

## Not Forgotten

By Hannah Tan

*The whispering breeze hushed, the distant voices silenced, the booming speech of Julius Caesar became only a murmur, all sound drowned out in the outburst of noise that had captivated my mind. We would be going to battle! It swept over me like the array of colours that spark in the early morning. That array of colours, however, always departed so soon, just like the brief pleasure. The thought of 'war' had indeed always exhilarated me, but I had never pictured it as being against the Gauls, it made me feel, almost, cheated. This battle, with all its glory, had come at the cost of months of monotonous training and weeks of wearisome travel, before finally, the precarious battle against... The Gauls.*



Our first day of travel had already disgruntled me, I couldn't stomach how I would survive the next few weeks. I had set off with a sorrowful attempt at optimism, however putting one foot before the other whilst maintaining a good posture, straight face and never allowing my equipment to droop was not a particularly easy thing to be optimistic about. The first few hours were tolerable, but as time went on it only got tougher, my breath got shallower and my footsteps got heavier. Nearing the last hour of march, it had become torturous, every muscle and bone felt like glass about to shatter, I had never been so thankful for a break.

At one point across the following weeks, we hiked across a mountain range, it was a test of determination to begin the task, the mountain's peak seemed to never get closer, but the ground certainly got further, I would briefly be paralyzed in alarm if I even just peeped down. Descending was provoking my fear of heights, it made me feel dizzy, like the rock would disintegrate and I would plunge to my doom. As we clambered down, I noticed a river tearing down the mountainside as hectically as predator hunting for prey, it chilled me to the core when I imagined how long it would still take for even such a nimble river to stroke the earth's surface.

I suppose I preferred the drearier days, even if my only source of entertainment came from counting how many miniscule legs pitter-pattered on me before nibbling at my skin. On chillier periods, I would also track every breath produce dainty spirals of smoke that snake away into the dull celeste sky, whilst listening to armour clanging gently to the beat of the wind, it sounds pleasant at first, but eventually time does its thing and the interest washes away. My preferred use of energy was creating daydreams, something I always fell back upon after the worst of days, however time did its thing again and after a week of limitless daydreaming I couldn't seem to be able to create another good one that satisfied my boredom.

Our travels only ceased when the raven's obsidian wings would pull the earth into a mighty embrace and its luminous eyes would droop, or perhaps, on a rare occasion, remain wide awake. This was the time we called 'night', when we would channel the remainder of our energy to construct camp. I would lie in the tent I shared with seven other soldiers, including Gaius, kept awake by Antonius' snores. The scent of sweat lodged into the air,

filling my nostrils unpleasantly whilst I mused about *things*. It always struck me as bizarre to know that whichever camp I would be sleeping in at the moment—or trying to sleep in—would be set ablaze the following morning, that everything would be swathed in dancing flames before declining to ashes. I also found it rather curious that the person who slept beneath me had been with me my whole life, from our first steps to reading our first words to the day we joined the army. These thoughts trickled through me with a sudden rush of appreciation, the tiniest of smirks peered through the corner of my mouth.



By the time we had reached our destination, I could hardly differ relief from the creeping uneasiness that had settled beneath my skin. I supposed it was pre-battle anxiety, it did not feel like that. It felt more like I was in a trap, a confinement I could not escape, yet I didn't understand why. I forced down mouthfuls of Puls, barely registering that Gaius was beside me, glancing nervously at my unusually quiet self. His distorted shadow loomed over my ghostly-white hands. I hadn't even realised I was in bed until my eyes began to flicker away into dreams.

Blood oozed around me like molten lava from the realms of the underworld, the boiling blood staining my cheek almost obscured my vision. A nagging feeling tightened a rope in my chest, I gasped for air. Suddenly, I was staring at something, something blurred and bloody, I couldn't make out its features...A Gaul? The shrill cry of a rooster pierced the air and I jolted upright.

I clutched my chest in fear that my heart would spring out of it, my breath came in pants as I strained to comprehend the tornado of thoughts whizzing around my head. Then the reality of war dawned on me. What would we lose? What could I lose? There were so many risks that may not be worth it: the wound formed by loss and heartbreak is irreversible. I wondered how I could have been so ignorant, allowing these factors to be overthrown by unimportant details such as discomfort. As I slipped out of the tent, my azure eyes met the tranquil sky, I hoped that Mars had heard my prayers. My tunic rustled in the breeze, like mice scurrying across a field, the dream *meant* something. I-I knew it *meant* something...

## **58 BC**

"...debellare Galliam venimus..." bellowed Julius Caesar in his pre-battle speech, but I was only half listening, an indescribable tension twisted through me. Who would survive? How long would it last? I was inhaling air so fast I thought I might choke. It felt so oddly similar to excitement. Gaius nudged my hand gently then whispered under his breath, "We will be fine, Publius. Mars must have heard our devoted prayers; I know he did." I nodded. The only person I confided in was Gaius, his voice was calm and unbetraying but his fingers fidgeted. My dream still stung vividly, like a soul of fire sneering that something was to go horrendously wrong, I shook the uncomfortable feeling away. The only thing that mattered now was that a battle would soon commence.



I stood there, trembling slightly with my hands coiled around my bow and arrow, soon, any second could be my last. It was a thought that sent shivers down my spine. My thick, blonde hair was already delivering ripples of sweat down my neck, I tightened my grip until my nails dug into my skin. The tentacles of grass slithered around my ankles; they too were quivering as we perched atop a sloped hill. My gaze met a few silhouettes emerging from a curtain of mist, more and more emerged until they were no longer outlines but people. People blood-thirsty for battle.

I hastened to raise my bow and arrow, we would bombard them with arrows and artillery. I was half terrified I would shoot one of my fellow soldiers, we were positioned in a tight formation with rows and rows of soldiers neatly packed together. The Gauls were to fight uphill, that was the plan. I drew back my arrow, my hands slipping, I recognised the signal and released. Swiftly I aimed more arrows, I glimpsed some Gauls, a stretching sweep of Gauls with a ravenous glint in their eyes. I flinched as I noticed that they were nude, utterly unclothed with blue body paint smeared on their robust figures.

Once we were done with the arrow stage, we proceeded to march steadily towards them, with each step the crescendo of screeching growing louder. At the last moment I drew my glistening sword that would so soon be ruby-red. I clashed with Gaul after Gaul, all of them with hair pale and spiky and frosty-blue eyes that quaked hope. They pelted towards us in chariots or on foot, jeering at our armour and seemingly unafraid of anything. Even *women* fought alongside them, as equals.

I narrowly dodged a chariot with horses ornamented by skulls, I shuddered as I realised that they must have once been severed heads. Without hesitation, Gaius scrambled towards me to check if I was alright, his face was contorted into a frown. He had a stream of blood running from his sword and a fresh cut leaking more blood onto his tunic. I scrutinized it questioningly then asked, "Are you—"

"I'm fine, what about you?" he interrupted. I simply nodded. In the corner of my eye, I noticed another two Gauls charging at us, Gaius must have seen them too because I heard his breath accelerate. These Gauls in particular would have been exceptionally intimidating if they wore armour, their lack of it made them appear quite foolish. Their wives stood from a distance, scowling at them in a horrible chorus of shrieks. In fact, as I glanced around, *many* wives were doing so. I couldn't get distracted. After a while, they perished at our feet and I groaned as we began clashing swords with another two.

Countless times had I wanted to stop fighting out of exhaustion, my body felt like a puppet with strings about to snap, I took me all of my tenacity to pull myself together and carry on. I sighed a pure sigh of relief when the blast of a trumpet could be heard, it meant that battle for the day was finished and I had survived. If there was one thing that I respected about the Gauls, it would have to be their passion for battle, they had a drive like no other, you could differentiate the spirit in their eyes from the sullen look in mine easily. Regardless, they

were still nude and tactless, me and Gaius often chatted about how bizarre it must be for an army of disciplined soldiers to fight an army of wild barbarians. Gaius told me he almost felt sorry for them, because they outnumbered us so greatly yet it was obvious who would win. I never felt sorry for the Gauls, but I always feel a tug at my stomach for my uncompassionate self, after all they were humans too.

We fought nonstop, day in and day out, eyeing our gleeful foes with what we hoped was a fear striking stare, the stillness before battle was something I'd never forget, the silence of the morning vanquished by a thousand howls that swept through miles. It always startled me; it was something I could never get acquainted with. As the months dragged into a year, I was astounded how the Gauls' vigour had remained untarnished, even the keenest of Romans weren't as euphoric as they had started. Their chaos hadn't decreased by a trace either, perhaps this was what aided them to last. It made them unpredictable. I shall now liberate a memory in more detail than I ever risked remember it in, a memory that shall *never* be forgotten, it feels *sinful* to allow it to happen.

## 57 BC

An impenetrable wall of clouds desolately hung above us, adding to the unbroken shade of grey. I wondered what the battlefield might have resembled if the trees were lush and the birds melodiously sang, I couldn't picture it. The wind would bound up to me like a wolf, licking me and tickling me before it howled and leapt away to the shadows, the area which my eyes would scan time and time again attempting to pick up signs of motion. Where *were* the Gauls? My ears listened intently for the familiar weight of footsteps, only to come back to the same conclusion that nothing and no one was there.

The gloomy atmosphere was enough to send a smile plummeting into an abyss, soldiers shifted around, uncertain what would happen. Even though we had been battling the Gauls for a year, they were still as unpredictable as the weather. I readied my sword, expecting them to come hurtling towards us at any second.

That was exactly what they did.

Ear splitting shrieks engulfed the air and before anyone had a chance to react, we were being ambushed by untamed men, some of our soldiers had already been speared through the heart. Once we had recovered from our momentary shock, I felt the pounding in my chest hasten as we began the struggle.

As more and more Gauls began to pounce on me, I fought furiously, grateful for every second that I was still standing. Chaos exploded around me, distinct screams coming to a halt, soldiers tumbling to the ground with a thud, the screeching of steel hitting steel, it was a trial to focus on my current opponent. Blood oozed around me like molten lava from the realms of the underworld, the boiling blood staining my cheek almost obscured my vision. "Publius! Behind you!" yelled Gaius' voice in a terrible, frantic scream, in that moment time slowed, the nagging feeling returned and I knew something had gone wrong.

My blood turned to ice as I spun around in what felt like slow-motion. A Gaul was racing towards me, determination imprinted with flames in his eyes, he had his sword held up high, I predicted he would bring it crashing down, using his staggering height to his advantage. In a few seconds the Gaul did exactly what I thought he would, I had held my shield up just before the sword collided with it and unhesitatingly kicked him harshly on his shin. The unexpected blow had an immediate effect on him, he staggered in pain for just a moment, that was enough. My sword jabbed through his stomach. Even though my foot ached from the force, I was relatively proud of myself, it had all happened in a few breaths.

Then I was acutely aware that the nagging feeling still gnawed at my stomach.

Out of nowhere, a chariot with two Gauls on it sped past me, they swivelled their heads around and flashed me a look of sheer evil. Their eyes had no soul, even though they were blue, they appeared as though a permanent darkness lingered upon them. They mirrored those from a monster in a child's dreams, cold, bottomless and inhuman. I was abruptly bathed in feebleness, the glare was draining, it made me feel fragile and *weak*. My eyes were glued to theirs. When I finally found the strength to look elsewhere, I caught sight of that menacing grin. I pulled my watch away once more, only to fix my eyes to the spot where Gaius had been. My heart skipped a beat...

He was on the floor in a puddle of blood.

A scream stuck to my throat, receding to an eternal vibration that bounced off every corner of me. Every instinct said I should give up, I desperately wanted to yet I couldn't. That would be cowardly. I was *not* a coward. Had it been my fault? It had happened mere seconds after Gaius had warned me. My inner voice cracked. Something, somewhere, knew I had been at least partially responsible. A sack of rocks nestled comfortably in my stomach, a sinking feeling that washed out happiness. I couldn't deny it, I had distracted my best friend, whisked his focus away. I felt hideous and unclean, a burning sensation thrived in my core, mixed with the pieces of a million crushed opportunities. I tremored as the wind let out a mourn, gone was the warmth fighting somewhere beside me. Wherever I looked, Gauls seemed to have that twisted expression that sneered at my helplessness. It made the burning sensation thrive even more. My arms and legs began to move again, my sword cutting into enemy flesh. My heart was being snatched out of my chest and beads of sweat ran down my back. Something trickled down my grubby cheek, washing the blood away until there was no blood left to wash.

Bodies collapsed everywhere, suffocating and strangling the ground, making the grass cower and trees droop further. My sword and hand fused together, acting off its own accord, slicing through the air fluidly. Something ran through my veins that kept me going, something that had never been there before: a motive. The reason to fight aided me when I felt like crumpling, or when a stitch prospered below my rib or when ghastly wounds pained me. I kept fighting, striking consistently, never faltering.

When the trumpet blasted, I attempted to rapidly retreat back to the castrum, despite how horrible I felt to just walk away and pretend nothing happened. It was in that moment that I risked a glance at Gaius's motionless body. I shouldn't have done that. His face was

permanently engraved with shock, it was obvious he had been caught off guard. He had fell on his side, revealing a hideous wound on his back, the attackers had come from behind. I don't understand why I blinked sharply a few times, as if hoping it was all a misconception and Gaius was still alive and well. I could fantasize all I want but his immobile, bloodstained body said it all.

### **38 BC**

My memory of Gaius has now faded, sliding away into the haze of time, being lost in the present worries. That doesn't mean I'll forget. I'll never forget. If I try hard enough, I can still visualise his face, he would always be smiling that infectious grin, his walnut eyes glistening, his cinnamon hair that coiled at the tips in its usual messy form and if I dared delve deeper, I could hear his welcoming voice joking and laughing. I would never forget. I would never forget how he saved my life that day. The guilt that I had drawn his attention and caused an opportunity for those Gauls still caves in on me, despite my old age it is still a fact that stabs my heart. I do miss the smile next to me that is now nothing but air, how perhaps me and Gaius could be chatting with our kids cheerfully playing Knucklebones, however I'm satisfied that our memories are one's worth treasuring.

I now have a wife called Clelia and three children. Today, as I wrote this, I observed a peculiar detail, I do not have a single curl in my hair, neither does Clelia or anyone else we know of in our families, however when I saw my son, Gaius, today, I noticed how his hair coiled at the tips and perhaps his eyes were a certain shade darker, with that familiar sparkle that could put anyone at ease. Then his gaze met mine and he gave me a mischievous, broad grin. I couldn't help but grin back.