already hard at work herding sheep alongside his brother Romulus.

They pushed the sheep along the river valley, tracing familiar paths they had trod thousands of times before. The sheep were pushed ahead of them by shepherd's crook and barking sheep-hounds. They spent hours herding them back into their pens after the grazing hour was over.

Remus and Romulus worked well together. Remus followed his brother's lead, but they needed to communicate little to move in concert. A nod, a gesture, and Remus understood what Romulus wanted him to do. They were twins, and they had always had a deeper connection than even that claimed by other twins in the village.

Remus loved the sheep. They were perfect animals, willful but obedient, kind but mischievous. He spent hours with them, knew them as individuals. He was at home in the countryside, in nature, where everything had an order

and a peace to it. Yes, there was violence as well: wolves were a constant threat to the flock, but even that had an orderliness to it. All was part of one great system that made sense to Remus. His days were filled with happiness, and he could not imagine anything better than being a shepherd and spending time with his family.

When they reached the pens and rounded up the last of the sheep, his brother grinned at him, that cocked smile that indicated he was ready to get into some trouble. "Let's get out of here."

Remus nodded. He never questioned his brother. Romulus had always taken the lead, always been the one in charge. It was nice to have someone to follow. Someone who knew what to do in any circumstance, someone who always had a plan.

Romulus led the way. Remus fell in behind him. They passed streams and small copses of trees. Their farm was at the base of a large hill, in a small valley nestled between seven such hills. It was a small patch of land, but it was enough to survive on. It was enough.

Remus loved getting out into the wilderness beyond the farm itself. The sun beating down on his head, the rustle of grass against his shins, even the bugs buzzing around him. Better than city life. Not far from them, the valley nestled such a city. Alba Longa, where the king sat. Remus did not much care about politics or kings; he could not even name the man.

Romulus had an eye for such things. He could tell you which nobles were in and out of favor; what rumors came from the court; which courtiers' stars were ascendant and which were falling. Remus saw no value in any of it. He would keep to his walks, out here in the sun and grassy fields.

They began climbing the hill next to their farmstead.

Despite himself, Remus tensed as they ascended. This hill was a point of contention between his father, Faustulus, and the neighboring lord, Numitor. Both claimed it as part of their property. An uneasy sharing arrangement had been worked out, but few believed the peace would hold. Perhaps they shouldn't be pressing their luck by climbing the hill. Perhaps this was only threatening to ruin a perfect afternoon. Perhaps.

Remus spoke up. "Romulus, should we be going up here?"

"Don't worry so much," Romulus replied. "We'll be fine. We might even find some of Numitor's men to brawl with."

Remus did not want to brawl. He could fight if he had to; Romulus had seen to that growing up. But he would rather avoid conflict.

"I don't want to pick a fight with the former king," said Remus. "He could make trouble for us."

Numitor had been deposed by the current king. He had been allowed to live, but his daughter Rhea had been imprisoned for violating her sacred oaths as a Vestal Virgin and giving birth to a child. She had claimed she had been raped by the God of War, Mars. Remus had picked up that much gossip and found it all quite strange.

"Former king," said Romulus. "He's out of favor. We can stand up to a disgraced monarch."

"We are peasants," argued Remus. "He is still royalty."

"You worry too much," said Romulus. "For we are children of destiny, are we not? Is that not what Father called us growing up?"

"Yes, but it was a joke. A quip. We will die to the hangman's noose just like any other commoner who picks a fight with a king."

"It won't come to that."

Romulus had always been quick to insult and quicker to resort to his fists. When Remus had complained about his bruises and scratches as a child to his father, Faustulus had simply laughed and said it was "in Romulus's blood," whatever that meant. Remus had the same blood as Romulus.

They crested the hill. To Remus's dismay, though not to his surprise, a group of men waited for them. Six of them.

"Oy!" shouted one of the men. He was taller, with raven-black hair and a sharp nose offsetting a square jaw. He was burly and dressed in dark finery. Certainly one of Numitor's men. "What have we said about you lot coming up our hill?"

"It's our hill, and always has been our hill, Trellus," called out Romulus. "Best you never forget it."

"Hear that boys? He says it's his hill."

The other men laughed.

"I reckon it's not his hill. I reckon it's not his hill at all." The raven-haired man's face darkened.

Romulus grew quiet at this. The hillside simmered with tension. *What a waste of a fine summer afternoon*, mused Remus. Romulus was spoiling for a fight. As always. And Remus was going to be pulled into the fray. As always.

Romulus broke the silence. "This is my hill. Someday I will found a great city here," he said quietly, almost beneath the whistling breeze. "A greater city than even Alba Longa. And I will rule it as king."

There was a moment's pause. A long moment. Remus stared hard at Romulus. What was he talking about? A city on a hill? King? Greater than Alba Longa? *King?*

Romulus's quiet declaration seemed to take the Numitor men off guard as well. They paused for a long beat. Then, they all burst out laughing simultaneously. The

raven-haired man crowed. "A city! A city on a hill! The Shepherd King! Ruler of the Peasants! Oh boy! I've heard everything, I have. Everything now!"

One of the men in the back was doubled over laughing. The raven-haired man was shaking his head, tears streaming down his cheeks.

"What a story! What an imagination this boy has! What—" He was unprepared when Romulus's fist buried itself in his jaw. So was Remus. Romulus moved so quickly, it was as though the wind itself carried him.

Gods damn it all. We're in the stew now. Six to two!

No way out but forward. Remus ran out and swung on the next closest man who slowly brought his arms up to block. Too slow. Remus's fist caught him squarely in the throat. He fell back, gurgling awkwardly. A precise blow. The man was out of the fight. As was raven-hair. Well. Four to two he'd take.

Swearing, the other four men surged forward. Remus found himself engaged with two of them, a pock-faced fat man and a tall skinny one. Pock swung too early. Remus easily dodged the blow and counter-struck, catching Pock in the gut. The air left him.

Skinny took the opportunity to land a blow to Remus's jaw. Remus stumbled backward, seeing stars. Pain lanced through his skull. *Minerva's tit.*

Skinny did not relent, attacking fiercely, raining blow after blow on Remus. It was all Remus could do to withstand the onslaught. He wouldn't win an outright punching match at this rate. He needed to shift tactics.

He lurched forward, smashing into Skinny full steam, grappling him and pinning his arms to his ears. Remus easily outweighed Skinny, and the grapple ended the attacks. He pushed Skinny back into a tree, grinding him into the bark as hard as he could.

He felt a sickening crunch on the back of his head. Light seared his vision, and pain coursed through his body. He stumbled, fell to his knees. He rolled just as a tree branch came down where he was. It was slick with blood. His blood, surely.

The branch was wielded by Pock. He and Skinny came after Remus, kicking and swinging. Remus scrambled away but still took a few good cracks to the ribs. Maybe two-on-one was not such good odds after all. The hilltop was spinning around him. He was too dizzy to run. This would be bad.

And then Romulus was on top of them, fists flying faster than Remus could follow. Remus stared up in wonder. Romulus grabbed the tree branch out of Pock's hands, broke it over his knee, then slammed both pieces hard against Skinny's ears. Skinny fell in a heap. Pock, reading the situation, turned and fled. Romulus threw the pieces of wood after him, whooping loudly. He kicked Skinny in the ribs a few times; Skinny began to crawl away too.

Remus surveyed the battlefield. The other four were all down or in retreat themselves. Romulus barely looked fazed. He was pure strength, sweat glistening off his body, shirt torn, but otherwise unharmed. A statue, like they had at Alba Longa, carved from stone.

Remus worked his way to his feet.

"I owe you, Brother."

"You had them," Romulus laughed. "You just needed your second wind."

Remus shrugged. "There'll be hell to pay."

"You let me and Father worry about that. It was about time we took this hill back and taught Numitor a lesson."

Remus watched the retreating figures scramble away.

He could not shake the uneasy feeling that things would not be so simple. But things rarely were.

FAUSTULUS STARED at them as they entered the farmhouse. It was a simple house, lightly adorned with rustic furniture. Remus loved his home. Romulus dreamed of wealth, but Remus would take the basic necessities over the trappings of luxury any day.

"What the hell happened to Remus?" Faustulus shouted at Romulus. "And why didn't it happen to you?"

"Trouble at the hillside," said Romulus with a shrug. "We took care of it. Remus had a bit more trouble with his half of the fight than I did."

Faustulus's eyes tightened. "Fight? Romulus, we had a truce. What have you done?"

Remus winced. He hated seeing Father brought to anger.

"I showed those Numitor dogs who is in charge."

Laurentia, the twins' mother, was drawn into the room by the shouting. "What's happenin—Oh, by the gods." She ran to Remus and immediately began fussing over his wounds.

Remus blushed. "I'm fine, Ma. They'll heal."

She glared up at Romulus. "What did you drag your brother into?"

Romulus crossed his arms. "Something we should have done a long time ago."

Faustulus sighed and sank into his wicker chair. "Romulus, you mean well, but you must understand our situation is precarious. Numitor may be out of power, but he is noble, and we are not. Picking a fight with him can only end badly."

Romulus began to pace. "Father, we must be bold in dealing with these nobles. They will run us over otherwise. There is no victory in passivity."

"You will learn some day, Romulus, that naked aggression cannot succeed. We must be careful in how we deal with our betters."

Romulus's nostrils flared. "I have no betters! I am destined! I will be king one day!"

"Romulus! You cannot mean that! If a nobleman, or even another peasant, heard you say such things, our entire family would be killed for treason! Promise me you will never utter such nonsense again!" Faustulus looked rattled. Remus studied him closely. There was something extra to his fear, beyond just a normal reaction to the insane ranting of Romulus. A recognition, almost. A lack of surprise that was itself surprising.

Remus shuddered. He had never seen his brother this riled up, nor his father so scared.

Romulus's pacing intensified. "I'm sorry, Father. I lost myself for a moment. I will not utter such things again. But understand—I feel a destiny bound about myself, more tightly than a cloak. I believe I am chosen to do great things. Do you not sense that about me?"

He was almost pleading, staring at his father for approval.

Faustulus sighed. To Remus's surprise, he nodded. "Aye, I do believe you are destined for great things, Romulus. And you, Remus. Ever since I found the two of you, suckling at that wolf's tit, I knew that you were no ordinary children. That I was taking on the burden of raising the Gods' own. You will do great things. I have no doubt. But you must be subtle. Gather allies, then strike your blows. You cannot defeat the world isolated and alone."

Romulus smiled. "But I wasn't isolated and alone. I

had my baby brother. I will be more careful going forward. But I don't think we'll have to worry about Numitor's men again. They were sufficiently…chastised."

Remus escaped his mother's fussing. He caught Faustulus's eye. His father shrugged, as if to say, *What can I do about him?*

Romulus stopped pacing. "I'm going to the shrine," he declared. "I wish to pay homage to the gods while the festival is in full swing."

The festival. Remus had forgotten that the fertility festival began that night. He should provide his own offering to the gods. But perhaps later. For now, he needed to speak with his father.

"I will stay here," said Remus.

Romulus shrugged. "Suit yourself." He turned and left the hut, leaving calm in the wake of his storm. As he so often did.

WHEN ROMULUS LEFT THE HUT, Remus turned to his father. "He is growing more headstrong."

"Ay," said Faustulus. "I worry for your brother. He will bring ruin on our family before greatness reaches him."

"Do you truly believe he is destined for greatness?"

"You both are." Faustulus stood and closed to Remus. "How often you sell yourself short, my son. You are as heroic as he is. The two of you, you carry yourselves differently than the rest of us. You have a more regal posture. A grace of movement that screams a life of destiny. But destined lives are just as often cursed lives. You must be ready to protect your brother at all costs."

Laurentia interjected. "Father, you must not speak like that. It puts bad ideas in their heads."

"They must know, Laurentia. They are more than normal children. They must know."

"They must not!" she shouted, rising from her crouch. "You promised!"

Remus shuddered at this outburst. His father never spoke so frankly, and his mother never shouted. It scared him, this talk of destiny and curses. It reeked of fate. Remus did not like fate. He wanted control of his life.

"Father, I do not know what my life will offer. I would be happy to be a simple shepherd, like yourself."

"You cannot escape your path." Faustulus surveyed Remus steadily. "You must step up to it and meet it in turn."

"Do you believe Numitor will retaliate?" asked Remus, pointedly changing the topic.

"He may. We should be ready. We have some protection. I am responsible for the king's flock. Numitor cannot be seen striking against the royal herd. But there is risk as well. Romulus's attack on his men may be too much to ignore. We should be cautious."

"You fill these boys' heads with talk of fate, and see what it gets us." Laurentia was staring daggers at Faustulus now.

Remus growled. "Fate again. I do hate it so."

Faustulus clasped Remus's shoulder. "We must meet our fate boldly and with a smile, my son. We cannot resist the gods' will."

He turned and went back to clean up after supper. Laurentia stayed. "I wish he wouldn't talk so."

"What must I know?"

"Don't worry about it, Remus." She pushed a lock of hair out of his face. "You are more handsome than your brother, you know."

"Don't let him hear you say that. Also we look exactly the same."

Laurentia laughed. "Not exactly. You pout. It's cute."

Remus glared. "I don't want to be cute. I can't be cute and handsome at the same time."

"That's what you think, Remus." She sighed. "Listen, you know your father found you in the riverbed."

"He saved us from a wolf, he said."

"Yes, saved." Her eyes grew distant. "We thought it a miracle sent by the gods. Well, it was. No thinking involved. You and your brother have been the greatest of blessings. But Father sometimes thinks that it was more than a simple country blessing. That you were actually divinely placed for us."

"Why would the gods care about us?"

"It's a silly theory. But there are…strange details." Laurentia bit her lip, considering something.

"Strange how?" Remus had not heard this part of the story. "And how did we end up in the woods in the first place? Do you know where we came from? Surely another villager must have been pregnant. It would have been obvious."

He had never seen his mother look more pained than she did in that moment, in being pressed on that question. Remus almost felt bad, but he suddenly felt a strong urge to know.

"Remus—"

Laurentia was spared from continuing. As she said his name, a knock came at the door.

"Faustulus! Faustulus! There is trouble in town!"

Remus moved to the door quickly and flung it open. The village elder, Meritus, stood outside, panting, snow-white beard dripping with sweat.

"What is it?" asked Faustulus, looking up from his dishes.

"Numitor's men are marching on the village, calling for Romulus and Remus. They are terrorizing the women of the village, seeking satisfaction."

Remus frowned. Numitor was not as passive as they had hoped. "I must fetch Romulus."

Faustulus shook his head. "I fear there is no time. You must go, son. Meet your fate. It has come early."

Remus sighed. "I did not want this."

"I know, but it is your responsibility to face it whether you desired it or not. Make me proud, son."

Fear coursed through Remus's body, but he knew the words rang true. He had no path but forward. He turned and left his bucolic home behind. Fate had come for him after all.

Chapter 2

"To be punished" - Livy

When Remus and Meritus arrived at the village square, Numitor's men were gone, but the signs of their handiwork were everywhere. Many of the local shops had gouges in their doors, clearly left by the brigands' swords, and several bloody villagers sat in the square nursing blunt-force injuries.

The village had been a home for Remus his whole life, and seeing it ravaged by the attackers hurt his heart. *Noblemen should be noble*, he thought. What was the point of nobility if it did not extend to spirit as well as flesh?

And where was King Amulius? Why was he not here to protect his people from his own retainers? A weakness had set into the capital, Alba Longa, and Remus's people were paying the price.

But Remus could do nothing about nobles or kings. He could only treat the problem before him. He could only help where he could.

Remus immediately began moving among the victims, tending to them. A village girl, Merra, whom Remus had

fancied for a bit before she ended up with old Darcus, smiled at him as he wiped blood away from her brow. "You're a kind heart, Remus," she said. "But don't let Darcus see you touch me like that."

Remus blushed. "I'm treating your wounds."

"Yes, but he knows how you used to feel. He's a jealous one. You should be careful. You sometimes miss things right before your eyes."

He stood. "Fine. I'll call for the doctor."

She laughed. "Darcus is gone to the shrine. You can treat me all you like." Her tone was too suggestive for the circumstance, and Remus blushed. The door was closed, and he would not reopen it. But old feelings resurfaced.

He was glad to be interrupted. Bastulus, the tanner, approached him.

"Remus, I don't know what you and your brother did, but they were looking for you both. The fiends have retreated, but they claim they will be back if you do not show yourself. They went east toward the pass."

"An ambush, I'm sure," said Remus. He suppressed a surge of anger. It was bad enough that Romulus's temper had gotten the family in trouble; now a whole village was paying for his impulsiveness. He looked eastward. "Still, there is not much to do but go forth."

Meritus joined them, frowning. "You can't mean to go alone. It might mean your life."

"I do not believe Numitor's men would be so bold. It would invoke the wrath of the king to harm the royal shepherd's family. They are looking for vengeance, but they would not dare fatally wound me."

"Still. You should not go alone. You may be able to negotiate from a place of strength."

Remus nodded, seeing the wisdom in this. He turned

to Bastulus. "Can you round up as many strong, willing men as you can? We will set forth in twenty minutes."

Bastulus nodded. "I will find them. You have my word, Remus."

Violence and leading men. This was not his way. He preferred the quiet of the meadows, herding the sheep peacefully from the hilltop into the valley. He liked dances and festivals, pretty women smiling as they twirled and drank and made merry. The violence of men against men was anathema to him. And yet, at times, it was necessary. He would not fail to answer the call to protect the village.

Bastulus returned with a band of six sturdy men. They looked at Remus expectantly. He supposed he owed them a speech. Not his nature. Not his nature at all.

"My friends, these foul men have descended on your village and done great harm. They have hurt your women and children and shattered the peace that rests over our gentle hamlet. They threaten to return unless I show myself. Well, I will show myself, and in great strength. Together, we will teach these bandits the resolve of our fair valley. To arms!"

A halfhearted cheer went up from the men. They knew they needed to act, but Remus had never been an inspiring figure. Grim-faced, they raised scythes, pitchforks, and clubs; makeshift peasants' weapons, to be sure, but capable of doing some damage if it came to blows. It would have to do.

Remus turned and strode toward his fate. The men followed.

An hour later, they reached the pass. Remus was on high alert. He himself had only a club. Using a weapon of war on a nobleman's retainers would cause more problems than it solved, but a brawl with makeshift weapons could be explained away. As they walked through the pass, an

eerie silence descended over the group. The sun was setting late in the summer evening. They would brawl in the dark if it came to blows.

Still, at first it seemed nothing would happen. Remus almost let himself relax. Perhaps the suspected ambush would not occur. Numitor had made his point, and he would retreat…

And then they were on them, without warning, a pack of jackals in human form, swinging weapons—true weapons, swords and pikes. They were using the flat sides for now, but even a blunt swing from a broadsword left a solid mark and threatened more. An arrow thudded next to Remus. He realized quickly that they would be slaughtered if they offered real resistance. Numitor's men did not come for a peasant's brawl.

"Parley! I call for parley!" he shouted over the din.

One of Numitor's men whistled, and the melee ended.

"We only want Romulus and Remus," he said. "The rest may leave."

Remus sighed. He did not want the lives of these men on his conscience. "My brother is not here," he called out. "It's just me."

"We'll take you, then, sheep's whelp. Come with us to meet the king's justice for your crimes against our lord. Or we will seek out your farmhouse and burn it to the ground after we water the soil with your bastard father's blood."

Bastulus made as if to speak in defiance, but Remus silenced him with a gesture. It was better that way. Cleaner. Less bloodshed.

"If I surrender myself, you will let the others go?"

"We have no quarrel with them. Only you and your kin," said the man.

No choice. "Then I will go."

"Remus!" hissed Bastulus. "You cannot!"

"I must, and I will. Thank you for escorting me. I wish it did not come to this."

Remus walked forward. One of the men swung a quarterstaff lazily at his abdomen, dropping him to the ground. Two kicks to his ribs made clear exactly what was in store for him in Numitor's care.

He steeled himself against the pain as the blows rained down. This was his fate. No need to fight it.

WATER DRIPPED onto Remus from the ceiling of Numitor's jail, but he was too sore to move. The cell was damp and musty, and he could smell the shit of prior prisoners sticking to the cracks between the stone floor.

After a brief audience with Numitor, he had been dumped here. Numitor, a wizened old nobleman who had once been king, had reeked of failed ambition.

Whatever Numitor's misfortunes, they did not make him forgiving towards others' sins. His skin was stretched taut over a skeletal frame, but he still sat stiffly and formally, the way a man might who still considered himself above others. "So, this is the young man who has been vexing my servants. You are Faustulus's son, are you not?"

Remus pulled himself up straight to address the old man. "I am, indeed, by adoption. We mean you no ill will. But the hill above our farmstead is ours. We use it to herd the king's sheep. It is important that we have hold of it, and your men were trespassing on our land."

Numitor laughed. "By adoption, eh? Makes sense. You carry yourself with a bearing that does not scream peasantry to me. I can hardly believe you are made of the same stuff as that coward Faustulus. As for the hill, I seem to recall that we had come to a mutual accord whereby we

each could use it. You and your brother came looking for trouble and found it. Well, we'll see what the king thinks of all this before I pass judgment. Be gone with him. We'll have an audience tomorrow."

And with that, Remus was dropped there in the small, dank cell, to nurse his injuries from the brawl and feel sorry for himself.

But no. He was not going to bemoan his fate. He would face it standing up. Whatever the consequence.

When morning came, two guards came and hauled Remus to his feet.

"Come. Time to meet your ruler," said the left guard. The right one only glared. Remus sighed, dusted himself off, and took what he hoped was a dignified pose.

"Very well," he said. "Let's see the king."

Remus followed the guards out of the holding cell. They mounted horses, with Numitor in the lead and six guards flanking. Remus was allowed out of his bonds, but he did not like his chances of escape. Besides, fleeing would draw the attention and ire of Numitor back down on the village and the homestead. It would only delay the inevitable.

So it was that Remus was escorted to King Amulius. He strode into the hall, head high, hoping not to show his fear.

King Amulius was a withering husk of a man, his head barely holding up the crown. He sagged into his throne, aquiline features staring suspiciously out at the air around him. When his green eyes focused on Remus, Remus found it impossible to suppress a shudder.

"So. This is the young man who has caused such disrepair in my kingdom. What do you have to say for yourself?"

Remus inched his chin up to confront the king. "We

have been loyal retainers of Your Majesty our entire lives. We tend to your flock and seek no strife. There has been a dispute over the hill near our farmstead for some years now. We were merely scouting our property when Numitor's men descended on us spoiling for a fight. We defended ourselves as properly as we could given the circumstances."

"Lies! They started the brawl! We had as much right to be there under our agreement as they did!" shouted one of the bruised-looking men standing near Numitor. Remus remembered him from the melee. Remus withheld a wince. His explanation was a mashup of the truth. He hadn't been spoiling for a fight, but Romulus had been, and his brother threw the first punch.

"Well? Is this true?" asked King Amulius.

Remus struggled to find the right words. "They had the right to be on the hill under our agreement. I do not dispute that. But they were spoiling for a fight when we arrived and disputed the terms of that same agreement, arguing that we had no right there. They cannot now hide behind an agreement they sought to tear up on the day in question."

"We didn't say they couldn't be there! He's twisted our words, he has!" the man shouted, somehow even louder.

Numitor cut in smoothly. "My King, whatever was said, the resort to violence was uncalled for. No one can deny that, not even the young man standing before you now."

Remus tried one more time. "Is a man not allowed to defend his property under the king's law? The repudiation of the agreement was fighting words."

King Amulius sighed and rubbed his nose. "Even under your story, sounds to me like Numitor's men brought words, and you and your brother brought fists. I see no

reason to deny Numitor his justice. But as the wronged party, he should choose and dole out the punishment consistent with the laws of this kingdom. I am done with this matter."

He dismissed the parties with a wave of his hand. Remus's heart sank. He had argued well, he knew, but it was futile. Numitor would take his pound of flesh. If he was lucky. He spared a glance at his new tormentor. To his surprise, Numitor looked thoughtful, not vengeful, as he stared down Remus.

Remus shrugged. "I thank the king for hearing my arguments and for his judgment in this matter. I will submit to my punishment."

He turned and walked out of the throne room. Numitor's men followed, snickering. Numitor trailed behind.



WHEN THEY RETURNED to Numitor's estate, Numitor dismissed all of his men, though not before having Remus bound. Remus's mind raced. Did Numitor mean to personally dole out the punishment? He was an old man; Remus doubted he could wield the punishing rod as well as his men.

The old man sat in silence for some time, regarding Remus steadily, watery eyes staring out from a papery face. Finally, he spoke.

"You do not strike me as a shepherd."

Remus grasped again for words. "I am, my lord. I am Faustulus's son."

"But by adoption, are you not?"

"Yes." He did not see how that could possibly matter, but he sensed an opportunity here somewhere. If he only had the wherewithal to seize it.

"Who were your birth parents?"

"I do not know. I suppose a she-wolf," Remus said, truthfully.

Numitor threw him a sharper look. "Do not play games with me, child. Your life is in my hands. My men are spoiling to give you better than you gave them, and I would not expect you to walk away from their vengeance. So answer me truthfully. Who were your parents?"

"Apologies, my lord. I meant no jest. My father found me and my brother suckling at a she-wolf. We were beside an ark that had been discarded in the river basin. He suspects that we were intended to be drowned." Remus saw no point in hiding the truth now. Perhaps honesty would save him in that moment.

Numitor took in a deep breath and blew it out. "And you are eighteen years of age? And twins? And you carry yourself with a noble stature. Could it be? After all these years?"

The nobleman looked shaken, his eyes darting left and right, his fingers curling around his seat's armrests. Some deep revelation had happened here, but Remus did not follow. He hunted his mind for some hint, some clue as to the nature of the discovery Numitor had made. He came up short.

"Do you know something of my birth mother, my lord? You sound as though you recognize the circumstances of my abandonment."

Numitor let a half smile cross his face. "Indeed, I believe I do, young lad. Eighteen years ago, my daughter Rhea gave birth. She claimed she had been raped by the God of War, Mars himself. She was called a liar and thrown into the deepest dungeons of the jail. For she was Vestal, and infidelity to the gods was punishable by the gravest condemnation. It was only my entreaties that kept

her from the headsman, truth be told. She withers there to this day."

He gathered steam as he told his story.

"The babes were to be drowned. King Amulius could tolerate no threat to his reign, and I was the former king with the better claim. He had torn me down, defeated me utterly, and he let me live as a trophy, an animal for the menagerie as it were. But my grandsons could grow to become a threat. So Amulius had them killed. If he had only suspected who was standing before him today…but to our advantage, he did not. Our salvation may lie in that oversight."

Our? The word sounded strange to Remus's ear. He was to be punished, perhaps killed, by this man. Yet now he was speaking to him like…like…

Like a grandson. It hit Remus like a dropped hammer. If Rhea was Numitor's daughter, that made him…

"You're my grandfather," he said stupidly.

"Aye," whispered Numitor. "And you, or perhaps your brother, for I know not who is older, are the rightful heir to my throne."

Silence filled the room. Remus struggled for breath. He was a peasant. A commoner. It was all he had ever wanted to be. He had heard the story of Rhea's child, but in the tale, there had only ever been one. Now, Numitor spoke of twins. Eighteen years ago. Placed in a royal ark to be drowned in the river. But for a she-wolf…

Finally, he choked out, "We do not know who is the elder, for we are twins."

The question had never bothered them before. They were equals; why shouldn't they have been born at the same time? But now a throne hung in the balance: would the question of succession turn a formality into a kingdom-deciding knife?

But no. Amulius was king. Numitor was deposed. He was heir to a shattered throne. Which was more dangerous than helpful in that moment. *I'd rather be a simple shepherd than this.*

"Well, that is a complication," said Numitor. "But not a fatal one. It will be many years before the issue of succession is relevant."

"Succession?" said Remus. He felt numbness spread through his body. This could not be happening. "But you are not the king."

"But I was. And with your help, I could be again," whispered Numitor, so low that Remus barely heard him.

Numitor walked forward and drew his knife as he did so. For a moment, Remus feared he had changed his mind, that he had decided Remus was still too dangerous to leave alive.

Instead, Numitor said, "Do you now swear to honor me, to pay homage to my throne, and to work tirelessly to advance my cause?"

"I am a shepherd. I don't—"

Numitor lifted the knife blade a notch and stared hard at him. Remus could barely meet his gaze. "You are my grandson and carry the blood of kings. Do you swear to honor me, to pay homage to my throne, and to work tirelessly to advance my cause? I will not ask a third time."

Remus stood in silence, weighing the possibilities. If he refused, he would die soon. He knew it. He did not want to be a royal heir, but what else could he say or do?

Fate.

He heard his father's words echo through that moment.

I will rule it as king.

His brother's proclamation, so absurd in the moment, now strangely prophetic.

Remus could not refuse. He had to rise to this moment. With the gods looking down, he had no choice.

Not knowing what else to say, feeling the heavy weight of his bonds and the implied threat of the knife, Remus simply said, "I do, Grandfather. I swear to you that I will honor you and pay homage to you, and spend my waking days advancing your interests and claims."

The knife was at his bonds, and he was free. Numitor smiled, tucked the knife away, and opened his arms. "Then embrace me, my grandson. We have much to celebrate and much to plan. And time is ticking away."

In utter disbelief, and barely hanging onto his wits, Remus embraced Numitor. *What have I done? Who am I? What happens next?*

The questions hung unanswered in the air as his grandfather's fingers dug into Remus's back.

Chapter 3

"To secure the citadel" - Livy

Remus and Numitor were deep in planning when Romulus burst into the room.

"It is good to see you alive, Brother. I heard what happened, and I feared the worst." He closed the distance to Remus and embraced him warmly. "I see you have been hard at work while I have been off praying."

Remus shook as he embraced his brother. Finally, something that felt real. "Romulus. I would like you to meet our grandfather. Our real grandfather. The true king of Alba Longa."

Romulus turned to regard Numitor. "I received your message, my King. I was heading toward the capital city with a force of men to free my brother when your herald found me and bid me come here. I could scarcely believe my ears when he told me what your message contained. Is it true?"

Numitor nodded. "Aye, it's all true. My family has suffered greatly at the hands of King Amulius. My daughter is imprisoned. My son was murdered by his

agents while I was away. The two of you were thought murdered as well. And I lost my throne so many years ago. My entire family has lived in disgrace and shadow since those dark days. Your survival is the first ray of light we have had in some time."

Romulus nodded. "We will scourge the kingdom of this monster Amulius and restore our family's rightful glory."

"Indeed we will, my boy. Indeed we will." Remus was still shaking. Things were moving so fast. His family was Faustulus, Laurentia, and Romulus, and he was a simple shepherd. Now they were talking in sincerity about overthrowing the king and taking the throne. It was all too much.

Romulus had always claimed they were destined for greatness. He could not have known this was in the cards, could he? Yet he was taking to it like a trout to water. Remus thought back to the confrontation on the hilltop with Numitor's men. Romulus's claim that he would found a city and be king one day. Could he have known? Or was it just in him all along, this drive for greatness born of noble blood?

Remus did not know. He did not want to shy away from this moment. But sitting here, listening to Numitor and Romulus scheme, he had more questions than answers.

"There are too many guards for us to storm the palace. We need a diversion," said Numitor.

"How many men can you muster?" asked Romulus.

"One hundred, give or take. You?"

"I can raise a peasant militia of eighty or so."

"It won't be enough if the king's guard is in the city. If—"

"They number only three hundred. We simply need to divert half of them—"

"What can we do to pull them out?"

They schemed into the night, but nothing came to fruition. They decided to call it as the pale light of the moon filtered through the window and the candles burned low. Romulus and Remus returned to the village to raise the peasant militia, while Numitor headed out to raise his own army.

Remus and Romulus rode in silence for some time. Finally, Remus broke the tension. "You are taking quickly to this."

Romulus nodded. "It is my birthright, is it not? I always knew that I was destined for great things. Now I know how."

"You were born to rule. I do not know if I was similarly blessed. I feel uncomfortable with this plan. I will do my part, but I wish I possessed your confidence, Brother."

Romulus turned his head to regard Remus. "Remus, you are the bravest, truest person I know. You know fear, and you do your duty despite it. That is true courage. You have it in you to lead as well. Do not forget it. The time will come when the world asks that skill of you."

Remus considered Romulus's words carefully. Was it true that courage was acting in the face of fear? If so, did Romulus face the same fears he did? He never let on. His brother was always so confident, so sure of himself. It was hard to imagine dread and horror rising up in him as he took those actions.

He thought back to Numitor, commenting on Remus's noble bearing and posture during the king's examination. Was Remus as outwardly self-assured and confident as his brother? It seemed hard to imagine, yet others kept telling him it was so.

He wondered what his father would think. But Faus-

tulus was no longer his father, was he? It was all Remus could do to hold onto his bay's reins.

When they reached the village, Romulus and Remus quietly rounded up those they could trust. "Spread the word. We are raising a militia. We will tell you more when the men are together."

Meritus and Bastulus were the first they contacted. Upon hearing the broad strokes of the situation, Meritus shook his head. "As for a diversion, there may be one in the making. Faustulus has headed to the king to beg for your lives."

Romulus and Remus exchanged a sharp look. "That puts Father in grave danger."

"Indeed, but he told me he intends to confess your true identities. He is under the delusion that the king will spare you if he only knew you were royalty. He is wrong. If he does so, the king will send his men to kill you. You are grave threats to him."

Bastulus spoke up. "If the men leave the city, they will come directly here to nab you. The city will be temporarily lightly garrisoned. That is our moment."

Romulus frowned. "I thought we had weeks to plan, but if Faustulus is acting so foolhardily, we will be exposed. We must go now. Rouse the populace."

Remus started. Romulus had called Father by his given name. Had he already moved on from his adopted family? Was he so quickly thinking of himself as royalty?

"We'll take the backroads to Numitor's manse and strike from there. This is our chance." Romulus clapped his hands together, greed glinting in his eyes. "Perhaps this move is advantageous. Best to move fast before the fear sets in. Before the enemy has time to learn of the plans."

Remus bit his lip. If Father was in the hands of Amulius's men, his life was in grave danger. Remus's body

flooded with fear once again, but this time, not for himself but for his family. *To confess.* Faustulus knew? Why had he not told them? To protect them? To shield them from their fates? But he had always talked about how fated they were. Remus thought of his mother, holding something back as he pressed her for details on that fateful night when the twins were discovered with the wolf. Faustulus knew. He knew this day would come.

It was a betrayal. It was a father's love. Remus did not know which was more true, but he felt both at the same time, and the feelings threatened to rend him in two.

Faustulus was in peril. But Remus saw no other way. This was the best chance to reach Amulius. A quick strike and the day would be won.

He was thinking like a general, a leader, a king. Perhaps someday he could lead as his brother did.

Perhaps.

THEY SET upon the city at midday.

Overnight, they refined their strategy further. Numitor's spies in the city would confirm that Amulius had sent an escort with Faustulus to seize Romulus and Remus at their homestead. Once confirmed, Numitor's spies would double back and assassinate the guards holding the western gate. Numitor's main force would strike through that gate, seize the palace, kill Amulius, and enthrone Numitor. The peasant militia Romulus and Remus raised would march to the front gate and cause a ruckus, complaining about taxes and levies. This would pull even more guards from the palace center, giving a clear path to the king. It was a daring plan, and one fraught with risk. But Remus was optimistic. This day, a great injustice would be undone.

And so, they entered the city past the corpses of the city watch. The populace had already fled the area, witnessing violence and sensing danger, so the streets were empty as they marched to the palace complex.

Alba Longa was the largest city Remus had ever seen.

Hundreds of dwellings and public buildings lined cobblestone streets. Some of the buildings stacked on top of themselves, multiple stories of timber and stone reaching toward the sky. A tower in the city center even rose four or five stories high. Compared to the handful of thatched huts in the village Remus grew up near, Alba Longa felt like something from a storybook.

To be sure, he had heard of larger cities in distant lands, lands with mythical names like Athens and Carthage. He had even heard there were pyramids dozens of stories tall in far-off Egypt, though nobody believed those legends.

To him, Alba Longa was the center of the universe, and it felt strange riding into the capital at the head of a small army to kill the king. A mere day ago, he had ridden into this city in bonds, set to be executed by the man who now called him grandson. Life was strange.

They reached the palace and saw an array of several dozen guards ready to meet them, in a general state of disarray, not expecting such a coup on this fine summer day. The plan had worked; they had caught Amulius flat-footed. Numitor's men roared and crashed into the enemy. As they did, Romulus nodded to Remus, and the twins splintered off with an escort of five of Numitor's most nimble guards. This too was part of the plan. They would sneak through a back window and assassinate the king while the melee consumed the front of the palace. With luck, they would reach Amulius before he realized he needed to flee.

Remus recognized one of the men who went with him as Pock, who he had brawled with the other day. He was a sour-looking man and still sported bruises from that fight. Remus smiled, hopefully reassuringly, at the man, who simply muttered and looked away. Some wounds would not close easily, Remus supposed, no matter who was on whose side following these shifting alliances.

The party found a window at the back of the palace, left unguarded in the confusion. They slid through. The hall had several servants moving about, tending to their business. Remus frowned. They must not be taking the attack seriously: they were not hiding or squirreled away somewhere waiting for the hammer to fall. Arrogance. It could work to their advantage.

One of the servants opened her mouth to scream, and the flat of a broadsword took her sideways across the face. She collapsed into a heap at Remus's feet, concussed but alive. Remus turned to look at Pock who met his gaze and shrugged. "I didn't kill her." He turned to the rest. "Anyone else want to scream?"

A number of heads shook no. One well-dressed man at the far end turned to run, and a knife flew out from behind Remus and caught the man in the back. Remus turned and to his shock saw Romulus's hand outstretched. He stared dumbly at his brother, who had just killed an innocent man. But they were launching a coup. It was no time to get squeamish about bloodshed. More would follow, in buckets.

They rounded up the remaining servants and left one guard behind to keep them from running or screaming. The rest of the party filtered into the throne room.

On the throne sat Amulius himself, barking orders at fearful-looking courtiers and hangers-on. Four guards had held back to defend him, Remus saw. They had not yet

noticed the newcomers, giving Remus and his crew a brief and fatal window of opportunity.

Charging past the assembled nobles, the raiding party descended upon the four guards, swords flashing.

Remus found himself squaring off one-on-one against one of them. The guard swung his sword with a trembling hand, and Remus deflected it easily. The guard was terrified, he realized. He knew he would die. Well, Remus had no choice but to oblige him. He pressed the attack, striking swiftly at the weak points in the guard's stance.

Remus was not especially skilled with a sword, but he had practiced some with his father's old longsword, left over from a half-remembered war with the Sabines some decades ago when Faustulus was still of fighting age. Remus knew the basics of what he was doing. And as he fought, he found himself taking to the combat naturally. It did not matter that another human was on the other end of his swings, one intending to kill him. Nothing mattered but the moment.

The guard made a mistake, a small slip in his footwork, and Remus pounced. He hammered the enemy's blade away with a strong sweep to the left, then on the back cut went for the throat.

He did not miss. An arc of blood misted the air red and splashed across Remus's face. He spat it out, tasting iron on his lips. The guard slumped, and Remus whirled to find a new enemy.

There were none. He saw the other guards dead on the ground, and Romulus standing over the king menacingly.

"Please, stop! I'll give you anything! I'll empty the treasury! You will be my highest-ranked man, I swear it, if you only let me live!"

Romulus grabbed Amulius by the front of his robes and threw him from the throne. The king looked like

nothing in that moment, a feeble old man cowering on the floor.

"You're sitting in my grandfather's chair," Romulus said. "What boons can you offer me from your place among the worms?"

He struck with his sword at the king's nape, and Amulius's emerging scream died in his mouth in a fountain of blood.

Romulus turned to survey the attendants, who were standing in stunned silence. "The pretender is dead. Numitor has reclaimed his rightful throne. Bow and kneel to me, Romulus, the true heir. Kneel, or die."

A moment of pregnant silence hung in the air, and then, in a wave, the courtiers kneeled. Numitor's men kneeled too.

Remus watched the scene in stunned silence. He realized with sudden self-consciousness that he was the only one left standing. Him and Romulus, standing over the most powerful men in the kingdom, all kneeling before them.

Romulus met Remus's gaze. For a moment, Remus detected something. A shadow of a frown, a beat of discontent. Did Romulus mean for him to kneel too? They were brothers, twins. They had done everything together. They had just claimed a throne together. Surely he did not need to kneel. He didn't even know who was born first. That throne was as likely his legacy as Romulus's. Would they not rule together when they came into their own?

The moment passed, and Romulus smiled tightly. It did not reach his eyes. "Join me, Brother, and take in our new kingdom."

Remus walked forward, stepping over the corpse of King Amulius as he did. The man who once ruled Alba Longa was already an afterthought. A barely remembered

moment in history, an aberration in the reign of King Numitor.

A prelude to something greater. Remus shuddered. Where had that thought come from? What was greater than a kingdom? This was the end of things, surely.

He took his brother's right hand with his left. Romulus squeezed him tightly, too tightly, but intuitively he knew to squeeze back, squeeze until the blood drained from both of their hands. Romulus finally smirked and turned to stare out at the attendants bowing to them. The pressure on Remus's hand relented just as he worried he might feel bone break. Remus turned to follow Romulus's gaze.

As he looked out across a throne room he had never imagined entering, much less controlling, at the dozens of courtiers kneeling with heads tilted to the earth, Remus realized with a sudden start and an uncomfortable shudder that this was just the beginning.