

Sons of Mars

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Epic Threads

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Artist's Statement

Ancient Rome's history often appears irrelevant to our future-oriented society, typically constrained to the world of niche academia, or possibly a guided tour through the Colosseum.

With this creative piece, I aimed to step out of that mold and highlight the significance of ancient history in our own current day, irrespective of interest, age, or location. The Roman Empire laid the groundwork for much of our contemporary society, and it is vital to recognize where many aspects of modern civilization stem from. I was inspired by the works of Livy, Plutarch, and Dionysius of Halicarnassus and the primordial legend of Rome they detail in their respective works. The character of the young boy serves as a reflection of how we ourselves can approach history with a sense of curiosity and wonder at all that has gone before us. In writing this story, my hope was to revive voices of a bygone era, highlighting their relevance by juxtaposing an ancient tale with a setting in a current-day small town.

Sons of Mars

ON a red clay road, three concessions down from here, is an old house coated in chipping white paint where a little boy plays with toy soldiers. His eyes are wide and curious, and his hands, though tiny, orchestrate an intricate battle scene with the polyethylene Romans that stand lifeless before his dirty knees. A weather-worn Emperor Trajan has just felled an army commander with one deft blow when the screen door swings lazily on its hinges. An old man steps out onto the porch.

“Hey Pop,” the boy says without looking up, “did you know they used to fight with spears like this in the olden days?” The kid holds up a figurine bearing a shiny, grey plastic straw in its fist.

“Olden days’, you mean back when I was a little boy?”

“No, Grandpa.” The youth rolls his eyes. “I mean in the Roman days. They were like The Avengers.”

“Ah, that’s right.” He looks on with a distant smile as his grandson repositions the military men on the wooden planks, sticky with yesterday’s lemonade.

“Do you know how all of that started, in the Roman days?”

The boy squints up at him, “Well, probably with a king, like this one.” He offers a crowned Roman in triumph.

“It started with a boy, just like you. Mind if I sit? I’ll tell you a story.”

The old man begins, as though reciting by heart:

“Once upon a time, in a land near the Tiber river, there was a son of the King of Alba, a man called Amulius. Now although he had all the gold and treasures in the world, his soul was blackened with avarice. Amulius’ appetite for power drove him to seize the throne from his brother, Numitor, despite having received his rightful partition of the inheritance.¹ Yet, it seemed not even this newfound dominion could appease Amulius. He forced Rhea Silvia, Numitor’s daughter, to become a priestess, binding her to a solitary life, never to be married, and unable to continue the royal lineage of his brother. With no choice but to comply, the girl joined the priestesses at the Temple of Vesta. As it happened, the maiden was making a journey to a small, verdant grove consecrated to Mars one day, intending to fetch pure water for her sacrifices. But once she arrived, she was seduced by a divine specter. He promised her, ‘You will bear two boys, fated to outshine mankind in valour and achievement.’²

Stricken with fear lest her pregnancy be found out, the maiden feigned illness and ceased to attend the usual sacrifices. This, however, stirred suspicion in Amulius. You can imagine the king’s fury when he at last discovered Rhea Silvia had given birth to a pair of healthy, bright-eyed twins. In his iniquity, he ordered the maiden to be shackled in chains, and commanded that the baby boys be drowned in the Tiber. A band of the king’s men carried the infants in a trough, down the muddy hillside of the Palatine to the banks of the river, cursing under their breath at the narrow path now reduced to a mire. The previous days had brought rain, and as they approached the rushing stream, they saw that the border was overflowed. After deliberating, one of the guards took the ark and placed it on the extremities of the sluggish current, assuring his comrades the water would pull the boys downstream and ultimately see to their end.”

“Wait.” The boy’s eyes are deep with concentration, his brow furrowed. “That’s it – they just die? How are they supposed to survive on their own?”

The sun hangs languidly in the sky, like a heavy apricot, waiting for gravity to pluck it down from above. A squall of street dust whirls beyond the house on the gravel way, as though it were an invisible stylus, writing words in silt on the street.

“Well, Son,” he adjusts in his seat, the rocking chair complaining as he does. “You’ve got to realize, these weren’t just any two boys. They were sons of Mars, and the gods weren’t in the habit of letting their offspring die.”

¹Livy, *The Early History of Rome*, trans. Aubrey de Sélincourt (London: Penguin Classics, 1960), 1.3.

²Dionysius of Halicarnassus, *Roman Antiquities*, 1.77, https://penelope.uchicago.edu/Thayer/E/Roman/Texts/Dionysius_of_Halicarnassus/1D*.html.

"Now, as fate would have it, the water was gentle with the twins' lives and expertly moored them on a rock, tipping over the makeshift boat so that the babes were left whimpering on the shore.

Some way off, a ruddy-cheeked swine herder was tending to his sounder. Faustulus and his companions were making their way across the pasture, their laugh and conversation falling underfoot as they went.³

Suddenly, they were struck by an incredible sight on the river bank – a she-wolf was suckling two human infants. As though they were her own pups, she lapped the dirt off their backs. From that moment on, Faustulus resolved to rear the boys with his wife as though they were his own, just as the canid had nurtured them.

The four dwelled humble lives, tending to their flocks in the mountains and residing in a hut of sticks and reeds when the sun set. One day, by the time they had grown to be young men, Romulus and Remus found themselves in a scrimmage with Numitor's herdsmen who were unfairly dominating the pastures. A brutal struggle arose and alas, Remus was swarmed and taken hostage.⁴ The callous champions bound him and led him back to Alba."

The boy draws in a tight breath.

"Am I scaring you?" his grandfather asks, his lips upturned mischievously. "Maybe I've told you too much already."

"Come on, Pop. I'm not scared," the boy protests, "you've got to say the rest of it!"

"Very well." In the narrator's grey eyes there is a glint that echoes the child's innocent curiosity. He continues:

"When Remus arrived at the king's court, Amulius left his punishment to Numitor, saying he could do with the boy as he pleased. Immediately, Remus' rightful grandfather was taken aback by the beauty and nobility of the young man, and following the posse of soldiers carrying the captive, decided to speak to him alone. As Remus told Numitor of his upbringing in the swine herder's home, and the little he knew about being discovered in the care of wild beasts, the wizened man began to remember the twin babies his brother had sentenced to death in the Tiber.

Among the once-tranquil mountain ranges, Romulus was restless, set on rescuing his brother. Faustulus saw that his adoptive son was too angered to act with reason. In order to dissuade him from being hasty in his vengeance, he revealed everything to the young man, explaining in detail how he had stumbled upon Romulus and his twin on the shore with the she-wolf when they were infants. But even as the words crossed the threshold of his lips, Faustulus had decided to take matters into his own hands. The anxious father took the trough, whence Romulus and Remus were discovered, and set off with it to Alba, in search of Numitor.

When he eventually reached the gates, he was met by several guards who customarily asked about travelers' business in the city. One of them, casting a skeptical eye on the swine herder, demanded he remove his cloak so all could see whether the visitor had disguised something in his garments. Faustulus was caught, revealing the trough concealed under his arm.

As it happened, the sentry interrogating him was the very one charged with getting rid of the twin boys so many years ago. Red-handed, Faustulus was brought before the king, and reluctantly told him the story.⁵

When Amulius heard the news, he flew into a frenzied passion. Tearing the royal garb he wore, he paced his chambers, muttering anguished oaths of reprisal.

Romulus was already close at hand, preparing to avenge his brother. Marching with him were citizens who detested the tyrant in secret. From within, Remus stirred up a revolt against the king. Thus, with two forces against him, an attack on Amulius ensued. In his desperate state, the usurper was seized, and before he could utter another curse at fate, they put him to death."

³Plutarch's narrative states that Faustulus was the servant who cast away the boys in the Tiber, subsequently rediscovering them and taking them into his care. This story instead follows the account of Dionysius of Halicarnassus, in which the servant is unnamed and Faustulus only finds Romulus and Remus later in the tale. See Dionysius of Halicarnassus, *Roman Antiquities*, 1.79.

⁴Dionysius of Halicarnassus, *Roman Antiquities*, 1.79.

⁵In Dionysius of Halicarnassus' account, Amulius tries to discover Romulus and Remus' whereabouts through Faustulus. However, this narrative follows Plutarch's portrayal, in which Amulius appears perplexed and less prepared to respond. See Plutarch, "Life of Romulus," 8.

The old man pauses again. The faithful arms of his wrist-watch reporting 9:30 PM.

As though predicting his grandfather's thoughts by a sixth sense, the boy's eyes plead with the old man.

"I know it's late Pop, but you haven't even said what happens to the brothers. If you could choose, which one would you be?"

"You might be able to answer that for yourself when you hear how the legend ends."

The storyteller clears his throat and goes on.

"The brothers celebrated their victory. At last they could fulfill their divine destiny.

Before too long, they determined to found a city themselves after returning lawful rule to Numitor. In an attempt to decide where to establish their kingdom, the two brothers fell into a dispute. Finally agreeing to settle the argument by flight of the birds of omen,⁶ whichever of them saw the greater number of vultures would have the final say. But when the time came, Romulus lied to his brother, claiming to have spotted twelve of the shadow-like birds. When Remus learned of the deception, Romulus had already begun constructing his city walls. Remus ridiculed his brother's work in contempt and leapt across the freshly-dug trench, but in a rage, Romulus struck him down.⁷

Remus was dead. His soul was dashed over the rocks, and the day wept.

Tearing himself from shock, Romulus brushed off whispers of remorse, as though mere specks of grime from his shoulders after a day of toil. All alone, the remaining brother, now a liar and a murderer, built his kingdom – what would become one of the greatest empires known to man. Looking up from time to time, he thought of Mars."

Over the cabin lodged deep in the boonies, dusk has settled comfortably. The boy is still holding the plastic figurine, feeling the rivets of armour mindlessly, churning over the tale in his head. History lingers in the air in concert with the hum of a box vent and the sweet scent of May lilacs.

The child is gazing up – the black-blue of the ether seems to swallow him whole. The erudite narrator has joined in the observation too. Leaning back, he points; his index touches a constellation of pin-pricks and his grandson follows his focus. The night is crisp and calm.

"See that?" he says. "They're still here, even today."

As though they had been listening all this time, the Gemini wink at them, watching eternally from above.⁸

⁶According to Dionysius of Halicarnassus, it is possible that one of Romulus' men slew Remus rather than Romulus himself. This story, however, follows Plutarch's narrative in its account of Remus' death. See Plutarch, "Life of Romulus," 9.

⁷Livy, *Early History*, 1.7.

⁸This detail references the alternative Roman interpretation of the Gemini as Romulus and Remus. See Stefanie Waldek, "Gemini Constellation: Facts, Location and Myth," *Space.com*, last updated July 13, 2023, accessed April 10, 2026; Tammy Plotner, "The Gemini Constellation," *Universe Today*, January 14, 2022, accessed April 10, 2026; "Facts About the Gemini Constellation – And How to Find It," *Star Naming*, accessed April 10, 2026.

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