



A NOVEL BASED ON THE LIFE OF  
**SCIPIO AFRICANUS**

# RIDE INTO THE SUN

**Patric Verrone**

**M**  
THE  
MENTORIS  
PROJECT

# Chapter One

A ROME OF WAR—218 B.C.

Laelius remembered standing valiantly at the bow of an immense ship at the head of the Roman fleet in the center of the marketplace. He recalled holding his sword outstretched before him as he faced down Hamilcar Barca, commander of the Carthaginian forces.

“Your fleet is no match against the power of the Roman Republic,” Laelius said.

“Rome is a state of cowards. Do your worst!” Hamilcar Barca said just before Laelius gave the command to pursue the Carthaginian fleet around the island of Sicily.

The turbulent Mediterranean frothed beneath their ships. The wind whipped through Laelius’s hair. Soon, Laelius heroically leapt from his ship onto Hamilcar Barca’s, and steel met steel. The two great men battled until their swords were thrown aside and they wrestled on the deck of the ship. Then, Laelius remembered knocking into the olive oil seller’s booth and nearly

toppling a row of carafes. Their imaginary battle was shattered by the merchant, who chased them out of the marketplace.

Laelius thought back on his childhood fondly, when he and the other boys would reenact battles from the First War against Carthage. They would terrorize the merchants and patrons of the Roman market with their overactive imaginations. Laelius's favorite was the Battle of the Aegates Islands, the battle that concluded the war and ousted the Carthaginians from Sicily. Everyone always fought over who would play the Romans and who would have to play Hamilcar Barca. Sometimes if the boy playing Hamilcar was particularly strong, he would knock the Romans over and rewrite history by claiming victory for the Carthaginians. If this happened, the other boys would pile onto him and reassert Rome's superiority.

As Laelius grew older, he realized that the reality was much grimmer than his play. The Rome into which Laelius had been born was a Rome of war. Rome had established itself as a superpower in Europe, rising above the smaller Italian kingdoms that populated the north, south, and Sardinian islands off the coast. No other power in Italy would dare challenge the massive Republic's control over the region. However, Carthage was no longer just a struggling African principality across the sea. Every day, news came of Carthage's allies landing in Iberia or their occupation of the Italian islands in the south. What history might consider peacetime after the end of the First Punic War was filled with paranoia, fear-mongering, and confusion. Not long after peace was negotiated, rumors arose of Hamilcar Barca's son, the great and enterprising Hannibal, building another army to avenge his family's name. The First War had drained Rome of its resources and its people's pride, and yet somehow it seemed to have made Rome's enemies across the Mediterranean

only stronger. As Laelius and his friends transformed Rome's battles into games, the rest of the city held its breath, fearing that Carthage would take its revenge.

Then, that fateful summer came. Word began to trickle in of Hannibal crossing the Alps into Italy. What was first dismissed as disparate drops of rumor and conjecture had, by the end of that summer, risen into a tumultuous ocean of truth. Laelius could remember the days when people began to truly understand what Hannibal had done. They were angry and scared. They wanted to fight or flee into the sea or plead the gods for mercy. But even in all that desperation, that summer was quiet. The birds didn't sing, the bees didn't hum, and the grass was always still. Yet, the fragile peace had finally broken and, as Rome scrambled to gather the pieces, Hannibal crossed onto Italian soil.

The Roman Senate was in utter disarray. They were a long way from recovering after the First War, and Hannibal's sudden descent into Italy had left them scrambling to sort out who would lead the charge and who would lead the Republic. Many of Rome's most prominent families had lost men in the First War, so the senate was put in the position of redeploying the statesmen who had survived. A large portion of these men were injured or exhausted and in no hurry to return to the battlefield. The senate erupted in bickering with consuls accusing one another of nepotism, cowardice, and traitorous activity during the First War. It was in this maelstrom that Publius the Elder and his brother Gnaeus decided that action had to be taken. Both well-respected men from the prominent Scipio family and both heroes of the First War, they took it upon themselves to form legions in northern Italy as the first line of defense against Hannibal should he march on Rome.

Many of the other boys whom Laelius had played with in

the marketplace were excited to join the Scipio brothers' army when they turned eighteen, sometimes younger. They all warmly remembered the war games they'd played and jumped at the chance to become real heroes themselves. Laelius, who'd left his childhood days of play to help his father tend to the horses on their farm, began to dream more and more of the valiant deeds, heroic victories, energetic sparring, and spectacular deaths he and his comrades had performed. Just a few weeks after the news of Hannibal's crossing into Italy had been solidified into Roman minds as fact, Laelius was on his way to join Publius the Elder's legion at Pisa.

The journey felt strange to Laelius. He had never ventured more than a few miles beyond the city, and everything was new to his senses. Even the words sounded different in the mouths of the locals. Laelius had grown up as an only child with his mother and father. He kept to himself during most of his journey. He could not understand why the other boys became so delighted in being worked up by rumors about Hannibal's army: tales of great Numidian cavalymen who were such brilliant horsemen it was as if they became centaurs in the frenzy of the battlefield; savage warriors from Gaul with skin like marble stone; and great beasts the size of buildings, called elephants, that Hannibal had brought with him over the mountains.

Laelius's father was a horseman and Laelius had grown up caring for and riding horses all his life. Because of this, he was accepted into the legion's modest cavalry. The other cavalymen were the sons of noblemen or statesmen who had learned horse riding as a part of their illustrious educations. Most of them were uninterested in interacting with Laelius, who was decidedly of a lower class. There was, however, one fellow horseman who took an interest in the quiet horse breeder's son.

The wind had picked up toward the end of summer and the breeze was pleasantly cooling. Laelius was attending to a stallion he had taken a liking to, nicknamed Narcissus for the long drinks that he took, making it seem as if he were engrossed in his reflection.

Another cavalryman rode up beside him. Laelius recognized him as the commander's son Scipio. Though not terribly handsome, he had a strong soldier's build and the high forehead attributed to wise men, as well as a clever twinkle in his eye. Aside from these, his features were distinctly Roman.

"Ride with me?" he asked.

"Where to?" Laelius replied.

"Into the sun. If we catch it, Apollo will have to give us two of the stallions from his chariot."

Laelius mounted his horse, and the two of them took off westward. They rode as far as they could, but as the sun began to set, the chances of catching up to Apollo's chariot fell with it. They slowed to catch their breath.

"I see you alone most of the time," said the commander's son. "Why is that?"

"I don't think I have much in common with anybody else in the legion."

"We're all Roman." He turned and started back toward the camp.

Laelius urged Narcissus forward and rode beside Scipio. From that point on, the two men became inseparable.

Life in the camp was a mixture of gradual preparation for an attack and cautious relaxation. Word of the army's movements reached the camp through multiple Roman allies and spies

throughout northern Italy, but no one could quite make sense of what Hannibal's plan was. The senate feared he would eventually take his army down to Rome and it was the job of Scipio's legion to make sure he didn't get that far. When they weren't preparing for an altercation with Hannibal, the soldiers played games. Those in the cavalry raced or dared one another to jump and dodge obstacles on their horses. It soon became clear to everyone in the legion that Scipio and Laelius were the most accomplished riders at the Pisa camp.

On a day when the lingering summer heat numbed the limbs into extreme lethargy, Scipio, Laelius, and a few other soldiers gathered by the bank of the Rhône. The trees had just begun turning from green into brown and red. Some of the leaves had fallen in swirling circles in the river, green beside red, two seasons rushing southward. Laelius was basking on a rock perched above a deep, lazy pool in which the stones had caught the river. Scipio was speaking to a few of the other soldiers behind him. As Laelius watched the leaves dancing in the water, he was surprised to find them speedily racing toward him. He broke through the water headfirst and quickly resurfaced to see who had pushed him.

Scipio looked down at him, a satisfied smirk splashing across his face. Laelius tried climbing the rock to pull his friend down with him. The other men laughed and some even tried pushing Laelius back into the water. Laelius finally gave up on climbing back up the rock and instead swam to the shore. He quietly crouched in the grass, listening to the muffled, anticipatory chuckles from the other men. Laelius leapt from the grass and began to wrestle Scipio along the bank. He was older than Scipio and physically stronger and, after a brief tussle, he was able to lurch both of them into the river. The sound of Scipio

and Laelius splashing and the other men cheering and booing covered the slow approach of horse hooves.

One of the men gave out a cry. Scipio and Laelius resurfaced just as a small band of Numidian horseman burst into the clearing. They wore golden lioness hides across their shoulders and poised slings and javelins above their heads. After a chilling heartbeat of recognition, the leader of the group charged right at Scipio and Laelius. The two Roman boys rolled out of the way and into the tall grass. Their comrades quickly gathered their shields and spears. The band of Numidians was small, but still outnumbered the soldiers slightly—and besides, they had horses and the element of surprise on their side. Scipio leapt out of the grass and grabbed his shield, turning just in time for the large iron circle to catch a flying javelin that would have gouged his thigh. Scipio tossed a spear to Laelius, who, with a burst of adrenaline even he did not know he was capable of, launched the spear further than he ever had and hit one of the Numidian's horses in its back leg. The rider dropped his sling and toppled into the river.

Laelius dove into the water to grab the weapon. He heard Scipio shout behind him. He was wielding a large rock and gesturing to the sling. Laelius grabbed it before it floated downstream and tossed it to him. Scipio placed the rock in the sling, swung it above his head, and lobbed it at the rider who had charged at Laelius and Scipio, hitting him between the eyes with a gut-wrenching crack! The man rolled off his horse and into another rider. Their leader unconscious, the Numidian band quickly retreated. All the Roman men were accounted for, and helped a comrade who had been struck in the shoulder by a javelin to walk back to camp.



Back at the military base in Pisa, Scipio headed straight to his father's tent. He insisted that Laelius accompany him to vouch for the events at the Rhône. When the two boys entered Publius the Elder's tent, they found him speaking with two of his head generals, Caius and Sempronius. Scipio described the Numidian attack at the river, and Publius the Elder immediately went to a large map of the region laid out on a wooden table. Scipio's father flanked the sides of the map with the palms of his hands, giving him leverage to lean against the table and look directly down onto the inked depictions of the Rhône, the Ticinus, and Pisa.

"What did the riders look like?" Publius the Elder inquired once his son finished his account.

"They wore lioness skins instead of shields," Laelius piped up.

Publius the Elder gravely studied his map. "They are Hannibal's men, then. We've received reports from northern allies of a similar group of Numidian cavalymen marching with Hannibal's main force. They were likely sent before the army to scout the area and they'll have told Hannibal where he found you. His camp must be close." He turned to one of his generals. "Caius, ready a group of our best cavalymen and velites to form a reconnaissance mission. We will march northward and westward in a wide sweep toward the mountains and gather whatever intel on Hannibal's movements and whereabouts we can. It will be impossible for him to evade us or travel any further south, and once we return, we will assess our viability of attack."

"Laelius and I will go," Scipio volunteered.

"You have helped us enough already," his father assured him.

"You said that you wanted the best cavalymen on this

mission. Laelius and I are the most experienced riders in this entire legion.”

“He is right, sir,” Caius conceded. “These young men have bested their peers and soldiers much older in most of the riding games.”

“He is too young. Son, you are only just eighteen and will be of much more help here at the camp—”

“Doing what? Playing more games?” Scipio interrupted.

The tent was saturated with tension that ran deeper than military insubordination: father versus son. Scipio’s defiant, youthful expression was mirrored in his father’s older but equally challenging face.

After a few heartbeats, Scipio softened and spoke. “I came here with you to fight on behalf of Rome. I would be more helpful with you on this mission.”

Though Publius the Elder’s expression did not shift, something in the hazel eyes he had passed down to his firstborn softened along with Scipio. “You will be included on the mission, but you will also be accompanied by a protectorate of cavalymen to assure your safety.”

“As long as Laelius can be included in my protectorate,” Scipio immediately countered.

It shocked Laelius how readily Scipio demanded concessions from his father and commanding officer.

Publius the Elder nodded. “Ready your things, then. You two are dismissed.” He gestured for Sempronius to join him at the table and the two immediately began poring over the map.

Laelius turned to leave the tent, but Scipio did not move. He hesitated, as if waiting for something.

Publius the Elder glanced up from the map. “I said ‘dismissed,’ boys.”

Scipio turned on his heel and exited the tent with Laelius in pursuit.

“Scipio, what was that?”

“I don’t know what you mean.” Scipio refused to turn his head and meet Laelius’s eyes.

“I mean back there, with your father—”

“That was me getting you a better position. You don’t think the commander would have included you in this mission if it weren’t for me, do you? You might say ‘thank you,’” Scipio snapped.

A poisonous pang of aggression flared up inside of Laelius at his friend’s arrogance, but died as quickly as it had come. Laelius had killed his temper at the age of twelve when a fistfight he had won against a consul’s son had resulted in his own father beating him. How would he fare if he struck the son of his legion’s commander?

Instead, Laelius remarked, “I only mean it was pretty brave of you to speak to your father with so much authority.”

Scipio shrugged and mumbled something about going to pack his things. Laelius watched his friend disappear amid the other soldiers. The enemy of Temper was Patience, which Laelius had learned years ago. Perhaps in time his friend’s distress would become clear to him.

Marching north, Laelius saw the full extent of autumn’s Midas touch on the country. All that was green a few miles south had been transformed into yellows and golds. The more north he went, the faster time seemed to race by. The reconnaissance force consisted of about four hundred velites, Rome’s light infantrymen, and twenty-five hundred cavalrymen, both Roman and

Celtic mercenaries. Scipio's protectorate was a small subset of the cavalry, handpicked by Publius the Elder and led by Laelius at Scipio's request. Laelius could tell that Scipio was not thrilled to be surrounded by a garrison of his fellow cavalrymen to ensure his safety at all times, but he had at least made it onto the mission. They had almost reached the Ticinus River, but still they hadn't caught a glimpse of the Carthaginian army.

The sun was high in the sky as Publius the Elder and his modest army approached the Ticinus. Scipio and Laelius were debating whether Narcissus was an appropriate nickname for his horse, given that she was female, when both heard a great gust of wind and saw a horse further up rear back. A spear was lodged in the grass in front of the horse's hooves. Out of the shadows, like wood nymphs emerging from their arboreal forms, a group of Carthaginian spearmen appeared. Soon, thousands of soldiers emerged by the banks of the river: Carthaginian infantrymen, Numidian cavalry, Celtic mercenaries, and Iberian warriors. They had found Hannibal's army.

A Carthaginian general shouted across the field to Publius the Elder, a saccharine grin on his face. "We have come seeking but one thing, something that our great Hannibal is yet to have received: the dripping, bloody head of a Roman consul." The general let out a bloodcurdling screech and the Carthaginian forces descended upon the Romans.

Laelius and Scipio's protectorate immediately bolstered themselves despite Scipio's protests.

"Get out of the way and let me fight!" Scipio yelled.

A spear whizzed over Laelius's head just as a Numidian rider sped at him from the left. Laelius swung his sword and felt it hit the rider's shield. He found himself facing another rider, who gave a loud shout and charged at him headlong. Laelius swerved

Narcissus to the rider's left and swung his sword again. This time he hit flesh, but the rider was lost in the chaos of the battle.

"Father!"

Laelius heard Scipio's cry and turned to see that a number of spearmen had encircled Publius the Elder. The commander was fighting valiantly, but had been injured. Blood covered his face and arms, and he fell to one knee every time he swung his sword.

"Help the commander!" Scipio looked around frantically for his protectorate, but it had dwindled to three cavalry. "Don't any of you hear me?"

"We're meant to protect you!" one of the protectorate shouted. "Your father told us—"

"My father, your commander, is going to die!" Scipio looked at Laelius pleadingly.

Laelius nodded, raised his sword, and announced a charge. Scipio, Laelius, and what was left of the protectorate charged at the spearmen. Laelius was immediately locked in combat with one who used his small spear as a lance and kept trying to stab at Laelius's horse. But Laelius was too quick and nimble on horseback and struck the spearman down.

After felling the Carthaginian soldier, Laelius looked up at a sight that would later cause him to wonder whether it had been a dream. Scipio had jumped off his horse and was steadily cutting down experienced enemy soldiers to reach his father. Publius the Elder had fallen with barely enough strength to hold up his shield to defend himself against the enemy's blows. But Scipio, with his cinnamon curls, youthful limbs, and powerful yet graceful gait, looked like a hero of myth. Never before had Laelius seen a man with such yearning flames in his eyes. Those flames powered an engine within Scipio that drove him forward until the boy stood over his father. The young man helped his

injured, half-conscious father onto his horse before mounting it himself. Then, with the same power that drove him through layer after layer of Carthaginian warriors, Scipio sped his horse off the battlefield and out of harm's way. He was out of sight in seconds.

After the battle had ended, Laelius and the rest of the protectorate rejoined General Sempronius's troops. They returned with them to Pisa, where Laelius met Scipio again. Scipio had ridden all day and through the night to get his father to the base's medic. Though he had lost some blood and been badly bruised, his father would be all right the medic said. Scipio stood outside of the infirmary tent, absentmindedly stroking his exhausted steed.

Laelius approached Scipio. Unsure of what to say, he began to pet the animal's muzzle, which made Scipio smile, even if just out of the corners of his lips.

"How did we fare?" Laelius asked.

"Not well. We lost a lot of men—at least half of the reconnaissance mission. Those who were left retreated. Hannibal's forces outnumbered us too much."

"Did you see him?"

"Who?"

"Hannibal."

A red streak of hatred flashed in Scipio's eyes. "No."

"Neither did I."

Hannibal's failure to make an appearance seemed to frustrate Scipio even more. He no longer felt a vague hatred for the general threatening Rome, but was personally offended that Hannibal did not fight his own battles. Laelius put his hand on Scipio's shoulder.

Suddenly, a large mob of soldiers approached Scipio. He

straightened his back in order to look more soldierly despite his own exhaustion. The crowd continued to grow until almost the entire camp was assembled. Unsure of the mob's intentions, Laelius touched the hilt of his sword.

General Sempronius stepped forward. "Publius Cornelius Scipio, son of Publius the Elder, the bravery and gravitas that you exemplified in defending and rescuing our commander are like none I have ever seen in years of combat. By Jupiter, all of Rome will know the feats you have performed in the name of the Republic."

The entire crowd erupted into a thunderous applause that made the ground beneath their feet shake. Scipio's career had begun.

## Chapter Two

HOME—217 B.C.

The entire city of Rome was buzzing with the news of Scipio's heroic rescue. While some cynical or jealous statesmen asserted that the story was an exaggeration or a nepotistic ploy by Publius the Elder to better his son's position, most of the people of Rome began to view Scipio as a glowing ray of hope against the ever-darkening threat of Hannibal. As autumn shifted to winter, Scipio and his father returned to Rome to help Publius the Elder's recovery. Scipio insisted that Laelius come with them.

The Scipio family was one of the oldest and most prominent families in Rome. The family's ancestors had been instrumental in the founding of the Republic and the patriarchs of the family had proven themselves again and again throughout Rome's history. The halls of the Roman Senate echoed the triumphant pontifications of Scipio's ancestors. Three generations of his lineage were renowned as heroes of the First War.

Though Laelius had gazed at the houses of noble families up on the hills just outside the city, he could never have imagined

the splendor that lay within their walls. Some of the interior walls were painstakingly painted to resemble marble and were decorated with cornices and reliefs of busts of Scipio's ancestors that protruded from the wall and seemed to follow you with their eyes. Others were painted with murals that mimicked looking out from the inside of a large forum. In the foreground, the painter had replicated realistic columns that obscured a breathtaking view of the city. Walking through the halls of Villa Scipio, Laelius looked out onto painted scenes of the Roman marketplace, architects building the Coliseum, chariot races in motion, and the climax of a popular Roman tragedy. The most remarkable of all was an enormous rendering of the construction of the Roman Senate chambers, a symbol of the victory of the Republic over the oppressive kings that had once held dominion over the city. Colorful tiles of vibrant red, sandy yellow, and the deepest ocean blue, some with gold accents, were inlaid in the floor in intricate mosaics. Laelius walked above brilliant recreations of Romulus and Remus being raised by their wolf mother, Hercules defeating the Nemean Lion, and glorious battles of the First War that sparkled with newness.

The atrium just beyond the entrance of the house was a wide-open space filled with foliage, marble benches, and small bronze bird feeders. It connected all of the other rooms of the house. In the center stood a statue of Vesta, goddess of home and hearth, the size of an actual Roman woman. Her face had been carved to resemble a great-grandmother of Scipio's. She welcomed visitors into her family's home, while at her feet a small stone fountain bubbled. When it rained, the water would pour down her arms and feed the fountain, causing it to overflow into small rivers that snaked across the atrium and collected underground.

The garden in Villa Scipio was particularly renowned for exotic vines and blossoms that Publius the Elder and Gnaeus had brought back from their military campaigns. While veterans of the First War had brought back gems, golden jewelry, animal hides, and other such spoils of war to decorate their homesteads, Publius the Elder and his brother had included in their souvenirs seeds from across the Mediterranean. With the caring oversight of Scipio's mother, this foreign flora had bloomed extravagantly and filled the entire house with fragrances found nowhere else in the city. Olive trees intermingled with passion fruit. Greek orchids grew beside Spanish bluebells. The garden was a fantastic sight that few Roman citizens were lucky enough to behold.

Laelius was one of those lucky few. He and Scipio spent much of their winter days sparring and riding horseback on the grounds of Villa Scipio. Meanwhile, outside the home, Scipio's fame grew. When the two friends attended a chariot race or gladiator games at the Coliseum, they would catch glimpses of Roman civilians looking their way and whispering excitedly. Crowds formed around them at the forum or the market, praising Scipio's bravery. The attention overwhelmed Laelius and made his heart flutter and his stomach fall, but Scipio received his admirers with grace and dignity.

While the two friends delighted in Scipio's new celebrity, Scipio's father and uncle were busy outlining their next move against Hannibal. Having fully recovered, Publius the Elder spent weeks appealing to the senate for more men and provisions. They had not anticipated the size of the force that Hannibal had successfully marched over the mountains, and any chance of defeating him lay in increasing Rome's defense. The senate, still disorganized, chaotic, and corrupt, did little to assist Publius the Elder. Scipio and Laelius would return to Villa Scipio in the

evening and, more often than not, find Publius the Elder and Gnaeus strategizing.

Though Laelius began to learn more about his friend the more time he spent in Villa Scipio with his family, the biggest revelation came in meeting Aemelia. Aemelia Paulla was the daughter of another of Rome's prominent families. The Pauluses and Scipios had been close allies since the founding of the city. Though her lineage was ancient, Aemelia was nothing if not a modern lady.

Laelius and Scipio were returning home from one of the many baths in the city when, upon entering the atrium, Scipio stopped and blanched. In the garden, seated beside Vesta's fountain, was an arrestingly beautiful girl. She had high, regal cheekbones, but round cheeks that showed her youthfulness. Her dark, almost black hair was tied into a ponytail that flowed over her shoulder.

Aemelia strode up to the frozen Scipio and said, "I'd heard talk that you were back home, but I couldn't imagine my friend Publius Cornelius Scipio returning without sending word to me."

Scipio rediscovered his voice and squeaked, "I'm sorry, I have been preoccupied with my friend."

Aemelia turned to Laelius. "So, you're to blame." She flashed him a coy smirk and extended her hand and introduced herself as Aemelia. Laelius kissed her knuckles and introduced himself to her.

She stepped back and regarded Laelius. "A word of advice from an old friend of Cornelius, Laelius: Don't forgive him so easily. He doesn't make many mistakes, so you have to relish in the rarity."

Dinner at Villa Scipio was an event every evening. As the

sun dipped below the hills, the servants presented mouthwatering banquets of bread, cheese, fish, and olive oil. Fruits from the garden were served in great metal bowls, and sometimes a lyre player was invited to accompany the meal. Dinnertime was also a battle, for Publius the Elder was not only a general on the field, but also in his home, especially with his eldest son.

“The *corona civica*,” Publius the Elder said, emphatically waving a half-eaten crust of bread, “is Rome’s highest military decoration for bravery. What you did on the banks of the Ticinus was the bravest act that most of those soldiers have seen—will ever see. How can you refuse such a reward?”

“The action was one that awarded itself,” Scipio said frankly, dunking his own crust into an amber pool of oil. “Having you alive at this table is enough of a reward, father.” Scipio met his father’s eyes.

Publius the Elder nodded, then turned to Laelius. “Perhaps you can convince my son, since it is evident that I am not getting through.”

Laelius laughed, but saw Scipio sigh softly out of the corner of his eye.

After dinner, Laelius was walking along the halls of the atrium when he noticed Scipio sitting in a corner of the garden. It had rained that morning and raindrops still fell from some of the foliage. The night sky was clear and the air smelled fresh. Laelius sat beside his friend.

“Why don’t you try for the *corona civica*? The senators might say you’re too young, but anybody from the legion who saw what you did would defend you.”

Scipio stared at a large, indigo-blue blossom. “I know this garden best in winter. When I was growing up, this house felt empty during the springs and summers when my father and

uncle would be away on a campaign. I could run throughout the entire house and nobody would protest—not Mother, not the cooks or gardeners or painters. But during the winter, Father and Uncle would be strategizing or conversing with generals in the triclinium or tablinum. I grew up surrounded by talk of foreign offensives in lands I had never seen, of soldierly conduct, integrity, and gravitas, and tales of heroes. I would hear the women or the other boys in the forum talking about Father’s glorious achievements on behalf of the Republic. I didn’t believe that he performed any of those heroic acts because of some prize. I don’t believe one should act for those reasons.”

Scipio’s head dropped. The tips of his curls sparked auburn against the olive oil–burning lamps. “My father wants me to be rewarded for my actions because of lesser men, but I act because of those greater than myself.”

“You mean like your father?”

Scipio sighed. “He wants this for me, but he wants it more for our family. He wants it for himself. The greatest reward I could ever receive is his thanks.”

A chilling wind blew past and the two boys shivered. They decided to warm themselves by the closest brazier. Watching the flames dance between his fingers, Laelius felt closer to Scipio than he had to any other person.

“When the First War broke out,” Laelius said, “the senate asked my father to supply some of our horses for the cause. He was happy to give them up and excited to fight for the Republic. But a few days before he was planning to leave with the other men to become soldiers, a horse kicked him in his right leg. My mother urged the rest of the family to bring him to a doctor in the city, but they all said it would be the end of him. My father recovered, but he was rendered lame and unable to fight in the

war. I remember feeling so much shame. I was the only boy whose father was not fighting. I remember thinking to myself that I had to be careful, that I couldn't risk the same thing happening to our entire family or I would pay for it. I have done the legwork for both my father and me since his accident. I have always been as careful as I could manage. I could not risk an accident. I decided that whenever I became old enough, I would fight for both of us. Every day I am proving my family's worth, trying to beat back the shame I felt as a child."

Scipio grabbed Laelius's shoulders and looked him in the eye. The low burn of the brazier reflected on his serious expression. "Laelius," he said, "if ever there comes a time, I will do everything in my power to help you restore honor and glory on your family. I swear by Jupiter."

Laelius had heard of prophesies witnessed by oracles in flames, but had paid little attention to those myths. Now, however, those legends flooded back to him as he stared into his friend's face lit by the bronze brazier. He saw Scipio in quite a different light—not the low orange of oil lamps, but the blinding white of a summer sun. Unlike at the banks of the Ticinus, he did not see Scipio as a youthful demigod, but as an older iteration of himself. Scipio was a great leader: respected, revered, and glorious. If Laelius could depend on one man to help him redeem his family, it was Scipio.

As the winter thawed gradually into spring, Publius the Elder and Gnaeus prepared to return to the field. Their appeals to the senate had finally yielded some progress. The senate would deploy four new legions northward to prevent Hannibal from coming any further south, as well as make up the loss that Publius the Elder had suffered at the Ticinus. Gnaeus would return to Spain to continue fighting off Hannibal's generals Hasdrubal

and Hanno, while Publius the Elder would return to Pisa with Scipio and Laelius to pursue Hannibal's forces where they had left them in the autumn. General Flaminius, a renowned leader from the First War, would lead a separate campaign in Tuscany to solidify Rome's defenses eastward.

The day before they were set to depart with the rest of the army, Laelius discovered Scipio whispering with Aemelia fervently in the garden. Scipio held her hand tightly in his. Aemelia was teary-eyed, though she had a smile across her lips. Laelius could not discern whether her tears meant sadness or happiness, and in the end he understood that it must have been a bitter-sweet mixture of the two. Together, Scipio and Aemelia filled the garden with intimate warmth that almost made Laelius forget that winter was only just departing.

Later, after Aemelia had returned home, Laelius found his friend staring up into the face of Vesta. He approached her as well.

"You love her," Laelius said.

Scipio nodded. The fact was plain enough. "I have promised to marry her if I return from this campaign." The bitter morbidity of the statement made Scipio scowl.

"Well, then, a celebration is in order," Laelius said, clapping Scipio on the back hard, knocking the morose air out of him.

Scipio was so startled that he couldn't help but laugh.

That evening, the banquet tasted of apprehension and anticipation. Recent news from the senate had only created further anxiety at Scipio's table.

"Fabius Maximus is a dictator," Publius the Elder asserted.

"It is troubling how readily the other senators elected him as a leader," Gnaeus commented, biting into a hunk of cheese. "He

has far less experience leading in wartime than many of them. I don't understand it."

"They are afraid," Publius the Elder said. "Winter is thawing and for months the only news we've heard is that Hannibal has advanced. Defeat after defeat, and so whom do they put in charge? A delayer. Fabius Maximus's only true talent is his ability to suspend making deliberate decisions. They don't know what to do, so they would rather follow someone who does nothing than someone who takes the wrong action."

"You would rather they have elected someone more decisive?" Scipio asked.

Publius the Elder looked across the table at his son. "I would rather they had maintained the integrity of the Republic. Your forefathers fought against the rule of a monarch because they believed that no one man should be given power over all. They were tired of living under tyrants. They believed that the people deserved to elect their own leaders. Whatever actions we take now, we must remember those beliefs for which the men who battled for our Republic fought."

Scipio had straightened up in his chair. He nodded solemnly at his father's words, absorbing them into the depths of his heart and mind. The rest of the dinner continued quietly.

At dawn the following morning, Scipio bid farewell to his mother and his younger brother, Lucius. Scipio's mother wished the men a safe return to the city. General Varro's army gathered at the eastern gates of the city. Publius the Elder took his place at the front of his army and signaled the march to begin.

As Scipio and Laelius began their journey, leaving the city behind them, Laelius turned to Scipio: "For the Republic."

Scipio nodded gravely. "For the Republic."