

The Shepherd's Wolves

By

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Preface

This should rightly be called a piece of Fictional History instead of Historical Fiction. I hope those of you who are more knowledgeable of this period of history will forgive my fabrications and tall-tale telling.

My favorite history teacher once said, "Great events in history are remembered not because of the dates upon which they occurred but because they are great stories to tell". That's why he was my favorite history teacher.

Still, dates put things in context. Our story begins in the year 406 AD in a small, long forgotten village in Ireland. Ireland was one of the rare countries the Roman Empire never conquered. Because of this, many seeking refuge from potentially deadly political intrigue of a collapsing empire came to the emerald isle. Although life in ancient Ireland presented at least as much danger as a life of political intrigue.

It was a time of confusion and conflict. The rich and poor alike were desperately trying to acquire more while keeping what they had, barbarian hordes threatened on nearly every border and the very definition of what it meant to be a "Roman" was blurred.

As the Roman Empire's powerful grasp began slipping, those who sought advantage in a crisis saw their next opportunity. Like a bear exhausted from the constant harassment of hunting dogs,

the Roman Empire was tiring. It would be centuries before the complete collapse, but in 406 we begin telling a tale which follows the efforts of those who would see a different opportunity in this crisis. An opportunity to save a small bit of light as the dark approached.

The Empire had two Emperors: Honorius in the West and his younger brother Arcadius in the East. Their father, Emperor Theodosius, had split the Empire. Perhaps he was forestalling another civil war by his Solomon-like decision. Perhaps he felt the Empire too large to be governed properly by a single Emperor. Or perhaps he simply felt his sons would be half the Emperor he was. Whatever the reason, Rome again had two Emperors.

Although to the citizens who felt the coming dark, what face smiled at them from a Roman coin was of little consequence. Rome was now a Christian empire. Catholic monks roamed far and wide, spreading the faith and fighting to convert the previously pagan peasantry. Ireland again was pushing back. The Druids there remained a powerful force behind many of the tribal leaders.

There's so much we don't know about those times that makes it an excellent opportunity for a story!

If it helps you enjoy the story more, think of it as a tale told by an old man to his grandchildren around a campfire many years ago. A story first told to him by his grandfather, a

retired Roman Centurion with the gift of gab and a knack for exaggeration.

My wish is that you will enjoy a story told with reverence for the people over relevance to the facts; with humor over despair; a story that focuses on the rise of a new civilization over the fall of an old one.

And my most fervent wish is that someday you might want to tell this story to your grandchildren.

Randy Cook

Book One

Chapter 1: The Stinking Pig

Somewhere in Ireland, 406 A.D.

Any soldier worth his salt will tell you a soldier's life isn't about fighting. It's about waiting. A soldier waits to march, to eat, to be paid, to fight, and to die.

Tiberius Scorpanicus Henno knew how to wait.

Former centurion of the 10th legion of Rome, he'd spent 25 years as a soldier waiting for one thing or another. Now he waited for his pension payment each month. Now he waited for his next drink. Now he just waited.

The young Gaul grinned at Henno, holding the knife in an overhand grip. A stance designed to give his opponent the illusion the attack would come in high. Henno knew the trick. He waited for the Gaul to make his move and end all the damned waiting.

He waited to die.

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To serve God is to wait. Wait to eat, wait to sleep, wait for the bread to rise, for the sun to set. He waited to hear God's voice, to be called to his service. He waited for the day he would be accepted as a brother in the Abbey of Folcutt.

Novice Fergus knew how to wait.

Now he waited for the outcome of a knife fight. It was the third he and Brother Brio had witnessed since they took a

table in the dark corner of The Stinking Pig. The name was either derived from its proximity to or from its owner's resemblance to its namesake.

Brother Brio gripped Fergus' arm tightly as a table crashed to the floor and the semi-conscious patrons moved aside to give the combatants room. The first two knife fights had been disappointing. The first ended with both men mortally wounded and calling for help. They were robbed and dumped in the river. The second ended before it even started with the man who started the fight breaking down and begging for mercy. This technically wasn't even a knife fight; only one of the men had a knife. "Watch the younger one, the Gaul," Brother Brio whispered, "He'll end it quickly with a strike to the other's heart."

Fergus watched, but his eyes were drawn to the other man. Short but powerful, he looked as though he'd been carved from stone. He stood still, his gray eyes watching the knife's tip pointed directly at his heart. He looked like he was waiting for another drink, not the deathblow that would end his life. Brother Brio's grip tightened on Fergus' arm, "Now. It ends now. Watch." Fergus watched and waited to see a man die.

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Henno waited.

"Want me to turn around?" He muttered in Gaulish, "All you Gauls enjoy taking a man from behind."

The Gaul snarled and leapt at Henno.

Just as expected, he flipped to an underhanded grip and came in low, aiming for Henno's thigh. It wouldn't be a killing blow. It would take hours while he bled and cursed in the mud. They'd rob him, beat him and humiliate him as he died. That's no way for a Centurion of the 10th Legion to die. He was one of Caesar's Bulls, a holder of a Golden Torque.

No, he thought, I'll wait a bit longer.

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Fergus watched in fascination as the knife flashed in a low arc. The man of stone suddenly moved like a snake, grabbing the Gaul's wrist with such force Fergus could hear the bones crunching from across the room. The sneering confidence was replaced with shock and terror. The knife clattered to the floor as the Gaul sucked in a lungful of air in preparation for what would certainly be an ear-shattering scream of pain. The older man's leg shot out, cutting off the other's breath with a powerful kick to the groin. The drunken crowd watched with mild interest as the Gaul's eyes rolled up and he hit the floor with a thud.

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Henno sighed regretfully. The brief flash of searing excitement had left him completely sober again. He looked down at the quivering heap at his feet. He'd seen better fighters, but not many. The Gaul might live. He reached

down and pulled a purse of coins from the convulsing man's belt. He tossed a few to the porcine innkeeper.

"For the trouble," he called out amicably.

He bent again to pick up the large knife. Crafted by an expert, it had a slight curve and jagged teeth along one side with a blood-gutter up the middle to make it easier to pull out of a man's guts. It was a fine blade. Finer than one would expect to see on such a poor belt.

He tossed a few coins on the Gaul's chest. "For the knife," he announced, causing some in the crowd to laugh before turning back to their cups.

All but the two hooded monks in the corner. They'd been watching the crowd all night, nursing small cups of wine and speaking secretively.

Christians, he thought sourly, always up to no good.

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Brother Brio drained his cup quickly. "Come, Fergus. He's not noticed us, so we can follow him discretely and approach him at just the right time."

Fergus nodded and drained his cup as quickly as he could, but he wasn't convinced they'd escaped the stone man's notice. He doubted anything did.

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Henno pretended to stagger a bit as he made his way down the dark streets of the small village. He must be getting old. Ten

years ago, he'd have never thought twice about slitting an enemy's throat.

"Never leave an enemy or a friend behind," he muttered, remembering his first day of training as a legionnaire.

Those were good days. Days when he knew his place. At the bottom of the shit pile, but still, that life made sense to him. Do what you're told, keep your eyes to the front, your blade sharp, your armor bright and stand strong in the shield wall. Not like now.

Now, he drifted with no purpose. He had enough money to live. He'd received a decent donative from his emperor when he retired after 25 years of service. He was a Roman citizen with land. He'd sold the land almost as soon as it was granted to him, but he still considered himself a former landowner.

But there was the problem. What was he now? An ex-soldier, a former landowner, a Roman citizen, a bodyguard, a gambler, a drinker and, it's likely, a father once or twice maybe. When he was in the Legion, he was Centurion Tiberius Scorpanicus Henno. They could grumble and complain all they wanted, it was the right of every soldier, even centurions, but no man could ever say he wasn't fair. He knew what was expected of him and he made damn sure every man in his command knew what was expected of them.

But now what was expected? To retire to some farm in Britain and scratch at the dirt? Pretend to listen as other ex-soldiers told the same stories over and over, waiting for his

turn to tell his same stories over and over until one day he just didn't wake up? Or to wander what was left of the crumbling empire, looking for trouble to distract him from his boredom until one day he found more trouble than he could handle?

"By Mithras," he mumbled as he pissed against a wall, "you're turning into an old woman."

He heard an echoed whisper not far behind and remembered he was being followed.

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"God preserve and keep us," whispered Brother Brio, "why didn't you remember to bring a torch?"

"I'm sorry, Brother." Fergus whispered quietly, not bothering to point out that Brio had said a light would alert their quarry.

"It's all right, Fergus," he replied smiling, "My eyes are adjusting now. I can see him just ahead relieving himself against the wall. Quite barbaric."

Fergus could barely make out a lump of darkness in the shadows near the wall ahead of them.

"Yes, quite barbaric, but I believe he is just the man we're looking for." Fergus could hear the smile in his older friend's voice. "Quietly now. We don't want to alert him."

A whisper of air, a glint of metal and Brother Brio found an arm of iron and a knife of steel at his throat.

"A bit late for that, wouldn't you say?" A voice calmly said at his ear.

Fergus reacted faster than his brain would've liked. He jumped at the man holding Brio, but a swift kick in his side sent him spinning into the far wall. He'd been kicked by a mule once and this was much, much harder.

His whole right side felt numb as he struggled to his feet and whipped out the closest thing he had to a weapon, pointing it in what he hoped looked like a threatening gesture. He tried to snarl in a growling voice, imitating the fighter's voice he'd heard earlier, "Turn him loose or I'll leave you for the dogs."

There was a pause before the man they followed into the dark alley burst out laughing.

"I've been beaten, whipped, burned and stuck," the laughing man sputtered, "I've been threatened with steel, stone, wood and fire, but this is my first time to be threatened with a spoon." He shoved Brio away. "I surrender, boy. I don't think I could bring myself to kill such a brave idiot."

He stuck his knife back in his belt and strode away, snatching his cape from the nail on the wall which they'd mistaken for him.

"Wait!" Brother Brio finally found his voice, "Please, we would speak with you!"

The man's voice echoed up the alleyway as he walked away.

"You've entertained me enough for the evening. My thanks for

the laughter and good night to you both. What else could you possibly have to say to me?"

Brother Brio called out, "We would speak to you of God."

The man continued walking, waving his hands as if waving off a beggar or street merchant.

"Of love!" Brio yelled.

The man laughed again.

"Of fortune?" Brio tried.

The man slowed down briefly but then continued on again.

"Of purpose!" Fergus blurted out desperately.

The man stopped.

Fergus continued, "We would speak to you of giving your life purpose."

Henno turned slowly and considered the two robed Christians carefully before replying.

"A man such as myself has his own gods, can buy love and can find fortune, but purpose? If you can speak to me of that, I would listen."

Chapter 2: The Drunken Cow

Henno stared down at the half-eaten bowl of stew and wondered if there was enough left to drown himself in. The monk droned on. Henno considered nodding again, but long since suspected his shows of attention were a waste of time. Why is it the more learned a man considered himself, the longer he took to say anything?

Henno glanced at the boy. He looked just as bored but was better at hiding it. The boy caught his eye and gave a nervous grin.

They sat together at another ale house. This one called The Drunken Cow. Named for the owner's wife or so he claimed during the frequent loud shouting matches between the two. The most recent shouting match had escalated into a throwing match. The sound of another clay pot shattering startled Brother Brio.

"Heavenly Father!" he exclaimed. "Now where was I?"

"You lost me around the time I lost track of the meat in this bowl, friend." Henno yawned ferociously. "Did you have something you wanted to ask me?"

"Why, yes, of course." Brother Brio stammered, "What do you think I've been talking about all this time?"

"Damned if I know." Henno replied. He grunted at Fergus as he pushed the stew away. "What about you, lad? Can you translate? Just skip to the punchline."

Fergus tried not to laugh at the easy way Henno had of flustering Brother Brio.

"We want to hire you." He answered in a quiet voice.

Henno slapped the table. "Bodyguard work? Well, why didn't you just say so, you honking old goose?"

Brother Brio tried to explain, "Well, not exactly. Perhaps it could be construed in such a manner as..."

Henno ignored him, "I get 10, usually 20 sesterces per day, but since you two are good religious types and dedicated to a life of giving, let's say 25 sesterces per day. Plus expenses."

Brother Brio, who it is rumored has the very first coin he ever earned still tucked away in his purse, frowned and began haggling. "Ridiculous. That sum is outrageous. You can't possibly..."

Fergus interjected, "Perhaps you would be so kind as to list your qualifications. Tell us why your services are so valuable."

Henno fixed them both with a cold stare. Even Brother Brio's feigned indignance slipped slightly at the darkness in his eyes.

"I'm Tiberius Scorpanicus Henno. I was First Centurion of the First Cohort of the 10th Legion of Rome. I was awarded a Gold Torque by General Stilicho himself. His own hand placed it over my head. You know why? I challenged the barbarian chieftain Gorteramax to one-on-one combat. Just me and him.

Eight feet tall he was, flaming red hair, hands as big as hams and as hard as stone. He carried an ax with a blade on it bigger than a wagon wheel. Took two men to carry it to him. Either of you ever hear of the Battle of Londinium?"

Brio and Fergus shook their heads dumbly; entranced in Henno's story.

Henno took a swig of his beer, wiping his mouth on the back of his hand. "Of course you haven't. There was no battle, because I killed the big bastard and we won the day without a single drop of Roman blood being shed. Other than my own, of course." He pulled up his sleeve and displayed a jagged scar across his upper arm.

"Got that when his beard whipped me during the fight."

"How did you beat such a monster?" Fergus whispered.

"By being a bigger monster, lad." Henno whispered back.

Brother Brio's snort broke the spell the tale had woven.

"Well, that's all well and good. We all love a good tale of adventure and heroics, don't we?" Brother Brio said derisively. "However, we're looking for someone who can perform certain military duties..."

Faster than they'd ever seen anyone or anything move, Henno slammed the knife he'd recently acquired into the wooden table. The knife was buried up to the hilt in the hard oak, the handle jutting out between Brother Brio's spread fingers. Henno took another swig of beer, "You wouldn't be doubting me, would you, friend?"

Brother Brio tried to swallow but couldn't. "25 sesterces per day is most reasonable," he managed to croak.

Fergus added, "We'll be traveling north, near Folcutt. It's a 3 days ride from here. You have a horse?"

Henno pulled the knife from the table as easily as if it'd been stuck in butter.

"No," he answered, "That's a plus expense."

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Later that night, Fergus lay awake listening as two roaring bears competed to shake apart the Drunken Cow's upper floor where they'd rented a room. At least that's what it sounded like. Fergus had thought Brother Brio had the loudest snore he'd ever heard until Henno agreed to join them and took the second bed leaving Fergus to a straw-filled mattress on the floor.

Not that he minded, he'd slept in worse places. Like the hold of a slave ship or the rock-covered ground where he watched over his master's flock of sheep.

He'd slept in better places too, although he tried not to think about them. His bed at the monastery in his spartan room near the bell tower was one. Unwillingly, he remembered the best place of all: his head in his mother's lap as she stroked his hair and sang to him. That was the best place to sleep, but it was lost to him forever.

As the two roaring bears breathing became synchronized; one breathing in as the other roared out, it became almost

restful. Like the sound of the ocean. Fergus drifted into that parchment-thin place between wakefulness and sleep.

He felt lost as he wandered through a place that was so familiar. Where was this? Then he remembered or he discovered, he was home. He floated through the rolling green hills surrounding his family's farm. Feeling the cold mist at dawn which signaled another rain, he raised his face to the gentle drops. He shivered as the water soaked his thin tunic and trickled down his back. He realized he was smiling, even though he knew it was all just a dream.

"Fergus!" It was his father's voice calling him. He could see his father; tall, strong and stern calling him from the hill near their home. Fergus waved but his father was now running toward him shouting. He strained to hear his father's voice but it was lost in a loud torrent of rain. The sky was dark, flashes of lightning blinded him as he tried to see his father again.

He heard his mother calling him, her voice cracked with fear. In another flash, he saw her standing in the door of their small hut. Red hair blowing wildly she screamed and pointed. Fergus turned and fell into the ocean.

He was back on the cramped slave ship which had brought him to Ireland. Or rather, he was back to the time he'd been swept overboard. He opened his mouth to scream, but a wave crashed into him, filling his mouth. He couldn't breathe! He began to sink.

Suddenly he realized he was awake, but he still couldn't breathe. He struggled against an iron hand with skin like an old boot clamped firmly over his mouth and nose.

He remembered where he was when he heard Henno's harsh whisper, "Not a sound, lad, if you want to live." Fergus couldn't decide if he preferred to be back in his drowning dream. He nodded, desperate to breathe.

Henno removed his hand allowing Fergus to draw in a cautious but precious gulp of air. Before he'd finished drawing another breath, Henno hauled him up by the back of his robe.

"Snore." Henno rasped, then tossed him in the bed, still warm from Henno's body.

Fergus' confused look prompted him to point at Brother Brio's still-sleeping lump in the other bed, his solo snoring still resounding loudly in the small room. It was then Fergus realized Henno had a vicious short-sword in his hand. A gladius, the preferred weapon of Roman soldiers.

Henno gave Fergus a brain-clearing smack in the side of his head.

"Snore, damn you!" He hissed, "As loud as you can!" He tossed the blanket over Fergus and melted into the shadows near the curtain-covered doorway.

Fergus began snorting and snoring as loud as he could, trying to imitate the rattling growl of Henno's. His breath caught in his throat briefly when he heard the small creak of the floorboards as someone stealthily entered the room. Terrified,

he wanted to jump up and scream for help, but he continued his feigned snoring. Then he heard the floorboard squeak again and realized there were two intruders. It took every ounce of resolve to quell his fear and keep up the facade. Where was Henno? Had he deserted them? He felt a tentative tug at the blanket from the foot of the bed. Fergus held on to the blanket as though still asleep.

It was yanked out of his grasp. Fergus sat up and faced his attacker. The two men were dressed in rags, crouched low like animals about to pounce. They both had the same look of utter surprise and confusion frozen on their dirty faces. Fergus saw the reason for their frozen expressions; both had sharp points of steel sticking from their chests. The points slid back out and the two men slumped to the ground like puppets with severed strings.

Brother Brio's sleep was finally interrupted at the sound of their bodies thudding on the floor.

"Hello? Is all that noise necessary?" He groaned sleepily, "We've a long way to go in the morning."

Henno stepped from the shadows into the moonlight, his gladius in one hand and his knife in the other. Both were covered in blood. Fergus noticed the blood looked black in the moonlight. He gave Brother Brio a not too gentle shove with his foot.

"Wake up, you old goose." He wiped both blades on the blanket still in one of the dead man's hands. "We've a long way to go right damn now."

Chapter 3: The Road to the Abbey

Brother Brio continued to find fault with each and every aspect of the last hour.

"We should not have taken that horse." He nodded at the fine mare Henno rode. It was magnificent animal; an all-white, strong, young mare that looked like she could outrace the wind.

The three were making their way quickly down the road away from the village. The sun was just starting to light the sky in the distance. The clouds, like rose petals, were just becoming visible over the distant hills in front of them.

"A red sky", Henno replied, ignoring Brio's latest complaint.

"Not a day for an ocean voyage, but a fine one for riding." He reached down to give his mount a pat on the neck. The mare responded with a happy snort. "Especially on such a fine horse as this."

"It's not right." Brother Brio continued grumpily, "It's not our way as God-fearing Christians."

"You can fear who you like, Christian, but this horse was bought and paid for. And you got a fine price for such a magnificent beast." Henno smiled. "My thanks to you!"

"We left a tenth of what that horse is worth and you know it."

Brio grumbled. "We don't even know if the owner wanted to sell it. We never even gave him the chance to haggle over price. We as good as stole it."

Henno turned and gave Brother Brio a discussion-ending glare. "Listen here, Brother. I'm not in the habit of wasting time haggling over the price of horseflesh when there's men after my head. Those two could've been friends of the Gaul I put down, murdering thieves looking for easy prey or maybe they just don't like monks. Whatever it was, there's no sense in waiting around anymore." He turned forward and urged his mount to a faster pace.

Brio and Fergus did the same, the three cantered forward for a bit before Henno called over his shoulder, "Reckon yourself the better haggler if it makes you feel any better."

"It does a bit." Brother Brio mumbled under his breath, but loud enough for Fergus to hear. He smiled and Brother Brio couldn't help but smile back. The boy showed real bravery, Brother Brio thought, more than I think I could've. It's something to keep in mind. This boy has a toughness about him despite his youth and easy-going nature.

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Henno set a hard pace all day. Brio told him where their monastery was and Henno said he knew the general area. He led them off the road a few times, traveling over the rolling countryside before rejoining the road as it curved back to them. Henno seemed to know short-cuts and side-paths which neither Brother Brio nor Fergus could've found without a map. If then.

They finally made camp a few hours after dark. Henno found a clearing hidden from the road by a thick grove, but he only allowed them a small fire and that only after he crouched by the road for a long time listening for any other travelers. When he decided it was safe, he built a fire quickly, surrounding it with rocks. Brother Brio and Fergus heated water for a simple stew while Henno saw to the horses. He'd decided to name his mare "Volucer". When Fergus asked why, he replied simply, "She told me she was a flyer."

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Henno stared into the fire. "You did good back there, lad." He told Fergus.

Fergus shook his head. "All I did was lie there and snore, just as you told me."

Henno snorted. "I know plenty of dead soldiers who died for not following orders. You've got steel in you which is better than having steel stuck in you." He stared hard at Fergus before turning to Brother Brio. "Now then, we've got some time. Suppose you tell me what you really want me to do for you?"

Brother Brio made a horrible show of not understanding.

"As I said, for...protection. The world is full of bandits, like the ones you...who were trying to..." He stirred the pot of bubbling stew with a wooden spoon. "Fergus, is there any salt in my bag?"

"Isn't lying some kind of crime in your religion?" Henno said.

"Lying is a sin, yes." Brio replied testily, "But I have not uttered a single lie."

"You're just not uttering all the truth and I'm getting mighty tired of it." Henno snapped. He tossed a small pebble into the pot.

"There's no cause for ruining our dinner!" Brother Brio tried to fish out the small rock with the spoon.

"Leave it," Henno snorted, "It's good for the liver. Adds muscle to the arms and flavor to the meal."

"I've never heard that," Brio replied, still fishing for the stone.

"You calling me a liar?" Henno asked, his hand casually resting on the pommel of his gladius.

"Is that how you win every argument? By threatening violence?" Brio was never one to forgive anyone who interfered with his cooking.

"Are we arguing?" Henno smiled, removing his hand from his sword.

Brio had found the small stone, but sighed as he dropped it back into the stew.

"You're right," He admitted, "I have been trying to avoid telling you the full offer my order would like to extend to you, but it's only because Brother Canus asked that he be the one to discuss all the details with you. Frankly, I'm not aware of all the facts myself. I can tell you that you will be

doing us and all that you know a great service if we are successful."

"And if we're not successful?" Henno asked.

Brother Brio continued to stir as Fergus handed him a small pouch of salt. The fire hissed and popped as the stew boiled.

"Darkness." Brio stared into the fire. "The world will be wrapped in a darkness which will last beyond our brief lifetimes."

"Well then" Henno grinned, "Best serve up that stew. Sounds like we're going to need our strength." He gave Fergus a wink as he tossed another small stone into the pot. They couldn't help but laugh as Brio gave a tight-lipped smile.

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Henno woke them before dawn and after feeding the horses, eating a cold breakfast and covering up any trace of their camp, they were on their way again just as the sun was rising. Henno seemed less worried about being followed now. He kept them on the road and at an easier pace. He was always alert, watching behind them and on occasion riding ahead, but the mood was much lighter. He even allowed them a mid-day break, much to Brother Brio's delight.

As strangers who travel together will do, they began to talk about themselves. Fergus found it easy to talk to Henno. A soldier is used to spending long hours with no entertainment but tall tales and bawdy songs. Henno was about halfway through the first verse of a particular favorite marching song

of his called, "The Loudest Whore in Capua" when Brother Brio suggested very insistently that Fergus tell Henno how he came to Ireland.

Fergus began telling Henno about his home in Britain. On the western coast, he and his mother and father had a small patch of land where his father tended sheep and farmed a few acres. When Fergus was old enough, tending the sheep became his job while his father hunted and fished. It was a life of hard work, but they were happy. At the beginning of each harvest season, they would travel to the small village a day's walk away. Fergus always loved playing with other children his age and watch his mother and father dance during the harvest celebration.

He was 12 when the pirates came.

It was late in the day. Fergus was herding the sheep back into their pen when he heard his father shouting from far, far away. His voice drifted over the wind and while he couldn't make out the words, Fergus knew something was wrong.

Then he saw the smoke.

A small band of raiders from Ireland had landed on the beach and made their way inland. Their hut was the first thing they found and the first thing they raided. By the time Fergus ran home, the thatched hut was engulfed in flames.

Lit by the fire, he saw his father surrounded by armed men and fighting for his life. One of the pirates, who Fergus later found out was the band's captain, was in the center of the

circle of jeering pirates with his father. The pirate was laughing and dodging as Fergus' father angrily, but ineffectively tried to stab him with a spear. Fergus' heart soared as he saw his father spin and swipe the pirate's leg, drawing blood from his opponent and cheers from the brutal audience.

The pirate captain evidently decided this signaled the end to the joke. Fergus' childhood ended as he watched his father fall. He called out with both rage and sorrow. The pirates turned and stared at him.

Fergus remembers picking up a rock and running at them. He was blind with the killing fever. As he ran, he saw the pirate captain push his way forward through his men. Fergus wanted to wipe the evil grin from his face. He howled as he ran, but as he got close enough, one of the pirates threw a club at him. He fell, tumbling and rolling until he was at the feet of the monster who killed his father. As the darkness closed in, he heard his mother shrieking then all was cold and dark. It stayed that way for a long time.

When he woke, he found himself shackled to other prisoners. They were jammed into the hold of the pirate's ship and well out to sea. An older man, who Fergus recognized from the village, told him they were to be sold as slaves in Ireland. Fergus asked desperately if anyone had seen his mother, but the man just closed his eyes and said no more.

Fergus decided his mother must have been killed. At least he hoped she'd been after he'd seen what the pirates did to the women prisoners. He never imagined anything so cruel could be done by one human to another. Their unanswered cries for help haunt him to this day.

One night, one of the pirates came for him. A drunken, leering old lecher who'd been staring at Fergus since day he'd been brought aboard. He staggered into the prisoner's hold.

Everyone backed away, not even looking at the slobbering wretch as he stared at Fergus with hungry eyes.

Unchaining the boy, he dragged Fergus by the ankle to a dark corner. As he drunkenly fumbled with his belt, Fergus froze with fear. Then, something snapped inside him. The death of his parents, days of sleepless terror, the lack of food; it all welled up inside him like a wildfire. His foot shot out and snapped the knee of the pirate, he felt the brittle joint crack and the man went down. Fergus was on him in a flash, slamming his head onto the wooden deck over and over. Several other crewmen rushed to see what the screaming was about. The last thing Fergus remembered was the warm feeling he got when his thumbs gouged out the man's eyes.

When he woke some time later, he was a mass of bruises and pain. His face was so swollen from the beating he'd gotten, he could barely see. The other prisoners stayed away from him, as if they'd be implicated just by being near him. Fergus expected to be killed.

But they never came for him.

The pirates just left him alone. Or at least, they didn't mistreat him as they did the other prisoners. After a few days, he was dragged up on deck. He stood blinking in the sun until he was given a small block of stone and a bucket of sand and told to scrap the deck. So, he did from sunup to sundown. When they reached to coast of Ireland, he was sold to a sheep farmer. Eventually, he was bought by Brother Brio and set free.

"You're a free man then, lad?" Henno asked.

"Aye." Fergus replied.

"No man is a slave," Brio added. "We are all brothers in Christ. Fergus has asked forgiveness of our Lord, Jesus Christ and when he is deemed worthy, he will be accepted into the ranks of our order."

Henno gave them both a confused look. "Asked forgiveness? Was that the bugger's name then?"

"Who?" Brio asked.

"This Jeebuzz Krits character. Is he the one who tried to unman you, lad? And why ever would you ask him to forgive you? Got what's coming to him if you ask me."

"No, I don't know the pirate's name, but Jesus is the son of God. He's..." Fergus began but Henno just waved his hand dismissively.

"Enough. I'm not interested in hearing about your cult. I've me own beliefs, they serve me well. I'm just glad the bastard

is crawling in The After with no eyes and a busted knee. When I get there, I'll be sure and give him another hiding and tell him it's from you." Henno yawned.

"I was but a lad not much older than friend Fergus here when I heard the calling of our Lord," Brio began. "I remember it was a warm, sunny day..."

Henno interrupted him by kicking a log into the fire, "Well, that's a fine story as well, I'm sure. It's late, I've eaten my fill and we've a long ride tomorrow. Bank the fire, one of you. Keep the noise down. I'm for sleeping." With that he rolled over leaving Brother Brio's story unfinished.

"Well," he muttered, "It is a fine story. Some other time then. Bank the embers, Fergus."

He too rolled over and Fergus wasn't sure if he was muttering in prayer or cursing Henno's bullying.

Fergus pushed dirt over the fire until it was smothered, the burning embers waiting to be uncovered again at dawn.

#

On the road the next day, Fergus felt uneasy. At first, he thought it was due to remembering things he wished he could forget. He hadn't slept well. As they rode, everything seemed too loud, too sharp or too rough. Even Brother Brio's usual cheerful banter seemed to irritate him.

He noticed Brio seemed to be waiting for a reply.

"I'm sorry, Brother Brio. I was lost in thought. What was you asked?"

Brother Brio tossed him some hard bread.

"I asked if you were feeling unwell. Maybe a bit to eat will help."

Fergus gnawed on a chunk of the bread and stuffed the rest in his saddlebag. Henno was riding a bit ahead of them.

"I didn't sleep well," Fergus answered scanning the trees around them, "but I've just been feeling..." He stopped when he saw Henno's raised fist. He and his horse stood stone still as if feeling the air around them.

#

Volucer gave an irritated snort and shook her head. Henno reined her in and raised his fist to halt the others.

"Quiet now, lass. I smell them, too." Henno whispered. Volucer seemed to understand and she raised her muzzle and sniffed the air, not unlike the way Henno twisted his head around trying to catch the scent again.

Henno scanned the ground at their feet. "Damn me for a fool." He twisted in his saddle and waved his companions off the road. Fergus understood immediately, Brother Brio a beat behind him as they urged their mounts into the trees.

Henno led Fergus and Brio deep enough into the forest as not to be seen from the road. He dismounted and giving his reins to Fergus, he dropped his belt, weapons and shoes then flipped up the hood of his dark green cloak.

"Not a sound," he whispered as he smeared mud on his face.

"Stay low, keep the nags quiet by giving them some feed. I'll

be right back." With that, he melted into the trees. Despite the sun streaming through the leaves, Fergus soon lost sight of him as he moved without a sound back the way they'd come. Brio started to speak, but Fergus shook his head and pointed to the saddle bags. They quietly pulled some grain out and feed their horses. Volucer wouldn't eat and stared in the direction Henno had gone. Fergus knew they didn't have to worry about her, she wouldn't make a sound. It was as if she'd been given a direct order by Henno and knew to obey. Fergus decided that would always be the best course for all of them.

#

Henno moved slowly, testing each step before putting his foot down to avoid any dry sticks or loose rocks. Not that there was much dry in this rain-soaked country. I miss home, he thought. Dry wind, warm sun and cool nights with agreeable women. Rome wasn't what it was, but it was a giant step better than this rocky island. Ireland. Just what had he been thinking when he came here? They don't even have proper roads. Then again, was Rome any more his home now than here? He nearly slipped on a moss covered stone and cursed himself. Be here now, he admonished himself. Enough dreaming about where you'd rather be. Be here now.

As he approached the road, he heard the clink of metal on metal and the easy talk of men who have nothing to fear. He dropped to his belly and crawled forward. He peered over a

fallen log and held himself completely still; as still as the log itself.

Almost immediately he saw a contubernia of soldiers. No, it was at least two; 16 men going in the opposite direction him and his companions had come. They'd nearly met on the road. He was too far away to make out any faces, but he recognized the design on the shields. They were men of his old legion. Why would men of the 10th be on this road? Why would men of the 10th be in Ireland?

He waited until they passed around the far bend and slipped away.

#

They moved quickly and they moved quietly. Henno didn't explain much. Only that when he's sees something someplace it shouldn't be, it's not good.

After a few hours of moving fast enough to keep them all winded, Henno allowed them a rest by a stream to cool the horses and fill their water skins.

"Why did you discard your weapons before you went back to the road?" Fergus asked as Henno scrubbed his face.

Henno laughed. "What's harder to catch: a hare or a bear?"

Fergus considered, "A hare. Catching a bear isn't the problem. A bear will always turn and fight."

"Exactly," Henno smiled, "And why is that?"

"Because a bear has little to fear. They're huge and deadly and eat what they want. The rabbit can only..." Fergus began to understand. "I see."

Brother Brio belched loudly as he took advantage of the break and munched on some cheese, "I don't understand. How is a bear and hare relevant?"

Henno nodded to Fergus and he explained, "The bear's weapons are its strength, its claws and teeth. The hare's only weapon is fear. The fear makes him watchful and fast. So when you want to move unseen, it's best to emulate the hare. Be weaponless, be fearful and you are more inclined to be unseen and less likely to be caught." He looked at Henno, "Correct?" Henno slapped him on the back. "Well said!" Fergus tried not to stumble at the good-natured blow, "If it was up to me, I'd send out every scout without a stitch of clothes and a rose up their arse! Nobody would ever want to be seen like that, right?" He laughed at his own joke.

Fergus and Brother Brio laughed politely but exchanged a confused shrug.

Still, Fergus thought, there's so much to learn in the world.

He wondered if he'd have made a good soldier.

#

Henno kept them off the road for the remainder of the journey. He kept them going well past sunset too, much to Brother Brio's very vocal discomfort.

"We will certainly be lost in the dark," He lamented. "We've seen no sign nor heard anyone since this morning. Surely we can stop for a bit."

Henno ignored him.

"We're not lost, Brother," Fergus said, trying to quell Brio's complaining.

Henno turned, "And just how would you know that, lad?"

Fergus pointed to the left. "You've been following the road to the west. I can see the breaks in the trees from here."

"Good!" Henno was impressed. "You're a smart one."

Fergus beamed at the praise, but noticed Brother Brio scowling at him.

"Pride is a sin, Fergus." He grumbled. "Our Lord praises the meek and the humble."

"Yes, Brother." Fergus replied. Still, he couldn't help but feel a bit of pride.

Henno stopped them as they approached the foot of a hill. They could see the road curving away to the west.

"We're near the valley," He said to Brother Brio. "Where's this monastery of yours?"

Brother Brio scanned the area. "It's too dark," he answered.

"I can't make out the landmarks. We should camp for the night."

"That hill is Mudders Peak, Brother." Fergus pointed to a dark rise in the distance. "So that must be the cut between the hills that leads to..."

"Yes, yes," Brother Brio sighed. "My eyes are not what they were, but I see now. Yes, head to that cut there to the east. We'll follow it through the valley straight home."

"It's only another couple of hours now." Fergus told Henno. Brio sighed again, "Only a couple of hours, he says. I feel Henno laughed and set off at a brisk pace.

#

Once they entered the valley, there was little confusion as to the direction they would take. The peaks grew tall and the valley became narrower. They were soon following a path barely wide enough for three horses.

Henno eyed the surrounding landscape with a soldier's eye. One way in that's easy to guard, high natural defenses on both sides. Excellent place for a fort he thought. Ahead of them, the peaks joined in the darkness. Henno couldn't see much, perhaps the path curves he thought.

He'd ridden a few paces forward when he noticed Fergus and Brother Brio had stopped. They were both smiling at Henno as if he'd just stepped in crap.

"What are you two grinning at?"

Brother Brio snickered in an irritating way. "Here we are." He seemed much too pleased with himself. Henno wanted to wipe the smirks off their faces.

"Here where?" Henno was not the best sport when it came to being pranked.

Fergus whistled loudly.

From a disturbingly close distance, his whistle was answered by a bell. Henno grabbed his sword and without thinking had it halfway out of its scabbard. Volucer whinnied and stomped the ground angrily.

Ahead of them, less than a hundred yards away, the darkness split and the path was washed with the light of torches. A vast wooden gate was being pushed open by several robed monks. Henno could see the outline of the wall now that the gate was opening. The wall stood at least 40 feet high. It was a brilliant job of concealment. It looked solid in the darkness, a part of the towering cliffs beyond, but now that the gate was open, Henno could see a court-yard.

As they rode forward, Henno couldn't decide whether to return his gladius to its sheath or pull it all the way out. Logic told him this was no trap, but facing the unknown always set his animal instincts afire. It wouldn't be the first time or the last those instincts saved his life.

He pulled his sword free and kept it under his cloak.

Brother Brio rode forward with Fergus at his side. Henno fell in with them as they approached the waiting monks.

Fergus nodded at Henno's concealed sword. "Don't worry. We're all hares here."

"Speak for yourself," Henno muttered. He sheathed his sword, but kept his hand resting on the hilt.

Chapter 4 - The Abbey of Folcutt

"Brother Brio! Novice Fergus! Welcome home!" Brother Mita called out cheerily. "We never expected you at such an hour." Brother Brio slid off his mount and painfully hobbled to Mita. He embraced his fellow monk warmly.

"Brother Mita! We never expected to be expected at such an hour." Brio groaned dramatically. He glanced at Henno who was looking around the large court-yard.

Expected to be expected? Henno thought. Are all these Christians such odd talkers? He studied the men who chattered away like children.

Brother Mita was of the same age as Brio, but much skinnier. He was very bird-like with a nervous energy. He was always in motion, his hands gesturing wildly even during the most mundane of conversations. He was joined by several other monks, all dressed in the same dark, brown robes. They greeted Brother Brio and Fergus warmly and nodded politely at Henno. Inside the gate, Henno saw the wooden walls stretched from one side of the narrow valley to the other. Beyond the court-yard he saw a stable, pens for various livestock and a vegetable garden. Directly across from the wooden gate was a large doorway carved right into the rock face. Up the high peak, also carved into the stone were narrow windows, each shuttered, but some were open now as monks looked down to see what the commotion was about. Some of the windows were at

least 8 floors above them. Henno was astonished, but took care not to show it.

Henno saw Brio and the other monks watching him. "Impressive, is it not, my friend?"

Henno snorted and dropped from Volucer's back nimbly. "I suppose none of you lot has ever been to Rome. I've seen towers there that make this look like a public crap house."

Brother Mita and several of the monks reacted with almost enough blustering to suit Henno. He stretched his back, farted loudly and added, "Speaking of which, point me in the direction and somebody take care of my horse."

Fergus tried and failed to hide his laughter at the monk's shocked reaction. He pointed and took Volucer's reins.

"Good lad." Henno gave him a wink as he headed in the direction Fergus indicated.

#

Fergus was in the stables just off the court-yard seeing to the horses. He was giving Volucer an apple as Henno joined him.

"He likes you." Henno smiled.

"He's a magnificent animal, Henno." Fergus loved horses and was always happy to work in the stables.

"Much better than a broken down old soldier like me deserves, that's for sure." Henno munched on an apple from the barrel by the door. "But I'll keep him around until he gets bored with me."

"I doubt..." Fergus began but was interrupted by Henno's sniffing the air.

"Hey now! I smell fresh bread!" Henno exclaimed. "You monks bake bread here?"

"We do. The best you've ever had." Fergus put away his currying tools. "I'm sure Brother Brio's first priority was to get the kitchen open again. There'll be bread, meat, all kinds of pies. Have you ever had...?"

"Don't tell me about it, lad!" Henno shoved the rest of the apple in his mouth, grabbed the boy's arm and pulled him out of the stables. "Show me! Come on!" He demanded, spraying apple spittle all over Fergus.

#

Henno pushed away his third helping with a loud belch. "One thing I'll say for you Christians, you sure know how to fill a man's belly."

Brother Brio pushed his fourth helping away with a more subdued belch. "You honor us, Henno." He stood and motioned Fergus to hand him a lamp. "Now I'll show you to your quarters and in the morning you can meet Brother Canus."

"And he'll explain this big mystery." Henno yawned. "Fine by me. Lead on." He rose and followed Brother Brio and Fergus.

#

They led Henno to a small chamber. It had space for a small cot and a wash basin, but not much else. Henno pointed at a small statue on a shelf cut into the wall.

"By the gods, what is that?" It depicted a man being crucified. "Is this some kind of warning? You trying to insult me?" Fergus and Brio took a step back from his angry glare. Fergus was the first to recover. "No, Henno. It's a symbol of our faith. Our Lord Jesus Christ was crucified for our sins and we..."

Henno shook his head dismissively, "More religious malarkey. Get it out of here." He picked up the statue and tossed it to Fergus.

Fergus was horrified, even angry, "Henno! You can't treat... you can't...don't ever do that!"

Henno ignored Fergus' outburst and was dropping his saddlebag, weapons and cloak on the floor. Brother Brio put his hand on Fergus' shoulder.

"It's fine, Fergus." He said calmly, "He means no harm."

"The damned thing would give me nightmares." Henno yawned again as he stretched out on the cot. "Imagine trying to sleep with a man dying on a cross next to you. Ridiculous." He muttered drifting to sleep already.

Brother Brio guided Fergus out of the room. Fergus shook off his arm stubbornly and replaced the crucifix in its place. Giving the sleeping Henno a glare of his own, he stormed by a grinning Brio.

By the time they reached the end of the hallway, they could hear Henno's thunderous snoring.

#

Fergus knelt in prayer next to his cot.

He whispered so quietly even God would strain to hear. "Lord, forgive my sins. Accept me into your grace. If I am to be selected for this task, give me your strength. Guide me. Help me to not be afraid. Help me to understand. I want to believe Brother Canus guides us on the path you have set for us. I want to have faith. I do have faith. In my brothers. In the order. In you. Please, forgive my doubts."

He continued to kneel in silent reflection for a while. He let the pain in his knees and his back wash over him, using it to help him focus on the simple act of listening.

He waited until he could hear the soft breeze from the window, the sputtering from the lamp and, he could swear, the faint rumbling of snoring.

"Amen." He sighed and got into bed. He slept better than he had in weeks.

#

Henno woke instantly, taking comfort in the hilt of his sword in his hand. He listened carefully while not giving any sign he was awake. The pre-dawn light filled the small room through the open window. He'd heard something, was it a dream? He could've sworn he heard a woman singing.

He realized he was being watched and rolled from his bed hitting the floor in a crouch, his sword ready.

And felt like a complete idiot.

Standing in the doorway, was Fergus and a crowd of other young boys of various ages all staring at him like he was a trained ape.

Henno waved his sword menacingly. "Well? If one of you doesn't tell me breakfast is ready, you're all in for a good bashing." All the youngsters babbled frantically that breakfast was indeed ready and scattered. As he tossed his sword on the bed, Henno noticed Fergus was giving him a sour look. "We've got our chores to do. The brothers will join you after morning prayer." He mumbled sullenly as he lit a candle by the doorway.

"Who were those...?" Henno began, but Fergus walked away after the others without a word.

Henno scrubbed his face in the stone basin. "Boys," he muttered. "If they're not giggling like morons, they're pouting like babies."

He tried to remember the sound of the woman's voice but it was elusive as smoke. Must've been a dream, he thought, although it reminded him of how long it'd been since he'd been with...best not to dwell on that now. He shoved his face in the cold water and got dressed.

#

Henno wandered back down the stone steps toward the kitchen but found nobody in the large eating area. The long wooden tables where he and Brother Brio had their supper were empty

and he neither saw nor heard nor smelled any sign of breakfast preparations.

"This is fine," he grumbled. "Where is everyone? Lazy bastards probably still sleeping, I bet."

He heard a choir of men's voices and followed the sound.

#

The stone corridors made it difficult to follow the sound of the singing and chanting as it echoed eerily seemingly from every direction at once. Henno wandered a bit and eventually found a large chamber. Rows of benches on either side flanked the impossibly high-ceilinged room with a huge round window cut into the far wall. The window was filled with bits of colored glass, the light streamed through in a mosaic of beauty which Henno noticed but wasn't delayed by. Several dozen monks filled the benches on either side, their heads bowed as they chanted quietly in a slow rhythm. Henno thought it sounded like a marching song done much too slowly to be of any use on a march in a language he didn't understand.

At the far end of the room, Brother Mita was standing in front of a large version of the crucified man statue Henno found in his room the night before.

Henno waited impatiently for someone to notice him or for the song to end. Finally his grumbling stomach prompted him to act.

"Good morning, all!" He called out cheerily, his booming voice echoing in the huge chamber.

The monks all started as if someone had beaten them unexpectedly.

"Nervous types." Henno muttered before continuing loudly, "Nobody's in the kitchen, so I'll just make due on my own then, right?"

The monks were shushing him and some rose angrily pointing at him and chattering.

"Alright then. Calm yourselves." Henno scratched his ass absentmindedly as he left. "No need for all that. I'm sure there's plenty and it's not like I've never made my own breakfast before."

At the alter, Brother Mita called for order and the monks began to chant their prayers again.

Henno appeared back in the entrance. "Lovely voices, all of you. If any of you know the words to 'Rise Up And Fight' it's a grand way to start the day. Nobody? I'll teach it to you after I've eaten. Continue." He disappeared again, whistling as he made his way back to the kitchens.

Several of the monks gave Brother Brio venomous stares as he tried to ignore them and prayed for patience. For all of them.

#

Fergus found Henno wolfing down a serving bowl of porridge, a half loaf of bread and a jug of water next to him.

"Oi, look at the mug on you." Henno grunted. "You always this sour first thing? Have a bite of breakfast then. You'll feel better." He shoved the unfinished loaf across the table at

Fergus and continued spooning porridge in the general vicinity of his mouth.

"Brother Canus and the Council..." Fergus began formally.

"Sit down, why don't you? Where's the rest of them? Thought you lot were up early calling out to your god and whatnot.

Here I've already had my breakfast and you're all just singing and lazing about."

Fergus tried to take a deep calming breath before speaking.

Henno continued, "You sick or something? I'll never understand children. Why is ...?"

"No!" Fergus exploded, pounding the table in frustration, "No, you'll never understand anything because you can't shut your mouth long enough to listen to anyone else! We've all eaten already. We've been up for hours. We serve God through our prayers, our deeds and our work!"

Fergus stepped back and gestured to the hallway, "If you're done eating, Brother Canus and the council of elders are ready to speak with you.

Henno stared with his mouth open. He swallowed the last of his breakfast. "Fine. You only had to say."

#

Fergus led Henno through a maze of hallways, up stairs and down, until Henno was thoroughly confused. There were no windows but the air was very cool and damp.

"Hey lad." Henno called out, "Are we below ground now? I'm not one for skulking around in rat holes."

Fergus whirled on him, his eyes so full of fire Henno braced himself for a fight. "Rat hole now, is it? How can you continue to be so ignorant?"

Henno had enough, "Watch your mouth, boy. You are starting to make me angry. I've put up with your ill temper as much as I intend to."

Fergus didn't reply, but he didn't back down either. He seemed to be debating whether or not to give Henno a punch in the nose and the debate was an angry shouting match inside his head.

"Take it easy, lad. I don't know what I did that's got your fur up, but I meant no offense. If I wanted to start a fight with you, I'd do it the same way I'd expect you to start a fight with me." He smiled at Fergus' questioning look. "I'd hit you when you weren't looking." He said with a wink.

Fergus relaxed a bit. He continued down the hallway.

Henno followed. "So, let's hear it then. What did I do or not do or what do you think I did that's got you barking?"

Fergus replied quietly, "You're in the house of God. A holy place. It's not a 'rat hole' or a tavern or your favorite...house of whoring."

Henno laughed, "House of whoring? No, I don't suppose it is. Pretty grim for that, lad. It'd put me right off my game and that's no easy feat, let me tell you. One time, there was this camp whore named, what was it? Durmissa? Domella? Doesn't

matter. Anyway, ground full of snow, she's bent over a rock and I'm going at her like..."

Henno stopped when he saw the look of disgust on Fergus' face.

Henno spoke in what he thought was a more reverent tone,

"Right. Sorry. Holy place and all that. Won't happen again.

Let's go see what the big boss monk wants me about. Lead on."

Fergus shook his head and continued down the hallway.

"Boys." Henno muttered.

Chapter 5 - The Council of Elders

Fergus showed him to a large wooden door at the end of the hallway. Henno could hear muffled voices from the other side. Fergus knocked and pushed the door open for Henno to enter. He saw 7 hooded monks sitting at a long table, torches flickering in holders in the wall and a large brazier of coal to one side. Still, the room had a damp chill to the air. "You're not coming in?" Henno asked, eyeing the group cautiously as they waited.

Fergus shook his head.

Henno stuck his chest out defiantly. "See to my horse, give my armor a scrub and a light coat of oil." He pushed the door open and marched forward.

Fergus closed the door and went to see to the rest of his chores. Including the two just given to him.

#

Three monks sat on either side of one with his face hidden in the darkness of his hood. Henno recognized Brother Brio who nodded politely but formally and the one called Brother Mita who twitched nervously when Henno's gaze fell on him.

It was Brother Brio who spoke first as Henno entered.

"Good morrow, Henno." Brother Brio began. "We hope you..." He stopped as Henno stomped forward to the center of the room and reported as he was trained to.

"Retired Centurion Tiberius Scorpanicus Henno, First Centurion, First Cohort of Rome's 10th Legion, Caesar's Bulls. First in, Last out. Reporting as requested." He stood rigidly at attention.

Brother Brio continued. "Yes, of course. Thank you. We know who you are. Please have a seat." He indicated a bench in the middle of the room.

"Thanks, Brio." Henno replied much more casually. The bench made a loud grinding sound as he dragged it to the table. He straddled it and sat down heavily.

A few of the monks coughed with nervousness which Henno ignored. He was trying to see the face of the monk in the middle.

Brother Brio started again, "Good morrow, Henno. We hope you..."

"Hey! What gives? Why is my kit spread out here? You lot had no right to go through my things!" Henno had just noticed his saddlebag's contents were displayed on the table. His awards, his travel papers, his military service records, his pension medal; all spread out like it was for sale in a market.

"If any of my gear has gone missing..." He stood, scooping up his possessions and stuffing them back in his bag. "I'm being lectured about respect by a boy and you're all grabbing at my gear like it was your own!"

"We're sorry, Henno. We only wanted to verify certain facts about you and your..." Brother Brio hesitated, "your background before we discussed the proposition we have for you."

Brother Mita spoke up in his high-pitched voice which Henno found irritating immediately, "We have a right to know who we've invited into our sanctuary. You are the first outsider who has been in these walls who's not taken a vow of obedience in many years."

"Well, that's as may be." Henno grumbled, his saddlebag now firmly in his lap. "I've nothing to hide and no reason to lie. Next time, ask. That's all I'm saying."

"Still, you are an outsider," Brother Mita continued. "And as such, a stranger to us."

"Stranger? Outsider?" Henno said testily. "Had a look at yourselves lately? From where I'm sitting, you lot are the strange outsiders."

Brother Brio held up a hand. "Henno, we hope you..."

Henno ignored him. "I think living in this cave castle of yours has made you all unsociable. You invite me here, then call me a stranger? Tell you what, you just pay me the 75 sesterces I was promised and I'll be on my way."

"But you've not heard why we..." Brother Brio sputtered.

"And I'm not inclined to." Henno stood, knocking the small bench over as he did. "Thanks for the grub, the bed and the horse. Pay me and I'll be on my way."

"He's right." The monk in the middle spoke from the darkness under his hood. His voice was quiet, but carried as if shouted. Henno felt a chill from inside rather than from the cool air in the room. "We have been most inhospitable." The monk stood, the rest of the monks shuffled to their feet immediately. Henno noticed he was at least a head taller than the others. "Centurion Tiberius Scorpanicus Henno, First Centurion, First Cohort of the famed 10th Legion, holder of a Golden Torque, twice awarded laurels for bravery in combat. Friend Henno, we salute you."

They bowed respectfully and took their seats again. The dark monk gestured at the fallen bench.

Almost before he knew what he was doing Henno picked up his bench and sat.

"I am Brother Canus," the monk continued. "If there can be said to be a leader of this place, I have that honor."

"Nice to meet you." Henno felt stupid as soon as he said it, but he didn't know how else to respond.

"We are living in a most unfortunate time, Henno. Or perhaps we are fortunate to be living in it as we have been given a most unique task. Some might say those of us who will live in the coming darkness are damned, that it will be a life of nothing but sacrifice and hardship. Others might say to live in such times are a trial. And who better understands the benefits of sacrifice and hardship than a soldier such as yourself?"

"Right. Hardship. Sacrifice. Makes sense to me." Henno said, not understanding a word of what Brother Canus was talking about.

Brother Mita interjected, "What Brother Canus is explaining to you is that..."

Brother Canus held up his hand and Mita stopped talking. Henno noticed the monk kept his hand covered by his sleeve. "Friend Henno has a question which is distracting him from anything else we would speak of. Isn't that so?"

Henno nodded. "Why are you hiding your face? You're not sick, are you?"

Henno could hear a smile in Brother Canus' voice, "No, but perhaps you are right in saying my life in this place has made me 'unsociable'. My apologies. I do not leave these walls easily. I am well known for a life I regret. Some find my appearance...disturbing."

Henno chuckled to hide his discomfort, "Look, fellows, I'm a soldier. I've seen things you can't imagine in your wildest dreams. I remember once, I was doing duty guarding the Emperor's own tent one night and let me tell you, what I saw would...By Mithras! What are you?" Henno leaped to his feet, shouting in surprise as Brother Canus pushed back his hood. He was completely bald, not an eyebrow, eye lash or a single whisker. His skin was so white it reminded Henno of snow in the moonlight. It even seemed to glow in the flickering torchlight. Every bit of skin was covered with tiny, blue

scratchings. Some kind of writing, but in a language Henno was glad he couldn't read. Whoever or whatever would write something like that on a man's skin wouldn't have anything good to say or anything a mortal man was meant to know.

Brother Canus' eyes, as light blue as a hot summer sky, stared at Henno while he composed himself. Henno snorted confidently as he resumed his seat. "Lose a bet, did you?"

The other monks grumbled angrily until Brother Canus laughed. "No, friend Henno, I lost my soul. I was a Druid. A high priest in the service of dark, ancient forces until I saw the light."

Several of the other monks nodded, "Amen." They intoned reverently.

Brother Canus closed his eyes and lifted his face to the sky far above them. Despite the layers of rock, he looked as though he could feel the sun on his face. "I felt the light and love and strength of the one, true god. Our Lord Jesus Christ."

"Amen" Again from the other monks.

Brother Canus opened his eyes. When he looked at Henno, he felt like Canus could read his every thought, knew his every past mistake and saw his fate.

"What do you want with me?" He whispered, not even sure if he was speaking out loud.

"The Roman Empire is failing, Friend Henno. It will fall." He held up a hand and stopped Henno's argument before it even

began. "It will fall." He repeated with the finality of a hammer pounding a nail. "Not today, not in our lifetimes, but the darkness is coming. Just as the dark slowly sweeps the land as the sun sets, so will the darkness consume all that Rome has built. It has already begun. It cannot be stopped. It can only be prepared for."

"You mean to hunker down here in your fort and wait it out?" Henno asked.

Brother Canus smiled. Henno was reminded of a wolf who'd picked out which slow moving animal to bring down. "In a way. Just as the sun sets, Henno, so does it rise again. There will be a new day. The darkness will be washed away. When it does, much will have been lost. We mean to save what we can before the darkness consumes it. We mean to save what is important. What will be needed when the light returns. Do you understand?"

"No." Henno's natural bluster was gone. He felt stripped bare and only wanted to leave this room alive with his mind intact. "Good." Brother Canus smiled again. Somehow this smile felt warm and friendly. "Your honesty does you credit." He leaned forward as if he was imparting a secret to Henno's ears alone. "We want you to teach us how to steal." And again the wolf smile chilled Henno to the bone.

#

Henno walked with Brother Brio through the upper levels of the monastery. Somehow with the bright sunlight shining through the windows, the whole thing seemed like a ridiculous dream. "Madness." Henno said aloud. "Complete madness. Training you lot to be soldiers so you can steal some bits and bobs and parchments? What makes you think I know how to be a thief anyway? The more I think about it, the more insulted I think I should be. Me? A thief?" His voice rose in volume, echoing loudly in the stone hallways. "What makes any of you think I know what makes a good thief?" He hands clenched into fists as he stopped walking and faced Brother Brio.

Brother Brio put his hands up to calm Henno's growing rage. He could see the flush of anger, the fire building. Away from Brother Canus' influence, even Brio had to admit it seemed...no, he knew it was the right thing to do. He'd prayed on it. God had spoken to them all. Brother Canus was right. "Henno, nobody is calling you a 'thief'." Brio said quietly. "You are a respected soldier. Is not soldiering little more than taking from others what they would not give willingly? Taking land, taking property, even taking lives?" He touched the cross at his neck. "God forgive us, we hope never to commit the sin of murder, but we need you to teach us how to move, to act and, if needed, to fight, in order to take those items which will not survive the collapse of the world." Henno grunted, but didn't seem fully assuaged. Brio continued.

"Think of yourself as Noah." He beamed, proudly explaining a very clever argument. "We are your ark. You will build us as Noah did to fight the coming flood."

Henno stared at the grinning monk, who was disgustingly pleased with himself for some reason. "The more you talk, the less sense you make. I'm hungry."

Brio sighed, this is the man Canus would have us stake our lives on? "I thought you wanted to see the armory."

"Right, let's go." Henno followed Brother Brio. "Show me the broken shields and rusted spears you've managed to scrounge."

Brother Brio managed to keep his smile tight. "We've done a bit better than that, Henno."

"Who's this Nonah character anyway? From one of Socrates plays, I bet. And now you say there's going to be a flood? Should we move everything to the upper floors? What's an 'ark'? Some kind of boat maybe? You want to steal a boat now? I smell fresh bread. You bake every day?"

Brother Brio sighed again and kept walking.

#

It was the third time in his life when Henno could not think of the words to describe what he was seeing.

The first time was when he was a young recruit. He'd spent months in the remote training fort where he'd mustered into the army. The training centurion Milo had weeded out the losers and kept the best prospects from the recruits. The losers he sent home. The rest he punished with exercise, drill

and regular lashing with his vine cane. After a few months, they felt stronger, tougher and ready to be the best legionnaires Rome ever knew.

They continued to think that until they caught up with the 10th and he saw a full legion battle against a massive tribe of barbarian Celts. There were still no words he could think of which described the horror before him and the lust for battle that welled up inside him.

The next time was when he was granted furlough. He made a beeline for what Fergus would call a "house of whoring."

Despite all his bragging to his tent-mates, he'd never even seen a naked woman before. He blew all his recruitment bonus and 5 months of pay on three of them. He'd never even seen one pair of tits before, now he was staring at 3 pairs! Words failed him then too. He couldn't think of a way to describe the beauty before him and lust for sex that welled up inside him.

Now, as he stood with Brother Brio staring into the monastery's armory, words just couldn't do it justice. He tried anyway. "Well, shit me out of a donkey's ass, Brother." Laid out before Henno was the most magnificent collection of weaponry and armor he'd ever seen. It was lustful brutality displayed in row after row of gleaming surfaces and razor-sharp edges. Jewel-encrusted blades fit for a king to hold high in the sunlight as he leads his armies to victory laid out next to heavy black iron axes made for hacking off heads

in the dark. Shining gold armor crafted to inspire the gods next to thick plates of steel meant to intimidate men.

Gleaming shields adorned with heroic animals next to dull, rock-like slabs carved with demonic faces.

Henno has never seen anything like it. He almost drooled at the sight. Only a soldier could fully appreciate the fortune, the history and the power of such a collection of killing tools.

"Where...?" He began as Brother Brio smiled smugly at his astonishment. "Where did you get all this...this?"

Brother Brio coughed nervously, "Ah, well. Brother Canus said I should explain when the time was right and I suppose now would be as good a time as any."

Henno nodded as he picked up a blade lying on the table. It was short, like a gladius, but despite its slightly thicker width, it felt lighter. "Go on." He inspected the blade as Brother Brio spoke hesitantly.

"This place. We didn't build it, as you may have thought. We couldn't. We've not even fully explored the lower levels. It's not that we don't want to, of course, it's just that once we...occupied it, it was decided...by the council of course, that it would be best if..."

Henno slashed the blade down on the table cleaving off the corner like it was made of bread.

"By Mithras, Brother," Henno put the blade back as carefully as if he'd been handling a serpent, "I swear, if you don't

pull your head out and come to the point, I'm going to punch you so hard that Jeebuzz god of yours will have a headache."

Brother Brio's face flushed with indignation and he managed to croak out, "Our Lord Jesus Christ does not get headaches, Friend Henno." He took a deep breath and all the anger drained out of him as he added quietly, "But he does manage to give them with great authority."

Brother Brio sat down on a stool by the broken table. He pulled out an amphora of wine and two silver cups. Henno joined him eagerly.

"About time somebody offered me a drink around here." Henno grinned. "I was beginning to think I'd die of thirst."

Brio filled both cups and began.

"This fortress was built by an ancient people who long ago lived here in Ireland. They were called the Tuatha Dé Danann. They brought many gifts to the race of man. They were said to be beautiful creatures of light. Some of our order think they may have been the Nephilim, holy angels sent to Earth in the guise of men. It's been the subject of much debate among us."

"Uh huh." Henno waved his empty cup which Brio filled again as he continued.

"One day, they left. We don't know why or where they went.

This place, this fortress, hidden away for centuries, was one of their homes. Brother Canus came here many years ago while he was a Druid priest. One night, he heard the word of the one true God, the God of Abraham and Moses. God showed him his

sins. He begged forgiveness and slew the wicked Pagans who had made this castle their home. He came to us, accepted our ways and gave us this place. We sanctified it and converted it to a place of learning and worship. A house of God."

"Great story, I can't wait to hear all the parts you're leaving out, but what about the weapons?" Henno poured for himself this time and generously topped off Brio's barely touched cup.

"Many of the weapons were already here. Gifts from Danu, a priestess of the Tuatha Dé Danann, some said. Others were taken by the Pagans. Stolen from the victims of their demonic sacrifices." Brother Brio shrugged indicating that was all he knew.

"You could've just said." Henno burped. "I don't care much for history lessons."

He rose quickly, his face flushed with the rush of excellent wine. "Good stuff." He grinned.

He grabbed a silver helmet shaped like a wolf's head and slipped it on. "Perfect fit." He muttered with surprise.

Helmets usually required a bit of modifying, but this felt like it was molded just for him. "Now, who are the unworthy bastards I am to train in the use of this fine set of arms?"

Chapter 6 -The Training Field

Fergus felt frozen and faint but mostly foolish. Henno had all the monks standing in the rain for the last two hours. They were over 50 when they started. Henno had glared as if his lunch was backing up on him as he walked down the line pulling out the youngest and the oldest.

The youngest was another novice like Fergus named Rory. He was a few years younger, full of energy and questions.

Henno had a stern look on his face as he stared down at the little boy. Rory looked back up at him with eyes wide with concern.

"Um, sir?" Rory squeaked.

"Well?" Henno asked, obviously trying not to let his stern demeanor slip too much.

Rory wiped his nose and continued in a small voice, "I have to go to the..." His voice trailed off as he squirmed.

Henno's face remained still, but there was a smile in his eyes. "Best be off then, boy."

Rory bit his lip as he looked from Henno to the monastery's entrance, contemplating his choices. "Can I still be a soldier?"

"One day, but not today. Now scoot." Henno replied seriously.

Rory managed to look both relieved and disappointed as he scooted away.

Brother Brio put up an argument, but not a very passionate one. Even if his heart had been in it, his belly would've won the day in any case. Henno just shook his head, poked him in the gut and pulled him out of the line.

They were left with 35 men. Henno had them close up the gaps the rejected had made. He marched to the center of the line, turned and faced them. The gleaming silver wolf's head helmet made him look even fiercer as he barked, "Stand at attention." They stood as he continued glaring at each of them in turn. For two hours.

A dozen of the men had fainted. If someone tried to help them, Henno shouted, "Leave him where he falls or you'll hit the ground next!" or similar angry threats. Eventually, the fallen would struggle to their feet and shuffle away.

If a man sneezed or scratched or moved a muscle, Henno was on them like a bolt of lightning. "Out!" He'd roar. "A soldier at attention is a block of stone! If you can't hold still, how do you expect to hold the line?"

Four hours later they were down to two dozen.

Fergus fumed. It was demeaning. All of the monks were ready to die for the cause of preserving civilization through the coming darkness. We have been chosen by God, he raged inside, who was this brash loudmouth to decide who is and who is not fit to serve? He let the pain in his legs and back fuel his devotion. He would not back down. He would not fail.

Finally, Henno stepped forward. "Stand at ease!" He shouted. Some of the men groaned and began sitting down with relief. Henno quickly added, "That doesn't mean laze about like a bunch of slaves on Saturnalia! It means you can relax from attention, but you still stay in line and you keep your cake holes shut!"

The rain had picked up a bit. Fergus shivered in the cold, but somehow his anger kept him warm deep inside.

Henno strutted to the end of the line and leaned into first monk's face. It was Brother Orbene. He was a large man who'd spent most of his days as a fisherman before taking the vows. His hands were huge and scarred from years of pulling nets. He looked less miserable than the rest. In fact, he was probably used to this kind of thing. Fergus seemed to remember him talking about his days serving as a volunteer in the local militia of his village.

Henno was scowling as if Orbene had insulted his mother. Why is he so angry?

Orbene smiled, "Hello friend. My name is..."

"Shut your gob!" Henno shouted, spittle flying in Orbene's face. "You speak when spoken to! You understand me, you shit pile?"

"Yes, I am sorry." Orbene answered pleasantly.

"Quiet!" Henno roared. "You think you've got what it takes to be a soldier, do you, sunshine?"

Orbene hesitated before replying, confused at the shouted contradictions. "I hope so. I want to serve God and..."

Before he could finish, Henno slapped him hard across the face. Rain droplets flew as Orbene's head was whipped to the side.

"How does that make you feel, big boy?" Henno grinned. "Come on. Show me what you've got. Give it back to me with all you can."

Orbene wiped the small trickle of blood from his mouth and smiled, "I'm sorry if I've done anything to offend you, friend. If you must strike me again, I'll understand."

Henno took a step back with a disappointed sigh. "You're out. Get out of my sight."

He stepped up to the next man, Brother Niall. "Where you from, sunshine?"

Niall was shaken by the display of violence he'd just witnessed, but managed to stammer, "Hello, my...my...name is...is Brother Niall and I'm from..." SMACK!

Henno's hand was so fast, Fergus heard it before he saw it hit Niall.

Brother Niall looked as though he might cry. He rubbed his cheek as his eyes welled up.

"Oh go on then." Henno told him. "Go inside and sit by the fire with the others."

Down the line he went. One monk pissed himself as Henno stepped up to him and ran away without waiting to be rejected officially.

Brother Mita was the first to pass Henno's violent test. Henno smiled wickedly, "Why are you still out here, little man? Wouldn't you rather be inside, having a nice crust of bread with the other little birdies?"

Mita began to reply when Henno's hand whipped him hard across the face.

Brother Mita returned to attention and stared stoically straight ahead. Henno grunted and moved on to the next man. Only a dozen seemed to give Henno the appropriate response. When Henno got to Fergus, he was ready. He planned on taking whatever Henno dished out. He clenched his jaw and waited. "Well?" Henno shouted. "You probably think you've got it all figured out, don't you? You're one for giving advice. Think you can take orders like a soldier? Huh?" Fergus decided not to respond and only stared straight ahead as if Henno wasn't there. "Come on, lad. Nothing to say now? You've killed before. I think you're looking forward to doing it again, aren't you?"

Fergus glared at Henno, daring him to strike. "Come on then," Fergus growled, "Do your worst."

Henno's right hand shot out, Fergus braced himself, but suddenly all the air left him as Henno's left fist punched him solidly in the gut. Fergus fell to the ground, the world

spinning as he hung on to consciousness with everything he had. He struggled to his feet and came to attention as much as he could with his stomach churning.

"Good lad, there's a good lad." He heard Henno say. "Prepare for the worst but know you can't prepare for the unexpected. Good lad." He gave him a pat on the shoulder.

Fergus pondered the odd advice while he tried not to throw up.

#

After a brief rest and some lunch, the dozen men who'd survived the test were back out in the court-yard. Henno had them line up in two ranks, six in each line.

And it began.

Fergus thought he knew pain and suffering, but Henno taught him the true meaning. He kept expecting it would get easier as they all got stronger. Wasn't that the point, after all? But as soon as things seemed to feel slightly less painful, Henno made it harder.

They started with rocks. Just holding rocks and walking in a long circle around the court-yard. Each man held a rock the size of his head in both hands and walked. If you dropped your rock, you got a smack with a stick from each of the other men and a few extra from Henno. Every night Fergus' body ached as he lay in his bed. He didn't feel like he slept that first week, it was more like passing out from exhaustion.

"I'm tearing down the old you to build you anew." Henno would chant things like that constantly. He never seemed to tire.

Despite the confusion and the anger they all felt toward Henno, they all had to admit one thing: he never expected them to do anything he didn't do more of.

If they carried one big rock, he carried two in full armor with a shield strapped to his back and his sword strapped to his hip.

If they were allowed a break for food and water, he stood while they sat. He drank a mouthful of water and maybe ate an apple while they drank their fill and ate as much as they could in the brief time they were given.

At the end of 10 days, something odd happened.

They were sitting on the ground, on a break from Henno's latest drill which consisted of pacing from one end of the court-yard to the other with the rocks, of course, and each of them had to stay in line with the men on either side of them. Shoulder to shoulder, rocks waist high and God help them all if one man let the rock slip below his belt line or if one of them got out of line.

Brother Orbene approached Henno. "Forgive me, friend Henno. Would it be possible for me to join the group?" He asked politely.

Henno chewed an apple thoughtfully before replying, "Why should I let you join this ragged mob of lazy rump biters? You're too soft for soldiering. In fact, I think you're too soft to even be a good monk. If it was up to me..." SMACK!

Everything seemed to stop when Brother Orbene hit Henno. The clouds froze in the sky, the birds stopped singing, Fergus could swear even the wind seemed to be holding its breath. Henno had a large red hand-print across the whole side of his face where Orbene's big paw had slapped him.

In an instant, Henno's sword was pressed to Orbene's throat.

"What do you think you're doing, you worthless good-for-nothing dolt!?! " He shouted, the point of his blade ready to drink deep.

Orbene's blinked in shock. "Isn't that how you play the game, friend Henno?" He asked innocently, his eyes twinkling with laughter.

Henno pulled his sword back and laughed. "Good! You're right, Brother. Well then. You've got some catching up to do. Pick yourself out two good sized rocks and get in line." Henno sheathed his sword and Fergus realized he hadn't been breathing. "Alright you sleeping daises, up off your arses! Wedge formation!"

Now they were thirteen.

They fell into a routine. Each day, Henno would wait for his men to finish their morning prayers in the chapel. He would often stand in the doorway toward the end, tapping his foot impatiently. It never seemed to hurry anyone, but Henno did it anyway. After a few days, he started coming earlier and sitting in the back. Then, taking a seat on one of the benches.

Before long, he joined the other monks at the beginning of Morning Prayer and once or twice when he was sure nobody was looking, Fergus thought he might see Henno's lips moving as he sang along to one of the hymns.

There might be hope for him yet, Fergus thought.

Chapter 7 - Brother Canus' Game

Henno met with Brother Canus several nights a week to report on the group's progress. He didn't like these meetings much. Brother Canus made him nervous.

Henno would keep the meetings as brief as possible. He'd make a quick report, usually along the lines of, "They're all completely hopeless. With hard work, I believe I can make them slightly less incompetent."

One night Henno joined Brother Canus in his room and found he'd set up a jug of wine and a small wooden board with little round pieces on either side. The board was segmented in squares and each piece was a small, polished bit of marble; black on one side and white on the other.

"Hello, Henno." Brother Canus smiled. "I thought you might like to help me identify this odd wine I discovered."

Henno joined him eagerly. "Happy to, Brother." He sampled the wine, it was familiar, but he couldn't say he'd ever had its like before.

"Not bad." After he tried a gulp. "Not bad at all. Reminds me of the grapes I had in the East. Can't say I've ever had anything quite like it."

It was sweet, strong and even the aroma of it seemed to be intoxicating. It made him think of lost loves, dead friends and old songs. He wanted to sing and cry at the same time.

Mithras! What is this stuff? Better think of something else fast before he made a fool of himself.

"So, what's this you got here?" He nodded at the game pieces on the table between them.

"This? I thought you might enjoy a game. My father and I would play when I was a child. It's a very old, he never bothered to tell me the name of it. He just called it 'The Game'." As he spoke he put ten stones on his side black side up and another set on Henno's side with the white side up. "I have always thought it's very much like warfare." He smiled.

"Is that so?" Henno considered himself very proficient at both gaming and warfare. Mostly gambling with dice, but he didn't often lose. He'd survived enough battles when others hadn't too. "What's the wager then?"

"No wager. Just a friendly game while we talk." Brother Canus replied as he began setting up the board. "The rules are quite simple."

Henno couldn't help thinking nothing around here was as simple as it seemed. "I think a bit of risk adds spice. If there's no payoff, no risk, what's the point?"

"Alright then. What say with each piece lost, the loser loses a finger?" Brother Canus calmly replied as if discussing the weather.

Henno starred unblinking into the bright, but unreadable eyes.

"Now I can see why nobody likes to play with you."

Canus laughed quietly and refilled their cups. "Let's consider this game to be a learning exercise. Like the training you're giving our brothers in Christ. Nothing to win but expertise and nothing to lose but a bit of pride. Fair enough?"

"What are the rules then?"

"The goal is, like war, to remove all your opponents. We each move one piece per turn, one square at a time, unless your piece is next to an opposing piece. Then, you can leap over the piece or pieces as long as there is an empty space available and your opponent's pieces are flipped to your color. When the board is all one color, we have a winner. Ready?"

"Who goes first?" Henno growled, his natural competitive spirit flaring.

Canus waved a white, tattooed hand at Henno and they began. Henno considered the distance between the two opposing forces, counted squares, judged numbers of moves and when he felt ready, moved his first piece.

Canus moved in response and before long, the pieces began a slow dance around each other.

"How goes the training?" Canus asked absently as he studied the board.

"They do what's asked as best they can. Orbene is the strongest, but Mita is a natural leader. He'd make a decent Optio."

"Hmm? Optio?" Canus asked.

"A second in command to a centurion." Henno took first blood, jumping over two of Canus' pieces. The piece was in position for Canus to take, which he did immediately.

"A sacrifice." Canus murmured.

"Aye, but worth it. I'm still one up." Henno grinned.

"What about Novice Fergus?" Canus moved another piece to outflank Henno's moves.

"He's smart enough. Too smart actually." Henno drained the last of his cup.

"How so?" Canus asked, filling both their cups again.

"The best foot-soldier is a dumb pack animal. He eats, craps, sleeps and fights when he's told to." Henno considered.

"Fergus thinks too much. He always needs to understand the 'why' of things. In most professions, it's admirable. In soldiering, stopping to think can get you killed."

"I see. Should he be removed from your group then?"

"Nah, don't worry, Brother." Henno replied with a smile. "I'll beat the sense out of the lad."

Canus took three of Henno's pieces in one move. Henno scowled at the board looking for revenge.

"Not all of his sense, I hope." Canus smiled. "We have high hopes for that young man. He will make a fine member of our order one day, God willing."

"If beatings and hard work made us stupid, I'd have long since forgotten my own name, Brother." Henno grumbled as he made another move.

"When do you think they'll be ready?" Canus asked as he went on the defensive again with a backward move.

"Ready? To fight?" Henno laughed. "They're still working on the basics. Building up their muscles, learning the formations and how to move as one solid unit. It takes time. If only..." He drifted off, not completing the thought. Canus waited. It was Henno's move, but he was distracted. "There's something holding them all back." He continued. "They do what they're told, like I said, but they don't see the importance of the drills. They don't push themselves from the inside. A recruit who comes to the legions for training is motivated by wanting to be a soldier. Sure, they want to fight in a battle, but mostly they want to survive the battle. These men are doing this because they think their Jesus fellow told them to do it."

"It's called 'faith'."

"I know all about your faith, Brother." Henno replied testily.

"It's thinking something is so without knowing it's so."

"Or it's believing something is true in your heart without the proof of your eyes." Canus countered. "They believe what they are doing is important to God, to mankind's future, so they will endure whatever is required of them. They will do whatever you ask of them."

"That's the problem. They need to do it because it's important to them. Not because of you, me, mankind or some invisible man whispering in their heads. It's either done or it's not done."

It's either right or it's wrong. It's..." He picked up two pieces from the board and held them in his palm. "It's either black or it's white."

Canus smiled his wolf smile. "I think you're better at this game than I am."

"Yeah? And what game is that, Brother?" Henno had a wolf smile of his own.

"How do you propose to resolve this issue?" Canus asked.

Henno sat back as he stared at the ceiling. "Way back when I was a raw recruit, we had a mean bastard name Milo as our Training Centurion. After we'd been working the basics for three months, he took us out on a forced march. He marched us for two days and nights. We never got more than an hour's rest at a time on nothing but honey and water. I'll tell you, Brother, if someone had slapped a bit of garum on my foot, I'd have eaten it in a heartbeat."

Something about the distracted look to Canus' eye when he mentioned eating a human foot bothered Henno, but he quickly continued.

"Anyway, he marched us to within view of a small farm. Plenty of livestock, fruits and vegetables. And plenty of tough slaves and overseers in sight as well. As it got dark, he told us we were to perform a military raid on the farm and whatever we brought back to the training depot, we could eat. The only rules were whatever we took, we shared and we left no man behind."

"What happened?" Canus asked.

"We managed to grab a few armloads of vegetables and a small pig. One of the boys took an arrow in the leg and I carried him over my shoulder all the way back." Henno's face darkened at the memory. "He died before we got him to a healer. I remember feeling his last breath against my ear."

Neither spoke for a bit. Henno moved another piece, taking one of Canus' before continuing.

"We ate like kings that night. One of the best meals I ever had. Hunger does that to you."

"It does." Canus replied, his face like a mask.

"We learned an important lesson. Milo didn't intend for a man to die, but it was always a possibility. We learned what was at stake. We learned why all the drilling, all the shouting and all the pain was important. From that point on, the training took on a new meaning."

"Because of a sacrifice." Canus flipped three of Henno's pieces.

Henno cursed at the board, then nodded. "From that point on, the training became important to us because we wanted to live."

"I see." Canus thought for a bit. "There is a villa about half a day's ride from here. It's owned by a retired merchant named Gratian. We've done business with him on rare occasions for various spices. He's never been exactly eager to deal with us, prefers to be left alone. The estate is not large, no guards

but a few slaves. I don't expect there'd be any real opposition. This could serve as a real training exercise for you."

"Sounds about right." Henno considered. "What's there for us to take? We need some kind of target. Maybe a bust of his household gods or a bit of his wife's jewelry?" He grinned. Canus almost looked embarrassed, "Well, he has several pear trees on the villa's grounds which he dotes on. We were never able to convince him to part with any of their fruit, not for any price. I've not had a pear in many years."

"Alright then!" Henno slapped the table. "Let the Battle of the Pears commence!"

"But one thing, Friend Henno," Canus flipped the last of Henno's pieces, "No sacrifices."

Henno scowled at the winning move. "Good thing we didn't wager." He mumbled flexing his hand.

Chapter 8 - The Road to the Merchant's Villa

Fergus and the others rode in two lines, making their way slowly toward their destination. Wherever that was. Henno rode at the lead, still wearing his wolf helmet. It had become rare to see him without it.

The rest of them had an eclectic collection of armor and weapons under their cloaks. It was an unusually warm day and Fergus was sweating rivers inside the heavy chainmail and breastplate. Henno told them all to keep the metal covered in case anyone saw them. The others were suffering too, but they all seemed to be bearing it.

And he would too. He felt stronger than he'd ever felt in his life. He'd put muscle on his skinny frame in the last three months and could see it in the others too. They all felt like the training was working. They felt like soldiers.

They'd set out late in the day and the sun was now dropping behind the hills. It was a relief to all of them. Not only for the cooler weather, but the sun was no longer in their eyes. Before long, he missed the sun's rays as the air grew colder. His sweat covered clothes made him feel as though he'd been dunked in a cold mountain stream.

Fergus pulled his cloak tighter and sat up a little straighter in the saddle. Whatever comes, they could handle it.

The last month had been a tough one, but he saw a change in all of them. It began subtly; some of the men not dropping

when Henno called a break but choosing to stand and only sip a bit of water as he did. Orbene never seemed to lose the smile on his big, friendly face and almost immediately, his enthusiasm for the hard training was infectious. Mita lifted their spirits often by using him as an example.

"Don't slow down! Keep going!" He'd call out on their long marches. "Look at Brother Orbene! He's having the time of his life!"

Fergus laughed loudly along with the others. Henno tried to hide the smile on his face, snarling, "Quiet in the ranks! You're not cheering your favorite chariot racer! You're soldiers on the march!"

It was the first time he'd called them "soldiers" and none of them could hide the grins on their faces.

The next morning, when they came out to the court-yard they found Henno standing in front of a table stacked with swords, spears, shields and armor. It was all dark metal, designed for night work and dark deeds. Fergus felt a bit of disappointment. He was hoping their first issue of gear would be gleaming silver and gold. He wanted to look like the angels in the stained glass; bright, shining soldiers like the Archangel Michael with flaming swords and sun-bright armor. Still, he was proud they'd earned the right to work with real weapons. He said a quick prayer of thanks and also for forgiveness for his prideful thoughts.

"Each of you will be kitted out. Your swords will stay in the scabbard, the covers stay on the shields and the cork stays on the spear tips. Right?" Henno shouted.

"We hear and obey, Centurion!" They shouted in unison.

"And," He added with a wicked grin "The rocks stay in your hands!"

Fergus could hear the smiles in their voices as they called out, "We hear and obey, Centurion!" Their boisterous voices echoing around the stone walls.

They were ready for anything, he thought.

#

Fergus saw they'd been heading in the general direction of Gratian's villa. The old merchant had no love for God or his messengers. He acted as though he was doing them a tremendous favor at great personal expense whenever he overcharged them for the meager, second-rate spices or used goods they bartered with him for.

There was a small village called Carnarth beyond Gratian's villa. Could they be going there? Why had Henno put them in armor? Surely, there was nobody to fight. And they'd only recently begun training with the swords out of their scabbards. Fighting bales of straw and practicing formations is one thing, but a real fight? No, that can't possibly be it. This must just be another of Henno's tricks to keep them off-balance. Surely, that must be it.

Still, Henno had been very quiet today. When Fergus had tried to ask a question, he'd barked loudly, "Shut your bean hole, you! When I give you an order, you obey! Right?"

"I hear and obey, Centurion." Fergus snapped back automatically.

He couldn't shake the feeling they were in for a bad night.

You can't prepare for the unexpected. Henno's words kept running through his mind.

#

When they were less than a mile from Gratian's estate, Henno checked his map then guided the group off the road to a small clearing and had them dismount.

It was a moonless night. He told them all to be still as he listened to the night sounds, smelled the air, felt the cool breeze. When he was satisfied they were completely secluded, he knelt and cleared away a small patch of dirt.

Fergus noticed Henno still wore his silver helmet, but had his hood up to keep it concealed.

"Gather around, all of you. Kneel down here so you can all see." Henno used a stick to draw a line in the dirt. "We're about here. Not far from the estate of that mean, old bastard Gratian. You all know him?"

The men nodded in response. "Forgive his spitefulness, Lord."

Mita muttered. Fergus wasn't sure if Mita was praying for Gratian or Henno or both.

"Quiet, you." Henno snarled.

Henno drew a large square in the dirt and continued.

"It's time you put your training to use. Our mission is a simple night raid." He glared as the monks exchanged worried glances. "We're not going to steal anything important and nobody's going to get hurt, so stop fretting like a bunch of virgins at an orgy and listen up."

Nobody felt compelled to point out that most, if not all of them, were virgins. Henno continued.

"We'll leave the horses at the bend here, just below the hill leading to the front gate. We won't be long and I'm not leaving anyone behind to watch them, so tie them good, but make it a slip knot because when we come back, we're going to be in a hurry."

He scratched a space on the square representing the villa.

"The front gate is here. Timon, you'll climb the gate and let the rest of us in." Timon nodded. "We enter as one unit.

Square formation. Mita, what's your position in the square?"

Mita chirped, "First rank, right corner."

"Right. Your job is to hold the rest steady. Every man stay in his position. You're going to want to rush. Don't. Stay in formation. Fergus, where will you be?"

"I'm in the last rank. Left corner." Fergus answered confidently. He felt he had the most important job of all.

"Right. You keep the cadence. Softly, we're a small group and your voice will carry. Keep the count. Everyone stay in step."

Henno scratched a small X in the dirt at the right side of the inner court-yard of the villa.

"The main house is here. We're going to hug the right wall as we make our way to our objective." He smiled as he tapped the X. "The pear trees."

The men laughed quietly.

"Simmer down." Henno was still smiling. "It's not the emperor's treasury, but a bushel of pears is a fine haul for the likes of you. When we're at the trees, each man grab a pear or two and stuff them in your tunics. When I say we're done, we go. Harrell, what's the maneuver when withdrawing while in the square formation?"

Brother Harrell hesitated almost long enough to get a thump from Henno, "Wheel left, Novice Fergus is the anchor. We wheel in formation with Brother Mita as our guide. Since I'm in the rear rank, right corner, I have the furthest to go so I have to move quickly."

Henno nodded, looking at each of them in turn. Fergus saw each man's face was full of anticipation and maybe a touch of apprehension.

"We go back the way we came. Get to the horses and walk them. Remember, we don't run, we don't make a sound. We're shadows, we're mist and we're very, very quiet. If we're spotted, you stay in formation. You don't do anything until I tell you what to do. Right?"

"We hear and obey, Centurion." They answered quietly but confidently.

Fergus realized he was sweating again. He calmed himself by going over his role and Henno's instructions.

Mita led them all in a brief prayer. All except Henno who vaulted on Volucer. Man and horse waited impatiently for them to finish.

Soon, they all got back on the road and headed to the villa.

Chapter 9 - The Battle of the Pears

Once the horses were secure and Henno was satisfied each man knew where his horse was in the line, he gave the order.

"Form square." He whispered. The men fell into formation with only a slight bit of jostling. Shields on their left arms, swords firmly in the scabbards, they got in their positions and froze at attention. Once they were set, he ordered, "At the slow shuffle, move out."

With Fergus whispering "step...step...step" on every other left foot, they moved out in a slow jog. Henno stayed to the left of the formation where he could keep an eye on them.

He was more nervous than he'd expected. Relax. This is like stealing pie from a fat baker, he thought to himself.

Although, he couldn't help thinking he wished he knew more about the layout of the villa, the strength of any opposition and the schedules of anyone who might still be awake now. How many servants are there? Any of them up for a fight or are they all simple kitchen and companion slaves?

"Stay in step, Orbene." He hissed. The big lump was always out of step, his long legs made it difficult for him to shuffle in cadence with the others. He smiled and nodded at Henno. At least he didn't thank me and apologize, Henno thought. I suppose that's progress.

Henno was impressed at how quiet everyone was and how they moved together. By the book, this should be a 4 man operation at most. No armor, no weapons; a simple dive in and out with

one man guarding the gate, another to keep watch and two to grab the goods.

Hares, not bears.

He shook it off. This is a training exercise. The goal is for them to feel the pressure of danger, even if the danger is mostly in their heads. Put a bit of scare into them, he thought and they'll push themselves even harder during training. Taking it seriously now will save their lives in a real fight.

He just wished he had more time with them. Maybe he should call it off?

No, they're doing fine. Besides, it's been years since he'd had a pear too.

#

They reached the outer wall. Every man scanned the top constantly on the lookout for movement. All was still. So far, so good, thought Henno.

He looked through the bars on the front gate. The villa was dark. Henno could see a flickering light from deep inside causing shadows against a curtain, but couldn't see anyone. All the windows were covered either with thick curtains or had the heavy shutters closed against the night air.

"Timon." Henno whispered. "Spread her legs." Timon grimaced at the lewd metaphor, but after carefully placing his shield on the ground, he scampered up and over the heavy iron gate. The

little man dropped to the ground barely disturbing the grass, but to Henno it sounded as loud as a war elephant's stomp.

Timon carefully unlatched the bolt and gave the gate a tentative pull. It gave a slight creak and he froze. Henno held up his hand and Timon waited.

Henno reached in his pouch and pulled out a handful of pig fat he'd taken from the kitchen. He smeared some on the two lower hinges and motioned Orbene to boost him up so he could smear a bit more on the highest hinge. He wiped his hand clean on his cloak as Orbene resumed his place in line.

At Henno's nod, Timon tried the gate again. Very cautiously, he pulled it open without a sound. All the men grinned at each other. Henno allowed himself an inward pat on the back while hissing, "Wipe those smiles off your mugs!"

"Move out." he whispered and they resumed their slow shuffling jog through the gate, cutting right and staying close to the shadow of the high stone wall.

Very Roman design, Henno thought. Our pear-hogging merchant friend Gratian must have done plenty of business throughout the empire. Must have cost him a goodly sum to build such a lavish estate here in the middle of nowhere. Canus made him sound like a right old miser, but he certainly didn't scrimp when it came time to pay out for this place. He couldn't help but wonder what other treasures were squirreled away inside. After they grabbed some pears, maybe he should have a little look around inside.

Henno saw the small grove of trees ahead and noticed Mita steering the group into the center.

There was a small fountain in the middle of the grove which provided both a refreshing spot to sit as well as water for the trees. Mita led the group to the pear trees and the men stayed in loose formation as they grabbed at the ripe fruits. Henno glanced around, all his senses alert for trouble and detected no signs. He spied a particularly succulent pear on a low branch and snagged it. He dropped another into his tunic and was just reaching for a third when he heard Fergus whisper.

"Well hello, little dandelion." Fergus whispered sweetly.

"Where did you come from?"

Henno's blood froze. Fergus was reaching down to pet a small white dog. The dog was eyeing them all suspiciously, completely unafraid. Some of the other men nearest were smiling at the sight of the tiny, little white cotton-ball of a dog.

"Kill it, Fergus!" Henno hissed. "Kill it now!"

Fergus gave Henno a shocked stare. "Henno, you can't be serious." He whispered back. "What harm can this little fellow be?"

Henno drew his sword and stepped forward, but it was too late. The little mutt scampered away without a sound. He disappeared around the corner of the villa.

"Damn it. We're done. Form up. Quickly now. We don't have much time." The fear in Henno's voice was contagious. They all stared as if he'd had lost his mind. What were they waiting for? Henno grabbed Fergus and tossed him back in position. "When I give an order, you obey! Now form up!" His voice rising in anger.

The men moved clumsily into the square formation again.

"Move out. Quick time." Henno pointed directly at the gate and Mita lead, not hugging the wall as before.

With Fergus calling out a faster cadence the formation moved silently across the court-yard. Maybe we'll make it, Henno thought. Mithras, let us make it.

Then they heard it.

It was a low rumbling like a herd of horses from a distance.

Henno glanced over his shoulder and saw them. Some of the men turned to look and gasped. The square crumbled as men stumbled into each other frozen in terror.

Coming around the corner of the villa were 6 of the biggest dogs any of them had ever seen. Huge, black and brown animals with gleaming teeth and big square heads. The monstrous dogs were fitted with spiked armor on their heads and chests.

War dogs.

The dogs stopped, lowered their heads and growled menacingly.

Henno realized they'd never make the gate now. Only one chance.

"Form testudo!" He called out. No need for whispering now.

The men looked around stupidly. Henno heard confused voices ask, "What...?" and "Is that the one where I'm at the point?" "The tortoise, you fools. Form tortoise now! Mita!" Henno had found the leader of the pack and didn't dare take his eyes away from the brute. Out of the corner of his vision, he could see Mita was frozen in place.

It was Fergus who broke the spell first. Henno heard the lad urging each man to his place.

"Quickly now, shields up. Outer rank shields out. Inner rank shields over our heads. Move!" Fergus was pushing and pulling the men and they began to quickly form the testudo. A tightly-packed formation with linking shields facing out all around and shields held high overhead to form a solid wall and roof of protection.

"Swords out. Crouch low. Keep the swords stuck out between your shields." Henno called out. Their only chance was if Henno could distract the rush of the dogs as the men used their shields to keep them off while backing to the gate. Hopefully, the swords will be enough to keep them at bay. As long as the testudo holds. He heard the swords rattling as their shaking hands pulled them from the scabbards and stuck them in the small gaps between their shields.

The leader snarled at Henno, he snarled back.

"Fergus, call the cadence. Move them back to the gate.

I'll...what do you think you're doing?" Henno saw Fergus had

left the relative safety of the formation and stood next to him. "I'm ordering you..." Just then the dogs attacked.

The pack of war dogs launched themselves forward as if on command. A rolling, snarling wave of fur, teeth and spiked armor thundered at them. Henno knew in his heart he'd never survive this. He'd be torn to pieces, but, by Mithras, he's going to take one or two of the bastard curs with him.

"Get your sword out, you fool!" Henno saw Fergus had sheathed his weapon. He was fumbling with a sling and pulling a small stone from the pouch on his belt.

He knew the testudo had crumbled without even turning. Mita's screeching voice said it all.

"Heavenly Father, look down on us and protect your holy messengers" He cried out plaintively to the sky as he tossed down his shield and sword and stood up. The others soon followed, tossing down their weapons and praying loudly as death charged across the court-yard at them.

Fergus began spinning the sling in a tight circle over his head. Whipping it faster and faster.

"Go for the big one in the middle, lad." Henno advised, despite the fact that it was hopeless. The boy's got real steel in him, he thought, at least we'll go down fighting.

"Father," Fergus whispered, "guide my hand." The sling spun faster and faster.

What was he waiting for? Henno crouched behind his shield and braced himself with his sword held tight. The leader was

coming right for him. "To me," He whispered, "Don't keep me waiting."

Henno heard a high whistling. It grew louder and higher in pitch. He realized it was coming from Fergus' sling. The boy spun it faster as he prayed quietly. The whistling got louder and higher.

Then the impossible happened. The dogs stopped.

The leader slide to a halt less than a dozen paces from Henno, shaking his massive head and pawing the ground as if he had a bee in his ear.

Fergus whirled the sling faster, the whistling seemed to stop. The dogs began howling in pain. Some threw themselves on the ground, others snapped at each other in rage.

Henno saw their only chance. "To the gate!" He shouted at the men. They left their weapons and shields where they dropped them, some tossing the pears to the ground as if that might appease their pursuers and they ran to the gate.

Henno and Fergus stood side by side as the dogs continued their agonizing howls.

"Let's go, lad." Henno said, still crouched behind his shield.

"Back up slowly now."

They began moving back a step at a time.

"I...can't...keep... it going...for much longer, Henno..."

Fergus panted. Already Henno could hear a faint whistling as the spinning began to slow.

"Only one thing we can do then, lad." Henno said.

"What's...that?" Fergus asked, his face covered in sweat and agony.

"Run!"

Fergus grabbed his sling in his fist, turned and ran while the hounds recovered and charged after them. If he and Henno had been racing, it was going to be a tie.

They dove through the gate and slammed it shut just as the snapping beasts hit it with the force of a battering ram.

The rest of the men were already on their horses as Henno and Fergus ran down the hill to join them. Henno looked back and saw the little white dog had calmly made his way to the gate. Henno could swear he could hear its mocking bark above the angry sounds of his larger brethren.

Without a word to any of them, Henno jumped on Volucer's back and cantered away.

#

They'd been on the road for a mile or so before Fergus built up enough courage to approach Henno.

The men were in a sloppy formation on either side of the road behind him. Henno rode ahead, never glancing back at the men slumped dejectedly in their saddles.

As Fergus joined him, Henno continued to stare straight ahead. He'd removed his wolf helmet and hung it on his saddle horn where it clanked as he rode. Fergus didn't speak. They just rode side-by-side through the winding hills as the stars blinked above them.

After another mile, Henno let out a long sigh. "What was that trick you did back there?" He asked quietly.

"When I was a shepherd, one of the slaves who was too old to mind the flock anymore gave it to me. He showed me how to use a sling to fight off wolves or stray..." He almost said 'dogs'. "Stray animals and the like." He finished quietly.

"The whistling stone was his best kept secret."

Fergus showed it to Henno, who gave it a cursory glance. It was a small stone, drilled with several holes through it.

"It's like a round flute." Fergus explained. Henno grunted.

"If I ever came up against an animal too big to take down with a stone or too many of them, he showed me how to use it to scare them off. We can't hear the sound, but an animal hears it like a spike to the head." He added, "Sometimes. It doesn't always work, but I prayed it'd give us time to escape."

Henno nodded, but didn't reply. The rode a bit farther.

Finally Fergus felt like his head would explode if he didn't speak. "I'm sorry, Centurion Henno. I disobeyed your order. I just...I couldn't just kill that little defenseless pup." He felt stupid for apologizing and explaining at the same time.

"But there's no excuse. I was wrong and I promise it won't happen again."

Henno snorted, "You're damn right it won't. Never again, it won't." Fergus wasn't sure what to make of that.

"How did you know we were in danger? That little thing surely was never on a battlefield, was it?"

Henno didn't answer right away. Fergus almost gave up and was about to drop back with the others when Henno replied quietly. "He's a Canis Melitae. Country estates use them. It's cheaper to buy war dogs from the army than to keep guards in pay, room and board. The problem with the big killer dogs is that after the army training, they have trouble telling friend from foe. So, some bright dog breeder came up with the idea of training mutts like your little dandelion to patrol the grounds and call up their big pals if they see anything they don't like."

"I see." Fergus answered humbly, "I didn't know."

"You don't need to know!" Henno snapped, facing him with furious eyes. "You only need to follow orders!"

"You're right." Fergus replied not avoiding Henno's eye. "I nearly killed us all by failing to follow orders. I will submit myself for whatever punishment you deem fair, Centurion Henno."

"Don't call me that!" He turned back to face the road. He sighed again, the anger reluctantly leaving him. Volucer snorted and he patted her neck as they rode. "It's not your fault, Fergus. It's mine. I was a fool to think I could make you into soldiers."

"How can you blame yourself?" Fergus fired back. "We failed. Not you."

"When I was promoted to Centurion, General Stilicho shared a cup of wine with me. From his own private stock, it was."

Henno grinned slightly before his face grew dark again. "He

said, 'Centurion, there's only one thing a true leader needs to know to be victorious: he must know the capabilities of his soldiers. Not what he wants, not what he needs, but what they are truly capable of.' I ignored the best advice I was ever given by the greatest leader I ever knew." Henno shook his head sadly.

Fergus persisted, "We forgot everything you taught us, but we'll try harder. We'll work harder. We can do this. God has given us this mission. With your leadership, we can..."

"Can what?" Henno shouted. "In case you've forgotten, lad, you all just showed your asses to a pack of dogs and I was out maneuvered by Centurion Dandelion back there! I can't make gold out of lead. I can't make soldiers out of you lot. Nobody can! You just don't have it in you!"

He tossed a pear to Fergus.

"Give that to Canus with my apologies. I consider all debts paid." Henno called out as he spurred Volucer forward, leaving Fergus and the others behind.

After a bit, Fergus realized he'd left them for good.

Chapter 10 - The Road to...?

Henno wanted a drink. No, he wanted to get blind drunk. So drunk the events of the last few hours would slip away into black oblivion. Not good enough, he thought. Make that the events of the last three months. Is that possible? How much wine would that take? He desperately wanted to find out.

The nearest town would be Carnarth, according to the map Canus had given him, but that would mean doubling back and running into the monks as they headed back to their monastery. No, that wouldn't do. If he never saw another monk again as long as he lived, it'd be too soon.

Idiots! Tossing down the only things between them and death to call out to the sky for help. Sure, I'm not above sacrificing to ask the gods for help in battle. I've sent many a goat and chicken to Mithras' table, but never during a fight! What kind of fools follow this Jezzbuz?

If it hadn't been for Fergus, they'd all be passing through the guts of those war dogs by now.

And that smirking little white mutt! I'd give every coin I've ever owned and every coin I'll ever earn to grab that fluffy shit by the ears and split him from ass to jaw! He could still see him, that tiny ladies lapdog dancing and barking with glee at the gate while they ran! Ran away! Centurion Tiberius Scorpanicus Henno! Scorpio, they called him. What a joke!

He needed to get drunk. And he needed a woman. Several women. He wanted to get drunk with a house full of whores and have his way with each of them. He wanted to take them all roughly; to hammer out his rage and embarrassment on them. He'd take them like dogs. Yes! Definitely! And he'd howl and bite and bark the whole time! That's what he needed. Drink first, women next, then more drink, more women. On and on until the pain left him or his coin ran out.

He looked at the once-prized silver helmet hanging on his saddle. Once he sold it, he'd most certainly have enough coin to last him through as much wine and as many whores as he wanted.

Now where was he going to go to unleash his furious, pent-up desires?

Volucer snorted and pranced, wanting to run. His horse was picking up his anger and frustration.

"Come on, girl!" Henno called out as he dug in his heels and gave her a smack on the rump, "Let's fly!"

Volucer let out a trumpeting whinny, leapt forward and raced down the road. Head down and ears back, the big horse stretched out grabbing the ground with thunderous speed.

Henno felt like he was riding a falling star. This will do for now, he thought and hung on tight.

Chapter 11 - The Abbey of Folcutt

When Fergus and the others returned later that night, the rest of the members of the monastery met them. Brother Canus and Brother Brio saw the dejected looks on their faces and knew the outcome had been failure. Brother Mita led the quiet procession of humbled men through the gates. They all saw one of their company was missing.

As Mita approached Brother Canus, he answered the unasked question. "Henno abandoned us on the road. He quit on us." Fergus couldn't believe his ears! "He didn't quit on us, we quit on him!" He snapped angrily.

"How dare you speak to me with such impudence! A good caning will soon..." Brother Mita stopped speaking, his eyes went wide with shock.

Fergus had his hand on his sword's pommel as he spoke with quiet menace, "Choose your words carefully, Brother Mita. I didn't throw my sword to the ground."

Brother Mita slid quickly from the saddle and scurried to the stables with his tired horse in tow. The rest of the men followed him. Brother Orbene caught Fergus' eye as he passed and gave him a respectful nod.

Brother Brio sputtered, "Fergus! That was uncalled for! You will report to the kitchen at once for..." Brother Canus held up his hand.

"For something to eat with the rest of the men." He finished Brio's sentence. "You will beg forgiveness from Brother Mita and from God, young Fergus." He turned to Brio. "I think they all deserve some rest. In the morning, we will speak of the night's events and plans for the future."

"Yes, Brother Canus." Fergus and Brio replied.

Fergus turned his horse to the stables, but twisted around in the saddle to toss the pear Henno had given him to Brother Canus. "He said all debts have been paid." Fergus cantered his horse proudly across the court-yard.

#

Brother Brio watched Fergus ride away and was reminded of the time he watched a legion of cavalry ride in parade through Camboricum in Britain. So proud, so sure.

"Well, I won't say I'm sorry to hear of Henno's leaving." He said as he and Brother Canus walked slowly back to the monastery.

"His training seemed effective for at least one of our order."

Brother Canus remarked as he admired his pear.

Brother Brio sniffed dismissively, "He was as the snake in God's Eden, Brother."

Brother Canus chuckled. "Honestly Brother, you do tend to exaggerate." As he took a large bite of the pear.

#

They all met the first morning after the failed raid to relate the events to the Council of Elders. Mita took full

responsibility, despite the other men's insistence that it was no one person's fault.

Fergus felt crushed. He was shamed by Mita standing up for all of them. He apologized in front of everyone. "I am sorry for my angry words, Brother Mita. I ask your forgiveness."

Mita smiled, "We were all angry with ourselves, Novice Fergus. I took no offense and offer my hand in fellowship." As they embraced, Mita whispered in his ear, "Never again." Before stepping back and smiling warmly. Fergus realized Mita would never fully forgive for embarrassing him in front of the others.

Fergus addressed the council, "It was because of my hesitation that we failed, Brothers. If I had slain the dog as ordered, we would've..." He paused. He still couldn't see himself killing a defenseless creature, no matter what the outcome.

"Would it really have changed anything?" Brother Canus asked.

"And if it had, I wonder if it would be worth the cost."

"What do you mean, Brother?" Brother Penter asked. He was a member of the council. Brother Penter was responsible for the library and oversaw the monk's copying of the older scrolls. His hands were always stained with ink, his eyes always squinting like a mole.

Brother Canus considered the tabletop briefly before continuing. "Had one of us killed an innocent in order to steal a pear, how can we say that is doing God's will? You all have said you failed in one way or another to follow the

training you have received from our departed friend Henno, but were you all not successful in following the training you have received here? You all glorified God with the choice not to kill. In choosing to run did you not, as our lord commands, turn the other cheek?" He looked around the room and waited. There was a brief pause of silence before someone got the joke first. Soon the tension and despair broke as the men laughed loudly.

Brother Brio was confused until Brother Penter pointed at his chair. "Ah, cheek!" He exclaimed and the room broke up again with laughter.

Fergus tried to join in, but could only manage a weak smile. He knew Brother Canus was giving them all a way back to their lives before they'd tried to be soldiers. With a few brief words, he'd turned their embarrassing defeat into a glorious example of God's power on Earth. While it was impressive, Fergus also found it unnerving how easily Canus had manipulated them all.

Fergus still felt as though he'd made a wrong choice somehow. He wanted to serve God, but he also wanted to be strong and brave. He wanted to be decisive; to know always know where he stood and what to do.

He wanted to be like Henno.

Chapter 12 - The Road from...?

Henno woke with no idea where he was or what to do.

He retched loudly, his empty stomach cramping as tight as a miser's fist. His head reeled and pounded. As soon as the world stopped spinning, he was going to beat the life out of whoever was jumping up and down on his skull. His eyeballs ached. His hair hurt. Everything responded with a dull thumping pain like he'd only experienced a few dozen times in his life.

Another morning after a night of unrestrained drinking.

He tried to focus his eyes. He saw his hands dangling limply in front of him. Beyond them, the ground, but for some reason the ground was moving. He tried to use his hands to grab it, but he wasn't able to touch the ground. By Mithras! Was he dead? Was he floating through the gray netherworld to the afterlife?

He retched again. No, he thought, if I was dead I'd be feeling less like a corpse.

He felt a pressure on his gut, like someone was sitting on him. Raising his head, which sent bolts of pain down the spiked thorn bush he used to call his spine, he saw he was sprawled across Volucer's back. Face down across his saddle. How in Jupiter's name had he managed that?

Volucer felt him stirring and gave a very judgmental snort.

Henno tried to speak, but couldn't seem to make any noises he could understand. In his mind, he said, "Good morning, girl. Have you had your breakfast, my fine loyal steed?" But what came out was more like, "Aarraah, oegah whaaaaaner ffffeerrble?"

Volucer tossed her head with disgust and bucked, tossing him to the ground with a thud which he was sure echoed throughout the empire.

He lay there face down with his ass up, not wanting to move. Volucer ate some grass while she waited. Eventually, Henno managed to fall over sideways. The peat was wet and wonderfully cold on his face. He took long, deep breaths of cold morning air until he managed to sit up.

Now the game would begin. The game called "What Happened Last Night?"

It starts with a basic inventory: 10 fingers; check. 10 toes; check. No broken limbs, no broken ribs. He had a small cut on his cheek with some dried blood and a bit of swelling. Another above his left eye. There was an ugly blister burn on the back of his right hand and his knuckles were bruised and sore. A fist-fight then. Without evidence to contrary, he decided he'd won against multiple opponents.

"You should see the poor bastards." He tried to grin at Volucer, but still couldn't manage intelligible speech.

Volucer looked away and pissed on the ground. The hot smell

assaulting Henno's nose made him retch violently again, wiping all thoughts of grinning from his mind.

Next part of the game, "What's The Last Thing I Remember?"

#

The previous day came back to him in bits and pieces.

Henno had kept racing Volucer across the rolling Irish countryside until they were both exhausted. He stopped by a stream where they both drank deeply.

After consulting the map and not finding a settlement within a day's ride, he decided to head up the coast for a bit. He was bound to find a town or village eventually. The map was the most detailed he'd ever seen. He'd always had a good sense of direction and was trained at a very early age to read the land. His mother was a camp follower and his father a Legion aquilifer; Henno was born a soldier.

He followed the stream, which would most likely lead him to a settlement of some kind.

After a bit, he found some worn ruts in the grass crossing over the stream and followed them. Soon, he saw smoke rising in the distance.

Henno didn't remember the name of the town; some way too long name in the local language. "If you don't speak Latin, don't speak to me" was a popular phrase in the empire. I suppose that's going to change if those holy monks are right and the empire falls, he thought. At the unwanted memory, he spurred Volucer a bit faster.

He found a tavern straight away. It was not long after walking through the doors that the night became a series of flashes like walking at night during a lightning storm. He remembered a group of blond Northerners. Long beards, loud voices and deep thirsts. He fit right in despite the language barrier. There were flashes of a variety of barbarian drinking games. One involving catching tossed axes. He must have done pretty well at that one since he still had all his fingers. Another was arm-wrestling with torches at either end. From the painful blister on the back of his right hand, he must've not done well at that one. Finally, another game which seemed to simply be taking turns punching each other in the face until one player fell down. That was probably a draw, he concluded. Then the women. True to his plan, he caroused freely with whoever was willing or at least willing to be paid. He remembered a black haired beauty. Then, brown hair or was it red? Laughing, squealing, sweating woman's faces drifted in and out of his memory. He was smiling now as he remembered. He was like a rutting stag; a wild bull surrounded by helpless females.

Ugh, even smiling hurt.

Volucer snorted again and pawed the ground.

"Enough of your carping." He managed to croak, finding his voice at last. "I'm entitled to a night of..." Volucer was visibly upset about something. She pawed the ground angrily,

whinnying. She stamped with both hooves and snorted as Henno tried to figure out what she wanted.

"Hungry, girl? We'll find you some..." Then he heard it. More rightly, he felt it. A rumbling in the ground, a change in the air. He'd never been able to explain it; sometimes he just knew when danger was headed his way. If he'd not been so poisoned with drink, he'd have noticed it sooner.

Volucer was staring the way they'd come as Henno lurched to his feet. Suddenly, the pain in his head doubled as he saw what she was looking at.

"Mithras, this is not good." He muttered before awkwardly jumping onto her back. He gave her an unnecessary kick in the sides; she was already racing away from the group of mounted Roman Legionnaires less than a mile off and closing fast. Their armor gleamed in the rising sun, their fresh mounts kicking up great clumps of sod as they bore down on him.

"Earn your name, Volucer!" Henno shouted, "Fly!

And she did.

Nothing begets speed like a pursuer and Henno had never seen a horse so fast as Volucer that morning. He'd seen squat, powerful ponies used by the Celts in Britain; the sleek, haughty desert stallions of the east; he'd seen horses in the arena from every part of the empire, but he'd never seen anything that moved like this horse as she flew across the mist covered ground.

You don't ride a horse like this, he thought, you hang on and pray to the gods you're not blown off.

But how long could she keep up this pace? He was sure he could hear the shouting of his pursuers. He twisted his head around for a look. He counted 16 as they spread out in a long line in case he decided to break left or right. The open plain afforded no place to hide. Damn him for a fool! Could he have made it any easier for them? Out in the open, sick as a leper with a horse who probably spent most of the night wandering without rest. He didn't know what the men wanted, but nobody rides like that after someone they want to discuss the weather with over an amphora of wine. These were men of the 10th, riding hard and bent on catching him. He knew the cut of these men. He probably knew their names. If they had bad intentions for him, then nothing short of death, his or theirs, was going to stop them.

"Fly!" he called out again and she stretched out just a fraction more. Already her sides heaved for air and flecks of white spittle were flaking from her open mouth. Henno considered turning and giving them a fight. A soldier's death, he thought. Better than running this fine horse to her death. He tugged on Volucer's reins, but she was having none of it. She wanted to make them work for it. So be it, he thought smiling, we'll run them for a bit more.

Then his heart sank. Ahead in the morning mist, he could see a steep range of hills. There was no way up it. Now, he'd have

to fight. He loosened the strap on his gladius and it was then he realized he still had the gleaming silver wolf helmet. He jammed it on his head with pride. He'd go out looking like a posh, pampered senator's son who could afford a fine piece like this with coin but not with deeds. He'd earn this beautiful helmet and fine sword today. He'd arrive in the after-life on a great horse too.

He'd show them how a veteran centurion fights and dies.

While he was fantasizing about his glorious death and just short of composing a song about his own heroics, he noticed Volucer wasn't slowing down. If anything, she was speeding up. "No," he whispered, "you can't be serious."

He started to pull back on the reins as he realized his horse was going to run up the impossibly steep hill, but decided to let her have her day. If any horse short of Pegasus could make it, Volucer could.

"Epona, give us wings." He prayed as she reached the foot of the hill.

She stumbled with her first steps, but regained her footing.

She grabbed at the hillside as if she had claws instead of hooves. Henno could see she was picking out the best places to spring from as she worked her way up.

He felt the impact and heard the whistling. One of the bastards had shot an arrow at him! It had impacted his shield still strapped to his back and whistled away to his right.

There would be more coming. Higher and higher they climbed. Another arrow flew passed his head, inches away from his ear. Volucer was gasping for air in huge gulps as she crested the top. Henno was too, more in amazement than effort. He leaped down from her side and let her recover as best she could. They were out of sight of the men below, but hardly out of danger. Henno peeked over a fallen log. He was out of range of the archers and out of range of their voices. One rider was gesturing wildly, obviously ordering the men to follow. Several of the men seemed to be making a case for going around and picking up his trail later, but the leader was unmoved. They dismounted and formed up into two tight ranks. The leader used his vine cane to quiet any more discussion and the group started working their way up the steep hillside. Henno glanced at Volucer. She was done. Her head down, she looked at Henno apologetically.

"You've nothing to be sorry for, my friend." He murmured.

"You've done your part. Now, I'll do mine."

He pushed himself up to get ready to give the men a good fight. The log gave a bit. It was covered with moss, still damp from the morning dew. A big thing, almost as big around as a wagon wheel. A wagon wheel? Henno had an idea.

"Come to me, my little birds!" He shouted waving his sword defiantly. "I'll give you as good a sticking as I gave your mothers, you piss-pot drinking sons-of-whores!" He danced on top of the hill laughing shrilly, but his head was still

feeling the effects of the night before and he soon ducked back behind the big log, retching and gasping for air.

He glanced at Volucer who was eying him nervously, "Overdid it a bit, but I'm fine. Just trying to speed them up. Don't look at me like I'm crazy. I know what I'm doing."

He heard the men shouting insults back at him and one voice calling out, "Scorpio!" but it was lost in the chorus of angry cat-calls. He glanced over the log again, but with their helmets on and their heads down as they climbed, he couldn't recognize any faces. Part of him already regretted what he was about to do, but the volley of arrows earlier convinced him he had no choice. They were about half-way up. It had to be now. He shoved the log with everything he had. It rolled a bit, but then its water-soaked weight settled back in place.

"Mithras! Come on, you fat bastard!" Henno grunted, his head spinning. "Move!"

He strained as his feet slid in the mud. He tried rocking the log. He heard the voices getting closer and he didn't dare risk a glance. He hooked his fingers under the log, scrambling to find any handhold in the moss-covered wood and pushed as hard as he could. His vision began to blur. Not now! Don't pass out now! Push, you fool! Push!

Suddenly, the log rolled forward and he collapsed on his face. It rolled over the lip of the hill and disappeared. The first scream came right away, the soldier must've been right near the top. Henno fought to not black out as he scrambled to the

edge. He saw the log bouncing down the hillside. The men had been close together. The hill was steep and didn't have much room for them to spread out. It smashed into them like a boulder fired from a catapult. He heard the screams of agony and the snap of breaking bones. The horses at the bottom of the hill scattered.

He was safe, all of the men were either dead or too badly wounded to come after him. He almost surrendered to exhaustion. He put his face into the mud and reveled in its coolness.

Volucer's prodding woke him immediately. The big horse pushed him again with her snout.

Then he heard it. Someone was climbing the hill! He hadn't gotten all of them.

"I hear them, girl." He replied. "We've bettered the odds at least." He tugged his sword free of its scabbard, pulled the shield from his back. He stepped back from the edge and readied himself for a fight.

But he was not ready to see who came over the edge, gasping for air with a wicked smile despite the chase, the climb and the death of his fellow soldiers.

"You can't prepare for the unexpected, right Scorpio?" The young man said as he took his feet, drew his sword and shrugged his shield free from his back.

"Titus?" Henno was gob-smacked. Titus was his Optio, his second-in-command for years. Friends, no, Titus was like a

younger brother to him. He was the one leading the men chasing him?

"What do you think you're doing, Optio?" Henno roared.

"Not Optio any longer, Scorpio." He tapped his rank. "I was called up to Centurion after you mustered out. Thanks for the vote of confidence, by the way. It carried much weight with General Stilicho."

"Don't mention it, lad." Henno rumbled, his vision was still blurred, every muscle ached, but a fire was building in his belly. A burning which began raging through him. "You dare to draw steel on me, you pup? This is how you treat a friend? A man who saved your ass more times than remembered? We stood side-by-side in the shield wall. We killed and bled together. We shared the last crust of bread we could find and the last drop of water. Why?"

"Orders." Titus shrugged. His face showed he had no love for this mission. "Henno, do me a favor. Do us both a favor. Kneel. Let me give you a soldier's death. General Stilicho wants your head and I'm not the only one after you. Let me end it here. I promise there'll be no pain."

Part of Henno wanted to accept the offer. It was a part of him he despised. Despite the lead in his arms and legs, the pounding in his skull and the daggers in his eyes, the fire in his belly gave him only one choice. He took his stance; shield up, gladius at the ready.

"Don't keep me waiting." He growled.

Titus shook his head sadly and took a similar stance.

"You can't beat me, old friend. I'm half your age and twice as fast. You taught me everything I know about killing. Look at you. You can barely stand." He said softly.

"I just killed or maimed two sections of your back-stabbing bastard friends. I think I can stand long enough to give you one more lesson in killing." Henno replied, his blood red eyes just visible over the rim of his shield. He kept his gladius pinned to the side of his shield, not only to present a compact target, but so Titus couldn't see his hand shaking.

"Well then," Titus sighed, "There's only one thing you..." He launched in mid-sentence.

He nimbly jumped the distance between them, his gladius like an arrow darting out at Henno's eyes.

Henno brought his shield up just in time, the tip of Titus' sword point grazed up the front of his helmet. Henno danced back a few steps and swept his sword at Titus' feet. It was a feeble attempt and they both knew it. Henno was just trying to keep some distance between them.

They circled each other slowly. "Nice helmet." Titus taunted.

"Where'd you steal it?"

"It was a gift." Henno countered. "From your sister."

Titus flinched at the insult. His sister had been killed in a bread riot in Rome years ago. Henno used the distraction to press the attack. He brought his gladius high in a sweeping

blow aimed at Titus' head, then spun around at the last second and tried a thrust to his sword arm.

Titus blocked the blow easily and responded with a furious attack of his own. His gladius point banging into Henno's shield over and over with tremendous force. Henno was just managing to block the rapid thrusts when Titus kicked Henno's shield full on just as he was stepping back. He was off-balance and stumbled backward.

Years of training took over; Henno rolled and came up in a crouch, but Titus was expecting it. He swiped hard at Henno's arm and only the metal bracer on his wrist saved him from losing his hand, but not his sword. His right arm went numb and the gladius slipped from his fingers.

The rim of Titus' shield slammed into Henno's face and he felt his nose snap. Blood spurted down his face and he tasted his own death.

But just a taste.

As Titus kicked Henno's shield wide and brought his sword back for the killing blow, Henno let it slip off his arm. His shield had hidden his hand as he slipped the knife from his belt. He jammed the deadly short blade into Titus' leading foot, sinking it up to the hilt through his heavy marching sandals and into the ground below.

As Titus threw his head back howling in pain, Henno rolled to his feet, scooped up his shield and tossed it like a discuss.

It hit Titus in the belly. He doubled over and flew backwards, the knife slicing through his foot as it wrenched free.

Titus fell flat on his back, his foot shredded with a jagged rip from ankle to toe. Blood spurted, coating the ground as he flopped like a fish.

Henno slowly retrieved his knife, shield and sword. He calmly kicked Titus' out of reach and stood over his fallen friend.

"You're right, lad. I did teach you everything you know about killing." He looked Titus in the eye. "But not everything I know."

"A soldier's death, Centurion." Titus said with all the pride he could muster between clenched teeth. "Don't let me bleed out like a pig."

Henno waved his gladius in Titus' face as if considering. "Why does Stilicho want me dead?" He asked. "What did I ever do to him?"

The blood loss was already clouding his thoughts. Titus laughed, blood trickled down his cheek where he'd bitten his lip in pain. "You really don't know?" His face began to pale, going gray as his life was being soaked up by the wet earth. Henno placed the gladius tip to Titus' throat, just above his gleaming metal breast plate. "Quickly now and I'll give you my respect. Why does he want me dead?"

Titus laughed again. "Because you stole his horse, you fool!" His laugh became a hacking cough. "He'll never stop hunting you for this insult. There's nowhere you can hide."

Henno gripped his sword tightly, his eyes hot with tears,
"Good-bye, Titus."

"Good-bye, old friend." Titus coughed.

Henno thrust forward, feeling his gladius sink through flesh and sever the bones at the back of his neck. Titus' eyes were focused on something beyond Henno; something high in the sky above them.

Then he was gone.

#

Henno found the other soldiers were either dead or close enough for him to give them a merciful death. All except one. A young legionnaire with a badly broken leg who begged for his life.

"What's your name, soldier?" Henno demanded.

"Tul...Tullius, Centurion." he stammered.

"I'm not a soldier anymore, boy!" Henno snapped. "I'm just a stupid man with a soft spot for young idiots like you."

He set the leg as best he could, giving the young soldier a sharp backhand when he cried out in pain. The boy tried his best not to make a sound as Henno helped him on a horse.

Henno saw he was one of the archers. He took the bow and snapped it across his knee.

"You tried to shoot me in the back? Real soldiers do their killing up close. This is fine for weaklings who have no stomach for the shield wall, but if you ever want to be a real

legionnaire, don't pick this toy up again. Right?" He barked in his best parade ground voice.

"I hear and obey, Centurion." The boy's response was automatic. Henno didn't correct him again.

"Now, you ride to Stilicho and tell him exactly what happened. You tell him how I killed 15 of his best soldiers and one of my best friends. You tell him I'm willing to forget his mistake as long as he forgets mine. I didn't know whose horse that was, but if ever a man earned a thing, I earned that horse today. Her name is Volucer and she belongs to me. You tell him either he forgets me or I will remember him." Henno gave the soldier's broken bone a squeeze to emphasize the message making him cry out in agony.

He gave the young soldier's horse a smack and he watched as it trotted away. He listened to his painful whimpering until he was swallowed up in the rolling mist. It'll be a long ride, Henno thought. Serves him right.

Volucer gave him a light shove.

"Can you imagine," Henno spoke softly as he stroked her head, "Only sending 16 men out to take my head? That's an insult, that is."

Volucer tossed her head and snorted. She was ready to go.

Henno climbed slowly onto her back, he was as tired as if he'd been marching for days and it wasn't even mid-day yet. He consulted his map.

There's nowhere you can hide. Titus' voice rang in his head.

Reluctantly, Henno realized there was one place.

Chapter 13 - The Abbey of Folcutt

Fergus' life returned to the routine before he and the others had trained with Henno. At first, some of them wanted to continue training. None of them knew why exactly. Fergus enjoyed the exercise, the camaraderie, the challenge. Brother Mita chastised them, but allowed them to continue.

While the men struggled to continue their training without Henno's guidance, the Council debated. Fergus winced at the thought of the endless talking; hour after hour. He imagined the council going over the same points over and over with as much results as a river's attempts to wear down a boulder.

What good is this talk?

He prayed each night for patience. He prayed for understanding, but he just felt more and more frustrated. He discovered he wasn't speaking to God in his prayers. He just knelt quietly and listened now. He admitted to himself that if he tried to ask God the question that kept rolling around in his thoughts, he was afraid of the answer. The question was: Was it time for him to leave the monastery?

He tried to quell his frustration with hard work and threw himself into the drills Henno had taught them. He attacked the straw dummies with an angry fever as if beating them would bring the peace his soul cried out for. The other men did the drills, but generally left Fergus alone when it was time for

sword fighting. Even using the heavy wooden, blunted practice swords, he'd bruised both the bodies and pride of the others. Fergus noticed Brother Canus watching them several times as they drilled, exercised and practiced sword fighting. One by one, the others stopped training. As the days went on, fewer and fewer men showed up after morning prayers.

One morning, only Brother Orbene and Fergus stood in the court-yard.

"We could form a very small testudo." Brother Orbene joked. Neither felt like laughing.

Fergus felt like a fool. "It doesn't matter. I'll clean all this up, Brother. It should go back to the armory."

Brother Orbene only smiled and helped Fergus collect all the training weapons, armor and straw dummies. Finally, they carried the heavy rocks Henno insisted they heft everywhere to build up their strength to the river and tossed them in.

Fergus carried the last one and watched it sink. He stood alone by the water and watched the ripples the rock made when he tossed it in.

"You should thank God for the gifts you've been blessed with, Novice Fergus," Brother Canus spoke suddenly. Fergus was startled. He hadn't heard a sound. Brother Canus rarely left the monastery and never in daylight. His pale skin burned easily and he preferred the dark, quiet of the inner rooms. It was late in the day, but he had his hood up covering his face.

"Rather than condemn the world for what you have not received." He continued.

"Yes, Brother Canus." Fergus replied dutifully.

Brother Canus stood still, watching the water of the river swirl around the rocks Fergus and Orbene had dumped there. Fergus waited, curious if Canus had a reason for following him.

"Do you believe that there is good in this world worth saving?" He asked, his voice so quiet Fergus was unsure if he wasn't speaking to himself.

"Yes, Brother Canus." Fergus decided to answer.

"Do you believe it is right to do wrong in order to save that which is good?" Canus again spoke so quietly, Fergus strained to hear each word.

"I...I don't know. I think it would depend on how wrong and how good." Fergus didn't understand why Canus was asking him, a novice, these things? Was this a test? Fergus was tired of word games.

Fergus could see Canus' smile in the setting sunlight. He paused again, deep in thought. Fergus thought maybe he should just leave.

But Canus spoke again, "How wrong and how good. Yes, I see. Well said." Canus spoke more directly. "You are correct. I'm still thinking in the spaces between the pieces. I need to think in absolutes. Black and white, right and wrong, good and evil. Yes."

Now Fergus was completely lost. He suddenly wanted to be somewhere else. He started to ask for permission to leave so he could return to a forgotten chore or visit the latrine or anything thing which would allow him to be anyplace else.

"Let me put the question another way," Brother Canus replied, still staring at the water, "If you had to kill an evil man to save a good man, could you do it?" He shook his head before Fergus could stammer out a reply. "No, I'm still thinking in muddy water." He said crossly. "To be clear, as clear as the water before us, if you had to kill to save your own life, could you do it?"

"I have done, Brother Canus." Fergus replied, not liking this conversation one bit and not doing much to keep his irritation out of his voice. "And you know I have."

Brother Canus looked up from the water, the reflection rippling across his strangely tattooed features. "I'm sorry, Fergus. I meant no insult."

Fergus nodded, already feeling embarrassed at the way he'd spoken.

"We have been discussing our options for the last few days, as you know, but I don't feel we are any closer to a solution."

He watched the water again. "It seems the best we can do is speak in circles. I fear I must send you and Brother Brio out again on another trip. Perhaps we can find another man like Henno who can guide us."

Fergus could hear in his voice what they both knew. Another man like Henno? Not likely.

#

He was Feyr. To know him was to know darkness. None of his followers knew his age; only that their fathers and their father's fathers had followed him. He was a Druid Priest, the most holy of them all. The most feared.

He always wore a bear's paw on his right hand. Many have speculated it wasn't a preserved paw worn as a glove, but his right hand. Part of his payment to the Earth gods for bringing so many souls to them as sacrifice. It was a wicked, horrible looking thing whether real or fabricated. Huge claws glistened in the moonlight as he stood staring out over the water at the shape of the Folcutt Monastery high up on the distant shore. He knew they feared him. He could smell it on them, see it in the way they always kept him in sight, never fully turning their backs on him. He reveled in their child-like ignorance of the true nature of things. If they had seen the horrors that live in the night as he had, they would go mad. They didn't know real fear.

He stood on the barge as his followers dropped anchor and waited for the monk to join them. A sliver of silver moon rose in the night sky surrounded by a splash of stars reflected in the ocean. It was easy to feel like he was surrounded by the eternal emptiness of the night sky. No water, no barge rolling

in the swells, no cowering fools hunched down trying to avoid the cold sea spray.

Feyr heard the tiny row boat approaching. He hissed at the archer to stand ready.

Feyr waited then whistled out a low tune. The archer pulled back his bow, the small rowboat and its lone occupant now just within his sight. There was a faint response carried over the winds; a melodious whistling, a snippet of a song no man ever dared sing.

Feyr glanced at the archer and he put his bow away, the barbed arrow dripped poison as he carefully wrapped it. The rowboat came closer.

Even Feyr was not aware of the identity the monk had assumed when he joined the order of Christians who inhabited his former home. The spy in their midst always wore a wooden mask when they met.

The masked monk guided the row boat alongside the barge. He gripped it to hold them steady as he spoke to Feyr as if they were alone.

He spoke in the Old Tongue, "My Lord of Earth, Holy of the trees, the sky and water, Father Feyr, I come to you as your ever-loyal servant." His voice muffled by the mask, he bowed his head in supplication.

Feyr replied in the same hissing language, they sounded like two snakes fighting, "My brother of Earth, loyal servant, valued by sun, moon and stars. What would you have me know?"

The monk told Feyr of the failed raid, Henno's desertion and their plans to find another to take his place. Feyr listened, asked a few questions and when he felt he understood all that had taken place, he dismissed his spy.

Once the row boat was out of sight, he signaled for his followers to row. He gave his former home one last glance as the barge turned silently. His former and future home, he vowed not for the first time.

#

The next morning, Fergus was allowed to attend the next council session since it concerned he and Brio's next recruiting journey. The council talked endlessly about where they should go, what kind of man they should look for, what provisions to take, what story to tell anyone who asks their business, on and on until Fergus thought his head would explode.

He wanted to jump to his feet and scream, "Just make a decision!", but he didn't. Whenever he felt himself getting angry, he just bowed his head and blocked out all the chatter. He just tried to listen for God's voice, but the question kept coming back: Was it time for him to leave the monastery? He felt more alone, more separated from his fellow Christians than he ever had. When he sat in the chapel, listening to the singing of hymns, it was like he was hearing the echoes of the music, not the hymns themselves. Where he used to feel pride in completing one of his assigned chores, he now felt bored

with the drudgery. Even the food tasted bland. What was wrong with him? How could his faith just leave him?

Was it time to leave?

He raised his head and startled to see Brother Canus staring at him. As if he knew Fergus' thoughts, he nodded. Fergus didn't want to think he was answering the question Fergus didn't want to ask. As he struggled with confusion, the warning bell at the front gate sounded.

The loud clanging announcing the arrival of a visitor.

Fergus saw Brother Canus was smiling at him. "Brothers, I think we will find our discussions to be moot. Let us greet our visitor."

The men moved quickly from the meeting room.

#

Fergus thought Henno looked more dead than alive. Wherever they'd been, they hadn't made friends and they left in a hurry. Volucer was covered in mud, her flanks wet with sweat but she still managed to look like a legate's horse leading a full legion on a triumph.

Henno, not so much. His nose broken, his eyes swollen and the only parts of him that weren't covered in mud were the parts that bled. Despite all that, he dropped from his horses' back energetically and tossed the reins to Fergus with hardly a glance, "Take good care of her, lad. She's earned her oats." He pushed his way through the crowd of curious monks straight to Brother Canus.

"I want a rematch." Fergus heard him say.

Brother Canus nodded. "Of course, Friend Henno, but first you want to see our healer and have something to eat. Maybe a quick wash too."

Fergus could hear Henno's stomach grumble at the mention of food as he walked Volucer toward the stables. "Is that fresh bread I smell, Brother?" He heard Henno ask.

Chapter 14 - Henno's Game

After a good scrubbing and a very short session with Brother Orbene, their best healer, Henno sat across from Brother Canus, the black and white game set up for their rematch between them.

Henno munched on a large chunk of fresh bread as he eyed the board. Brother Canus poured wine. Henno gulped his eagerly.

"I was wrong." Henno said after belching loudly.

"There's no need for recrimination or apology, Henno." Brother Canus answered evenly.

"I don't know what the first thing means, but I know I'm not apologizing." Henno stated. "I'm pointing out that I went about this whole thing the wrong way."

"I see." Brother Canus poured more wine into his cup and moved the first piece on the board. "We can talk while we play."

Henno grinned. "You were wrong too, Brother. It's not a soldier you want. It's not a soldier's job."

Brother Canus waited while Henno waved his hand at the pieces at the game pieces.

"It's like this game. It's not about fighting, it's about winning. We can't expect to prepare for the unexpected, so we have to do the unexpected. We have to be unexpected."

Canus shook his head. "I don't understand."

Henno removed eight of his pieces from the board, leaving just the two at the far right corner. "Your move." He announced.

"But you didn't move yet." Brother Canus replied, "You only removed..."

Henno smiled, "I forfeit my move. Your move."

Canus moved one of his pieces and Henno gave up his turn again. And again. And again. Finally, Canus had moved several of his pieces right next to Henno's two, but since they both were at the edge of the corner, Canus had no more moves.

Henno slapped the table triumphantly, "See?"

"You act as though you've made some grand point here, but all I see is that the game is a stalemate."

"If you can't win, I can't lose." Henno crowed.

Brother Canus waited.

Henno sighed. "This wine is really strong. This was making sense in my head a few minutes ago."

He bit off another mouthful of bread and continued, "Here's what I'm getting at: I can't make your men into soldiers, but you can make me into a monk. At least teach me how to look and talk like one of you priests. A priest on the outside, but a soldier on the inside. Sort of Soldier Priest. With just me and one other, we can move from place to place being mostly ignored. Nobody considers a couple of boring, holy types to be any threat and people tell things to you monks they wouldn't tell anyone else. Am I right?"

"You're referring to the holy rite of confession." Henno could see Canus was starting to understand.

"Right. People love bragging about all the bad things they've done." Henno grinned. "I could tell you some stuff that would..."

Canus interrupted, "It's a holy relationship between the confessor, the priest and God."

Henno waved the objection off. "So we won't do that part. Okay, but you see how two monks could move with much less attention than a dozen soldiers?"

"Yes, I'm with you so far," Canus replied cautiously. "We help you become a Soldier Priest, but who will you choose to be your compatriot? The Priest Soldier?"

Henno smiled and picked up one of his pieces from the board.

"Who do you think, brother?"

#

Fergus was still half-asleep and fully confused as he and Henno rode through the front gate at dawn the next day.

"I'm sorry, Henno. Where are we going again?" He felt like he had to ask for the third time since he'd not understood the previous answers.

Henno laughed loudly and tossed his answer over his shoulder, "I told you, we're going to visit an old friend."

"All my friends are here." Fergus replied, sleepily. He looked over his shoulder as the gate closed behind him. "Back there, I mean. You mean an old friend of yours?"

Henno launched into another round of "The Loudest Whore in Capua" and Fergus decided to wait until he was in less of a

strange mood. Henno's voice echoed up and down the canyon walls with the bawdy lyrics of the soldier's marching song. The bell at the gate rang in salute as they rode away. Fergus turned and saw several dark robed figures watching them go. One was easily Brother Brio, his width the telltale feature. Standing next to him must be Brother Canus. The smaller, thin one was Brother Mita and next to him the largest one must be Brother Orbene. The smallest one on the end must be Brother Penter. Fergus raised his hand to return the salute. They rode slowly through the valley as the sun rose behind dark clouds bringing an eerie grayness to the day. It was cold and the sunrise did little to warm them. Henno apparently didn't feel the cold or the effects of his wounds. Even Volucer seemed to have a skip in her gait. She was clean, well-fed, rested and on the road. Fergus was given one of the smaller work horses from the monastery, a tough little mare named Barrel for her capacity to eat. Despite her girth, she was tireless, fast and very good-natured. Fergus always chose her whenever he traveled. They rode in silence for most of the morning, just enjoying the quiet. "Tell me about this Jessaws fellow you religious types are always singing about." Henno asked as he finished off another apple. Fergus' brow knitted in confusion. "It's Jesus. Jesus of Galilee, the son of God. But, what...?"

Henno interrupted, "He's from Galilee? That's in Judea, isn't it?"

"Yes, he was a Jew. But...?" Fergus answered patiently.

"Ha! That's what I thought. This priest stuff isn't so tough. What else do I need to know?" He asked brightly.

"What else do you need to know about what? What's going on? Where are we going?" Fergus hated to repeat himself, but the more he knew Henno the more he realized repetition was a necessity to get his attention. Repetition and volume.

"You brought everything I told you to? You're in for a good thumping if I find out you forgot anything." Henno's swollen eyes narrowed at Fergus.

"Three days food and water for me and my horse." Fergus recited. "Leather armor, worn under my robe. Heavy cloak, extra shoes and gloves. Sharp knife, short sword and..."

Fergus finished with his impression of Henno's loud parade voice, "That tricky sling and stone of yours!"

Henno glared at Fergus for a second before laughing loudly, "I don't sound like that."

Fergus decided not to argue that it was a perfect recreation, but tried to bring the topic back to one of his many questions at a time. "Where...are...we...going?" He spoke loudly, emphasizing each word as if talking to an imbecile.

Henno glanced at the gray, cloud-covered sky. It must be close to mid-day according to his stomach. "I suppose we can stop for a bit of food. I'll tell you the plan while you make us

something." Henno trotted Volucer to a clearing. Fergus followed muttering. At least he'd achieved the small victory of getting Henno to agree to answer his questions.

#

Fergus had built a fire and the small pot of porridge and bacon was just boiling, but he didn't notice. He was still staring at Henno as if he'd grown an extra set of arms. Henno had donned a borrowed monk's robe and stood grinning at Fergus.

"Brilliant, isn't it?" Henno asked gleefully.

"And Brother Canus agree to this...plan?" Fergus still couldn't comprehend all of it. It sounded a bit mad.

"Aye, he did." Henno nodded. "That porridge looks done to me."

"I'm to teach you how to appear as a Christian priest.

Together, we're going to retrieve artifacts deemed by our order as important enough for us to steal and preserve through the coming dark times. Is that right?" Fergus felt the need to repeat it in his own words, but the plan sounded even madder when he said it. Henno was one of the most un-Christian-like persons he'd ever met.

"That's right. Hand me a bowl, I hate scorched porridge."

Henno was much more interested in eating than explaining.

Fergus filled a bowl and handed it to Henno. He was about to tuck in when Fergus stopped him.

"Wait!" He called out. "First, we Christians always thank God for what we are about to receive." Fergus knelt and clasped

his hands in prayer. He motioned for Henno to do as he did.

Henno awkwardly got to his knees.

"You...I mean, we do this before every meal?" Henno asked.

"Even when nobody is watching?"

Fergus shushed him. His eyes were closed as he prayed. "God is always watching us, Brother Henno." He said with a smile.

#

Henno closed his eyes. The lad is right, he thought, I should get in the habit of acting like a priest even when nobody is around. Except that God of theirs, of course. He's always watching? How does he manage that? Even Jupiter only pays you any attention when you make a sacrifice to him and not always even then. Do Christians think this Jerus is more powerful than Jupiter? Must be why they're always kneeling to him. Tough on the knees though. He shifted to get more comfortable and pulled a stone away from his knee.

Fergus shushed him again. Henno gave him a glare, but Fergus' eyes were still closed. "Repeat after me: Lord, we thank you for this meal and for our health and ask that you bless us on our journey." He waited as Henno repeated it.

"Amen" Fergus nodded for Henno to say it.

"Right, amen." Henno replied, "Now we eat? The porridge will be getting cold if we keep blathering on and on."

They were both hungry and ate quickly. The horses were grazing nearby as the sun made a valiant effort to push through the clouds. Patches of sunlight drifted across the meadow as they

ate giving the wet grass a rolling emerald glow. Henno didn't know so many shades of green existed until he'd come to Ireland. He shook off his day-dreaming with a grunt as he pulled a bit of gristle from his teeth. We're on a mission, he admonished himself, I'll be writing poetry next if I keep up this wool-gathering.

"Now, I betting you're wondering what were up to, right?"

Henno asked as he finished the last of the porridge.

"I've only asked three times." Fergus replied. "So yes, I am curious."

"We're going back to Gratian's estate and this time we're setting our sights a bit higher than a couple of pears." Henno laughed.

"Is that wise?" Fergus asked. He could still hear the snapping jaws of the war dogs as they'd just made it out last time.

"Shouldn't we think about this?"

Henno was packing up his gear. Fergus finished eating quickly and put out the fire.

"Never over-think, my father always told me, but never under-plan either" Henno recited.

"I'm not sure that makes any sense, Henno, isn't thinking and planning the same..." Fergus was trying obviously over-thinking the adage.

"We went in like bears last time, lad." Henno said leaping onto Volucer's back.

Fergus tossed his saddlebag over Barrel's back and did his best to copy Henno's nimble leap. He landed heavily and got a disgruntled snort from his horse.

"So, now we go in like hares?" He smiled as he understood the plan.

"No, not hares either." Henno replied as he rode away.

Fergus frowned in confusion. "What then?"

"Wolves!" Henno called out over his shoulder as he kicked Volucer into a brisk canter.

Fergus gave Barrel a light kick and followed.

"Wolves?" He called out to Henno's retreating back. "Why is it the more answers I get, the more questions I have?"

#

They made their way slowly toward Gratian's villa. Henno insisted they take a very roundabout route. On the way, he told Fergus that it's never a good plan to ride directly to or from your home fort in case you're followed. He left out the story about General Stilicho sending men after him. He didn't like to be thought of as a horse thief. He knew he'd have to deal with Stilicho one day, but not today.

He didn't think it was possible that the injured Tullius had gotten back to Stilicho and that more troops were out after him again already, but he couldn't shake the feeling that they were being followed. It wasn't anything he saw or heard, it was just a feeling of being watched. He turned off the narrow

trail they'd been following which led in the general direction to Gratian's and went deeper into the forest.

He found a spot screened by heavy brush, turned and watched the path.

"What is it?" Fergus whispered.

"Just being cautious." Henno whispered back, patting Volucer's neck to keep her still.

"Isn't that a bit like over-thinking?" Fergus taunted.

Henno gave him a "Shut your bean hole" look. Fergus shut his bean hole and watched.

They waited. Still as stones, quiet as the breeze.

Nothing.

Henno closed his eyes and waited longer still.

Nothing.

Even that feeling of being watched was gone. He wanted to think it was because he was still tired from the long ride after the beating he got in his fight with Titus, but he was never one for simple answers. Ignoring potential threats is a sure way of inviting death. He couldn't stop thinking that whoever was following them was very good at it. Very, very good.

He quietly slid off Volucer, motioning Fergus to do the same.

He handed his reins to Fergus and motioned for him to head down the path again. Fergus nodded, glancing nervously back up the path. Henno gave him a reassuring wink and Fergus

continued on humming a hymn and laughing occasionally as if Henno and he walked together.

Henno waited in the brush, all senses alert. He watched, he smelled and felt for someone else. Soon, he had the feeling again. Someone was moving silently far down the trail. Even the singing birds weren't disturbed. He is very, very good, thought Henno, but so am I, you sneaky bastard.

He waited. Then he saw a dark shape moving through the trees. It wasn't on the path, but on the far side, moving like a shadow as it followed the direction Fergus had taken. Henno moved silently to intercept the shadow. The clouds were thick, it was late afternoon and the heavy foliage added shifting shadows everywhere. Henno lost sight of his prey several times, but managed to circle around to where he thought he'd come up behind him.

Or it. Was it a man?

Henno could be damn quiet when he needed to be, but whoever or whatever was following them seemed to move without touching the ground. Was it a shade from beyond come to drag them to the Underworld?

Henno shook off his childish fears. He slid his knife from his belt without a sound, the heavy coating of oil he'd applied working just as it always did. It's a man, not a shade or a shadow or a demon. It's a man and he bleeds and I'm going to teach him to go skulking after his betters.

Henno slipped around a large tree. He should be just on the other side of that boulder if he was staying on the same line. Henno couldn't hear Fergus' distraction anymore. Was the lad safe?

Henno reached the boulder and readied himself. He heard a soft rustling on the far side and knew his target was within reach. Fast and furious, he thought. Always attack with speed and anger.

He gripped the knife and leapt over the rock with a screeching war cry!

"Henno! Don't!" Fergus cried out, his hands up in surrender.

Henno slammed into the boy knocking him to the ground.

"What are you playing at?" Henno roared. "Where is he?"

Fergus decided to stay on the ground where it was safe. "Who? There's nobody. I thought I saw something and...why did you try to kill me?"

He helped Fergus to his feet. "Just keeping you alert, lad."

Henno laughed covering his concern. "And I never 'try' to kill anyone." He added with a wink. "Come on, we've still got some ground to cover."

They got back on their horses and Henno led them at a gallop for a bit. Maybe it was just my nerves. Maybe I'm just tired, he thought.

Maybe.

#

They left the horses hobbled not far from Gratian's villa, but close enough in case they needed to leave in a hurry again.

It was dark when they climbed a hill overlooking the courtyard and house. Henno had picked the spot carefully. The rising sun would be at their backs, it was well away from the path leading to the front gate and it afforded a fine view of the property.

Fergus took in the reasoning, soaking up the older soldier's knowledge like a sponge.

Henno showed him how to build what he called a "hide". They scooped out the ground the length of their bodies a few inches deep so they'd be below the ground level and made a low cover over the small spot with branches and bushes to match the surrounding vegetation.

"Don't make any drastic changes to the area that will be noticed. You'd be surprised what people see even when they don't know they've seen it. When something changes too much, it stands out. We need to blend in while we watch the goings-on below." Henno said.

They lay down under the brush on their bellies so that just their eyes were above the edge. Fergus could imagine they were invisible from the villa below, even if someone were to look directly at them.

After a few minutes, the cold, wet ground started seeping in through his robe and his smug feeling of invisibility turned to shivering misery.

"Now what?" He whispered.

"Wolves are experts at watching their prey, lad." Henno whispered back, handing him a bit of bread and cheese. "They watch, sometimes for days, until they find the weakest link." Henno grinned at Fergus. "See? We're wolves now. We're going to watch until we find Gratian's weak link."

Fergus watched, but didn't see much to watch. Occasionally, a servant would walk the grounds with a torch or he'd hear a loud voice drift up from the big house. Soon, he started to drift asleep.

He woke with a start when Henno gave him a smack in the back of the head.

"Ow! Why did you...?" Fergus complained.

Henno snapped back with an angry whisper, "Quiet! The wolf that sleeps is the wolf that goes hungry!"

"We've eaten already." Fergus grumbled "Don't wolves take turns so one can sleep while the other...?"

"You want to be clever, do you?" Henno interrupted. "Right then, what have you seen so far?"

"A servant with a torch..." Fergus began.

"How many servants?" Henno asked.

"I don't know. I saw somebody three times." Fergus replied.

"It was the same man the first two times and a different man the third time." Henno gave him another cuff in the back of the head. "Pay attention."

"Alright, but quit hitting me." Fergus complained.

"I'll do worse than that if you fall asleep again, sunshine!"

Henno glared at him. "In the legion, sleeping at your post is a death sentence, lad. You'll put up with a couple of light taps and be happy for it. Right?"

"Yes, Henno." Fergus replied.

"Good. Now, why is it important to know that the third time it was a different man?" Henno asked.

Fergus considered. He looked at the moon's position.

"Because they change who patrols the grounds in the third hour of the night?" He ventured.

Henno nodded, looking impressed. "Good. Although I'd say it's closer to the fourth hour, but good work."

"And the loud voice we heard. Gratian is not an easy man on his servants." Fergus continued.

Henno nodded. "That may be an advantage to us hungry wolves."

Fergus thought there might be some merit in being a wolf after all. He pulled his cloak tighter around him and got as comfortable as possible. It was going to be a long, cold night.

#

Henno was sore, tired and hungry the next morning. Dawn broke behind them as the sky cleared. He welcomed the warm breeze through the trees. They didn't see too much in the night, but he knew it was important for the lad to learn the discipline of spending a cold night on watch.

"Go check on the horses." He told Fergus. "Give them some oats and walk them for a bit without the hobbles. Don't be all day. The villa is waking up and there's bound to be some activity soon."

Fergus nodded without a word. His eyes were red from lack of sleep, but he looked alert and determined. He slid back and made his way quickly and quietly back down the hill.

Henno smiled as he went back to watching the villa. He's learning, he thought.

He was used to soldiers who simply did what they were told, no questions, no back-talk; just a hearty "I hear and obey, Centurion!" He was discovering that he got the best out of Fergus when the lad understood the situation completely. They were both learning.

#

Fergus found the horses quickly. They had not strayed far in the night. He did as Henno told him and made his way back up the hill. He crawled in the hide and retook his place in the dirt next to Henno.

"Did I miss anything?" He asked handing Henno some dried fish and cheese from his saddlebag.

Henno ate quickly so Fergus did the same. He drank deeply from the waterskin and handed it to Henno.

"Not much." Henno replied after taking a long drink.

"Centurion Dandelion made his way around the grounds. Took a

crap over there by the fountain then went inside. What do you make of that?"

"The war dogs are penned up during the day and Dandelion is someone's pet. A child perhaps?" Fergus speculated.

"Could be." Henno replied. "Does Gratian have a wife?"

Fergus thought hard. He'd only been to the estate on a buying trip one time last year.

"Yes." Fergus replied finally. "A hearty eater, as Brother Brio would call her. I don't know if there are any children."

"I think we'd have seen some sign if there were any brats about." Henno grumbled. He stretched his back causing his joints to snap and pop. Fergus grimaced.

"The symphony of age, boy." Henno chuckled, "You'll be playing that tune one day, so wipe that look off."

"I hear and obey, Centurion." Fergus smirked.

"Go fetch a bit more of the dried..." Henno began, but stopped when they heard loud yelling coming from the house.

A servant stumbled quickly out the front door, ducking as an object was tossed at his head. He was quickly followed by a large man, fat and naked from the waist up. The fat man had a willow branch which he whipped the cowering servant with.

"That's Gratian." Fergus whispered. "I was right. He's not an easy man on his servants."

"You were right indeed." Henno replied as they watched him berate the kneeling servant loudly. They could only hear bits

and pieces of Gratian's ranting, but phrases like, "Imbecile", "Taking advantage" and "Back to Carnarth" floated up to them. A large woman joined Gratian. She snatched the branch from Gratian and gave the servant a few smacks of her own. She was holding Centurion Dandelion in one meaty arm who barked loudly at the servant while she beat him.

"Little shit." Henno growled. "That poor servant has to take it from all three of them. Remind me never to be a slave." He quickly added as he remembered Fergus' past, "Sorry, lad. Wasn't thinking."

"It's fine." Fergus replied smiling. "I don't recommend it if other options are available."

The slave was apparently given his orders and was now rushing out the front gate heading down the road toward Carnarth.

"Well, lad, I would say we have found our weak link. Do you agree?" Henno asked with a wolfish grin.

Fergus responded with a very quiet wolf howl.

#

Pug trotted down the road from the villa until he was out of sight, then slowed to a petulantly slow walk.

"Damn all slavers." He muttered. "May Taranis strike them all dead with his lightning."

He'd been born a free man, but was sold into slavery because of his debts. Gratian being the man who bought up his debts meant he would die before his debt was ever paid. He knew he had only himself to blame, but why does life always have to be

so unfair? Why couldn't he have been a rich merchant and Gratian the slave? He lamented his bad luck.

He tugged at his slave collar and thought once again about running away. It's just a dream, of course. Where would he go? Everybody in these parts knows him and he'd probably starve before he got someplace else. Even if he knew where the nearest someplace else was, how would he get there? Walk? His feet hurt him all the time as it was. No, better to just make the best of it. After all, today he would have most of the day to himself. It was a fine morning and he wouldn't be expected back until before sunset.

He heard the sound of horses and was about to duck out of sight when he saw the two coming up the road were Christian monks. An older man and a younger one, both in dark brown robes. A pair of Christians way out here? No need to hide. He might even be able to get a coin or something to eat.

Christians were soft in the head. Always wanting to help others.

He smiled and waved. The two monks waved back.

"Soft." Pug muttered behind his wide smile.

#

"So he blames you because the jeweler forgot to add the bracelet to the package when it was delivered?" Henno asked with shock as he poured poor, mistreated Pug another cup of wine. "You carry the weight of another man's mistake, my friend."

Pug nodded sadly, "It's the lot of a slave's life, Brother Henno." He gulped down the wine. How wonderful it tasted! The wine he managed to steal from Gratian's kitchen was watered down and of very poor quality. The other slaves stole too, but didn't notice how bad the wine was. What did they know of wine? He pushed his cup slightly toward his new friend and Brother Henno immediately filled it up again.

Brother Fergus, his other new friend, nodded sympathetically. He seemed a bit on the quiet side. His eyes looked like they were having trouble staying open. He was obviously not used to good wine either.

The two monks had let him ride double with Fergus to Carnarth and insisted he use his extra time to join them for a meal and a drink. Normally, slaves wouldn't be allowed to sit in the tavern so openly, but the innkeeper must have decided the two monks had no bad intentions and allowed it. It's not like they were going to talk a slave into running away or anything. The innkeeper knew Gratian and must have understood he could use a kind word from two holy men. Besides, the place was nearly full and he must have important things to worry about. As long as the monks paid and didn't bother anyone, they could bring pig in for all he cared.

#

Henno smiled as Pug ranted on. This was working out better than he'd hoped. This particular weak link had every quality

he could've hoped for: no love for his master, but plenty of love for wine and gossip.

The slave Pug downed the last of his cup and glanced fearfully out the window. "It's getting late, Brother Henno." He said rising. "I must go."

"Must you?" Henno replied cheerfully, although he felt they'd gotten all the info Pug could provide them. "We would be happy to share our horses with you for the ride back."

"My horse, you mean." Fergus mumbled sleepily. Henno gave him a sharp elbow to the ribs. "Ouch, I mean. Yes, don't rush off, friend Pug."

Pug seemed to be considering it. There was still wine left in the jug and he licked his lips greedily. Finally commonsense won out. "Gratitude, brothers, but I still have to pick up the bracelet and I should hurry back. I'm sure my masters would welcome two Christians to their home. As I said, his new wife has always been curious about your cult."

"Ah, safe travels then." Henno replied smiling. "And may the Lord Jezzbuzz smite your foes with fire from his golden castle in the mountains."

Fergus groaned and rubbed his face. Henno pretended not to notice and kept smiling in what he thought was a very priest-like way.

Pug left quickly, darting out the door to complete his errand. "Henno, it's Jayzus, not Jezzbuzz." Fergus slurred. "I mean Jesus, not Jayzus." He shook his head to try to clear it.

"Gold castle? Where did you get that from? And he doesn't throw fire from the mountains. Well, sometimes he does punish the unbelievers. The Pharaohs, now those fellows got some fire and locusts too. You know what a locust is, don't you?"

Henno was staring at him. "You don't drink much, do you, lad?" Fergus stared back. "Much what?" He mumbled.

Henno laughed and tried to get the serving girl's attention, but she was too busy pretending to be offended by a table of large men who kept pulling her onto their laps. She's not bad, Henno thought. Then he remembered, I have to act like a priest so that means no carousing with the likes of her. He sighed and tried to think of something else.

Food.

"We need to get some more food into you." Henno said. "I'll be right back."

He made his way through the crowded tavern from their little table in the corner. It was a good-natured crowd, they either smiled or ignored him as he hoped. Most of the customers were singing a local song about a girl who waited for a sailor who would never return. Henno liked it, he'd never heard it before and tried to commit it to memory. By the time he got a tray of meat, bread and cheese from the innkeeper and was returning to their table, he was humming along as everyone sang. Yes, this was working out nicely.

The song ended and there was a cheer followed by a lull before the conversations started to fill the void. In the lull, a young voice sang out a lusty ballad Henno knew very well.

She was the loudest whore in Capua,

her nipples made of gold!

She once wore out two legions,

or so the story goes!

Henno almost dropped the tray when he realized it was Fergus singing at the top of his lungs. The entire place watched in wide-eyed amazement as the young monk stood singing every bawdy verse. They'd never seen any priest sing anything like that before.

Fergus continued to sing his solo, even as Henno reached the table and tugged at his sleeve. Fergus snatched his arm away and sang even louder. Henno tried not to laugh at the shocked looks on the crowd's faces. They looked like a bunch of cows waiting to be watered. Might as well enjoy the show, he thought as he sat down.

As Fergus reached the last verse and grinned at the stunned crowd, Henno stood.

"Amen." He said solemnly and pushed Fergus back into his chair.

The crowd stared for a bit then went back to minding their own business. Fergus looked like he might toss any second. Henno was stuffing the food in his saddlebag.

"Fine voice you have." Henno said smiling. "But I'm thinking that was not the hymn the people were expecting."

Fergus burped. "Did I sing that out loud?" He mumbled.

"Right then, Brother." Henno said helping him up. "Let's be on our way then." He half-guided, half-carried Fergus to the door. He tried not to let on that he saw several tough-looking customers eyeing them suspiciously.

#

"I can walk. Leave off me." Fergus snatched his arm away as Henno was mostly dragging him to the stables where they'd left their horses.

"Then walk and quickly now. We have gotten all the information we need and more attention than we want." Henno whispered fiercely. "You miss a night's sleep, get a bit of wine in you and you fall apart? You've got some toughening up to do, lad." Henno walked on while Fergus stumbled behind him keeping up as best he could. He grumbled, "I'm plenty tough. You think you're so tough? You're maybe not as tough as I think I am." Henno was trying to work that out in his head when a loud voice called out. "Hey! You two. We want to have words with you."

There were four of them, although they were big enough to be considered six.

You're a priest, Henno reminded himself as he turned smiling like a fool. "Peace of the Lord Jeezuzz to you all, my friends."

"It's Jeepus! Jeenus!" Fergus shouted. "I mean, Jeezuzz! Oh, now look. You've got me doing it, you big idiot!"

The biggest of the men approached the weaving, drunken Fergus.

"What kind of Christian you call yourself, little one?"

Fergus replied in an exact copy of the man's voice, "What kind of fool you call yourself, fat one?"

The men exchanged shocked glances which quickly turned to angry glares at the snarling young monk. Henno was sure he could take two of them, three maybe if he got lucky, but all four? No way around it, they were in for a pounding. He stepped forward, trying to calm the situation.

"I'm sorry friend. This young novice only just discovered he is to be rejected from our order for his drunken ways. He is distraught and has been possessed by an evil humor. Pay him no mind. We'll be on our way." Henno gritted his teeth, trying to maintain his smile. Being a Christian was hard. He wanted to punch the lout so badly his knuckles itched.

Fergus wasn't helping. "What are you talking about, Henno? You aren't ready for this yet. You still need more training before you can act like a real priest. Better let me handle this."

Before Henno could stop him, Fergus walked up to the big man who confronted them and poked him in the chest. He had to reach up a bit to do it.

"You don't want to mess with us, fat-butt." He slurred. "I'm almost a legionnaire and he's almost the toughest monk who ever lived. Ever."

Henno couldn't help but be reminded of the little dog on Gratian's estate. Centurion Dandelion was also a tough-talking little shit. As long as he had his war dogs behind him, that is. Hey, does he think I'm just a big, dumb dog? Henno saw the look on the men's faces and realized where this was going. He braced himself.

"Is that right, little man?" The leader of the men poked Fergus back in the chest. He had to lean down a bit to do it. He poked Fergus again in surprise at the hard, thumping sound.

"Are you wearing armor? What kind of priests are you two?"

"The Irish kind." Fergus replied proudly. "I am wearing armor and you know what?"

"What's that?" The big man's eyes narrowed suspiciously.

"You're not!" Fergus grinned just before kicking him solidly in the groin.

It was on.

As the fat man doubled over, Henno pushed him aside and leaped forward to punch the man directly behind. He went down spewing blood from his broken nose. Fergus threw a swift punch at the other man, but it went wide. Fergus stumbled forward into the man, giving Henno time to put his elbow solidly into the third man's temple. His eyes rolled up and he slid to the ground next to his two friends.

Henno saw the man Fergus missed had him by neck. Henno paused.

"Let's see if I'm as tough as you think you are, lad." He

smiled. Fergus gurgled something in response, his eyes started

to close. Henno was about to help when he saw his eyes snap open with an angry fire.

Fergus broke the man's grip by sweeping his arms up, grabbed the man's tunic and gave him a powerful head-butt. Henno saw several teeth stuck in Fergus' forehead as the man fell backwards.

Fergus grinned stupidly as several of his opponent's broken teeth fell to the ground. Fergus rubbed his forehead and examined a bloody tooth he pulled free. "That's not mine." He said. "Where did...?" He looked skyward as if he expected to find it raining teeth.

Henno yanked him quickly up the street to the stables. They were mounted up and riding away before the first of their attackers began regaining his feet.

Henno couldn't help but grin as Fergus struggled to stay in the saddle. Not bad as bar fights go, he thought. Not bad at all.

Chapter 15 - The Road to Gratian's Villa

Fergus tried as hard as he could to not throw up or fall down, but Barrel followed the pace Volucer set, the smaller horse gleefully galloping into the setting sun.

"Henno", Fergus called out weakly. "I need to stop."

"Right then," Henno called out as he left the road and headed toward a stream. "This looks like a good spot."

Fergus tried to slide slowly from his saddle. However it was impossible when your feet refuse to follow your instructions and the world kept spinning. The ground came up and smacked him in the head. A tuft of grass was stuck in his ear as he rolled over on his back.

"Stand up, you!" Henno barked in his loud parade ground voice.

"I swear to God, Henno," Fergus whispered, "I thought I was standing up."

Fergus felt himself being lifted by his collar and dragged.

Henno was helping him to get a drink of fresh water from that beautiful stream. That's so nice of him. Henno was a wonderful man. For all his shouting, all his ignorance about the Lord, he was perhaps the most loyal and trustworthy...

His soliloquy on friendship was reversed when Henno dunked him under the rushing cold water and held him under.

Fergus raged as he struggled to free himself. There are no words, he thought, no words to describe how cruel and stupid

this godless lout is! When I get my feet, I shall tell him what an evil, godless sinner he is for treating me this way!

"You...!" That was as far as Fergus got after Henno allowed him one quick breath before dunking him again. His hands pressed on the soggy bottom trying to scramble away, but Henno had him by both hands now.

"I'm...!" Fergus gasped before another dunking. He grabbed a stone at the bottom and slammed it as hard as he could on Henno's foot. Ha! That should show him!

Fergus jumped up, weaving slightly in the current as Henno hopped around holding his foot. Fergus laughed as he gasped for air and coughed out water. "Let that be a lesson to you, you godless heathen!"

Henno snarled and Fergus suddenly felt like he'd made a huge mistake. "Calm yourself, Brother Henno! Remember, God is always watching!" He backed up as Henno advanced with his fists balled and his eyes blazing.

"Watch this, Jesus!" Henno threw a punch to Fergus' gut, forgetting they were both wearing armor underneath their robes. Henno yelled in pain as Fergus laughed, "See? The Lord protects the worthy and punishes the stupid!"

His braying laugh turned to a yelp of surprises as he was lifted from the stream and tossed like a rag to the bank. He hit the ground so hard, he saw stars. Then an angry moon loomed over him. No, it wasn't the moon. It was...once again he was dragged to the water.

"Stupid, am I?" Henno growled. "Smart your way out of this, lad!"

Much of Henno's angry ranting was lost on Fergus, his head was underwater for most of it. The bits he heard were along the lines of "...Dandelion...", "...dog, am I?" and "...Insolent, Sophist, patrician snob!". The last one he wasn't sure of, his ears were clogged with water by that time.

Eventually, he found himself on the bank again. He was drenched, cold and feeling much more sober. He would find it in his heart to forgive Henno. Our Lord Jesus teaches us that in each man is a divine spark of goodness and for all Henno's faults, he was still...an evil Godless bastard!

Henno had vaulted on Volucer's back and, grabbing Barrel's reins, he took both horses away at a trot.

"A bit of a run will do you good, lad!" He called out. "Try to keep up."

Fergus shouted a litany of very un-Christian words as he lurched after him.

#

Henno was enjoying the beauty of the landscape as the sun set behind the distant mountains. The night birds were beginning to sing out their songs of love and want, the forest creatures were stirring for their nightly hunts and Fergus had finally stopped yelling.

He took a quick glance back to make sure the lad wasn't face down on the road. Fergus was marching angrily a short distance

back. Head up, chest out and marching as much like a legionnaire as any recruit Henno had ever trained. If he wasn't covered in mud and wearing his monk's robe, he might even pass for a real soldier, he thought.

"Feeling better, lad?" Henno called out congenially. "Keep in mind, your answer will determine whether you ride or walk."

He saw the boy take a deep breath and mutter either a prayer or more curses before he slapped a smile on his face and shouted back, "Why yes, Brother Henno. I feel quite refreshed after my bath and walk. And yourself?"

Henno laughed loudly and pulled Volucer to a stop. Barrel looked back, waiting for his friend to catch up. Fergus ran the last few steps briskly and vaulted over Barrel's back only to get his knees caught and sprawl to the ground again. Henno watched passively, using great restraint not to laugh, as the boy painfully climbed on his horse with as much pride as he could muster.

They headed down the road again.

After a bit, Henno decided they should review the information they'd gleaned from the talkative slave Pug and form a plan.

"So, we've got a fair bit of useful gossip from our disgruntled weak link, wouldn't you say?" Henno started cheerfully.

Fergus sniffed indifferently and replied, "True enough."

Henno tossed him an apple from his bag. "Enough of your pouting. You let yourself get drunk while on duty. You needed

sobering up if we're to do the job we've set out to do. You might not like how it's done, but you're going to admit it worked if you're the honest young man I think you are."

Fergus munched the apple, swallowed with some effort. "You're right. I'm feeling sober now. I'm even starting to get hungry."

"Good for you!" Henno reached over and clapped him on the shoulder. "We'll find a good spot to stop for the night and draw up our plan of attack."

Henno's treatment had worked wonders. It was a tried and true method of dealing with soldiers who drank too much and apparently it worked on young, mouthy Christians too.

#

The fire crackled brightly under the canopy of leaves and stars. It'd be a cold night, but a dry one. The hare sizzled and popped over the open flame, giving Henno and Fergus both an extra anticipation for the meat. Fergus couldn't remember being so hungry. He surmised all the confrontation and regurgitation had something to do with it.

"Pretty handy with that toy of yours, aren't you?" Henno referred to Fergus' skill with his sling. He'd come back with two plump hares almost as soon as Henno had the fire going. Fergus shrugged. "It was that or watch my master's sheep be carted off."

Henno carved a hunk from one hare and Fergus did the same.

Fergus was surprised and pleased to see Henno waiting with his hands clasped in prayer. He followed his example.

"My turn." Henno said, his eyes closed. "Thanks for the grub, Jesus. You're a good god. Amen." He beamed proudly.

"Well said." Fergus smiled. He's learning, he thought.

As they ate, Henno wanted Fergus to recite everything he remembered about what Pug had revealed to them. Pug was a disgruntled, free-flowing fountain of gossip. He was only too eager to tell tales on his master as long as Henno had kept pouring.

First, Gratian was Vibius Claudius Gratian. A former senator, no less. He'd become involved in some kind of scandal and fled Rome. Pug said the prevailing gossip among his fellow slaves was that Gratian had tried to cheat one of the emperor's friends and was under a death sentence. One of the few places a man could run and not be in the shadow of Rome's eagles was Ireland. He had bought his way into the Senate using his gains from a thriving import business. When he ran afoul of the throne, he was able to slip away somehow, most likely with the help of high-ranking members of the military who were opposed to Emperor Theodosius. He managed to cart his considerable fortune and nearly all his worldly possessions to this remote part of this forgotten island at the edge of the world.

He was a cruel man, prone to excess in everything as was the fashion among the Roman upper classes. He went to considerable

expense to build the small villa they lived in and tried his best to maintain his distance from others while enjoying many vile sins of the flesh.

Henno grinned at that part. "At least, that's how you see it." "Jesus taught us that every man is born in sin. Some seem to enjoy it more than others." Fergus said solemnly. Henno kept his opinion to himself and nodded to continue.

His new wife Ruttella Octavius Albina, was a distant cousin and widow of the former governor of some minor province of Britain. She claimed interest in Christianity, but Pug had never heard of her meeting with any priests. She too had excessive appetites, but Pug only shivered when pressed for details and changed the subject.

He also mentioned briefly how a small group of young children had recently tried to steal some fruit from the villa gardens but were chased off by the dogs. Henno's face had clouded at Pug's laughter over how the "children" wet themselves crying for their mothers as they ran off into the night.

After a few more cups of wine, Pug revealed that in recent weeks there has been more messengers coming and going from the villa. He'd noticed a change in his master's actions recently. There was an inventory of household goods, pulling items from storage areas, etc. Almost as if Gratian was planning on moving again. He was most interested in any news he could get and had been uncommonly welcome to travelers recently.

"Not bad," Henno admitted. "You remembered more than I thought you would."

"The strong wine made it hard for me to talk and stand, not listen." Fergus replied.

"Or sing!" Henno brayed loudly as Fergus scowled in embarrassment.

Soon they were greedily gnawing on the bones, stomachs full to bursting and Fergus couldn't help but feel a bit like a wolf. Their wet robes drying nearby and both had changed into the extra robes Henno had insisted on bringing. Fergus thought they both looked very little like holy priests though. Between Henno's broken nose, his two black eyes and their assorted cuts and bruises, they both looked more like drunken soldiers in borrowed robes. Which, Fergus thought with a small amount of pride, was more accurate lately. He shook that thought. This wouldn't do.

"Henno, we can't go to Gratian looking like this." Fergus said as they finished off the last of their meal. "We look like...we look like exactly what you'd expect someone to look like after a drunken brawl."

"Fergus, first off, that was hardly a 'brawl'. I've been in plenty of brawls and that was no more than a minor dust-up at best." Henno bragged. "Not that you didn't hold your own. You broke the skinny one's grip just like I showed you. The head-butt needs some work."

Fergus rubbed his head. The blood had stopped, but he had a nice bump to show for it. He could still remember the look on the skinny man's face as he smashed his forehead into him. He should feel guilty about it, but he didn't. He would pray for forgiveness later and decided the painful headache would be his penance.

"If he asks, we'll say we fell off our horses or something. Now, let's talk about strategy." Henno grinned. "I've been thinking, since we know Gratian's wife is interested in the cult of Jesus."

"The church of Jesus Christ. Not a cult." Fergus sighed.

"Exactly." Henno said. "Gratian seems to be looking for outside information. We'll say we're traveling monks on a...what do you call it?"

"A pilgrimage?" Fergus suggested.

"Right! One of those. We'll worm our way in and when everyone's asleep, we'll scout around a bit to see if there's anything worth...what are we calling it? I don't like the sound of 'stealing'." Henno scowled.

"We're saving." Fergus answered. "We're saving that which deserves to be saved."

"Good enough then. We'll find something worth saving then." He beamed.

"That's it?" Fergus asked. It seemed like there should be more of a plan.

"We're not on a military mission now, lad." Henno said, looking very serious. "We're not soldiers. We're...doing God's work, right?" He suddenly smiled.

Fergus liked the sound of that. Henno seemed to be understanding how important their task was now. "Yes, Brother Henno. We're doing God's work."

Chapter 16 - The Villa of the Lady and Lord Gratian

You are a fat bastard, Henno thought as he smiled his big, toothy, idiot smile at Gratian. One tremendous, foul smelling, ill-tempered bastard who was under the impression he was not only brilliant, but beautiful. What I wouldn't give to have him in my cohort for a month, he thought. A day. He'd run the barrel of pig fat until he fell, toss him in the river, fish him out and run him again. Over and over.

"Yes, friend Gratian." Henno nodded as he realized Gratian was waiting for some kind of reply. "You are most certainly correct in that. Wouldn't you agree, Brother Fergus?"

"Certainly correct." Fergus replied in quiet sobriety. Henno noticed the lad still looked pale and he was only sipping his wine. Too bad, he thought, it's excellent. He gulped his greedily.

Gratian laughed loudly. "I must say Brother Henno, I am enjoying our conversation immensely." He stuffed a handful of olives in his mouth. "You are not like the other priests who've come sniffing around here." He smiled briefly at Fergus who was trying to smile as he gagged at the sight of olive juice running down his host's rolling chins.

"I'm not?" Henno thought maybe he'd done something wrong. "I'm sure you're mistaken. I'm just like all the other Christian priests. I'm sure of it." He laughed nervously.

Gratian's eyes narrowed suspiciously while his voice betrayed not a hint of suspicion. "No, you're quite different. For one, you don't seem above getting into a scrap on occasion."

Henno countered nervously, "Ah, my recent injuries. No, fighting is against our...rules, of course. Jesus..." He smiled triumphantly at Fergus. "Yes, Jesus, says fighting is wrong. I...uh...fell from my horse?" He added.

"Both of you?" Gratian asked reaching for another handful of olives as he glanced at Fergus' recent cut forehead.

"Yes!" Fergus blurted out. "We saw a...serpent, yes, a snake on the road. Our horses bucked and we both went for a tumble." Fergus gave a very real shudder.

The lad must have a problem with snakes, Henno thought. Just enough truth to make the lie work.

Gratian's grin made it clear he was skeptical of Fergus' less-than-convincing tale. "A snake, you say? Must be a very lonely fellow. I can't recall ever seeing another. Have you, my sweet?"

"Why must you always be so suspicious, my dear?" Ruttella, his wife, entered. She was an impressive woman; in size if not in beauty. Great care had gone into her clothing and hair and it was clear she wanted to display her most expensive jewelry and most expansive cleavage. She was carrying the small white dog they called Centurion Dandelion who locked eyes with Henno.

Get your eyes off me you little shit, Henno thought. They both growled at each other before Fergus interjected.

"Why, what a perfect little dandelion. He looks to be your constant companion." Fergus smiled. The dog recognized him too and wagged his tail accommodatingly.

"He likes you." Ruttella smiled at Fergus. "You must have a good soul." She gave Henno a decidedly wicked look and added, "You must have a very baaad one." The way she drew out the word "bad" reminded Henno of the kind of woman who was having "baaad" thoughts herself.

Gratian was paying little attention to his wife's attentions.

"That spoiled mutt works for his keep like everyone here."

As Gratian turned to shout for more wine, Ruttella gave Henno a wink and ran her tongue over her full lips. Henno liked a woman with appetite and he couldn't help but give her a responding wink. Fergus' eyes looked like they might pop out of his head.

Maybe it was the wine, maybe it was the fact that this was the first opportunity he'd had for...this kind of thing in too long or maybe it was all this play-acting was boring him, but he'd be damned if he was going to let Fergus spoil this opportunity.

"My young friend is very interested in literature and history." Henno said to Gratian. "We've heard tell you have a very well-stocked library."

"My dearest, I'm sure the young priest would appreciate seeing your collection." Ruttella smiled at her husband sweetly. "I

would like to show Brother Henno my...garden before you set the guard dogs free for the evening."

"Hm?" Gratian waited as one of his slaves poured wine into his massive cup. "You'll bore the man to death with your blather about fruit trees."

"I'm not a priest yet, my lady", Fergus stammered, "I'm only a novice, but I'm sure we both would like to see your library, sir."

"No!" Henno said too loudly, then recovered politely, "I'd much rather see some...garden. If I could be so bold as to impose on your good wife." Henno saw the flush of blood rising into Ruttella's face and he felt the same rush of blood elsewhere. Damn this robe anyway, he thought.

"Very well, I suppose I don't have to worry about you two, do I?" He laughed loudly. "Follow me, young man." He lurched to his feet. The slave tried to help him and got a backhand to the face for his efforts. "Don't touch me!" He roared before switching to a conversational tone as if nothing had happened. "Don't be too long, dear. Our guests have a long journey ahead of them in the morning."

#

Fergus' head still ached as he walked with Gratian down the marble hallway to his library. It was at the far end of his villa. Gratian stank of wine and mildew.

"You two monks are a far ways from home then?" Gratian was prying.

"Our monastery is in Britain." Fergus countered. He was sworn not to reveal the location of the abbey.

"Ah, Britain. I've only visited briefly and that was to change ships. Terrible mess. Armies always fighting. If not with the locals then with each other. Do you know General Marcus?" The last question came quickly. He eyed Fergus carefully as they walked as if Gratian was attempting to catch Fergus in a lie. "I'm afraid I've not had the pleasure." He answered honestly. "We've had little to do with the army."

"Good man, Marcus." Gratian rumbled. "Knows who his friends are. And who his friends are not." He winked at Fergus as though he was imparting some hint of a secret. Fergus only nodded and smiled.

Gratian trailed his beefy hand along the wall to steady himself as they walked. He put his other hand on Fergus' shoulder.

"Too much wine, I'm afraid." He shrugged at Fergus. "Getting old, I suppose. You don't mind helping me walk, do you?"

Fergus felt as though he was being leaned on by a horse, but replied graciously, "Of course not, friend Gratian. As our lord said, 'Carry each other's burdens'." Gratian leaned on him even more, making Fergus grunt, but Gratian was too busy talking to notice.

"Interesting thing this Christianity of yours." He droned on. "Of course, I converted when it became fashionable to do so, but truth be told, I never really got on with this new

religion. The gods of my father's fathers have always served me best. No offense intended, of course. Ah, here we are. My priceless collection of art. What do you think?"

Fergus started to reply, but found he couldn't.

They had entered under a large archway into a room filled with tapestries covering every inch of the walls. They depicted the most graphic sexual scenes imaginable and Fergus tried not to imagine such things. There were statues of a similar nature and a small shelf filled with scrolls.

Fergus cleared his throat and tried to speak again. "I see you have a library as well." Inwardly he prayed for strength. They were wasting their time here. He could see nothing of value; only the most vile representations of humanity. He was disgusted by every...that's interesting, the way that mermaid with four breasts was...No! He had to be strong!

Gratian was breathing heavily and Fergus realized he'd been a stupid fool. Gratian's hand on his shoulder squeezed tightly as he mumbled, "You're a reader, are you? You'll like this. Let's sit down. I'm feeling a bit weak."

Fergus' hands clenched into tight fists.

#

Henno clenched his hands into tight fists.

He thought of gutted fish, bloody swords and flaming arrows.

It didn't help. He was as erect as Mount Olympus and as hard as a tax-collector's heart. Damn this robe! Ruttella smiled as she saw the effect she was having on him.

She stood by the fountain, completely naked and framed in the moonlight. She'd dropped her loose robe as soon as they were out of sight of the villa.

"I can see you like what you see, Priest." She murmured in a throaty whisper. "Unless you're hiding a gladius under that robe."

He was, but it was strapped to his back.

"We...um...Christians have...promised...uhhh. Damn." Henno couldn't stop staring at her. He did enjoy a woman who enjoyed a hearty appetite! "Jeezness! That's the fellow. We promise him not to...do things...with ladies." He felt like he should at least make an attempt to act like a priest.

She laughed quietly, "But you're still a man, aren't you, Brother Henno?"

"What do you think?" Henno nodded at his lower half. "I'll knock one of these trees over if I'm not careful."

"I'd like to see that." She breathed as she backed up against the pear tree waving him closer. "See if you can knock this one down."

Henno glanced at the little white dog which sat nearby scowling at him.

"Would you mind shooing that little shi...the little dog away? I don't think I can do my best in front of an audience." Henno muttered but his feet were already shuffling forward almost against his will.

"Soon, you won't notice him. Or anything else for that matter. Except me." She laughed again in her mocking way. Henno was getting tired of her smug attitude, but he also realized she was right. They could be in the middle of the Coliseum surrounded by thousands of jeering drunken plebeians and he'd still want her. His lust was building out of control. His head swam as if drunk, but he felt a clarity of purpose like what he felt before going into battle.

"What about your...husband?" Henno said as he stepped closer. He could smell her perfume; a sweet, musky scent like boiling cinnamon filled his nose and inflamed him further.

"He won't be bothering us. I put something in his wine. He'll be fast asleep for the rest of the night. What are you waiting for? You know you can't resist."

"I can't. What did you do to me?" Henno stepped closer still. He could feel the heat from her body coming off her in waves. "I put something in your drink too. Now stop talking and..." Henno covered her mouth with his and felt her gasp as he pushed his robe up and thrust forward.

#

Fergus was beginning to panic! He'd only punched Gratian once. He didn't even think about it, he only wanted the slobbering pervert to get away from him. The fat beast fell over and was now on the floor.

I must be getting stronger, Fergus thought. I felled the ox with one punch!

"Gratian! Forgive me!" He checked his breathing. "Thank the Lord, you still live. Can you sit up? Gratian?" Fergus realized the man was completely unconscious. He roughly slapped his face a few times in an attempt to wake him. Then once more for his disgusting advances on Fergus.

"Forgive me, Lord." Fergus prayed. "I acted in anger. Please forgive my violence and help me show this...sinner the light of your glory." He took a deep breath and calmed himself.

Think! What would Henno do?

First, assess the situation. Gratian was unconscious. Fergus was alone among his collection. He should search the room for anything that might be less sinful and worth adding to the future generations greater good.

"I really don't want to do this." He muttered. Still, there may be a chance. The detail on that statue of the satyrs and the nymphs was impressive. It might actually be...stop! Even if it wasn't depicting an orgy of mythological creatures in physically impossible positions, how would he sneak it out of here?

Think! What would Henno do?

Of course! The library! There must be something there worth saving. It can't all be pornography. There's not that much sexual deviancy in the world to cover an entire bookshelf! Speaking of what Henno would do, what was Henno doing?

#

He wasn't a man. He wasn't on the ground. He wasn't breathing air. He was a thrusting beast, flying through the sky with a struggling prey clenched in his talons and he was breathing fire. For the third time in a row.

Deep in the back of his mind, he knew he should be doing something else. What was it? Did it really matter? All he could think about was knocking this damn tree over. Pears dropped from the branches. One hit him in the shoulder, but he scarcely noticed. Another fell between her heaving, voluminous breasts. She leaned her head down and bit into it, offering it to him. They ate it greedily, their mouths meeting again in the middle as pear juice covered their chins.

This wasn't sex or love or lust; this was madness. He was mad with desire. How long had they been at it? Again in the back of his mind he was thinking he was setting some kind of personal record, but there was something else. She pulled at his hair as her voice rose in another wailing orgasm and he forgot everything else.

#

Fergus yawned, trying his best to stay awake. He'd been there for hours and found several treasures; a play by the Greek named Aeschylus called Prometheus Bound which he'd never heard of before; some very funny poetry by one of his favorites, Plato. And most interestingly of all, a list of prominent Roman citizens along with lists of items which Gratian had

sold them. Fergus decided this might be missed and decided to make a copy of it.

He'd found a quill and ink, but no blank paper. He was forced to use the blank side of a very lengthy scroll which contained graphic details on the female anatomy and how best to pleasure each area. He had no idea if it was accurate, but felt like if anything among the pornographic material was worth saving then perhaps future generations of men and women would benefit from this knowledge.

Plus, it was very good paper.

He began copying down the names, locations and lists of items as quickly as he could, but it was a very extensive list. He yawned again, then his blood froze with fear!

"Master?" A slave's voice called from the hallway! "Do you require anything?"

Fergus did his best to emulate the sleeping lout's voice.

"Leave us alone or I'll beat you bloody!" He relaxed as he heard the bare feet running back down the hallway.

The fright made him have to urinate, but he dared not leave the library in case he was seen. Gratian was still unconscious. Had he been drugged? As tempting as it was for Fergus to think he was strong enough to put a man down like that, he knew even the boxers in the arena woke after a few seconds of being knocked senseless.

He sighed with relief as he pissed into a large urn with pictures of women riding Centaurs. And Centaurs riding women,

of course. Fergus couldn't help but feel he was missing something in life. Celibacy is supposed to be difficult, he thought. It is a test. We devote ourselves to God and can have no other love. Although, none of these illustrations seemed to involve "love" in the strictest sense. His mind drifted as he shook out the last drops while staring at a nearby statue. He wondered what it would be like to have a woman with six arms? He realized he was still shaking himself and quickly dropped his robe. He returned to the table.

"I must stay focused." He muttered to himself. "I must not give in to the temptation which surrounds me. Jesus, give me the strength to do your will." He began copying the document again.

Occasionally, his eyes strayed but he soon became fascinated with the information he was copying. It seemed Gratian was not only an honest merchant but a dishonest one as well. He made a very substantial living acting as a buyer and seller of stolen goods. According to this document, he'd brokered the sale of hundreds of stolen items to a select group of clients. Several dozen high-ranking members of the Senate or members of prominent old families made up the client list. Fergus recognized the family names, if not the individuals. Julians, Claudians, Octavians; the best and the oldest of the Roman Patrician class, most claiming ancestry back to Romulus and Remus themselves.

The most intriguing aspect of the document was that some of the items listed appeared to be in code. At first, the listings appeared to be some kind of inventory designation but the more he read, the more he realized it was an elaborate code. He was so tempted to try and break it, but Gratian snorted and mumbled. He continued his copying as fast as he could.

He was running out of time. He hoped Henno was safe.

#

Henno was sure his heart was going to explode. His legs ached, his back felt like it was full of broken glass and his lungs were burning. They exploded together again, panting into each other's sweat-covered faces.

"Enough!" Ruttella cried. "I can't take anymore, my sweet priest!"

"I'll say when it's enough." Henno growled in her ear. "You wanted this, you witch." He started the primitive rhythm again with renewed intensity.

"No!" She protested weakly. "You can't possibly still..." Her words trailed off into another wail of pleasure as Henno grabbed her prodigious butt and lifted her from the ground. She wrapped her legs around his waist as her eyes rolled back in her head.

"Think I need some magic potion to wear out the likes of you?" He snarled. Anger was a potent aphrodisiac all by itself. When

combined with a powerful aphrodisiac, it was proving to be more than the appetites of even Ruttella had ever experienced.

#

When Henno's mind cleared, he was sure he was dying. He felt as though a boulder was lodged on his chest and each breath was a nearly impossible labor. He was startled by a snorting snore in his ear and realized Ruttella was lying on top of him. They were on the ground, having fallen in orgasmic exhaustion. She gave a blissful sigh and wiggled on him as though she slept on her favorite cushion.

He pushed with all his might, but barely shifted her. His arms felt like he'd been in a shield wall for a month. He was completely spent. Is this the end, he thought? He felt her wiggle slightly and the white furry face of his hated enemy, Centurion Dandelion, appeared over her shoulder staring down at Henno with tiny little eyes narrowed in anger. It gave him a low growl. He could only moan. This can't be happening, he thought.

Then two more faces appeared. His horse Volucer and the other one, Barrel. Both loomed over him with curious looks. Henno could almost hear Volucer ask...

"Henno, what are you doing?"

It was Fergus. He too was standing over him looking down.

"Help me shift this ravenous Medusa, lad. She's crushing me out of love." Henno grunted.

Fergus was trying to figure out where to grab the snoozing naked woman. "Medusa?"

"Well, she turned part of me to stone anyway." Henno slid out from under her as Fergus tugged gently on her ankle, averting his eyes as he did so.

The small white dog snarled and snapped at the naked Henno.

"Henno, where is your robe?"

"It's around here somewhere, but first I've a debt to settle with this little shit." He slid his gladius from its sheath and advanced on the yapping dog.

"No! You don't need to do that!" Fergus stepped in between them. "We've won. We've got what we came for and we need to go!" There were shouts coming from the villa. Gratian must have awoken. "Now!" Fergus hissed urgently.

"But that little mutt challenged me and he should..." Henno couldn't imagine letting such an insult go.

"Challenged you? Listen to yourself." Fergus countered.

"You're thinking like a soldier. Let it go. We've won."

Fergus tried to vault onto Barrel's back, but ended up awkwardly sprawled across the horse's neck. While he recovered, Volucer snorted and pawed the ground as if reinforcing Fergus' adamant pleas.

"Right then. Forget you, Centurion Dandelion." Henno turned to mount Volucer. "Live and fight another day." As he spoke, the small dog ran up behind him, nipped his ankle and scurried away before he could react. Henno reached for his gladius

instinctively, then laughed. He climbed on Volucer's back, still naked.

"Henno, your robe." Fergus admonished.

"No time, lad." Henno brayed. "We best be gone and not forgotten!"

"Henno, my love." Ruttella was trying to get to her feet. "You can't leave. Take me with you."

"You're an evil witch, Ruttella, but a fun ride!" Henno called out as they headed for the front gate. He glanced at the pear tree. He could swear it was leaning a bit. "We didn't knock it down, but it knows it's been in a fight!"

Ruttella cursed and threw pears at them as they rode away into the night.

Chapter 17 - The Road to the Abbey

Dawn was breaking over the treetops. The sun and the clouds were having a beautiful debate over who would rule the sky that day. Rays of sunlight, like God's fingers, reached between dark clouds caressing patches of the wet, green ground. Fergus had been brought to Ireland against his will, but more and more it felt like home to him. Especially when he could find the time to just sit and admire the beauty of the countryside.

Henno sat shivering in the cold stream while Fergus built a fire. They'd ridden in a wide circle until they were sure they were not being followed. Henno was up to his neck in the rushing water.

"Feeling better?" Fergus asked, doing his best to hide his smile.

"I've never felt better in my whole life." Henno said through chattering teeth. He looked down at himself. "No permanent damage anyway."

Fergus couldn't help himself, he had to ask. "You and the lady were...together for three hours? Constantly? You didn't stop for wine or conversation or anything?"

Henno grinned despite the freezing water. "Conversation?"

Henno shook his head in confusion. "What would we talk about? She bewitched me. Pure and simple. Now, I'm known throughout the empire for my skills in bed, but this was something else."

He rose from the cold river. "Finally, I'm at parade rest." He muttered as he flung the water off with his hands. He stood by the fire, hopping from foot to foot as he dressed quickly.

"We need to get this back to the monastery as quickly as possible, Henno. Brother Penter is an expert on word and number codes. I'm sure he'll be able to decipher it." Fergus said anxiously.

Henno yawned expansively. "I could do with a few hours of kip."

Fergus knew if Henno laid down, he'd be out for the rest of the day. Most likely the night too.

"Really? You need a nap, do you?" Fergus began unstrapping his saddlebags from Barrel. "She wore you out then. I suppose it's understandable. You're old. It's for the best. You just have a seat and I'll..."

Henno kicked dirt on the fire. "Old, am I?" He roared, suddenly full of energy. "Wore me out, you say? Let me tell you lad, I'm as hearty as a rutting stag. She was vigorous, I'll give her that, but I'm far from worn out. What are you standing there gawking for? We've got miles to go today."

Fergus nodded apologetically. "I'm sorry, Henno. You just looked a bit pale. You're sure you're not too tired?"

Henno gave him a snarl and jumped on Volucer's back, gave her a kick and galloped away. Fergus followed.

Soon they were on the road back to the monastery singing The Loudest Whore in Capua at the top of their lungs.

#

Maybe it was the potion Ruttella had slipped in his wine or the relaxed euphoric feeling of several hours of crazed lovemaking; maybe it was the warm day, the beautiful, sun-warmed emerald countryside rolling by on the back of a magnificent horse; maybe it was that Henno thought Fergus was a good listener or perhaps it was just that he needed to talk. "There's something I'm confused by." He said as they rode.

"This confession practice of yours. You're telling me, that no matter what a man does, no matter how vile or evil or wrong, as long as he goes to one of your priests and tells him about it, he's forgiven and goes to the afterlife with a clean slate?"

"That's essentially it, but..." Fergus began.

Henno laughed. "I bet that makes for some wild tales around the supper table every night, eh? Come on, what's the worst thing you've ever heard confessed? Don't be shy. Tell me all the details and don't leave out a thing."

Fergus gave him a shocked look. "The holy sacrament of confession is a sacred bond between the confessor, the priest and God. A priest is sworn never to reveal what he hears. It would never happen."

"I suppose that makes it easier then, but I still can't imagine why anyone would confess their crimes. You never know. You might be yapping away, then the priest hears there's a reward and before you know it, you're hauled off by the city

guard." Henno gave him a wink. "No, best to keep your mouth shut and take your chances in the after, I say. Besides, this God fellow is all about the forgiving, so why not wait until you're in his palace before you do any confessing?"

Fergus was trying to explain several things at once. "It's not a palace, but..."

"You said God sits on a throne, right?" Henno interjected.

"Yes, but..."

"You can't have a throne without a palace, lad. Where would it be? Out in some swamp somewhere? You're not being realistic."

"God isn't meant to be thought of as..."

"And how do I know the priest I'm talking to isn't going to get in his cups one night and start talking to the wrong person? They tell someone, that one tells another and before you know it, the whole empire knows things that's none of their affair."

"As I said, a priest is sworn..." Fergus began, then he realized why Henno was asking. "Henno, is there something you'd like to confess?"

"What? You're daft. I've done plenty of things you Christians are against, some as recent as a few hours ago." Henno laughed a bit too loudly. Fergus noticed he was speaking faster too. Sure signs of someone hiding something. "But that doesn't mean I'm feeling bad about any of them. You holy-types are all the same. No matter what you call your religion, and I can't keep track of all of them these days, it's always about making

people feel bad about themselves so we have to come to you for advice. Now I don't mind handing over a coin or two to have my future told and if I have to slice the neck of a chicken or even a goat to get the best, so be it. But crying about the past, that's not for me, lad."

Fergus kept quiet and just looked at Henno as they rode.

"And there's no point in giving me the eyeball like that. I don't do things I feel guilty about." Henno said as his voice was taking a harder edge. "Some things just need to be done. If I worried about being punished for every bad decision, I'd never had made Centurion, I can tell you that. What would my father think of me then? I know he's proud of his son. First Centurion of the First Cohort of the 10th? There's no father who wouldn't be proud of a son who'd done that." Henno was speaking to himself as much as Fergus now. "The past is over and done and there's no dealing with it."

"Tell me about your father." Fergus said quietly.

"Why? What'd you bring him up for?" Henno asked sounding annoyed.

"It's just that I don't remember you talking about him much. He was in the legion, wasn't he?"

"He wasn't just in the legion, he was the legion. He was the aquilifer of the 10th. Do you know what that means?"

Fergus shook his head, not wanting to interrupt.

"It means you are the heart and soul of the legion. You carry the legion's standard, the eagle itself. You carry it into

battle and you defend it to your last breath. My mother was a...well, she and my father fell in love. She followed the legion, they saw each other when they could. Long enough to put me in her belly anyway. I was born on the march to retake Gaul. I remember the day my father was given the legion's eagle. He looked like a god. I wasn't much older than you then and was a raw recruit. The other soldiers treated me different from then on, let me tell you."

He rode in silence for a bit. Volucer snorted as if wanting him to continue the story. Henno patted his neck and went on. "It was a skirmish, not even a full-on fight." He spoke so quietly, Fergus had to strain to hear. "Two cohorts of foot, one squadron of cavalry; I was in the aquilifer unit with my old man, not officially of course. He just let me march with him sometimes. We were supposed to be meeting up with some local tribe's leader, I don't even remember what tribe. Funny, isn't it? Anyway, it was quiet. Beautiful day. My father was stepping proud, holding the eagle high for all to see. The Tribune was on horseback, Sullus was his name. Good man. Young, but knew his stuff, you know?" Henno smiled as he remembered.

Then his face darkened. "Damn barbarians. We were under a truce. We carried the branch. It was an ambush. I heard it, but I didn't know what I heard. It wasn't my first fight. Hell, it wasn't even the first time I'd been ambushed, but

they all started out noisy. This one started out quiet. Just a whisper of air. The Tribune's horse didn't even notice. I remember my father clearing his throat like he wanted to cough, then he stumbled a bit. I looked over and saw he had an arrow sticking out of his chest. I was as surprised as he was. He just stared at it. He looked at me and I saw the eagle slipping through his hands. The first noise I remember was Sullus shouting at me. 'Take the eagle!' he shouted. I didn't even think, I grabbed it just as it fell. Just as he fell. Then it was like somebody ripped open the day and every noise you could think of blew out. There was shouting, crying, cursing. Sullus was yelling orders, the barbarians were attacking, the horses were screaming. My ears were ringing. I didn't know what to do, but my muscles knew. The soldiers formed up in a square and I was in the middle, holding the eagle high. It was bloody; a blood-soaked slaughter. Everyone was covered in so much blood it was hard to tell friend from foe. We fought our way back to camp, one bloody step at a time. I just left him there. I didn't even check to see if he was breathing, I just grabbed the eagle."

He didn't speak for a long time after that until he muttered quietly, "There's no forgiveness for that."

Fergus wanted to say something, anything. He wanted to say there is forgiveness if Henno asks for it, but he knew he wasn't ready. Fergus wasn't a priest yet, but he wanted him to know this confession was as holy to him as if he had already

taken his vows. "Henno," he began quietly, "you did what your father would've wanted. You did what you were ordered to do. You did what a soldier would do."

Henno stared down the road. Fergus was afraid he'd said something wrong when realized it was something else. He followed Henno's eyes and saw them.

A few hundred yards ahead, six riders were spread out across the road. They wore dark cloaks and dark leather armor. Each had either a spear or an ax at the ready.

Henno and Fergus stopped. Barrel whined fearfully and Fergus felt the same way. The men all sat completely still as they blocked the road.

Fergus swallowed, his mouth had gone dry. "We should turn around. Maybe we can outrun them."

Henno had not taken his eyes off the riders ahead. "Maybe, but what about the ones behind us, lad?"

Fergus twisted around in his saddle and saw 4 more riders making their way up the road behind them. They were still a ways off, but closing fast.

"I told you nothing good can come from bothering with the past." Henno replied. "Might as well as had my head up my arse."

#

Henno squinted at the riders in front of him. They didn't look like bandits. What bandit would bother robbing two poor monks? They could be after the horses, but Henno sensed these men

were after more than coin and horse. They'd been waiting for them. It was a trap.

"What do we do?" Fergus asked him quietly. Waiting for orders like a good soldier, Henno thought.

"You stay with me, that's what you do." Henno replied, his lips barely moving. "You ride close on my left like you were nailed there, right?"

"Right." Fergus whispered.

Henno and Fergus nudged their horses forward. The riders ahead remained completely still, waiting. Henno gave them a big smile as he shouted, "Good day to you, brothers! The peace of our Lord be upon you this fine morning!" As he waved with his left hand, he slid his right hand across and carefully untied the knot on his sword's scabbard where it hung on his saddle. Out of the corner of his eye, he saw Fergus doing the same.

"Welcome, fellow travelers!" Fergus called out with the same cheery voice. "Are you in need of blessing? For a small token, we would gladly pray for your safe journey."

They were close enough now to see the riders more clearly.

Henno suppressed a shiver of fear as he saw they were all wearing wooden masks. He heard Fergus gasp quietly at the sight. No sense in letting the boy know he was just as afraid.

"Don't let them scare you, Fergus. They must all have the pox from laying with sick whores to cover up like that." He muttered with more bravado than he truly felt.

Volucer twitched anxiously, she was ready for whatever comes.

Henno whispered out of the corner of his mouth, "When faced with the unexpected, do the unexpected."

"And...by unexpected, I...I don't suppose you mean we...surrender and hope it's all just a misunderstanding?"

Fergus whispered. The lad was terrified yet still making jokes, Henno thought. Good soldier.

Barrel shook her head nervously, her ears twitching at the sound of the riders behind them approaching. Volucer tossed her head defiantly and it seemed to calm Barrel down.

Henno waved again. They were 50 yards away when his fake welcoming smile changed to a grin of evil intent. He shouted loud enough to shake the trees, spurred Volucer while releasing his sword from its sheath. Fergus did the same, although his shout may have been a bit less tree-shaking.

Volucer leapt forward, Barrel just a step behind. They rushed straight at the center two riders. Even behind the wooden masks, Henno could see their eyes go wide. Definitely

unexpected, he thought. He held his gladius straight out like a cavalry sword, pointing directly at the rider's face. The rider raised his spear like a lance just as Henno expected.

The spear had a longer reach, but the rider had brought it up quickly, more out of reflex than attack. His horse was

trained, but couldn't help but shy away from the two shouting riders. Henno grinned as he saw the tip of the rider's spear swerve to his right. Just before impact, Henno slashed his

sword against the thick wooden spear knocking it wide. Volucer slammed into the side of the rider's horse as they crashed through the line, Fergus and Barrel pounding right behind them through the gap. The rider on Fergus' left hacked at him with his ax, but his horse also shied away from the two galloping attackers and his swing missed by inches.

They raced down the road, leaning forward and spurring their mounts on. It was obvious Barrel didn't have Volucer's speed, but neither Henno nor his horse was about to leave them behind. They had a bit of a head-start, but not much. Henno turned and saw the riders were after them. The race was on. He looked over at Fergus. His sword was back in its sheath and he urging Barrel on with deliberation and confidence.

"Good soldier!" Henno called out.

#

Fergus could not remember ever being so scared. He'd been in many dangerous situations, but rarely did those situations give him the opportunity to realize just how much trouble he was in. Usually it happened so quickly, it was just a jumble of frightful images to be sorted through later in safety. Now, riding Barrel as fast as he could, it was all too easy to be in the horrific moment.

He could feel the heat coming off his galloping horse, hear the snorts of the horses behind them. Beside him, Henno was urging both horses to more speed, but Fergus could also tell both horse and man were letting the slower horse set the pace.

Despite the situation, Fergus felt a warm admiration for them both.

The lead they had was holding, but for how long? Fergus and Henno had been on the road most of the day and their mounts would tire soon. He could see Henno was trying to work out a plan in his head. He was looking all around as if trying to find some advantage, anything that could help them. Unless there was a group of soldiers lounging around somewhere in the woods, Fergus couldn't think there was anything they could do but run and hope.

And pray.

"Heavenly Father," He whispered, "Please guide us. Watch over us. Give us your strength to live on and do your will. Amen."

"Amen!" Henno shouted. Amazingly, he actually sounded like he was enjoying himself. He gave Fergus a confident grin and nodded forward. Fergus looked ahead and saw a group of farmers and wagons on the road being pulled by oxen. The farmers were already shouting warnings and waving staffs to warn them off. Fergus risked a glance behind and was shocked to see the riders were gone. Disappeared like a bad dream. Henno reined in to a trot and Fergus did the same. Some of the farmers were cursing at them. Others were trying to get their oxen moving again.

A toothless, red-faced farmer shouted angrily as they rode by. "What do you think you're doing? Damn fool monks, scaring us like that!"

"Such a fine day, we couldn't help ourselves!" Fergus replied. Henno laughed.

As they passed a wagon stacked with hay, Fergus saw a small child perched precariously at the top. The young boy smiled and waved. Fergus waved back enjoying the smell of fresh cut hay. Barrel grabbed a mouthful as they passed and skipped playfully as she munched on it.

They walked the horses for a bit before Henno brought them up to an easy gallop.

"Best put some road between us." He said.

"Who were they?" Fergus asked.

"No idea." Henno replied. "Didn't have the look of robbers. Or soldiers. At least, not any soldiers I've seen before.

Anything look familiar to you?"

The riders were the stuff of nightmares. Even in daylight, they had a darkness about them, but there was one thing which looked familiar.

"Maybe Brother Canus will know." He thought aloud.

"I have a feeling he might." Henno answered quietly.

Fergus realized Henno had seen it too. The rider's hands were tattooed with strange blue writing. Just like Brother Canus. He closed his eyes in a small prayer of thanks. He looked over at Henno and for the briefest moment, thought the soldier was doing the same.

Chapter 18 - The Abbey of Folcutt

Brother Canus' face was completely still. Fergus couldn't help but be reminded of the rider's wooden masks.

"And when they saw the others on the road, they vanished?" Canus asked.

"Like smoke in the wind." Henno replied formally. They had agreed not to reveal the blue tattoos the men bore. As Fergus looked at Brother Canus, the same blue writing across his face, he realized how little he knew about the man.

They stood in the courtyard of the monastery. Fergus and Henno were exhausted, but stood tall as they were greeted by the other monks.

Brother Brio spoke up. "We're proud of you both. Your mission is the first of many. We'll examine the scrolls while you get something to eat and some rest."

"Of course." Brother Canus' face split into a wide grin. Maybe a bit too wide, Fergus thought. "We'll talk more when you've had a chance to recover."

Henno stifled a yawn, "We should talk now, Brother."

Fergus tried his best to look energetic, but inwardly he felt like he was already sleeping. He was weaving slightly and his stomach ached for something to eat. When the monks looked at him, he set his jaw firmly and gave them what he hoped was a confident nod.

"Perhaps it would be best if we allow Brother Penter to examine the coded scroll first." Brother Canus said warmly.

"There's fresh bread on the tables, we just uncorked another amphora of honeyed wine. And, unless I'm mistaken, I believe the kitchens have a nice chicken or two on the spit."

Henno's stomach grumbled loud enough for everyone to hear.

"Well, I suppose the boy could do with a bite to eat. I'll keep him company. Come on, lad." He said nearly drooling in anticipation.

Thank you Lord, Fergus thought. And thank you, Brother Canus, for giving Henno's ego a way to rest and food.

They headed off toward the kitchen. The smell of fresh roasted pig practically pulling them. Yet, with all the thoughts rolling around in his head, Fergus couldn't stop thinking about the riders who'd tried to ambush them. Unwanted questions popped up in his head.

Druids? The Druids are back? Why now? How did they know where Henno and Fergus would be?

And the most unwanted of all: Was there a traitor in the monastery?

#

Fergus wanted sleep, but he wanted food more. He and Henno attacked their plates. Their faces covered in grease, they both grinned at each other when they grabbed at the same chicken leg.

"Want to fight for it?" Henno joked.

"Yes." Fergus replied in mock seriousness.

Henno laughed and let go. "Yours then, lad. I don't want to tangle with a hungry, young wolf such as yourself."

Fergus bit into the chicken greedily while Henno glanced around to see if anyone was watching. They were alone in the dining room. The rest of the monks had gone about their duties.

"There's something I've always wondered about Druids." He said quietly, "What do they do when one of theirs wants to quit?"

Fergus worked on a mouthful of chicken. It was a good question, but he had no idea. He shrugged.

"I've had some experience with barbarian tribes. And with Druids." Henno's eyes said it was a tale he wasn't ready to tell yet. "When they mark a man, it's forever. It's a brand. A mark that tells all others who and what the man is. Only the top Druids get marked from head to toe. I don't like to think about what a man has to do to get to that rank in their world. Whatever it is, it must require a commitment unlike anything either of us have ever known."

He was talking about Brother Canus.

Fergus washed down the chicken with a gulp of watered wine.

His throat suddenly felt too small and he swallowed hard.

"I can't believe it, Henno." Fergus whispered. "He'd never betray us. He's a man of God. We're all brothers in Christ."

Henno nodded gravely. "And yet, would his Druid brothers have doubted his love for them until he betrayed their trust?"

Fergus just shook his head. It wasn't possible. He knew that every soul was redeemable, that once you profess faith in Jesus Christ and accept him into your heart, your past was forgiven. It was the very core of his faith. He'd always found Brother Canus' conversion to be inspiring. If a lost soul like his could find the path to Jesus, then any man could.

But...what if it was a sham?

Now that they'd eaten, they were both feeling the need for sleep. The warm hearth fire of the dining room, the cool quiet of the monastery, their full bellies; Fergus felt his head nodding. All he wanted to do was crawl into his little bed and sleep, but the monastery he'd called home for so long now didn't feel safe. Years ago, he'd been taken from his home, now he felt like his home had been taken from him.

How could this happen? He felt Henno's hand shake his shoulder and he jumped.

"Easy, lad." Henno said. "You'll bang your head on the table before long. Come on."

Fergus followed Henno from the dining hall.

#

Henno sat with his back against the heavy wooden door as Fergus slept soundly in Henno's bed. Fergus had protested weakly, but Henno's decisive 'shut your bean-hole' and his exhaustion won the argument. He'd made Henno promise to wake him in a few hours.

Henno told him to get some kip. There'd be no surprises. He'd see to it.

He felt the same unease Fergus felt. Someone must have talked. Maybe it was unintentional. The wrong word, overheard by the wrong ear, passed from one to another until someone connected to the Druids knew what Henno and Fergus were up to. It's possible.

He yawned. Maybe he was being overly cautious. Why would Brother Canus bring them all this way, go to all this trouble to hire someone like Henno, only to conspire against them? None of it made any sense. He'd never had much use for religion of any kind and Christians in general always seemed a bit stuck up to him, but he'd never met one who was bad. Kind of a silly belief, he thought, but they all seem to try to do the right thing.

His mind wandered. If this Christus fellow is so all-powerful, how did the Romans catch him and nail him to that cross? Henno thought he'd found a major flaw in the Christian's story, he'd have to remember to ask Fergus about it when he woke up.

He put his sword by his right hand, just as he was taught as a recruit and laid back on the cool stone floor. He was right next to the door, it was locked. He could relax. Get some sleep. Too bad none of these monks would be impressed by his performance with Ruttella. He looked forward to telling that story sometime. He wouldn't mention the potion she'd slipped him, of course. It's not an important detail to the story, he

thought sleepily. That's the secret of a good story. Leave out the parts that don't matter.

Soon, he floated into the warmth and darkness of a deep sleep.

#

Henno woke with a start. Instantly alert; he was crouched, sword in hand and facing the door. He'd heard the sound of running feet and now someone knocked loudly.

He looked over and was pleased to see Fergus was also on his feet, sword in hand. Even though he was facing the wrong way and still looked half-asleep, Henno gave him a complimentary nod.

"That way," He gestured with his sword. "Not bad though."

Fergus shook his head to clear the cobwebs and faced the door.

"Who is it?" Henno called out.

Behind the door a small voice squeaked. "Fergus? Um...it's Rory."

"Rory? What's wrong?" Fergus opened the door. Rory's big eyes that got even bigger when he saw Fergus and Henno's swords.

"I didn't do anything wrong." He stammered. "I was...sent to fetch you both. Brother Brio...the council...is that a real sword, Fergus? When am I going to get one?"

Henno grunted. "One day, not today."

"If you work hard and do as you're told." Fergus said. He held the sword out. "Want to hold it? Careful, it's not a toy."

The boy reached out carefully and grabbed the hilt. He raised it and looked it over, running his finger along the edge.

"It's really sharp. I watched you practice. You're both very good."

Henno grunted. "All it took was 25 years in the legions, boy. What time is it?"

Rory handed the sword back to Fergus with a nod of thanks, his big eyes gleaming with admiration at the older boy. "It's nearly mid-day. I have to go. My chores. Did you fight a lion, Fergus?" Henno found the way the boy switched from one idea to another annoying and funny at the same time.

"No," Fergus chuckled as he splashed water on his face from the basin. "There were some big dogs, but..."

"Yes, he did." Henno growled. "He picked up a little boy just like you, and jammed him down the lion's throat until he choked. RAAAWWERRR!" Henno roared loudly.

Rory jumped with fright and ran away.

"You didn't need to scare him like that." Fergus said, drying his face.

"Never underestimate the power of a good story." Henno replied. "If the youngster thinks you killed a lion, where's the harm?"

"The harm is in the stain lying puts on your soul."

Henno waved him off dismissively. "Ah, enough of your preaching." He dunked his head in the cold water of the basin and came up sputtering as water sloshed on the floor. "You need to learn the difference between telling an untruth and telling a good tale. A good story and the teller are both

admired by those that hear it. Everybody loves a good story." He shook his head like a wet dog, Fergus tried to avoid the spray.

"Lying is lying, Henno." Fergus said as they headed toward the door. "Hey, are you saying all your stories are just stories? Just made up tales to impress others?"

"Don't be ridiculous, lad. I don't need to make up stories." Henno shouldered his way by Fergus and marched down the hallway. "If anything I have to leave out parts so amazing they'd not be believed. Did I ever tell you about the time I killed a lion? It was in Africa during Gildo's revolt..." Henno continued his story, his voice echoing loudly in the stone hallway as Fergus shook his head and followed.

#

Fergus could feel the hostility coming off Henno like heat from a furnace. It was obvious he no longer trusted Brother Canus and was making very little effort to hide it.

They all sat at the Council's table while Brother Penter chattered excitedly. His mole-like appearance even more pronounced as he sorted through the scrolls Fergus and Henno had brought him.

"Quite extraordinary. Not one of his best, of course, but Aeschylus has never been one of my favorites. Not that it's not a profound work, I just feel he tends to make too much of the dialog in this one. Now if you can get your hands on a

copy of Hector's Ransom, that would be a find. I once saw it performed in...why are you doing that?" Henno was waving his hand in the small monk's face.

"How can you see with your eyes scrunched up like that?" Henno asked.

"I can see quite well. If I was blind, how do you expect I would be in charge of our library?" He sniffed with irritation at the interruption.

"Even in our sleep, pain which cannot forget falls drop by drop upon the heart, until in our own despair, against our will, comes wisdom through the awful grace of God." Brother Canus quoted solemnly.

Fergus wondered what made Canus think of that particular verse.

"From Aeschylus' 'Agamemnon', yes. A beautiful play. A verse which will last for ages." Brother Penter twittered.

Henno apparently wanted to join in on the recitation with a popular verse of rhyme he enjoyed.

"There once was a Goth named Hoth, who fell in love with a sloth..." Henno began loudly.

There was a general burst of coughing and conversation which interrupted him. Brother Brio's voice rose above the cacophony of nervous chatter.

"If we could move on to the coded list?" Brio asked.

As the conversation died down, Henno's voice could be heard muttering, "...wouldn't know a good rhyme if it bit them on the..."

"The code is not especially complicated," Brother Penter's voice squeaked. "It seems a simple substitution cipher. Once I detected the vowels, the rest was..."

"What does it say?" Henno growled. "Or should we come back after you're done bragging about how bright you are?"

Fergus gave Henno a look as if to say, 'Calm down'. Henno responded with a 'Shut your bean hole' glance.

"Well, as I was saying," Penter continued, his eyes squinting at the scroll in front of him. He lifted it up to the light, revealing the reverse side with all its detailed illustrations of the proper techniques for pleasuring a woman. Henno let out a loud whistle.

"That's my kind of secret code! No wonder it took you so long!" He laughed loudly. Penter put the scroll back down on the table quickly. "No, hold that part up again. I think I know her!" Henno roared with laughter all alone.

Fergus couldn't help but be embarrassed. Henno was deliberately trying to humiliate them all.

Penter was blushing brightly as he continued, "The cipher is intended to be a simple one. Probably just to keep Gratian's servants from prying into his private business. The numbers correspond to letters. What we have here is information about the stolen artifacts which he has been acquiring and selling

to wealthy Roman citizens throughout the empire. Apparently, we are not the only ones concerned with what will happen once the empire begins losing its hold on the borders. Some of the most valuable pieces seem to be heading to a General Marcus Buteo. In Britain."

They suddenly had Henno's complete attention. He stopped retying a loose strap on his sandal and sat bolt upright in his seat.

"Marcus Equitius Buteo?" Henno asked intently. "General Marcus Equitius Buteo?"

Brother Penter nodded while scanning the document again, "Yes, that is his name. Member of the Equestrian class, a Spaniard I believe. Rose rather quickly through the ranks if I remember correctly."

"You know him?" Brother Canus asked. Henno looked at him like he was a bug.

"Maybe." He shrugged.

He and Brother Canus locked eyes briefly and Fergus wondered if Canus was going to question Henno further. Henno's defiant gaze certainly seemed to discourage further discussion on the matter.

After a few awkward moments, Canus spoke again, his deep voice sounded hallow and distant. "We need further guidance in this matter. Brother Penter, prepare a message."

Henno stood up so suddenly he knocked his chair over. "More talk? Right. Why break with tradition and make a decision?"

Come on, Fergus. You're sorely in need of training and I need some fresh air." Before anyone could protest he turned and marched out of the room.

Fergus glanced at Canus, not because he was waiting for permission, but to see Canus' reaction. Canus gave him a nod anyway, his face completely passive again. Like a wooden mask, Fergus thought.

Fergus gave a curt nod in return and followed Henno.

As he was closing the door, Penter begin to ask a question.

Out of the corner of his eye, Fergus saw Canus raise his hand to silence him, obviously wanting to wait until Fergus left.

Too many secrets, Fergus thought. Too many questions.

#

"Again!" Henno roared.

Fergus charged at Henno and hit the ground hard. Again.

Every muscle ached from exertion. Every inch of his body felt as if he'd been trampled by a horse.

Henno had insisted he needed more training in boxing. Fergus knew he was right. He was always off-balance and clumsy like a puppet with crossed strings. Every time he thought he was getting better, Henno would increase the challenge. Even in the thick woolen tunic he wore to blunt the blows, Henno's punches made his ribs rattle. When he managed to get a blow in, it was like punching a rock wall. Would he ever get better at this?

Rory watched from his seat on a bale of hay near the stables, munching on an apple. Fergus and Henno circled each other in the middle of the court-yard. They closed, each grabbing the other's tunic. Fergus tugged and pulled, trying to get Henno off-balance. He felt Henno shift his weight and Fergus adjusted. His hands ached as he gripped tightly. Then, in what he hoped was an unexpected move, he threw a quick punch to Henno's side. He felt a brief satisfaction when he heard the older man grunt as the punch landed solidly, but quickly felt the ground slam him in the head again as Henno broke his grip. Again.

Fergus wiped the sweat from his eyes. "I need a break."

Henno shouted, "A break? Is that what you'll say to your enemy?" He spoke in a whining imitation of Fergus. "Oh, I'm so sorry kind sir, but I am feeling a tad overworked. Do you mind if we take a break so I can brush my hair?"

"There's no need for that, Henno," He panted. "We've been at it for hours. You know I work hard. I just don't feel like I'm getting any better."

Henno dropped the sarcasm, smiled and knelt down. "It's supposed to be hard work, lad. The one who trains the hardest, lives the longest. As soon as you get stronger, I make it harder. Look over there." Henno pointed to the wooden training posts they used for sword practice. "When you first started, you could barely make a dent in one of those. Now, you're sticking the first 3 inches of your blade in every time. And

there." He nodded at the big rock Henno made Fergus run with.

"Remember the size of the one you started with? It was a pebble compared to what you're using now. And you're running farther and in full kit."

"I understand, it's just that I thought it would start feeling easier." Fergus said as Henno helped him to his feet.

"It'll never feel easy." He looked around the court-yard.

"Your grip is still weak." He pointed at the large oak near the stables.

Fergus groaned. "Not The Hang, Henno. I can barely feel my arms as it is."

"Good! Then you'll not feel the pain!" Henno laughed. He gave Fergus a mischievous wink. "I'll make a deal with you."

Fergus was suspicious; these deals of his usually involved Fergus getting in very painful situations. "What kind of deal?"

"You do The Hang until I get back and we'll call it a day. I'll go see what's on for dinner. If you're still up when I get back, we'll go eat. Otherwise, you do the run to the end of the valley and back and no dinner. Think you're up to it?"

Fergus could smell roasted chicken and freshly-baked bread. He was already starving. "How long?"

Henno shrugged, "Long enough to make it interesting."

Fergus didn't like the idea of backing down, but he hated the idea of running 5 miles and missing dinner too.

"Or you could just go off and have a nice cry." Henno smirked.

The smug look of condescension was the deciding factor.

"Deal!" He was determined to hang there until Judgment Day if he had to. He'd show Henno what he could do.

The Hang was a simple but torturous exercise designed to strengthen the grip. The oak had a branch low enough for Fergus to jump up and grab. All he had to do was grip it with both hands and hang there until Henno returned. He spit on his hands, rubbed them together briskly and jumped.

He immediately felt his shoulders ache. His hands stung as his latest crop of blisters split open. Fergus closed his eyes and took a long slow breath.

"All set then?" Henno asked smiling innocently as he stood nearby.

"Why are you still here? Go!" Fergus shouted between gritted teeth.

Henno waved and strolled toward the kitchen, whistling a happy tune.

Fergus took another deep breath and closed his eyes, trying to focus on nothing but listening for God's voice as he did when he prayed.

"What are you doing, Fergus?" Rory stood near Fergus' dangling feet. He was munching his apple and watching with wide, curious eyes.

"Rory...I made a wager with Henno...Why don't you go and...."
Fergus was having trouble speaking. Hanging made it difficult to breath.

"But gambling is a sin." Rory warned as he took another big bite of his apple. The bright red apple looked delicious and made Fergus' mouth water.

"IT'S NOT..." Fergus started too loudly, then spoke more evenly, "It's not gambling. He just challenged...me as part of our training. Now, if you don't mind..."

"I want to see how long I can do it." Rory dropped the apple to the ground and began climbing the tree.

Fergus groaned in pain. The last thing he needed was for the youngster to start bouncing the limb around, but he hated to shout at him. Despite how irritating he could be, Fergus couldn't help but like the little boy.

"Rory...listen..." Fergus' grip slid a fraction as Rory began working his way up the tree.

"That's enough, young man." It was Brother Orbene. "Why don't you come down here?" He grabbed the squirming Rory and pulled him from the tree.

"But I want to help Fergus!" Rory complained as Orbene placed him on the ground.

"I think you can best help Fergus by not helping him." Orbene handed him his apple. "The challenge is for him to do this alone. You don't want him to fail, do you?"

Rory gasped in surprise. "No! Of course not, Brother Orbene. I'm sorry, Fergus!"

"It's... quite...alright." Fergus said, trying to sound as relaxed as possible. When is Henno coming back? He could feel his hands going numb already. He shifted his grip again.

"Why don't you go and see what's keeping friend Henno?"

Brother Orbene suggested.

Rory nodded and ran off.

"Thanks... Brother...Orbene." Fergus grunted.

"Don't try to talk, Fergus. There's a trick to this. I can help you. Just listen." Orbene said in his quiet, melodious voice. "Don't fight it. Relax. Close your eyes. Listen to the sound of my voice. Your hands are steel hooks. They can't unbend. You are walking up a stairway. A white marble stairway. It goes straight up to the clouds. See it in your mind. Feel the stairs on your feet as you step up each step. With your right foot, then your left. Keep climbing the stairs. Right...left...right...that's it. Look to the top of the stairs, they lead to the gates of Heaven, Fergus. Bright, shining like the sun, surrounded by clouds. See them in your mind. Right...left...right...yes, keep climbing each step. Your feet are heavy, but you keep climbing to our Lord's house."

Fergus could see it. It was like looking at the sun. His eyes teared up from staring at the brightness. He wanted to wipe away the tears, but his hands were steel hooks. He felt his feet moving as he climbed each step in time with Orbene's voice. Right...left...right...left...

"Good. Right...left...keep going. Your legs are feeling heavy, but you still climb. The gates are far away, but keep going. Right...left...right...left..." Orbene's voice was the only thing he could hear. He kept climbing. He felt as though he was carrying a huge weight on his back, his feet ached from the pressure, but he kept climbing. Higher and higher.

"Now the steps are covered with thick carpet. Soft like clouds. There is no pain in your feet. No pain in your legs...in your back...no pain...You are walking on air. Light as a feather. Right...left...right...it's like you're floating now. You don't feel the steps, you rise like a feather on the wind. Higher and higher..."

Fergus felt the pain leave him. He took in a deep breath and floated. Higher and higher. It was wonderful. He felt like he was flying. He could smell the coming rain, the green grass at his feet...and chicken!

His eyes snapped open and saw Henno and Rory watching as they each chewed on a chicken leg. Suddenly, a bolt of pain shot through his entire body. His hands slid from the branch and he fell painfully to the ground.

Henno chuckled as Brother Orbene helped him to his feet.

"You won, Fergus!" Rory chirped happily. "Want some chicken?"

"Not just yet, thanks." Then to Henno, "How long have you been standing there?" Fergus sputtered angrily.

"Around the time you started flying to Heaven, I believe."

Henno replied. "Neat trick, Orbene. You'll have to show it to me sometime."

"Of course, Friend Henno." Orbene smiled. "I would be happy to. It's just a simple matter of distraction. The mind can be lead away from pain as easily as a horse to water."

Fergus couldn't believe how simple it seemed. Before Henno's eating interrupted, Fergus felt like he could've hung there all night! "Thank you, Brother Orbene."

Orbene nodded. "I believe that tables have been set for dinner. Shall we?"

Henno grinned around a mouthful of delicious-looking chicken.

"Come on, lad. You earned a good feed and a long night's kip."

The four of them walked together to the dining hall. The sun was just setting behind mountains behind them brilliantly lighting up the low, dark clouds above their heads.

Despite the pain, Fergus couldn't stop smiling. The confusion and frustration of the council meeting was far behind him. He felt as though he'd made a huge leap forward in his training. He was getting better at this!

#

Something was very wrong.

Henno woke in the night covered in sweat with a belly full of knives. His head pounded, his heart raced.

Outside the window, he could hear a drenching rush of rain lashing against the stone walls. He slipped in and out of a

feverish nightmare of sounds and fears. He felt as though he was falling from a great height at one point, then felt as though he was drowning. What was happening? He tried to sit up, but found his muscles locked in a spasm. His whole body was clenched like a fist and refused to respond.

The wait was over.

He was dying.

#

Rory yawned as he ducked into the stables. It was late, but the storm had woken him. The rain was coming down in buckets. He had gotten soaked just running across the court-yard. Another bolt of lightning exploded across the sky, but he wasn't scared. Thunder and lightning scared him when he was a little boy, but he was too old for that now.

He could hear the horses stamping and whinnying with nervousness. He loved the horses of the monastery and loved working in the stables. When the storm started, his first thought was to be with them so they'd not be afraid.

"It's just water and wind, little ones." He called softly as he walked down the line of stalls. "Nothing to fear. God is watching over you. Hush now." He stopped suddenly. Someone else was in the stables. A flash of lightning displayed a dark figure at the other end of the row.

"Who is it?" Rory called out, still trying not to alarm the horses. "It's...me...Rory."

"Rory?" It was Brother Mita. He sounded angry. Or afraid. "Who else is with you?"

"I'm...alone, Brother." Rory stammered. The way Mita was acting was scaring the boy. Be a big boy, he thought. Be like Fergus. He heard someone coming from the other direction and turned to call out. Mita ran at him and before the boy could cry out, he felt Mita clamp a hand over his mouth.

"Not a sound, little one." He hissed in the boy's ear.

#

Something was very wrong.

A crash of lightning woke Fergus. No, it wasn't the lightning. It was something else. His muscles ached from the training session with Henno. He sat up. He was alone in his room. Henno was down the hall in his quarters. Fergus had heard something. Or dreamed it. It was like an echo in his mind now; a woman's voice? Singing? He had the feeling he'd been dreaming of his mother singing to him, but the voice had sounded so real. He was sure he'd heard a woman singing, but that wasn't possible. He stood up and listened. He closed his eyes.

The sound of the heavy rain seemed to wash away all other noises. It was like a waterfall outside. Another flash of lightning followed by a crack of thunder. Perhaps it was just a nightmare?

No. There was something else. Henno said you ignore your fears at your peril. There was something in the night to be fearful

of. Fergus decided to find out what it was. He dressed quickly, strapping on his sword before stepping out to the hallway.

He should wake Henno. If there's something wrong, he'd know what to do.

No. Let him sleep. I can handle it, whatever it is, Fergus thought confidently. He decided to check the court-yard first. Start from the outer perimeter and work in, that's what Henno would do.

Fergus was heading to the gate when he noticed there were no sentries. The rain probably drove them to seek shelter in the blockhouse. Even in the vicious storm, he felt an odd stillness; a sense of something missing. The rain continued to blow fiercely. He thought he heard voices, but from the other side of the massive wooden gate. Was it the wind?

As he moved to the gate, another sound caught his ear. He recognized it immediately. Barrel whined again in fear. Storms never bothered her before. He ran to the stables to investigate.

When he got to the stable door, his breath caught in his throat. Young Rory was lying on the stable floor, his neck was broken. Brother Mita was struggling in the powerful grip of Brother Orbene.

"You foul abomination!" Orbene snarled as he lifted Mita from the ground, holding him by his scrawny neck. The smaller man

twisted, kicking, desperate to free himself. Mita saw Fergus standing in the doorway and reached out a hand beseechingly.

"Brother Orbene! What happened?" Fergus shouted.

Orbene turned and saw Fergus. He dropped Mita. The skinny man fell hard to the floor next to the still body of the small boy. He tried to speak but could only manage a croak,

"Fergus..."

"Quiet! You...monster!" Orbene was enraged. Fergus had never seen him like this. He smashed his foot into Mita's face and Fergus could hear his jaw snap. It twisted Mita's face into a grotesque mask of pain and he fell back screaming.

"He killed the boy!" Orbene raged. "Killed him!"

Mita was still trying to speak, but his broken jaw made it impossible. He could only whimper and moan pitifully.

Fergus' head was spinning. "I'll get Henno...wake the others. Watch him. Don't..." As he turned to go, he heard another loud crack of lightning. Then he realized, there was no flash. The crack was the sound of Orbene twisting Mita's head until his neck snapped.

Fergus stared as Orbene rose, dropping Mita's lifeless corpse next to Rory's. A flash of lightning and Fergus saw he faced the real monster. His eyes were dark, cold and full of hate.

"There's no waking Henno, Christian. He's long gone by now. I just wish I had enough poison for all of you." Fergus couldn't believe his ears. Henno was dead? "Christian"? Orbene was the traitor. A Druid.

He heard shouting and pounding on the front gate. They were under attack! The Druids were coming to reclaim their home. Orbene stepped quickly between Fergus and the safety of the monastery.

"You godless bastard." Fergus snarled as he pulled his sword. He tossed the sheath aside and took a strong stance. Just like Henno taught him.

Orbene smiled. Fergus could remember all the times this man's smile warmed his heart in fellowship. Now it chilled him beyond the cold rain that soaked his clothes.

"You can't hurt me, Fergus." He said quietly. "Your arms are weak. Your feet are sore. You've been walking for so long. One step after the other, up a marble staircase. Remember? It was beautiful." Orbene's voice was soft and welcoming. He inched slowly in a circle, cutting Fergus off from escape. "Remember how the marble steps felt on your feet? The pain in your arms is real. Like hot, burning ropes as you climb.

Right...left...right...left..." Fergus wanted to shout at him to be quiet, but he was so confused. Henno was dead? Orbene killed Rory and Mita? Why? How could this be happening?

"Right...left...yes...that's it...don't worry..."

He kept stepping in a circle, Fergus stepped to face him.

Right...left...right...his arms ached terribly. He'd not had a chance to rest completely. He'd barely slept for a few hours. If only he was in his bed right now and all this was just a bad dream.

"Right...left...that sword is heavy...like holding a tree...right...left...keep climbing...can you see the bright sun above you?" Orbene's voice seemed to warm him. If he could just shut his eyes for a bit, he'd feel better. He could see the sun, it was so warm on his face. He kept turning to follow Orbene's voice. Right...left...his arms were so heavy...the sword began to drop...God, please help me...

A bright flash of lightning shocked him awake! He saw Orbene leaping for him. Everything seemed to slow down, the snap of light drew out as if the night had been suddenly lit by a dozen torches. He could see each drop of rain as they bounced off Orbene's bestial face.

Fergus threw his head back and howled like a wolf.

He thrust his sword forward, leaning into it just like Henno taught him, just like he'd done hundreds of times into the wooden post. The point caught Orbene in the mouth and slid down his throat. The big man's eyes went wide as the point burst out the back. He made a choking sound, blood spewing down the blade, mixing with the rain flowing down Fergus' arm. He twisted the blade and yanked it free, giving Orbene a kick in the groin for good measure. Just like Henno taught him. Orbene's body fell to the mud. Fergus dropped to his knees. The pounding on the gate was louder now. A deep rhythmic thumping. They have a battering ram! He jumped up and ran back to the monastery. He couldn't believe Henno was dead. He had to know for sure.

As he ran by the warning bell in the court-yard, he yanked the rope hard. The bell began tolling, he didn't wait. He kept running. Shouting at the top of his lungs.

"Arise! We're under attack! Arise!" He called out. His voice sounded pitifully small in the roaring rain. The attackers voices outside were getting louder.

#

Henno was going to give some jackass the thumping of a lifetime.

Here he was, sick as a leper, and some cowardly bastard was jamming their hand down his throat. Who in their right mind would do such a thing? He gagged and puked. Someone, the someone who is in for a right good pounding, turned his rigid body on his side as he tossed up a hideous-smelling, greenish-yellow pile of puke. He'd puked some foul stuff in his life but this was especially rancid. What had he eaten? The someone who Henno would soon be bashing made it even worse by punching him solidly in the gut, just under the breast bone and he heaved again. Another rush of nasty-tasting, hot, stinking foulness splattered on the floor.

He was going to find whoever the cook was tonight and along with gut-puncher here, he was going to smack both their heads together until he...he found he could move a bit. He doubled over again and dry-heaved. His stomach was empty. He saw a fist coming for his gut again and caught it at the wrist.

"That's enough of that you back-stabbing, shit-eating..."

Henno coughed and spit. His eyes were clearing. "Canus?"

Brother Canus pulled him from the bed and sat him on the floor. Brother Brio tossed a blanket over the foul pile Henno had puked up. Brother Penter splashed a basin of water in Henno's face. It revived and enraged him.

"What do you...you MONKS think you're doing?" He roared. He tried to stand, but Canus kept him down with a strong hand on his shoulder.

"Drink it." Canus' shoved a clay jar to Henno's lips and a chalky, lumpy mess slithered down his throat. It helped. He swallowed some more.

Henno heard the warning bell ringing in the court-yard. His mind was clearing. He heard the pounding, the shouting. Was that Fergus yelling outside?

"How many?" He snarled.

Canus somehow managed a grin. "We don't know. Can you stand?" Henno struggled to his feet, "I'll do more than that, Brother. Where's my sword? Help me strap on my armor."

Brother Timon appeared in the doorway. He had several leather saddle bags over his shoulders. "At least a hundred at the front gate."

Penter spoke quickly to him. "Is that all of the copies? Good. Go out the western gate. Do not let the scrolls fall. We'll see you there. Hurry now!"

Timon disappeared down the hallway.

Fergus rushed in, his face full of relief at seeing his friend alive. "Henno! He said you were..." The young man embraced Henno, then stepped back. "What is that smell?" His face contorted with disgust.

"The chicken was off." Henno quipped. "Get your armor on. If it's a fight they want..."

Canus put a restraining hand on Henno's shoulder. "They are too many. It's the Druids. There was a traitor. We long suspected...but I failed to uncover the spy."

"We've no time, Brother!" Penter chirped, hopping from one foot to another.

"Henno, you and Fergus must escape. Take this with you."

Brother Brio handed Fergus a small leather pouch.

"No!" Fergus and Henno shouted together.

"We must protect our charges. We have several copies of all the documents we've collected so far. We're going to split up and make a run for it. Even if some of us are caught, at least, God willing, one will escape to sanctuary." Brother Brio explained. "This is the list of stolen goods you found at Gratian's. Start with General Marcus. Find out why he's bringing so much to Britain. You must continue the work, Fergus. It all rests on you." He looked at Henno. "On both of you."

Canus spoke calmly with the serenity of a man resolved to die.

"We are not important. The works of man, the art and science,

the wonders of this world must survive. Do not let the darkness take it. Trust in the church, Fergus. We will send word to you through the church. You are God's strong right arm." And to Henno he added, "And you are Fergus' strong right arm."

Henno saw Fergus' blood-covered sleeve and knew instantly what he needed to do. He was as tired of taking orders from civilians as he was of running from Druids.

"Strap up, Optio!" Henno barked.

Fergus gave him a blank stare. "Op...What?" He stammered.

Henno gave him a thump in the chest. "You're promoted to my second. I said strap up!"

They grabbed their kits which were always packed and ready and began strapping on their weapons and armor.

"What are you doing? You need to leave! Now!" Brother Brio argued.

Henno was full of fire and ready to burn. "I'll not see us turned out of our home." To Fergus, "Round up our men and meet me in the courtyard. Fully kitted out and ready. Step lively, lad. It's not a pack of dogs we're facing this time."

Fergus snapped to attention and saluted. "I hear and obey, Centurion!" He called out loudly then darted out.

"And tighten up that chin-strap!" Henno called out after him.

"If I've told him once..." Henno muttered.

"But a dozen of you against over 100? You can't expect..."

Brio blustered.

"Send riders out the western gate with your copies. The rest of us will fight. My soldiers on the ground, the rest on the ramparts." Henno jammed on his wolf head helmet. "Canus, you're in charge of the ramparts. Round up every man and start hauling stones, logs, anything that will make a big impression when dropped."

"I hear and obey, Centurion." He smiled and Henno couldn't help but think this is what he'd intended Henno to do all along. Just another game piece on the board, he thought. Canus made the sign of the cross over them. "God bless and protect us all."

"Amen to that, Brother." Henno rumbled, "Now let's show them our strong right arms!"

They ran out the door and down the steps leading to the courtyard.

Chapter 19 - The Battle for Folcutt Monastery

The rain was still pounding down like a waterfall, rattling loudly on their helmets. Fergus stood in the court-yard with the other 9 men Henno had trained. Not a one had hesitated when called, but he could feel their doubt. Fergus could see several men flinch each time the battering ram thundered against the outer gate.

Henno stood in front of them. He looked each man right in the eye then thundered in a voice that rose above the rain, the angry shouts of the attackers and the thunder itself. Fergus thought he could wake the angels with such a voice.

"There are those who would say that turning a bunch of monks into soldiers is impossible. You stand before me as proof that nothing is impossible!" As Henno spoke, Fergus could feel the men around him stand a little taller.

Henno continued, "I am a Roman Centurion with 25 years in the ranks. I know how to make war and I know how to make warriors. You may not march under an eagle, but you have as much reason to fight as any legionnaire who ever lived. The last time we face the enemy, we ran. That night, we fought for pears.

Tonight, we fight for our home." Fergus heard him call the monastery his home again and smiled. Henno immediately gave him an angry glare and he replaced it with the impassive look of a soldier at attention.

Henno raised his sword to the sky. "Tonight, you fight for your brothers! Tonight, you fight for God!" He let out a loud roar.

The men responded with enthusiastic roars of their own. They shouted and punched the sky with their swords. Henno began rapping the flat of his blade on the side of his shield. The men did the same falling into a clanking, primitive rhythm.

"Form wedge! Optio, with me!" Henno barked over the clanking. The men quickly fell into formation, shields out. Henno took the point with Fergus behind him on his left. "Optio! Call the cadence!"

Fergus took a deep breath and began calling out the cadence.

"Section...step...step...step..."

The spear-shaped group of men began marching toward the front gate.

The men kept up the clanging in time with the cadence, rapping their swords on their shields as they approached the gate.

They could all see the wooden gate buckling and splintering as they got closer.

Henno waved at Canus waiting on the ramparts. He'd overseen the remaining men as they loaded the walls with everything they could find to drop down on the enemy. They had taken care not to be seen by the attackers and waited crouched behind the wall on the walkway high above. Canus waved back.

Fergus saw him stand. He was illuminated by a flash of bright lightning and looked like a dark avenging angel of death. He hoped the attackers looking up felt the same.

#

Feyr looked up and saw his foe briefly in a flash of lightning.

"There! See the traitor! The coward hides from us!" He shouted as the men grunted with the effort of heaving the log against the gate again. The rain made the log slippery and they struggled to maintain their grip on the chains wrapped around it. Their feet slid in the mud but they were damaging the great door. Feyr could see it giving way.

Their man had failed to open the way for them, but it was no matter. He'd prepared for the unexpected. He'd long ago learned never to trust in good fortune or in men. He'd ordered the creation of a battering ram out of an old oak from their sacred grove. These lazy bread-bakers could not stand before his men. The rain meant he couldn't use his archers, but if the Forest Gods brought this deluge down it was to wash away the usurpers.

"Again!" He cried "Harder!" The log thumped solidly against the gate and he could see it bulging forward. He laughed shrilly. Another thump. Wait, what was that?

Then he heard one of his men scream and lurch away from the log. His arm hanging loosely at his side. Another thump and

another scream as a man's head snapped to the side. It was raining rocks. The monks were tossing stones from above! "Shields!" Feyr called. Some of those who waited for the door to be opened rushed forward to cover the men on the log with heavy wooden shields of blessed oak. "No harm shall befall one protected by the forest", Feyr intoned. A stone glanced off one of the shields and rolled along the ground. The pounding on the door continued.

He cursed the traitor Canus in the Old Tongue. "You will be the food of birds forever. You will know no peace. You will lay in the ground, but never die." He shook his clawed fist. Canus responded by heaving a large rock at him which Feyr skipped away from, laughing as he made the sign against harm with his hand.

The thunder crashed again and Feyr saw the door giving way. Soon!

"Again! Harder!" He screamed as the sky burst with light again. "We're nearly through!"

Soon!

#

Soon, Henno thought. That door won't hold for much longer. Every time they hit it now, the door parted just enough for him to see the blank, wooden faces of the Druids hefting the log. He heard some of the monks muttering in prayer. Blast it, that's how it started last time!

"Quiet in the ranks!" He roared. "Wait for the word!"

He had the formation positioned just a few yards from the door. Waiting. Henno knew he had to time it perfectly or the whole plan would fail. He still felt weak from the effects of the poison. His gut clenched painfully, he couldn't let on. Can't show any weakness. It's one of the burdens of command, Stilicho had told him once, but it's also a gift. You lead your men, but their trust strengthens you. I need all the strength I can get right now, Henno thought.

Wham! The log slammed into the door again. In a flash of lightning he could see the attackers clearly through the gap between the two massive doors.

Almost...Almost...

"Now!" He shouted.

Brother Canus yanked the chain from above the door. The locking bar slid up and fell to the side just as the log hit the gap again. The attackers had put everything they had into the heave and now stumbled forward as the doors popped open. Some of them fell, the log was tipping, throwing the others off balance.

"Forward!" Henno called.

Fergus picked up the cadence. Good soldier!

"Step...step...step..." As he counted out each left step. The wedge moved forward. A solid line of shields bristling with gleaming points of death as they kept their short swords pointed at the enemy.

"Hold the line!" Henno shouted as he rammed his shield into the first attacker. He followed it up with a jab to the man's wooden mask and was rewarded with a gurgling scream as the sword went in his right eye. He gave it a twist as his opponent fell backwards and pulled the sword free. It came loose with the mask embedded. Henno raised it up for all to see, shouting a victorious war cry echoed by the rest of the men in the wedge.

They went to work.

Fergus' voice rose above the clamor of men engaged in bloody work. "Step...step...step."

The wedge moved forward.

The first wave of attackers were still fumbling with the log, slipping in the mud as Henno and the monks lay into them.

Thump, jab, twist and pull. Henno could hear the grunts of effort as his soldiers' blades found targets. The cracking of bones, the tearing of flesh, the foul stink of open bowels and the screams of the dying; it had been too long since Henno had been in a real battle. The euphoric war-lust consumed him, driving out any lingering effects of the poison and replacing it with a cold rage. He felt it ripple across the line of shields as the other men jabbed and cut and killed their foes with admirable precision.

They enveloped the chain-covered log almost before the rest of the attackers knew what had happened.

"Grab the ram!" Henno shouted as he stuck his sword into a man's throat and pulled it free while giving another on the ground a neck-breaking stomp to the back of his head.

Several monks ran out within the protection of the wedge and dragged the big log back into the court-yard.

The front line of attackers were either dead or desperately stumbling into the men behind trying to escape the metal wall of death. Henno rejoiced at the sight. He stole a quick glance and was rewarded with the sight of Fergus dispatching an ax-wielding Druid with a quick jab to the belly, just like Henno taught him.

"Shield wall!" Henno commanded. "At the gate!"

The men moved as one. The wedge transformed into two lines of shields packed tightly across the entrance. The first line was braced by the line behind, they put their shields into the backs of the men in the first rank to give them support, both physical and mental. To stand in a shield wall gives a soldier strength. He becomes a part of something bigger than himself when his own mortality is dependent on the mortality of his brothers.

Henno and Fergus stood side-by-side and Henno was emboldened by the feel of a strong metal shield on his arm and against his back. By Mithras, he thought, it's working!

"For Folcutt! For God!" Fergus roared. The rest of the monks took up the cheer, banging on their shields again, taunting the disorganized mob before them. The attackers were close to

breaking, Henno could see it. They hadn't anticipated such an organized defense. He had to finish it before they realized just how few defenders they really faced.

Henno saw one of the Druids shouting at the others, trying to mobilize them for a rush. He was tall, wore no mask, but his face was a skeletal mask of hate. His white hair whipping in the wind, he shrieked in a language Henno had never heard and never wanted to hear again.

When one of the men closest to the screaming Druid leader turned as if to retreat, he slashed him across the face with a fur-covered claw weapon. Was that a bear-claw? Impressive, he thought, I wouldn't mind having something like that.

"Bone-sucker! Over here!" He shouted. "Let us kill your scarecrows for you! Bring them to our blades, you butt-biting, piss-drinker! You're too old to be out on a night like this! Go home, scarecrows!"

"Go home scarecrows!" Fergus began chanting, the rest of the monks quickly joining in.

"Go home scarecrows! Go home scarecrows!" The called out, their voices a boisterous mix of taunting and laughter. They could feel it; they were winning.

The hail of stone began again as Canus and the others joined the chant.

Canus shouted something in the same hissing language. Whatever he shouted, it caused Bear-claw Man to scream in fury. Whether it was a response or just a howl of frustration, Henno

couldn't tell. Several of the Druids were felled by the barrage of stone. More of the Druids began moving backwards. Before Henno could stop him, Fergus sheathed his sword and pulled his sling out. He whipped it around his head a few times to build up momentum and let a stone fly. Straight out like a wasp, the stone flew and hit Bear-claw Man right in the eye! He stumbled backwards, blood pouring from between his fingers. One of the Druids attempted to pull him back to safety and was rewarded by having his throat slashed open by the vicious claw.

That was it. The rest of the attackers broke and ran. The thunder rumbled and the monk's jeers chased them as the Druids escaped into the darkness.

Henno and Fergus howled like wolves, the rest joined in. The night was soon full of victorious howls echoing all around the valley.

Henno howled until his throat was raw.

#

Henno's voice grated painfully as he spoke, "Of course they'll be back."

Other than a few sentries on watch, the entire monastery was meeting in the large dining hall.

Canus had insisted they conduct a Mass in the chapel first while Henno inspected the bodies of the fallen.

Other than a few sprains, cuts and bruises, the monks had suffered only two casualties: Brother Mita and young Rory.

There were at least two dozen dead Druid attackers lined up side-by-side in the courtyard. Henno had dumped Orbene's body among them.

They'd pieced together what must have happened. Orbene had been a Druid traitor planted in their midst from the beginning. He'd only been waiting for the right time to betray them. Once the Druids had a sufficient force assembled, the plan went into action. Mita must've seen Orbene skulking around and confronted him. Rory was caught in the middle.

Poor, little lad, Henno thought. He knew a good boy like that had a seat at the best table in the next life. Tragic deaths of good people like Mita and Rory made Henno want to believe in a heaven like the Christians described, but it also made him wonder how an all-powerful god like Jesus could let such good ones be sacrificed.

He regretted not knowing either of them better, but pushed the feeling aside; no sense in regret. Big waste of time. Still, he knew their faces would join the parade of lost friends and enemies which haunt his dreams.

In the chapel, the monks had prayed for the souls of all of the fallen. Henno didn't understand that. A few hours ago, these men had come at them with all the angry intent of a starving pack of dogs. Orbene had killed two innocents. Why pray for their peaceful passing into the next life? There was so much about this Christian religion he just couldn't get his head around. He'd have to ask Fergus about it later. The lad

had a talent for explaining complicated religious matters in a way that made sense.

And he had a talent for soldering too.

Henno was proud of him. Of all of them. After the disastrous rout by Gratian's guard dogs, he was sure these priests were useless when it came to a fight. Depends on what you're fighting for, he thought. His pride in their win had faded fast as the pulse-pounding exultation of the battle-lust faded. He knew they had been lucky. Very lucky. You can only do the unexpected once.

He had picked up one of the wooden masks from a Druid's corpse, the one killed by the slash from Bear-claw Man's razor sharp talons. Henno was a liberal user of a vine cane to reinforce proper technique to his recruits, but a man who was capable of killing one of his own men so easily was capable of anything.

He tossed it on the table in front of Canus and the others.

"What kind of man would kill one of his own like that? You know him." It wasn't a question.

Canus nodded. "His name is Feyr. He is the oldest member of the Druid order in Ireland and the highest-ranking. I was a young man when he came to us. I remember thinking he looked ancient then, but he's far from frail as you saw. I don't think he's aged a day in 20 years."

Henno spit. "Enough Druid nonsense. He's an old man who can't control his men or his bladder." There was a ripple of

laughter. Men who survived a battle felt a light-headed buzz of joy not unlike the rush that comes from a good wine. The aches, pains and regrets would come later. For now, the monks who were usually reserved and even shy, behaved with a swaggering confidence that reminded Henno of every battle-tested soldier he'd ever served with. "But he lives, so they'll be back."

"How can you be sure?" Brother Penter asked.

"We've given them a good pasting, but this Feyr fellow can't lead based on failure." Henno explained. "He'll let them lick their wounds while he blames their lack of commitment. Then, he'll attack again. But it won't matter. You'll be ready for them."

"You're leaving." Canus replied. It wasn't a question.

"As you said, Fergus and I must follow the information from Gratian's list. We'll go to Britain. Something is up. If half the goods on this list are still there, we'll have a goodly stack of scrolls and books to bring back for your library. Your job is to make sure it's still here when we return." He grinned at Canus.

Henno turned to the assembled monks. "Those I've trained will train each of you in the ways of attack and defense. Work hard. Apply the same dedication to the study of war that you apply to the study of your religion." He added, "And there will be sentries posted and alert for trouble at all times, no matter what the weather."

The monks had never taken guard duty especially seriously, but from now on understood an alert sentry was the difference between life and death.

Brother Brio stood and cleared his throat loudly. "I should like to accompany you, of course, but..."

Henno smiled, "But we need to move fast." He added, "We will need a contact to arrange for whatever items we...acquire to be shipped to a place of safety. That is your task."

Brio nodded smiling, "I'll be at the abbey near Chester or I'll leave word for you there." He resumed his seat looking relieved.

"When will you leave?" Canus asked.

"I think the lad has earned some rest." Henno grimaced as his stomach gurgled. "And I need to spend some time in the privy. I don't recommend Orbene's garnish." He smiled grimly. "We'll go at first light. Right, lad?"

Fergus looked up, his eyes red with fatigue but still bright with enthusiasm. "I hear and obey, Centurion!" He called out loudly causing another ripple of laughter among the monks.

Good soldiers, Henno thought.

#

Henno knew there would be no sleep for him, there was too much to do. They couldn't delay, he and Fergus needed to leave first thing in the morning. In the meantime, there were maps to study, supplies to collect and weapons to sharpen.

In fact, why was he letting the boy sleep? He decided to rouse Fergus. I can't treat him any differently that I would any other raw recruit, he thought. He marched down the stone hallway getting more frustrated with himself at every step. What was he thinking? Treat him like a pup, he'll stay a pup. This is serious business! They were going to be making their way across the savage barbarian land of Ireland! Even the Roman Legions didn't conquer this country of crazed blue madmen who sang and laughed during battle.

"To be fair," he muttered under his breath, "we could've, we just decided not to."

But there's no reason for the boy to be lounging about in bed just because he cut off a few Druid heads. So what if one of them was someone he trusted? He pushed away the memory of his friend Titus' last breath.

"Treat 'em soft now, bury them deep later." He muttered as he stomped up the stairs. "I've been too easy on him. He needs toughening up. Like new leather. Got to work it with a hammer to make it usable. That's what the lad needs."

He didn't break his stride as he reached Fergus' door, but kicked it in with one mighty smash of his heel. "Right!" He shouted. "Up, you lazy slug!" The door flew inward and crashed loudly on the bed.

The empty bed.

"What?" Henno looked around, picking up the door to make sure he'd not squashed the boy. Where was he?

#

Fergus knelt before the cross in the chapel. His eyes stung with tears as he prayed.

"Please Lord," he whispered, "I can't believe my brother, your child, Orbene would do such a thing. Whatever evil possessed his soul, let it not touch mine. I took from him what only you have the right to take. I killed more men during the battle, but I don't remember how many. Three, I think, but the madness was on me. I can't ask for your forgiveness, I did what I did willingly and knowingly. I did what I felt in my heart that you willed me to do. I cannot ask to be forgiven for an act which is your will. I will be your strong right arm, but, if I am to be your instrument, I ask that.. you never make it easy."

He paused, listening for God's voice. All he heard was the wind, the far-away sound of the storm and rush of blood in his ears. Would he never be touched by His holy word?

He continued, "Bless my brothers Rory and Mita. Forgive any transgressions or doubts I had about either of them. I regret my suspicions about Brother Mita. I regret my impatience with my friend Rory. Bring them into your care."

He listened again. Just the wind.

And the steady drip of water outside the window. He knew there was a chipped tile on the roof just above the chapel window and it made a puddle in the courtyard whenever it rained. He'd meant to fix the tile, but kept forgetting. He realized how

much he knew about this place. It was the little things that you carry with you when you leave a place; the smell of new hay in the stables, the taste of fresh bread every morning, the grainy feeling of the ink they used to copy manuscripts, the sound of his voice mixing with the brother's when they sang during Mass. Would he ever return? Perhaps not, but he would take all the memories of his new home with him on his journey.

"Amen." He whispered.

"Amen" Brother Brio stood not far away. He smiled. "I thought I'd find you here."

"I've never been so tired, Brother, but I can't sleep." Fergus stood.

"You've seen more in the last few weeks, in the last few hours, than anyone of such few years deserves to see. We choose to serve God and humanity. I fear that the life of quiet contemplation and inner peace is not for us. Not for a long time."

He motioned to the benches and they sat. Brio turned slightly so he wasn't facing Fergus. "Do you want me to hear your confession?"

He thought about it. "No, Brother." Fergus said finally.

"Perhaps I should, but I don't feel any burden from my actions. We all did what we had to. It's God's will."

Brio turned and looked at him. He seemed to be looking right through Fergus. "Henno will change you, Fergus. He already

has. In what comes, he will save your life; just don't let the price of your life be your soul."

Brio smiled in response to the confused look. "You will change him as well."

"I thought I'd find you in here!" A familiar voice roared.

"Having a nice chat, are we?"

Henno's voice filled the chapel, echoes bouncing around the walls.

Brio stood, hushing him angrily. "Friend Henno! What have we said about the chapel?" He whispered fiercely.

Henno grimaced. Then he answered in the loudest whisper either of them had ever heard, "There's work to be done! You expect Jesus to send a giant clamshell down from the clouds to whisk us all the way to Britain or will we be riding horses?"

Brio sniffed with smug look, "I've not been praying for flying clamshells, I've been quite busy."

Henno strode toward them, hands on hips defiantly, still whispering with a vengeance, "Busy? Doing what?"

Brio stood, "Both of you come with me and I'll show you. In the Armory."

"Now you're talking!" Henno called out, then again in a whisper, "Sorry. Let's go!"

Fergus looked around the chapel as he followed them. Maybe he'd be back one day, maybe not, but for now it was enough to know it would always be here.

"Won't do." Henno stated with all the authority of a soldier who'd seen it all. "Too light, too thin. Wouldn't stop a stiff breeze."

He poked Fergus in the chest again. The boy was wearing a vest, like a breastplate, but made of a gray animal hide. He'd never seen anything like it. It was flexible, obviously much more comfortable than a metal breastplate, but comfort was not a criteria when selecting armor. What do these monks know about it? Brio wasn't even listening to him.

He was rummaging through a large chest as Fergus admired the odd bit of armor.

"It's made of the skin of a very rare animal discovered in Carthage." Brio's voice was muffled as he leaned down into the massive chest. "Very popular in the arena but virtually impossible to capture, much less transport. Massive thing. Strong as an elephant, fast as a cheetah, vicious as a lion, with a giant sharp horn on its snout."

Henno was not impressed by made-up stories about imaginary beasties. "Right and I'm sure it had wings, too. Don't you have anything...?"

He stopped as Brio turned with a huge, double-bladed ax. "Ah, this will do, I think."

Before either of them could react, he swung it at Fergus' chest. The boy looked up just in time to be knocked backwards across a table, sliding to a stop when he knocked over a shelf

of helmets with a loud crash. He disappeared under a pile of gleaming metal faces from a dozen different lands.

Henno snatched the ax from Brio's hands and was trying to decide the best way to beat him to death when he heard a cough coming from under the mound of helmets.

Henno was shocked to see the boy struggling to his feet, gasping for breath, but without the expected jagged, bleeding rip in his chest. In fact, the strange armor was completely untouched.

Henno returned Brio's grin. "Got one that will fit a man-sized chest?"

"Of course." Brio tossed him a larger vest.

"That really hurt." Fergus coughed.

"Pain is the reward of the courageous." Henno snapped as he strapped on his vest. "What else you got for us?" He asked Brio.

"Yes, well, I believe I have heard it said that the strike is also a block." He was rummaging in the chest again.

Henno heard Fergus approaching him from behind. "Don't do it, lad." He warned. He turned and saw Fergus sheepishly putting a large spiked club back in its holder on the wall. "Nice try, but we've already tested the armor."

"I thought maybe your courage could be rewarded as well." He grumbled.

Brio turned with two bucklers. Small, wooden shields, they were about four hands wide and could be easily concealed on

their backs under their robes. He'd seen similar shields used by gladiators.

"Not much use against a volley of arrows." Henno picked up one. It was made of a light metal and made to look like wood. Interesting.

"Then I would suggest avoiding such volleys." Brio advised.

"This is the interesting bit." He put the other on, looping his left hand through both straps. There was a small ring near his hand, he slipped it over his fingers. When he clenched his hand, a curved knife blade slid free along the outer edge of the shield.

Henno approved. "I like it. It'll take some practice. A shield like this requires speed to be effective, but a surprise blade is always welcome. What else?"

Brio went on to show them several more items. Henno would've taken them all if he could, but they needed to move quickly and their weapons had to be light and easy to hide until needed. In the end he added a few more bits to their arsenal: small metal helmets they could hide under their hoods, forearm bracers made of the same gray hide as their vests and, for Fergus' sling, a bag of small iron pellets. For himself, he added a pair of leather gloves with spikes jutting out over the knuckles.

"A wolf needs a pair of claws." He said grimly as he recalled the bear-claw of the Druid priest Feyr. One day, scarecrow, we'll go claw to claw.

"That should do it." He and Fergus stuffed their gear into their saddlebags.

Brio cleared his throat nervously. "There is one more...Brother Canus was quite insistent...I think once you consider it...it makes quite a lot of sense actually."

Henno didn't like the sound of this at all. "Consider what?" He narrowed his eyes at the stammering monk.

#

It's the little things you carry with you when you leave a place, Fergus thought and this was one of those things he planned to carry with him for a long time. Right now, he was surrounded by laughter as he watched something he'd never forget. It was a little thing to have your head shaved in a monk's tonsure, but watching it done to a protesting, squirming Henno was hilarious.

"Please, friend Henno!" Brother Penter protested again. "You must hold still! This razor is quite sharp!"

"It had better be, you little mole!" Henno shouted.

This provoked another burst of laughter from the surrounding monks. They'd all gathered in the courtyard to watch as Brother Penter stood on a block while Henno sat twitching with nervousness on a small barrel.

Henno lamented, "Isn't there anyone else who can do this? You can't possibly see through those squinty eyes of yours!"

Brother Penter was obviously tired of being ridiculed. "I can see quite well, but if you continue to jump around like that,

I may mistakenly lop off your ear! Now be still!" He placed the razor against Henno's ear for emphasis. Henno went as still as a rock.

"Carefully, Brother," He warned. "Very carefully. Whatever you lop off of me, I'll take two off of you."

"Your terms are acceptable." Penter replied confidently. He began shaving Henno's already close-cropped head.

The Irish tonsure was a bit different than other orders. They shaved the top of the head and left the sides to grow free. Soon Henno looked like any other monk at the monastery. Except for the unrestrained furious look on his face, daring anyone in the gathered audience to laugh again. There were a lot of smiles though.

"Welcome, Brother Henno." Fergus called out. He couldn't help it. There were several chuckles and more welcomes. Henno shoved Penter away and rose from the small barrel he'd been sitting on. Brother Canus stepped through the crowd to join them.

"It's all itchy." Henno grumbled rubbing his head.

"You'll get used to it." Canus replied with a smile, rubbing his own head. The rest of the monks laughed again, rubbing their heads.

"Funny. You're all a bunch of minstrels, you are." Henno roared. "Alright, lad. Step up. Your turn. We're losing ground standing here."

"Sorry, Brother Henno," Fergus grinned, "I'm afraid that's not possible."

"Fergus will have his head shaved on the day he is accepted into our order." Brother Canus explained. The courtyard erupted into laughter again as Henno realized the joke was on him.

Henno was speechless, his mouth open like a gasping fish. For a terrifyingly crazy moment, Fergus had an image of Henno grabbing Brother Penter by the ankles and using him like a club to beat them all senseless. Then, Henno burst out laughing along with the rest. After the hard times of the last few days, they all needed a good laugh. Fergus laughed so hard his sides ached.

His smile faded when he thought about the journey ahead and what Brio had said. How would he change and how would he change Henno?

#

Henno and Canus walked along the rampart looking out over the valley beyond. The sun was just rising and the ground mist was escaping with slow angry swirls as the sunlight warmed the air. Henno had been hoping for another heavy rain so they could slip away undetected, but he'd settle for sunshine. At least he would be able to see the enemy as well as they would see him.

"You wanted to speak with me." Canus interrupted his thoughts. His mind had already started the trip.

"We were lucky last night." Henno said quietly.

"I would prefer to say we were blessed, but I take your meaning." Canus replied looking down on the courtyard. Fergus was finishing up the last ties to secure their packs on the horses. Several other monks were going about their morning chores. The prayer service would start as soon as Henno and Fergus left.

"If they knew how clumsy and useless those men are in a fight, we'd have all been slaughtered." Henno knew it was a harsh truth, but one that must be said. "We surprised them. If they'd charged our shield wall, it'd have broken like parchment."

Canus kept watching the courtyard. "They certainly seemed confident last night. Thanks to your rousing speech."

"Fear of death will do one of two things to a man. It'll either give him heart or give him wings. After all the insults, my praise them gave them heart. Next time, those Druids will return ready for a real fight." Henno warned.

"We'll be ready." Canus was watching some of the monks getting in some drill practice. Their armor clanked as they moved quickly through the formations.

"Why? Why is this place so important to you? Why not just leave and build a monastery someplace else?" Henno blurted out. "Why is it so important to them? What makes this place so special?"

They walked a bit farther as Canus looked up and down the cliff face with the windows cut deep into the rock.

"I was a boy when I first came here. Younger than the boy Rory was. My parents gave me to the Druids because I saw visions. They thought I was mad or possessed by demons. The Druids saw it as a gift and raised me, taught me their ways and I became a High Priest of the Order. I have seen, I have done, I know terrible things, Henno." His usual deep, commanding voice had dropped to barely a whisper. Henno could almost see the young boy in his eyes now. Alone, frightened but never losing heart.

"There is a myth of a people who lived here long ago. The Tuatha Dé Danann. The Druids believed their goddess queen lives here still. They call her Danu. In the caverns, below the castle, I saw her one night. She was all in white, glowing like a single star in a dark sky. She sang to me. At that moment, I knew she was no pagan goddess. She is Saint Mary, the Virgin Mother from Nazareth, the mother of Jesus Christ." He glanced at Henno. "You probably think I'm mad or possessed as well."

"I..." Henno wasn't sure if he should tell Canus. "I heard her singing. The first night I was here. I thought it was a dream." He added quickly, "It was most likely a dream. I dream about women a lot."

Canus smiled. "The spirit of God touched me that night. I renounced my former life. I asked for God's forgiveness and he blessed me. My skin will always bear the shame of my sins, but

my soul was washed clean. I became a Christian and rid this place of the heathens who'd infected it. We made this place a holy temple of worship to the one true faith. It will never revert to their hands again, Henno. I swear it."

Henno saw the conviction in his eyes. He held out his hand to Canus. "I believe you, Brother. We'll have another game when we return."

Canus grasped his hand firmly, the impulsively hugged Henno kissing him on both cheeks. "God be with you both, Friend Henno."

"Right, let's just...we don't need to do that." Henno muttered hoping nobody saw as wiped his cheeks. "And...uh...Jesus will watch your backs, too." That sounded fairly holy, he thought as he turned to leave.

He paused at the top of the stairs. Canus was staring at the cross perched at the top of the castle. "Brother, how exactly did you get rid of the Druids who were living here?"

Canus kept his eye on the cross and replied simply, "With poison, of course."

Henno was suddenly very glad to be leaving. The open road surrounded by enemies with steel made more sense to him than this quiet hall of rock and shadows.

He quickly made his way down the stairs toward the courtyard where Fergus was waiting with the horses.

#

Feyr sat straight and proud as the healer Zomostis, a Greek, gently probed and tutted while examining his wounded eye.

It had taken him months to convince King Loiguire to give him soldiers. Once he finally had the army he craved, he acted. He knew his men were watching, not daring to show even the smallest sign of anger over the failure of the attack. Not daring to show how much they blamed him.

His face was a solid mask; unflinching, unemotional despite the fiery spikes of pain ravaging his face. His eye! The small one took his eye! He wanted to scream out the fury and the anguish but he dared not show any weakness. He knew they already doubted him. Doubted his power. He could hear them wondering in their minds as clearly as if they shouted, "Have the gods abandoned Feyr? Should we?" He had promised them victory. No, more than a promise, he had prophesied victory. He spoke the words spoken by the gods. Now they sat in the sacred grove and doubted him. They doubted the gods.

There can be no doubt. First, they must fear him. Then, they will follow.

The Greek was waiting, wringing his hands like an old, worried woman.

"Well?" Feyr growled, pushing his voice so the men would hear.

"What will you do?"

The Greek stammered, trying to soften the blow of his findings. "Lord Feyr, the jelly is punctured. There is a piece of bone...here..." His shaking finger pointed, "which must be

plucked. I must clear out the socket and close up the...where the eye was...sew it shut, so that it stays free of dirt. Otherwise it will fester and pustulate causing sickness and...death." He dropped his voice nearly to a whisper and spoke haltingly, "I have some dream milk, made from the local plants...you will sleep while I..." His words caught in his throat as Feyr raised his clawed hand.

The bears claws twitched dangerously close to the Greek's face as Feyr spoke loudly, "If you speak to me again of such weakness, I will take your eye for my own." He wanted them all to know he had the strength to endure any pain, but deep down he was afraid that if the Greek offered it to him again, he'd succumb to the blessed relief.

"I meant no disrespect...." The Greek's pitiful apology was cut off with a scream as Feyr slashed his face. Not too deeply, but the cuts will leave scars. A reminder of his place and of Feyr's strength. The Greek cowered holding his cheek and whimpering like a dog.

Now, he would show them the strength the Old Gods imbue in the faithful.

He began digging out the remains of his damaged eye with the sharp claws of his right hand. The Greek stopped whimpering and began retching into the grass. Feyr heard several men nearby do the same.

The pain he endured was nothing compared to what he would inflict on the one who took his eye. His men would follow him.

They will take back their temple. He would find the small one and make him suffer as he was suffering now. He would not release his own pain with a scream. He would wait.

His release would come when the boy screams.

Chapter 20 - The Road to the Coast

It was a beautiful day. A rare kind of beauty that's impossible to define. The sun shone brightly, but not too warmly. The rain gave everything a clean smell, but didn't bog the road down with mud. The birds sang, but quietly, as if afraid to disturb the two riders as they made their way slowly east. It was as if the world was rewarding them for surviving the terrors of the night before.

Fergus didn't feel like talking and he was glad Henno was in a quiet mood as well. They'd set out going north for a few hours before turning and heading east. To the coast. To Britain. To home?

Would he know anyone in his village and would they know him? It seemed a lifetime ago now although it'd barely been four years. The monastery has felt like home for so long. A refuge from the horror his life had become. Was that the only reason? Did it only feel safe compared to the life of a slave? No, it was more than that. It was his home. It was where he was destined to be. And where he knew he was destined to return one day.

They continued to ride in silence. At mid-day, Henno turned in his saddle and raised a questioning eyebrow at Fergus. He shook his head. Neither of them felt like stopping to eat, so they rode on.

It was late in the afternoon when Barrel made it clear she was ready to stop. She planted herself solidly and refused to take another step until Fergus called out to Henno. "This one needs a break."

Henno waved and steered Volucer toward a small pond surrounded by large shade trees. Only when she saw the other horse leave the road, did Barrel give a satisfied snort and follow.

They unpacked their gear and let the horses drink their fill. Fergus hobbled them both so they could graze in the meadow without wandering too far. When he turned, he saw Henno had the small buckler in one hand and his sword in the other.

"Strap up, lad." He said calmly. "Time for sword practice."

Fergus sighed, but before he could even consider what to say in protest, Henno shouted a war-cry and ran at him. He barely had time to duck before the gladius punched the air just above his head. He didn't have time to enjoy the well-executed dodge before Henno's knee caught him in the chest. He went sprawling backwards.

Looking up, he saw Henno standing over him, the wicked sword's point pressed against his temple. It was ice-cold and needle-sharp.

"I told you. Time for sword practice." Henno said quietly.

"I can't practice unless you let me get my sword." Fergus muttered. He didn't like this. Henno was acting strangely.

Fergus wanted to move away, but the gladius pressed tighter against his skin.

Henno shook his head. "Danger can come at any time, from any direction. What if we'd wandered into an ambush here? Do you think you'd be given time to get your sword?"

Fergus didn't like this game one bit, but he understood it. It's not supposed to be easy, he remembered, it has to get harder all the time.

He glanced behind Henno causing his eyes to involuntarily flick away for just an instant. Fergus slapped the sword point and rolled backwards. He got to his feet quickly and got a smack in the ribs from Henno's shield. Fergus rolled with the blow and came up by his pack. He quickly whipped out his sword and grabbed a thick stick in his other hand. He cursed his foolishness for packing his shield in his saddlebag.

Henno grinned, "Good. Next time, you keep your gear handy. Understood?"

Fergus nodded. He felt a warm trickle of blood coming from the side of his head where Henno's sword had nicked him. The training had gotten harder. Again. Good, he thought, that means I'm getting better. He returned Henno's grin.

They spent the next hour in combat drills. A long sequence of movements which Henno had taught Fergus and which he expected him to execute flawlessly and very, very quickly.

Henno called out the sequence along with corrections, usually emphasized with the end of a long tree branch.

"Step...jab...turn...block...jab...parry...hold your wrist straight! Straight, I say!" Smack with the branch along his

arm. "Again...jab...turn...block...better...hold...jab..." And so on. The moves required precision and concentration, both of which Fergus was running short on as the day was slipped into dusk. He was drenched in sweat and shaking, his arms bruised and bleeding from the numerous corrections when Henno finally called it.

"Rest!" He barked. "Good work. Get cleaned up and I'll get the fire going."

Fergus stayed rock-still, remaining in the ready position.

Henno stared at him. "Well? You gone dippy on me? Aren't you ready to stop? It's late. I'm hungry. I know you're hungry."

Fergus was starving, but he didn't entirely trust Henno. "How do I know you won't rush me as soon as I put my guard down?"

Henno laughed, "Come on, lad. We're done for the day. I promise. Now stop being silly and help me gather up some firewood."

"You promise? We're really done for the day? No surprise attacks?"

"I promise on my honor as a centurion not to hit you as soon as you put your guard down." Henno said with mock solemnity.

"Now, stop mucking about and get some firewood."

Fergus hesitated then saw he was sincere. He sheathed his sword. "Alright, sorry. All this talk about ambushes and the way Orbene..." His head rocked back and he saw spots in front of his eyes as Henno punched him solidly in the jaw. The world spun around once and flew up to catch him as he fell.

"You...bastard..." He managed to sputter as he tried to focus his eyes. "You...promised!"

Henno ticked off the points on his fingers as he listed them one by one, "First off, I'm not a centurion anymore. Second, fighting with honor is an excellent way of getting yourself killed with honor and thirdly, a promise is only worth what the promiser makes it worth."

Fergus' eyes were clearing but he decided to stay on the ground. "So, you're saying I can never trust you. Is that it? I thought soldiers had to trust each other. How can I trust you if I never know when you're telling the truth?"

Henno considered. "Good point." He placed his hand over his heart. "I swear on our friendship, Fergus, we are done training for the day. Now come up and let's get some food cooking."

He held out his hand and when Fergus took it, pulled him to his feet.

#

They fell into a regular routine for the next few days. Riding all day, stopping at mid-day to rest the horses and continuing on until sunset when Henno expected Fergus to train. They kept to open country to make it easier to spot anyone following, but picking their way through the numerous marshy bogs slowed them down. As they rode, Henno taught Fergus all he knew of reading terrain, using the stars to navigate and detecting pursuers.

And Fergus taught Henno all he knew about being a Christian using phrases, gestures and other behavior people would expect. They had long conversations about the nature of war and the nature of God. Fergus' life in Britain had been a quiet one. He'd heard stories from travelers about battles between various tribes. As he learned more about the massive battles Henno had taken part in, those tribal skirmishes seemed little more than drunken bar brawls by comparison.

"Who was the best military leader you ever served with?"

Fergus asked as they rode. It was late in the afternoon. Henno was thinking they should start keeping an eye out for some fresh game. A deer or even a couple of rabbits would do him right for dinner.

"The best leader? You mean the one who won the most battles or the best soldier?" Henno thought he'd use this as a teaching opportunity. Never stop training, he thought, if not the body then the mind.

"Is there a difference?"

"Of course! A general can get lucky or he can be a blood-thirsty bastard who just picks on smaller-sized enemies. Or he can be one of those types who wins but at the cost of so many men, it's hard to call it a win." Henno replied. "The other kind of leader is a soldier you'd walk into Hades for. You fight because he makes you want to fight. You're happy to endure the pain and hunger and hardships of all kind because you know he's right there with you."

"The best soldier then." Fergus asked.

"Easy. Stilicho." Henno smiled. "Meanest, toughest bastard who ever took a breath, but he had a way about him that made you want to fight your way through and live. If for no other reason, then just to see the look on his face afterward."

Henno laughed. "He was one of us. A barbarian turd the legions picked up, polished, pounded and turned into a lump of gold."

"Were you with Stilicho at the Battle of the Frigid River?"

His eyes wide with awe.

"That's General Flavius Stilicho to the likes of you and close your mouth before you swallow a bird." Henno frowned. "And yes, but I don't want to talk about it."

"It must have been cold." Fergus prompted, ignoring his friend's obvious reluctance.

Henno stared at him. "Why does everybody think that? No, it was hot as hades. They call it that because it happened near the Frigidus River." He sighed. Once Fergus got curious about something he wouldn't give up until he'd exhausted every possible source of information. "I'm surprised you've heard of it. I thought all you monks wanted to read was stories about magic tricks with fish and floods."

"Heard of it? You're not serious." Fergus was aghast. "It's the single most important battle for the faith in recent history. It was the defining moment when Christianity won over paganism in the western empire! If it hadn't been for...General Flavius Stilicho...and Emperor Theodosius, then

Arbogast and his puppet dictator Eugenius would've returned the west to pagan worship of false gods. It was a triumph for Christianity. A triumph for God."

Henno smirked. "I guess that's one way of looking at it."

"How else would you look at it?" Fergus pressed.

"When you're on the ground, in the thick of it, politics or religion don't matter. None of us thought we were fighting for one god or another. All I know is it was Roman fighting Roman. None of us felt like it was much of a triumph for anyone." He looked down the road, his mind going back to that day. "I'll tell you something else too. We betrayed the trust of our allies. Theodosius ordered Alaric to attack with his whole force, 20,000 Goth auxiliaries, before he'd bothered with any reconnaissance of the battlefield. He's the first kind of leader. The kind that wastes men like waves crashing on rocks. It was a slaughter. The Western Troops had seeded the ground with caltrops and spiked pits. Alaric lost half his men in the attack and we lost a valuable friend to Rome. Alaric and his troops were good soldiers and they deserved better respect."

"Still, the battle was won, right?" Fergus asked.

"It was won, yes." Henno continued. "But only because the troops who were sent to flank Theodosius were bribed to switch sides."

"Bribed? Are you certain?" Fergus was trying to reconcile Henno's version with the accounts he'd read. "I read that Theodosius prayed and God sent a windstorm to blind the troops

of Eugenius. The winds were so strong, it blew their arrows back on them."

Henno snorted. Volucer did the same. Probably by coincidence, Henno thought, but it was still funny.

Fergus ignored the unspoken comment and continued. "And when they saw they could not hope to defeat an army blessed with God's might, they repented. They begged forgiveness and were allowed to fight on the side of the Lord."

Henno was laughing now, he couldn't help it. The lad is so easily misled. "I don't know if I will be able to pass myself off as a good Christian. I don't think I could pretend to be so gullible!"

Fergus angrily jabbed his heels into Barrel and the horse trotted ahead with an equally angry toss of her head.

"Now, don't be getting all full of yourself." Henno called out, catching up with him. "No matter what you want to think, there was no magic wind, no talking clouds and no fiery rain of death on the soulless unbelievers. I surely wasn't a Christian and there's plenty who fought for Stilicho who weren't either. You want to think it was the holy spirit of Jesus, you go right ahead, but I'm telling you it was a fat, satchel of gold that brought three cohorts of Arborgast's troops over to our side."

"But how do you know that? How do you know they weren't touched by...?"

"Because I'm the one who delivered that fat satchel to their tribune, lad! How do you think I know?" Sometimes this boy is as thick as mud, he thought. "And by the way, the tribune's name was Marcus Equitius Buteo." Henno gave Volucer a nudge and trotted ahead.

"Wait!" Fergus caught up with him. Barrel and Volucer were enjoying the game and wanted to run for a bit. Volucer tossed her head energetically and Henno let her go.

"Come on, lad!" He called over his shoulder. "Let's give them a chance to stretch out for a bit!" There was a rare long, dry stretch of road ahead and Henno wanted to make full use of it.

"But...wait! You mean...?" Fergus gave Barrel a kick and she happily galloped after the other horse.

Even at a full gallop, he was still pumping Henno for information. Amazing.

"Marcus Buteo? General Marcus Buteo? The same one we're on our way to see?" Fergus continued. "But you said you didn't know him."

"That's not what I said. I said maybe I know him." Henno replied. "Turns out I do." He called out over his shoulder, "Try to keep us in sight, lad!"

"Why didn't you say you knew him? What else aren't you telling me?" Fergus was trying to keep up as Henno nudged Volucer to more speed. The champion horse was holding back to stay with the slower one, but at Henno's encouragement she was stretching out and pulling away. Henno laughed with the joy of

it. A beautiful day, a good horse and an impossible mission.

This is what he needed! Now if he could just get far enough away from that joy-killing, jabbering boy, he could really enjoy it.

#

It was easy to forget the hardships of the recent days as they rode like leaves on the wind. The farther they galloped, the farther their troubles seemed to drift behind.

Fergus laughed out loud, holding tight and moving with Barrel as she churned up the road as fast as she could. It had been a long day, but there's nothing a horse loves more than to run.

Fergus watched as Volucer and Henno rounded the bend ahead, but he didn't care. It wasn't a race and if it was, it'd be a short one. Volucer ran like she was bred by Mercury himself.

Probably shouldn't think that, he chided himself. He tried to think of someone in the Bible who raised fast horses. Solomon. He had 4,000 stalls of horses, didn't he?

Soon, he found himself shouting with the joy that comes from racing at full gallop on a happy horse.

He rounded the bend pushing Barrel for more speed. How exciting would it be if they could actually catch up to Henno and Volucer? His fantasy ended when he saw Henno had dismounted and was staring into the red glow of the setting sun just visible over the trees ahead.

"Hey!" Fergus shouted. "Why'd you stop? Never seen the setting sun before?" Fergus called out as he slid to a stop next to them.

"Never seen it set in the north before. You?" Henno said. He rummaged through his saddlebag and pulled out a map.

A cold lump grew in Fergus' stomach. "It's a fire, isn't it?" He asked, but he already knew the answer.

Henno nodded as he looked over the detailed map Brother Penter had given them. "There's a village called Brenowith. Or Cenowidh. Penter's handwriting is terrible. Whatever it's called, I think it's that way." He said pointing north, toward the red haze. "Well, best not get involved in local trouble. We'll head south, put some more miles in before we stop. Damn. I was hoping for an early night too. We'll leave the road here and head south for..." Fergus couldn't believe what he was hearing and it showed on his face. "What? No. I know what you're thinking and the answer is no."

"We have to. People might be hurt." Fergus was already urging Barrel down the road toward Brenowith or Cenowidh, if it was still there.

"Yes, that happens when there's a fire. It's who caused the fire I'm more concerned with. The tribes around here do little more than raise cows and fight each other. We've got plenty of trouble behind and ahead, we don't need to fill the gap in between, lad." Henno mounted Volucer. He tugged the reins to move her to the south, but she wanted to follow Barrel.

"Everybody wants to argue with me." Fergus heard Henno muttering.

"Let's just take a look." Fergus suggested. "A reconnaissance. If you see anything you don't like, we move on. Agreed?"

"Who promoted you?" Henno called out with frustration, still trying to rein in Volucer.

"You're in charge, Centurion." Fergus replied. "You coming?" He urged Barrel to a trot.

Henno was soon trotting alongside. "As long as we agree who out-ranks who." He grumbled.

"I hear and obey, Centurion." Fergus grinned.

"Shut your bean hole and keep your eyes open." Henno was scanning the road ahead. "We'll leave the road and head overland. Less chance of meeting unfriendly types."

They turned their horses from the road and moved into the forest toward the red glow. Fergus could smell burning wood now. Very faint. It made Barrel's ears twitch. He gave her neck a pat as they trotted toward the red sky and the thick smoke.

Chapter 21 - The Village of Denowhin

They slowly made their way through a thick marsh. Fergus realized Henno's choice was a sound one; it was an unlikely route for anyone leaving the area. They walked their horses, taking care not to get stuck in the bog.

The smell of burning wood was thicker now. Fergus could also smell roasted pork. Despite his nervousness at what they might find, his empty stomach rumbled. They'd only stopped briefly to water the horses during the day and the smell of a hot meal was reminding him of how hungry he was.

Henno was smelling the air and frowning.

Fergus spoke quietly as they stepped onto dryer ground and approached the base of a brush-covered rise.

"Can't be all bad." He said brightly. "Somebody's got a pig on the fire."

Henno scowled at him. "Tie up the horses here." He handed Fergus his reins.

Fergus was confused. When had Henno ever not welcomed a hot meal?

"What?" He asked. "It's probably a bonfire to celebrate some local god. If we're lucky we'll be invited to tuck in. You love roasted pork."

"It's not..." Henno face was darkly serious as checked his sword and buckler making sure they were ready for quick access. "Stay with the horses, lad."

"Why? They horses will be fine here. I want to come with you."

Henno stared at him, his face full of concern. Why was he being so serious?

"Alright then, lad" He said quietly. "Alright. Stay low and no matter what you see remember to stay quiet. Understand?"

"I understand, but..." Fergus stopped as Henno turned and quickly made his way up the short rise.

He checked his weapons and followed. The dropped to their bellies as they approached the crest. Fergus could see a cloud of black smoke drifting up into the darkening sky. The smell of cooked meat was stronger. Henno stopped near the top and waited. He'd taught Fergus to always approach every new situation with stealth and fear. Be a hare, he reminded himself, but there was something in the older man's manner that told Fergus this was not a simple feast or celebration. Henno took a deep breath and Fergus realized his friend wasn't breathing through his nose.

It was then he realized it wasn't roasted pork he was smelling.

His stomach churned and his limbs froze. Henno had begun crawling forward again, but Fergus didn't want to move. He didn't want to see. He closed his eyes and prayed for strength. Henno had reached the top and was peering out from under a bush.

"God, please give me the strength to bare what I'm about to see." Fergus whispered and forced himself to move. He slid beneath a bush next to Henno, staring at the ground. He felt his friends hand on his shoulder.

"Take your time, lad." Henno whispered quietly. "There's no rush."

Fergus lifted his eyes.

#

Henno was a veteran of dozens of battles, big and small. In his time as a legionnaire, he'd witnessed the horrors that one person could inflict on another. Wounded men screaming for mercy as the enemy chopped them to pieces. Women and children slaughtered without a thought. He'd been tortured and he'd tortured. He knew war was inflicting fear as well as casualties.

But none of it compared to this.

Stretching out before them, like a field of corn, were dozens men, women and children. They had been impaled on wooden stakes with small fires lit under each of them. The fires smoldered, some flames still flickered sending dancing shadows of a painful death across the ground.

He thought he'd long since become immune to the sickness that comes from seeing brutality. Now, he felt a wave of dizziness and a rush of saliva that precedes puking your guts out. He forced it back. He wasn't about to toss up in front of the boy. He had to be strong.

Beside him Fergus had covered his mouth and gave out a muffled cry of horror. He squeezed the boy's shoulder again. Fergus covered his face in his arms and took deep breaths. He could hear him praying, but his words were choked off with muffled crying.

"I'm sorry, lad." Henno whispered. "I knew it would be bad, but...I had no idea."

Fergus wiped his eyes and looked at Henno. There was no sadness or fear, only anger. Henno felt it too. This wasn't war, it was the work of madmen. When an animal goes mad, you put it down.

He took Fergus' hand in his. "Fergus, I want you to listen carefully to me. I swear on my life, on our friendship and on the power Jesus, Jupiter, Mithras or whoever is listening, we will find who did this."

Fergus stared back, his eyes full of blood and fire, his grip was like iron. He was looking Henno straight in the eye, but wasn't talking to him. "Lord, we are your wolves."

#

Henno knew something had snapped in the boy. First, he was a boy no longer. A child has the luxury of believing in the best of others. Fergus has lost that quality now and forever. Henno had lost it the day he saw his father die. Fergus had somehow managed to keep that child-like ability through the terrors of seeing his parents slaughtered, of being kept a slave. Perhaps it was why he had embraced the Christian faith so completely. A faith which preaches that no matter how evil you are, you can be redeemed. A faith which preaches love for all, especially your enemies.

That faith had been challenged. Henno wasn't sure if it was possible for the young man beside him to ever have that faith again. He'd been tempted by the faith himself. He could see why this new religion was growing in popularity. During times

of peace, it was easy to see why people would find it so comforting. Love your neighbor. Why not? Life would be much more enjoyable if everyone could love their neighbor.

Until your neighbor snuck in one night and stole your cow or raped your wife or killed you in your sleep. Loving your neighbor was fine as long as you knew your neighbor wasn't going to take advantage of it.

Henno told Fergus to wait with the horses while he went down and checked for survivors. Not because any of them had a chance to live, but because he wanted to give them a merciful death. Fergus ignored him as if he hadn't spoken. He gripped his sword tightly and walked with Henno, scanning the area for any sign of danger.

Henno started down one row, Fergus took the next. They marched in quick-time, falling into the practiced cadence as if they both needed the mechanical, rhythmic steps to keep their feet moving. When they saw a twitch or heard a sound, a quick jab to the throat ended the suffering and sent a soul on its journey. They both moved quickly, reacting without hesitation. The only sound was the snapping of the burning logs and their marching footsteps. As they reached the end of a row, they each turned and headed down another. Between the two of them, they covered the entire nightmare in short order. Thankfully, there'd been few survivors.

Several large huts had been torched as well. The buildings were round, large enough for several families each and had

limestone walls. The thatch used for the roofs and to plug up any gaps in the walls had collapsed with the fire. It was still too hot to search the insides. Without speaking, they each began a long circle around the settlement in different directions looking for signs of the attackers.

They met at the far end.

"Several sets of tracks leading off to the south." Henno reported. "You?"

"Tracks leading in from the north." Fergus said in a cold, unemotional voice.

Henno nodded. "South then. The tracks are fresh, maybe a few hours at the most. I know you'd like to give these people a proper burial..."

Fergus hefted his sword in an energetic, almost nervous, twitching motion. He was eager. He was hungry for blood. Henno had seen it before.

"We don't have time." Fergus snarled. "We'll honor their memory by sending their murderers to Hell, one piece at a time."

"Fergus, you need..." Henno started.

"Let's go." Fergus walked quickly back toward the horses. The animals had refused to approach the remains of the village and still waited on the other side of the ridge. "It's too dark to follow the trail, but they won't have gone far in the dark."

Henno followed, but Fergus was practically running now. He was mounted and moving south as Henno crested the ridge. He jumped on Volucer and rode after him.

This is bad, he thought, the lad's heart is on fire. Henno knew what would happen the moment he saw anyone he suspected of being responsible for the slaughter. Fergus would explode in a fireball of screaming rage and fly at them like a wild animal. That would not do. He'd as likely kill the wrong men as get them both killed in the process. Revenge was good, it was satisfying. Henno liked revenge. There was a finality to it that comes rarely in life, but blind fury leads to sloppiness and sloppiness is the way of an amateur. He'd trained Fergus to be a professional soldier like himself. Now was the time for Fergus to learn the true power that comes with knowing how to use a blade to kill the enemy.

It was time for him to learn the real secret of the Roman Legions.

It was simple really. For thousands of years, man fought man in a drunken orgy of passionate anger. They hacked at each other with rage; undisciplined butchers who reveled in their blood-soaked clumsiness. Amateurs.

Rome became the first real army. The first to use full-time, carefully selected and well-trained professional soldiers. A group of individuals who learned through tortuous training to move as one unit. Of course there was the battle lust, the mind-numbing combination of fear and fury that comes when man

faces man to the death, but the legion taught a man a discipline for killing. It was like teaching a man any craft, just like a blacksmith or a sculptor or a baker teaches an apprentice. A method for using that emotion to the soldier's advantage. It was like water to a tree; it gave them all a deadly, unified strength. No nation had stood before such an army. Rome's soldiers had conquered the world behind their shield walls, with their sharp swords, marching together, one step at a time.

Now Fergus needed to harness all his rage like a wild horse needed to be broken to the saddle. If he didn't, Henno knew it would consume him. Even if he survived the coming fight, he'd be useless as a soldier. He'd be as unreliable as a mad dog is to a shepherd.

He'd be useless to Henno.

#

Fergus pushed Barrel hard. The horse was reluctant to go too quickly in the dark, but he kept kicking her side repeatedly to goad her on. She stumbled a few times, but righted herself as he yanked her reins to avoid the rocks. She whinnied in fear at his rough treatment, but he barely noticed.

He felt like his head would explode. Blood pounded in his ears like a primitive drum beat pushing words out of his thoughts. All he had were images of victims charred beyond recognition.

Images of a blackened face, its eyes flickering toward him as a single tear ran down its burned cheek.

He tasted blood in his mouth. He'd bitten his lip. He sucked on the cut. It tasted hot and metallic as the blood swirled around his mouth. He wanted more. He wanted to find the men who did it and feel their blood on his face. Hot and metallic. A voice in the back of his mind was trying to speak to him. It whispered to him, but he ignored it and focused on the drum beat. The whisper was talking of love, of forgiveness, of peace. None of that had a place in Fergus' heart now. All he wanted to hear was the screams of the murderers as he pushed them from this life one agonizing inch at a time.

The voice was louder now. It was Henno trying to get his attention. He grabbed Fergus' bridle and was pulling his horse to a stop. Without realizing it, Fergus had pulled his sword out of its scabbard.

"What are you doing?" Fergus demanded. "We can't stop!"

Henno stared back with a mix of anger and surprise on his face. Fergus realized Barrel was heaving great gulps of air, her sides flecked with sweat and spittle. His own face was wet. He wiped it and realized he'd been crying. His head spun. What was wrong with him? He felt like he was dying. Had he really drawn steel on his good friend?

He slumped forward and felt Henno catch him. He knew he was passing out. The pounding in his ears lessened, slowing down

as he drifted into unconsciousness until he heard Henno's voice.

"That's a good lad." He heard. "I've got you. You're alright now. You're a good soldier."

#

It was still dark when he woke. He was covered in sweat but shivering in the cold night air. It was misting out, but Fergus was covered with several cloaks under a low shelter of leafy branches.

He saw Henno had risked a small fire, the peat gave off a wet, musky smell. He was hunched over the low flame which he'd surrounded with rocks to shield the light. A small iron pot was hanging above the flames and Fergus could smell porridge bubbling. He sat up and tried to make sense of what had happened.

"Feeling better?" He spooned some food into a bowl and handed it to him. "Get this down you. I expect you need it."

The bowl was hot, the porridge even hotter. Fergus welcomed the warmth in his hands as he blew on the bubbling mix. His throat was dry, he tried to speak but could only cough.

Henno handed him a cup of water which he downed quickly. They sat quietly. Fergus gulped a bit of the porridge, swallowing hard to get it down. He felt like he'd been punched in the throat.

"How long?" He managed to croak.

Henno shrugged. "A few hours." He nodded south. "I scouted ahead. They're camped about a mile from here. They'll stick until morning."

Fergus was overwhelmed with shame. He looked down and tried not to cry. "I'm...sorry...I don't..." He found he couldn't say any more. Henno poked the fire giving off a warm glow which lit his face as he smiled.

"Nothing to be sorry about." Henno said quietly. His smile faded. "It's my fault. You weren't ready for...I should've stopped you from seeing that. I didn't know. It was too much, too soon."

Fergus ate quietly while he tried to piece together what he'd seen. He realized Henno had given him his cloak as he slept and was shivering. He quickly tossed the cloak back to him, which Henno wrapped around himself eagerly. Fergus shuffled forward to join him by the fire.

"What happened to me?"

Henno tried to find the words. "I've seen it before. It's a madness. We called it the Blood Fever. Your eyes see more than they can take in. It's like jumping into a rushing river. The current just carries you away. Some just get washed away forever." He slapped Fergus on the back. "Some manage to climb out. Like you."

"I think it was more like you pulled me out." Fergus shook his head. "I feel as though I've been snatched from the grip of Satan himself. Thank you, friend Henno."

"Don't get all weepy on me. I just did what I'd do for any fellow soldier." Henno shrugged. "Satan? He's the bad one, right?"

Fergus nodded. "Right. He's the bad one."

"I don't know about that, but when you pulled your blade I thought I was going to have to take you down." He added seriously. "I'm glad it didn't come to that."

"Me, too. I'd hate to have your death on my hands." Fergus joked, trying not to think about how close they'd come to blows.

Henno laughed. "Is that right? Well, just remember I may have taught you all you know about killing, but I've not taught you all I..." He stopped suddenly. "Never mind. It's all done now. Eat up. Once you get your legs back, we'll move."

Fergus wondered what memory had surfaced that changed Henno's demeanor so suddenly. He ate quickly and decided he'd best keep his mind focused on the task at hand.

God's work would have to wait. There was soldier's work to do.

#

They left their horses at their make-shift camp and went after the men Henno had discovered. They moved quickly and quietly. Like a pair wolves on the hunt, Henno thought.

Fergus had returned from the Blood Fever with a new calmness in him. It was the same with the other soldiers he'd seen come out the other side of the madness. Almost as if the farther into the madness he'd traveled, the steadier his mind was when

he returned to solid ground. Fergus moved like an experienced soldier, like a veteran of dozens of night raids. He followed Henno's footsteps and hand-signals without hesitation. He dropped to a knee when Henno did and scanned the area, smelling the air, even turning to look back the way they'd come so he'd be familiar with the route back. Just like a good soldier.

Henno indicated the enemy camp was just beyond a thick patch of trees. Fergus nodded and they both dropped and slithered forward silently. They were carrying their weapons. This was no reconnaissance; not a time for hares.

This was a killing party. A job for wolves.

Henno went over the details of the attack plan as they moved. The murderers were dressed in local tribesman gear. The massacre was most likely some tribal dispute over land, cattle or women. The men had on light armor, carried swords but only two had shields. Henno hadn't seen any watch posted.

Amateurs.

They were sleeping around the remains of a small fire. There were seven in total, wrapped up in their cloaks and, when he'd seen them earlier, sleeping soundly. Bastards. How could anyone sleep so peacefully after doing something like that?

There was only one way to do this. An attack against multiple enemies was tricky. If they were fast and lucky, they might be

able to kill two each before the other two were roused by the noise. That would make the odds better.

That's if they were very fast and very, very lucky.

They would slip into the camp and use daggers to start. Once the alarm was sounded, they'd switch to dolabras. The two-handed ax would give them an advantage if faced with multiple attackers. It was used to bring down trees, dig trenches and was a great weapon to hack down an attacker.

Fergus' training hadn't included going up against multiple attackers yet. Henno told him the most important thing to remember, "Keep moving; always use one opponent to shield you from the other."

Don't worry about him. He'll be fine. Focus on your job, he'll do his.

It was going to be dawn soon. Henno glanced up and saw the stars were already fading, pulling back to their sky houses as the chariot of fire which carried the sun approached. He could smell the smoldering fire and the stink of man and horse. He shifted his direction and headed for the smell, Fergus staying close behind.

The ground was wet and covered the sound of their movement perfectly. They slid along the ground like a couple of serpents. It's a difficult way to move, crawling across the soggy, cold ground, but the anticipation of bloody work gave their muscles a humming, warm energy.

They heard stumbling footsteps approaching and they both froze. The jerky steps came closer. Henno leaned his head around a tree and saw a man fumbling with his breaches until he started pissing. It steamed in the cold night air as he sighed sleepily. Behind him was the camp. The fire had died and a lazy curl of white smoke twisted above the six sleeping lumps. The horses were on the far side of the camp. That was good. They were downwind of the animals who could easily give away their presence. Henno had long ago learned to be wary of horses and dogs when it came to a night raid and to trust them when he was on guard against one.

He knew he didn't have to signal Fergus. They both knew the move and when to make it. As the man turned to stumble back to his spot, tying up his breaches again, Henno was on him. His arm crushed his windpipe, pulling him off his feet. Fergus shoved his dagger into the man's side with perfect precision between his ribs, through his lungs and punctured his heart. The pisser was dead before he even knew he was being attacked. Henno slowly lowered the cooling carcass to the ground. Fergus slowly pulled his blade free. It dripped black in the darkness.

One down. Six to go.

#

They split up so they'd be attacking from two different directions. Fergus moved as soon as he saw Henno move. They

swept into the camp like smoke, not a sound. Fergus approached the nearest sleeping man and did just as instructed.

"Hand over the mouth, slit the throat; cut deep, cut quick, move on to the next." Henno had told him.

He dispatched the first man who gurgled blood through his fingers, his eyes wide with shock. Fergus saw Henno was done with his first and moving on. No sound, none of the others were alerted yet. Maybe they'd be able to get them all while they slept.

Maybe.

He pounced on the next sleeping form, grabbed a handful of hair and yanked back. He raised his knife up. And froze.

It was a girl. Not just a girl, but a vision. She was about Fergus' age and he saw her hands were bound. Her pale white skin seemed to glow in the moonlight. He could see her bright emerald eyes shining like a pair of fresh leaves floating on a sun-drenched pond. Time seemed to stop as they stared at each other.

Then, her perfect lips parted and she screamed like a banshee! Fergus barely had time to take a breath before he was tackled and knocked to the ground. One of the men had jumped him, Fergus' dagger was knocked away. They rolled until the bearded man was on top, his thick hands wrapped around Fergus' throat. Spittle flew from the man's mouth and sprayed Fergus as they struggled. He brought a knee up and slammed it into the man's groin. He saw him wince, but his grip only got tighter. He was

leaning down now, trying to crush his windpipe. Fergus shifted one way, the suddenly the next, throwing his attacker off-balance. He punched wildly and managed a solid hit in the nose. The grip loosened enough for him to break it and roll away.

He was on his feet in an instant and took in the action around him in a flash.

Henno was swinging his dolabra wildly against an attacker with a shield.

The girl was running to the horses.

The man who jumped Fergus had grabbed his dagger and was running at him. Fergus yanked the dolabra off his back and swung it with all his might. The man screamed and brought up his arm instinctively to block the blow. The ax chopped off his arm at the elbow. He fell back clutching his spurting stump and screaming in pain.

Another man was trying to get up, but had his feet tangled in his cloak. Fergus finished him off with a vicious chop to the face.

Henno had killed his man and was looking for the next opponent. Had he run?

The girl had managed to untie one of the horses but shrieked as Fergus saw the last man leap up behind her. He slapped her and tossed her face-down across the horse. He jumped up and was riding away!

Fergus dropped his dolabra, pulled out his sling, fitted one of the iron pellets into it and gave it a quick spin. He knew he'd only have an instant before the horse was too far in the dense trees. He let the shot fly. It struck the horse in the rump causing it to rear. The girl saw her chance and flipped off the horse, falling heavily to the ground.

The man turned, saw Fergus loading another shot and Henno charging and decided to make a dash for it. He kicked the horse and it bolted away. Fergus got off another shot, but it clattered against a tree, careening off wide.

"Stop her!" Henno called out. Fergus saw she was running to another horse. Fergus caught up with her. She struggled in panic as he caught her arm.

"It's alright!" He tried to soothe her. "We won't hurt you. We're priests."

She screamed again as she saw Henno beheading the man whose arm Fergus had chopped off.

"Can't you keep her from howling?" Henno shouted. "She'll have the whole country on us before long!"

Fergus was trying to hang on to her arm, but the girl was thrashing hysterically. "Show her your head!" Fergus shouted over his shoulder.

"What?" Henno was angrily approaching now.

"Your tonsure! Show her you're a priest!"

"Right." Henno pulled back his hood and showed her his recently shaved head. "See? A priest. That's me. Us. We're

holy men so quit your screeching." He made the sign of the cross. He did the cross bar wrong, but Fergus didn't think the girl would notice. She stopped struggling and stared at Henno. "You got it backwards." She whispered quietly to Fergus' astonishment.

"How do you know that?" He asked her.

She yanked her arm free and reached inside her tunic. She pulled out a small wooden cross which hung from her neck. "I'm a Christian. Like...you?" She was obviously still skeptical after witnessing the two priests dispatch the warriors so brutally.

Henno couldn't help but chuckle. "No, not like us."

Fergus cut her hands free. He put his cloak around her and helped her on a horse. Henno was quickly searching the bodies and removing purses or anything small which might be of value. Fergus grabbed the reins of two of the faster looking animals and sent the rest off in different directions. "Henno!" He called out. "We need to go!"

"Of course, Brother Fergus." He replied stuffing the purses inside his tunic. He gave the girl a wink as he jumped on a horse's back. "Just collecting for the poor, my sweet."

Henno galloped off, leaving the girl to stare questioningly at Fergus. He shrugged. "It's difficult to...we need to leave. I swear by Almighty God, you are safe with us. Now, please. Will you come?"

She nodded and galloped after Henno. Fergus followed.

He took a deep breath. The dawn was breaking, the air smelled fresh and wet. It would rain soon. The blood they'd left behind would be soaked into the earth.

It was good to be alive.

#

Henno pushed the stolen mount at top speed, the girl and Fergus not far behind. When he got close to where they'd left Volucer and Barrel, he didn't bother getting down, but jumped straight on to Volucer's back. He was impressed when Fergus did the same. They were both feeling the rush that comes from winning a fight.

"Very nice!" He called out.

Barrel let out a very dissatisfied snort. She obviously felt above such gymnastics.

Henno pointed toward the track he wanted to follow. "We're going west. Ride hard and try to keep up!" He pointed Volucer's nose west and gave her a kick. She jumped forward and grabbed the ground.

The girl pulled her horse to a stop and frantically cried out to Fergus, "No! My family! Please, we must ride north back to my home!"

Fergus couldn't tell her, he didn't have the words. Besides, even if he did, she'd never believe him. He had sworn to keep her safe and that meant hiding the truth from her for now. Maybe forever.

"We can't! It's the first place they'll come looking." He hoped his hood covered the lie on his face. "Now, we must leave! Hurry!" Barrel was aching to run after Volucer. Fergus stopped holding her back and prayed that the girl would follow. After a reluctant glance north, she did. They rode down the track Henno had taken.

Chapter 22 - The Road West

As Henno said, they rode hard and tried to keep up. Volucer set a fast pace which Barrel and the girl's mount struggled to maintain. They ate on the move and when the horses need to rest, they walked them at a brisk pace. Fergus was glad for the chilling, light rainfall. It hid the smoke from the girl's village. He tried to find out more about what happened, but all he got from her was her name, Sarah, before she started crying.

Fergus let her ride ahead for a while, keeping her in sight while giving her some privacy. He couldn't stop staring at her. It made his heart both break and soar to look at her crying in the rain. He'd never seen anything so beautiful. At mid-day, Henno joined them.

"Keep going west." He told Fergus. "I'm going to scout back and make sure we're not being followed."

The girl looked panicked. "Followed? Do you think...?" Henno was already gone. Fergus did his best to calm her. "No, he just wants to be sure. If they were within a mile, he'd

know it." He gave her an awkward smile and impulsively tried to pat her arm. She pulled away and looked north again. She gave her mount a nudge and rode ahead of him.

They rode like that for another few miles; the girl slumped in the saddle her shoulders shaking as she cried. Fergus behind, wishing he knew what to do, what to say.

#

This was all wrong, Henno thought. We shouldn't be concerning ourselves.

"Just once," he muttered as he rode, "I'd like to meet someone who isn't trying to kill me or get me killed." Volucer tossed her head in obvious agreement.

Or more likely because she sensed it too. Someone had been following them.

It was the same feeling he had when he and Fergus were on their way to Gratian's. It wasn't anything he heard or anything he saw. If anything, it was the silence and absence of movement. The birds were quiet, as if afraid to be noticed. He didn't see anything unusual, but he'd catch something stop moving out of the corner of his eye when he scanned the area. He got down from Volucer, calming the horse with a pat and a whisper as he walked the big horse for a bit. "Good girl. I know he's out there. Wants to play, does he? That's right. We're not bothered, are we?"

The horse relaxed, trusting him, but he could tell she was still very alert.

The sooner they got to the coast, the better.

But what about the girl? The last thing they needed was more people after them. He knew the lad was smitten with her. More complications. He'll be spouting poetry and singing to her before nightfall.

Henno sighed. "First love and his first broken heart."

Volucer gave him a shove in the back. "Right, we're going." He swung back up in the saddle and gave the area one last hard look.

The only sound was Volucer's impatient huffing and the patter of the rain. He knew he was being watched and he hated it. He shouted to the trees, "Enough of your games! Step out and face me like a man!"

Nothing.

He spit on the ground and turned Volucer. Just as the big horse moved, he thought he heard it. Just under the rain, a slight whisper of breath.

The kind of sound someone makes when they laugh quietly.

He shivered and told himself it was from the cold.

#

Fergus heard Volucer coming quickly up the road. Too quickly.

"Find anyone?" He called out.

Henno tossed Fergus an apple. "Found a tree back there." He said as apple juice dribbled from his packed mouth. "Nothing else." He nodded at the girl up ahead. "Get anything out of her?"

"Her name is Sarah." Fergus replied. "She was from the village. They called it Denowhin."

"Denowhin? I don't care how much he denies it, that Penter is blind as a Senator." He took another apple from his bag and leaned down to feed it to Volucer who ate it noisily, much the same way as Henno eats. "You tell her what we found?"

Fergus shook his head. "I couldn't." He admitted.

"It's for the best. She'd just want to go see for herself and...no. We couldn't let her do that." Henno said. "You did the right thing."

The girl had stopped her horse and was waiting for them to catch up. Henno spoke as they joined her. She looked exhausted, her eyes were dull and lifeless. Fergus was afraid she'd fall out of the saddle. He handed her the apple. She took it but just held it, not eating.

He dropped from Barrel and took her reins. "Sarah? We're stopping for the night. You'll feel better after something to eat and some sleep." She barely nodded.

Henno dropped from Volucer's back and pointed toward a clearing. "There's a likely spot." He led the way.

#

While Henno saw to the horses, Fergus made a shelter for Sarah by bending some saplings over. Their leafy tops would keep out the rain, mostly, and keep in some warmth. He fussed over a bed of leaves for her as if he was building their marriage bed. Henno smiled. The lad has it bad for her.

The rain had stopped, but the clouds remained. It would be a dark night. Good, Henno thought. The rain covered any tracks they may have left, the dark will hide them for the night. He'd take the first watch, let the youngsters sleep for a bit. He dug a shallow pit and built a low fire. Just enough to heat up some food and warm your toes if you sit close enough. Fergus came back with a couple of stoats, strutting back like he'd brought down an elephant. He obviously wanted to impress the girl and she gave him a small, polite smile before turning back to the small fire. Fergus looked like he could walk on air after that tiny morsel of attention.

Soon they were dry, fed and feeling the weariness that comes from a long, hard day. Not a day I'd want to repeat, thought Henno.

He was startled when the girl started speaking as if answering a question. She finished eating, put her bowl down and began in a quiet, but strong voice.

"My parents named me Sura. I was born in Britain, in the north, near the Pict's land."

Henno snorted, "Picts? Wild red-haired barbarians, they are. I remember once on a patrol..."

Fergus shushed him urgently, his eyes never leaving her.

Right, love-struck. Damn, it was a good story too. He had a feeling hers was going to be sad and as curious as he was about who she was and who might be after her, he wasn't really

in the mood for sad just now. He wished there was a tavern nearby.

"I'm a Roman citizen. My family was attacked and brought here as a slaves."

"Me, too." Fergus whispered in astonishment as if it was a miraculous coincidence that bound them together. Henno shook his head. Just like thousands of others, he thought. In fact, he was willing to bet more people in Ireland were dragged here in chains than were born here. He was certainly looking forward to getting back into the Empire. Crumbling or not, he missed the familiarity and routine of Roman life.

The girl continued, ignoring Fergus' admission. "I was very young then. My parents and I were sold together. We were lucky in that and in who bought us. His name was Murtach, a farmer. He didn't care that we were Christians, he even allowed us to worship as long as we didn't try to convert any of the other slaves. Still, some were curious and wanted to join us during our services. When my father became ill, I began holding the services. He baptized me and I took the name Sarah."

She was quiet for a bit. "You've got change your name when you...?" Henno began.

Fergus shot him a glare. Right, he forgot he was supposed to be a priest. Best just keep my mouth shut, he thought. But what if you like your name? Henno grabbed another hunk of stoat meat and wondered how long this was going to take.

"He died that summer." She continued. "Murtach allowed us to bury him according to our faith. He started attending our services after that. He converted from his pagan ways to our faith."

Ah, thought Henno, now we're getting to it. "I'm sure that didn't exactly please the local king and his Druid priest, did it?"

She looked up at him sharply, as if just now realizing she wasn't alone. She shook her head and continued, "Loíguire has taken the title of King of this land. I don't know the Druid's name. He comes and goes. An old man, white hair, very tall. He wears an animal's claw on his hand." She shuddered and pulled the cloak tighter around her shoulders.

Henno and Fergus exchanged a quick glance. It had to be Feyr. Fergus started to speak, but Henno cut him off with a curt shake of the head. Best keep what we know to ourselves for now, he thought.

One good thing, at least it's not somebody new trying to kill us, he thought grimly. You've got to look hard for the rays of sunshine sometimes.

"Last month, King Loíguire sent word to us. He demanded Murtach renounce his faith and kill one of us as a sign to all Christians. He refused. The King himself came next. His soldiers beat Murtach but still he refused to renounce God."

"Bless his strength." Fergus whispered.

"We tried to fight. We out-numbered Loíguire's men, but all we had were farm tools. We managed to scare them off, but Murtach was badly hurt. The king sent a messenger the next day demanding I be given to his son as tribute. I would be his...his slave." She stared at the fire, her voice dropped to a frightened whisper. "I was ready to sacrifice myself, but Murtach wouldn't allow it. He killed the messenger. Cut off his head and sent it back to the King." She began to weep again. Fergus started to reach out and pat her shoulder, but pulled his hand back.

They had seen what happened next. The King sent more men, some to haul her away; the rest to send a message to anyone else who might want to defy a king.

"Men in power are all alike." Henno spit into the fire.

"Always trying to prove how strong they are."

Without another word, she crawled into the bed Fergus had prepared for her, wrapped herself in the borrowed cloak and curled up tight.

Fergus stared at Henno, his eyes calling for blood and revenge.

"What's done is done, lad." Henno said quietly. "There's no undoing it."

"It's not right." Fergus said stubbornly. "We have to do something."

Mithras, this boy was full of vinegar! Did he want to take on a king's army all by himself? Henno realized at that moment

he'd never been in love. Not like this. Good thing too, he thought, if it makes you want to do ridiculous things like the lad was suggesting. The realization also made him a bit sad, although he didn't know why exactly.

"We'll see her safely home. To Britain. That's the best we can do." Henno spoke both as a friend and as his commander. He saw Fergus hear the finality and the wisdom of his decision.

The boy nodded reluctantly, adding, "She needs to be told about her family. Her people." He was volunteering to be the bearer of the terrible news.

"No, lad, she doesn't." Henno said quietly. "Best she doesn't ever know."

They didn't speak for a while. They sat and watched the fire, listened to the creaking woods around them. Soon, Henno heard the girl's measured breathing. She was asleep. Henno longed to do the same.

"I'll take first watch." He said. "Check on the horses, then get some kip."

Fergus shook his head. "No, I'll sit first watch. I had a nap earlier." He grinned grimly.

Henno gave him a shove in the shoulder. "Horses. Sleep. That's an order." He grinned back. "I'll wake you when it's your turn." Fergus stifled a yawn and stiffly rose to follow his orders.

Good soldier.

Fergus woke suddenly, but kept completely still. He was wide awake, listening, smelling and feeling all around him. It was deep into the night. The clouds had drifted and he could see the moon shining low in the sky. Why hadn't Henno woken him? He turned his head slowly as his hand gripped his sword with his right hand.

He saw Henno sitting by the fire. All was well. He turned and nodded with a grin. As quiet as Fergus was trying to be, Henno had known he was awake. He was once again amazed by his friend's uncanny abilities.

He joined him by the fire, the low flames danced across a bed of warm, glowing cinders. They spoke quietly so as not to wake the girl.

"Why didn't you wake me earlier?" Fergus didn't like being given special treatment. He knew he still had much to learn, but he longed to be treated as an equal.

Henno stretched his back and scanned the marsh beyond the track they'd been following. "Something was following us. I don't think it's out there now, but...I wanted to make sure."

"Some...thing?" Fergus whispered. Thing?

Henno nodded, "On the way to Gratian's, when we split up. I noticed...felt like we were being watched. When we didn't find anything, I told myself I was just nervous after not being in action for a spell or just hungover." He spit into the fire. It sizzled quietly. "But earlier today, when I checked the

road behind, I felt it again. Volucer did too." He added as if he needed the extra confirmation.

Fergus nodded. He had no trouble trusting Henno's judgment. If he said there was something out there, then there was.

"What do you want to do?" He asked, ready for whatever the order would be.

"About what?" Henno responded in frustration. "What are we supposed to do about a feeling that maybe there's something out there? It's like an itch I can't scratch." He spit again. "I know there's something out there. I can't see it, I can't smell it or catch it, but I know it."

"That's what we Christians would call 'faith'." Fergus smiled.

"Right. I've got faith that once I get it within reach, I'm going to gut it from ass to ear." He replied grimly. "Whatever it is."

"It's really got you spooked, hasn't it?" Fergus was seeing Henno's bravado slip a bit.

"Nah, I just don't like anyone making my horse nervous is all." And, just like that, it was back. "If you're quite done lazing about, you can take your turn on watch."

"Sleep well." He settled in while Henno crawled off to the bed of leaves Fergus had vacated.

As he marveled at the beauty of the night, he realized something. Why doesn't Henno snore when he's sleeping rough like this? If he can control it, he'd have to make sure to ask

him to do so next time they're bedding down in a tavern or back at the monastery.

He thought about the Folcutt monastery. By this time, those on kitchen duty would be up and preparing the bread for the next day. Fergus loved waking to the smell of the baking bread. More times than he could remember, he'd wake early and go down to the stables only to find Rory was already...

He stopped there. He didn't want to think about the past. He must focus on his future. He glanced shyly toward the small shelter he'd built for Sarah. Was that a bit of her hair peeking out over the cloak she was wrapped in? He remembered how soft her hair felt in his hand when he...almost slit her throat! He stood and quietly moved away, closer to the edge of the clearing. He didn't want to be distracted with thoughts of her.

Also, he needed to piss badly.

He sighed as he began relieving himself against a tree.

"Fergus?" He jumped at the sound of her voice, whispered so quietly he wasn't sure he really heard it. He fumbled trying to stop mid-stream and only succeeded in wetting his boots.

"Uh, no. I mean...yes. It's me." This was embarrassing. "Just a moment."

"It's so dark." She was walking tentatively toward him.

Now? He looked skyward. Lord, you couldn't have let her sleep just a bit longer?

"Can I ask you something?" She was whispering as she approached him. As he was quickly trying to tie up his breeches he broke the strap.

"Of course. Just...um...is...are you...?" He held up his breeches with one hand and kept his back to her.

"Do you think we can be forgiven? For anything?" She was closer now. He could almost feel her just behind him. She moves like a shy fawn, he thought. So beautiful and so scared. He wanted more than anything to earn her trust. He tried to stuff the waistband of his breeches under his belt.

"Yes, of course, but can you give me a moment?" This is just the worst thing that could happen to him.

"I'm sorry." She was right behind him now. She must think I'm a complete...the night sky exploded in a burst of white light and he fell.

As he hit the ground, he heard gentle footsteps running away and wondered what he had done to frighten the beautiful fawn. Fawn? What fawn?

Then the darkness embraced him.

#

Henno woke suddenly, immediately awake with all senses alert and his sword in his hand. He knew something was wrong.

Volucer was pawing the ground and snorting angrily on the other side of the camp. The fire was down to only a small patch of glowing embers.

Where was Fergus?

The girl! She was gone too! Had they left him there?

"Damn foolish boy!" Henno grunted. "What's he thinking?"

He knew the lad was head-over-heels, probably for the first time ever, but there's no way he'd have just taken off with that bit of fluff. No. Maybe they were just off in the brush somewhere doing what young lovers do. Still, Fergus doesn't seem the type to jump into it no matter how smitten.

Something was wrong and Henno hated when things weren't right.

He rolled to his feet in a crouch and moved quickly to the horses. Volucer shook her head at the sight of him as if to say, "I tried to wake you!" The girl's horse was gone, but Barrel was still there looking grumpy from all the commotion. That means Fergus must be here somewhere, but if he's not alerted Henno, then he must be...no, don't guess. Just find the lad and be quick about it.

He made a quick circle around the camp. It was difficult to see tracks clearly, but he followed a recent path toward the edge of the rise which overlooked the open field beyond. Henno guessed if Fergus had wanted to keep an eye on any approach, he'd be there. It's what I'd have done, he thought.

He heard a low groan and knew it was him. He rushed toward the sound.

Fergus was trying to sit up, rubbing the back of his head.

Even in the dark, Henno could see the black stain of blood on the lad's hand.

He jerked when he heard Henno approaching and groaned again at the pain the swift movement caused.

"Henno. I...she..." He could see his eyes were having trouble focusing as he joined him.

"Quiet." Henno grumbled. "How many fingers do you see?" He held up three.

"Fingers?" The lad asked, still rubbing the back of his head.

"Stay still." Henno chuckled. "Let me make sure your head's not caved in."

Fergus bit his lip while Henno checked the wound.

"Where's Sarah?" He asked through gritted teeth. "Is she alright?"

"She's gone, lad." He pressed a rag against the wound. "You've got a nice lump there. Small cut, but the ones on your head always bleed like a river."

"Gone? They took her! We've got to go after her!" Fergus struggled to get up, but Henno clamped a hand on his shoulder and kept him sitting.

"Hold fast, soldier." He growled. "Nobody took nobody, except she took you for a fool with his back turned." Henno looked around on the ground until he found it.

"What are you talking about?" Fergus winced as he pressed the rag to his head. "She's in trouble."

Henno held up the rock he'd found. "Still got a bit of your red on it."

"But she wouldn't...it must've been Loiguire's men...the one that got away..." Fergus was staring at the rock with disbelief, but Henno could see the truth squeezing past his youthful love-sickness for the girl.

"There's only two sets of tracks coming out here that I can see." Henno explained. "Yours and hers. If any of Loíguire's men had found us, they'd have stabbed us both in the neck not thumped you with a rock. Why, all the lass did was give you a light kiss good-night." He smirked.

"Stop laughing. We've got to find her! She must've gone back to the village." Fergus shook off Henno's hand and struggled to his feet. He was still wobbly, but started walking quickly back to the camp. Henno followed.

"Slow down, Fergus." Henno knew he needed to rein the young man's passions in before they made him do something stupid. "I know what a smack to the head can do to a man's thinking, but you're not using all the facts. You're guessing and guessing can get a soldier killed."

Fergus stopped. "What facts?"

Henno strode by. "This way. I'll show you."

Henno took him to where the horses were tied up. He pointed to the ground. "See what direction she went? Her village is off that way and she went in another direction. She's not going home."

"Where then?" Fergus asked.

Henno shrugged. "Not our problem. We helped her, she left. We best be on our way. Pack up the..."

Fergus was already packing up his gear and loading it on Barrel. "No!" He interrupted angrily. "You know where she went! She went to King Loiguire. She must think if she gives herself up, he'll spare her village. She doesn't know what happened. If you'd have let me tell her, then she wouldn't have done this! She can't sacrifice herself now. It'd all be for nothing! We've got to stop her!"

"You don't know any of this. You're still guessing. She may have been in with those men for all we know."

Fergus whirled around on him furiously. "That's impossible. She was kidnapped, being taken back to serve as a...as a..." He couldn't even say it out loud. "For the King's son!"

"All we know is what she told us, Fergus. Nothing is impossible."

"She's a Christian. She was wearing a cross."

The lad is digging in, Henno thought. "So am I." He said quietly. He pulled the cross from under his tunic. "But we both know it doesn't mean anything."

Fergus held his ground. "I believe her." He looked Henno straight in the eye. He could see the lad's mind was made up. "I have faith." He pulled the straps on Barrel's saddle tight. The horse gave a dissatisfied snort.

"Think about what you're saying. We'll not catch up with her, even if we knew exactly where Loiguire's camp was. She's made

her choice. There's nothing we can do. Besides, we've got a mission of our own." Henno didn't like it either, but rescuing maidens from evil kings was the stuff of campfire tales, not work for soldiers.

"Do as you please, but I'm not letting her give herself to the murdering bastards who staked and burned all those innocent people." He glared at Henno, his eyes full of recrimination.

"And I'm surprised you would. I thought you were a stronger man than that. How did you earn those citations? Bravery was it? Prove it!" He vaulted on Barrel's back.

"There's no need for name-calling. I've never backed down from a fight, ever. I was splitting heads before you split your ass cheeks for the first time! I'm just saying that she must be pretty determined to go this route." Henno was loading Volucer up with his gear. The big horse was ready to go any direction as long as they rode fast.

"She thinks she can save her village. She's wasting her life for no reason." Fergus said with finality. "We have to help. It's the right thing to do. It's what Jesus would do."

Henno jumped neatly onto Volucer's back. "Would he now?" He grinned. "Well, who am I to argue with the Almighty Himself? Let's go!"

Fergus grinned as Henno kicked Volucer in the direction Sarah had gone. "I knew that cross meant something to you!" He shouted.

Maybe it does, Henno thought. Who knows, maybe one day someone
will tell this tale around a campfire.

Chapter 23 - The Camp of King Loiguire

"Loiguire, High king of Ireland, son of the great Niall Noigiallach, ruler from sea to sea, of sky, of earth and wind." His son Lugaid called out his father's titles in a loud voice. The pride in his father showed. Loiguire could hear it. One should be proud of one's father, he thought. It's a son's duty.

And Loiguire knew all about duty.

His father was a great man and a strong king. Niall conquered, seduced or bought all who opposed him. He founded a kingdom and made it clear to Loiguire whose kingdom it was to rule.

Loiguire, High King of Ireland.

His earliest memories were of his father. Teaching by word and by stick. Teaching him when to be strong and when to be crafty. When to praise and when to punish. A son inherits the reputation of his father. He is a living monument; brighter than the fiery funeral pyres and more impressive than the largest stone monolith. Loiguire was determined to honor his father's memory by solidifying his rule over all of Ireland.

And after him, his son would do the same. For 10,000 lifetimes, his family would be kings of this island.

But why stop there? He grinned slyly. Why not expand? With Roman legions leaving Britain, perhaps...

His expansionist daydreams were interrupted as his son finished the lengthy introduction and a cheer went up from his

men surrounding his camp. He had over 200 men with him. A formidable army of loyal fighters. He sat on an old stump in front of a crackling fire. The rough surface made his butt itch, but he sat proudly as if on a throne of gold. Where sits the King, a throne there is, he thought. He nodded at his cheering soldiers; they grew quiet. They were used to following his lead. He had brought great victories and many cattle over the years.

However, the men he lent to Feyr had failed in the raid to take back the pagan fortress at Folcutt. Feyr had failed. The pagan high priest stood before him now. He'd lost men, he'd even lost his own damn eye but there he stood, straight and proud, as if ready to announce a great victory.

Punish or praise? What would his father have done?

"Does it hurt?" He skipped over any formal greetings to the tall priest. "It looks like it hurts."

The priest's cheek flinched only slightly before he answered with the usual familiarity bordering on insult, "Pain is the song of the unbeliever. The gift of my eye was given to the forest gods with silent pride."

The King smirked. "It was an aye or nay question, old one." He wasn't about to show any anger at the old man's words. It would be a sign of weakness. "I lost a toe once in a fight with my brother. I howled like a banshee." His men laughed when he grinned at them. "You saying I lack pride?" He asked, his voice dripping with menace.

"No, my lord," Feyr replied easily, "How a king gives to the gods is not for a mortal such as I to comprehend."

Mortal? The King laughed. Does he really expect me to believe he thinks himself mortal?

"Enough." The King was tired of word games. "I gave you 100 of my best men. What have you brought me? Clever words of flattery? Your other eye perhaps?" A wave of laughter surrounded them again. Feyr stared back at the king, his face as still as the wooden mask he insisted his men wear. He felt the battle rage well up inside him.

Then Feyr had the nerve to smile and all kingly restraint disappeared!

"On your knees!" Loiguire roared as he jumped to his feet. He whipped out his sword, Sky Cutter, the sword his grandfather had forged. It had never tasted a pagan priest's blood before, but now was the time! "How dare you stand before your King, you slug shit!"

He jumped over the fire and backhanded the old man across the face. Feyr fell to the ground as Loiguire put a boot on his skinny neck. The bloodied bandage had been knocked aside, the King could see the swollen socket where the eye had been.

Feyr's remaining eye glared as the King raged loudly.

"You have failed me! You have failed all of us! Where are your gods now? You make promises of power and glory when you take your pagan sanctuary back! But you failed! You say the gods want sacrifice so I put Christians to the stake! We see

nothing! You lose my men! You lose my horses! You sully my name and you bring me nothing!" His voice rose as the heat in him rose. He felt the killing rage coming on him and only blood would quell it. "What do you offer me, dried-out husk? What price will you pay now for your life? What will your gods give me when I sacrifice you?"

Despite the heavy boot on his throat and sword in his face, Feyr spoke as calmly as if discussing the weather.

"The gods will shrivel your cock like a worm in the sun if you harm me. I am not for sacrifice. I am not served to the gods, I serve others to them. You ask what I bring you? Behold, great King, I bring you the virgin bride promised your son."

The sound of hoof-beats caused them all to turn. All except Feyr who lay on the ground, grinning as if he'd known all along what was to happen. Loiguire hated that about the old priest. Dealing with someone who acts like they know everything is bad enough, but dealing with someone who actually knows everything is maddening.

The girl called Sura or Sarah, depending on who you asked, rode in hard. Her long brown hair flew behind her as her white legs gripped the winded horse with a strength and confidence not often found in a girl so young. She will bred fine sons. Rulers for a new kingdom. A queen like that could make a king strong. Perhaps she is too fine a mare for my son to ride.

He glanced at Lugaid and saw the same thoughts. What would a man be willing to do to possess such a prize? Kill a son? Kill a father?

She jumped down from the horse and threw herself at Loiguire's feet in supplication. "My dread lord!" She panted, exhausted. "Please, I bring myself willingly to your son's service. Please, I beg you, spare my people!"

There was a pause before the assembled soldiers burst out laughing. The chilling, mocking laughter echoed round and round their heads. Could it be? Does she not know?

The girl looked around confused and afraid until the realization beginning to dawn on her.

He looked at the head, freshly stuck on a spike. The surviving member of the raiding party who'd failed to bring her to him stared back with dead eyes. Loiguire gave Feyr a brief snarl as he strode over to the dripping head and gave it a hard smack on the cheek. As it spun around on the slippery spike, he shouted, "Why don't you tell her, you worthless turd?" This sent the soldiers into another round of wild, howling laughter.

Sura recognized the head and began screaming. At a nod from the king, two soldiers hauled her away, her cries lost in the raucous laughing.

"Women!" Loiguire shouted, "No sense of humor!"

#

"This is a bad idea." Henno grumbled.

Fergus and Henno approached Loiguire's camp slowly. Fergus carried a green leafy branch, the generally accepted sign of good intentions. They wore their armor, having stowed their monk's robes deep in their saddle bags.

"A very bad idea." He continued. "And believe me when I say, I know a bad idea when I see one. I've gotten in more bad spots because of bad ideas than you can possibly imagine. Young officers who got all their battle plans from books; half-mad generals so afraid of losing they come up with fully mad plans; why even once or twice I've had my own bad ideas. So, I know it when I see it and this is a bad idea."

Fergus sighed. He'd been hearing this speech for the last mile as they'd run out of options.

"It's all we have. You know we don't have a choice." Fergus kept his eye on the growing crowd of soldiers who began lining up at the outer edge of the camp. "They'll be leaving in the morning. Sarah will be...there'll be a big feast, lots of drinking, then the King's son will..." He choked back the image in his head. "We don't have a choice."

"I'm not saying I have a better idea, lad." Henno muttered as they walked steadily. The warriors were now calling out insults at them. "I'm just saying this is a bad idea. That's all."

"Noted." Fergus replied. He spoke the local language since it wasn't likely anyone in the camp spoke Latin. Henno could make due in several different languages, but the growling, rolling

Irish Gaelic was beyond him. There was no room for misunderstanding so Henno would do the talking and Fergus would translate.

"Can you make out what they're saying?" Henno asked.

Fergus blushed. "I don't think they really knew your mother."

"Pretty standard stuff then." Henno grinned. "I might not know the words, but the meaning is pretty clear."

One of the warriors stepped forward. He was naked, his body smeared with blue paint. He waved a spear, dancing and shouting a challenge to them. The crowd of soldier cheered him on.

"Careful now, lad." Henno nodded. "I know this game. Keep an eye on the dancing fish there. He's going to..."

Before he could finish, the blue warrior threw the spear at them in a high arc.

"Don't flinch, don't break step, keep walking." Henno whispered. They watched as the spear rose high into the air, reached its peak and began its fall right at them. Fergus could swear he could hear the whistling death coming straight for his nose.

"Steady...steady..." Henno muttered.

THUD! The spear sank into the marshy ground a few yards in front of them. Barrel flinched a bit, but Volucer didn't even bat an eye. Henno snatched it from the ground like a flower as he and Fergus strolled by. The soldiers gave them a cheer. The

blue warrior grabbed his crotch and waved his personal spear at them in challenge.

"Want to play, do you?" Henno twirled the spear around.

"Please, be careful." Fergus whispered.

Henno gave him a cocky grin, "I could stick this in the eye of a flea from this distance, my young friend. Watch."

He brought his arm back with practiced ease and fired the spear as if it was shot from a Roman scorpio. It flew straight and true, sinking right between the feet of the mocking warrior. A huge cheer went up! The soldier's jeers at their comrade were as loud as their cheers for the two approaching strangers.

"That's why they called me 'Scorpio'." He grinned.

"I thought it was short for 'Scorpanicus'." Fergus replied with a smile.

"I'm glad you're in a festive mood." Henno answered grimly.

"That's just the opening act. This is still a very bad idea. A very, very bad idea."

Fergus sighed as they kept walking.

#

They stood before King Loiguire, the self-proclaimed High King of Ireland. His father, Niall, known as Niall of the Nine Hostages, had also been so self-proclaimed. Truth be known, most of the people of Ireland were blissfully unaware they had a king, high or low. Still, when a man like Loiguire, a power-hungry, charismatic leader with hundreds of powerful warriors,

decides to call himself King, there's few who could argue with him.

Few left alive, that is.

"Great King Loiguire, High King of Ireland! All hail!" Henno and Fergus took a knee before him. The harsh-looking King sat on an uncomfortable tree stump.

Henno spoke while Fergus called out his translations, his nervousness giving his voice a bit of a squeak.

"We are warriors, sons of this land. We would fight for you. We would die for you. We ask to serve you." Henno waited, his head bowed while he waited for Fergus to translate.

There had been a general murmuring since they'd walked into the camp. Henno stole a glance around the circle of warriors. They were all staring at Volucer. The King waved at Fergus to be quiet.

He rumbled out a long string of what sounded to Henno like a dog trying to sing.

"He says he doesn't take deserters." Fergus said. "Or children." He added. "You were right, this was a bad idea."

"Always have a back-up bad idea, my father used to say." Henno stood. "Deserter, am I?" He shouted angrily, drawing threats and swords from the surrounding warriors. "This child and I claim the brown-haired girl by right of combat. We're the ones who killed your men for her and we want her back!"

Fergus hesitated then stood alongside his friend. "That is a bad idea, too."

"Tell him." Henno looked the King in the eye. Fergus tried to emulate Henno's brash tone as he spoke.

The crowd fell silent, all eyes were on the King. He stood, glaring at the two who'd just confessed to killing his men. Suddenly, he burst out laughing and shouted something while pointing at a familiar-looking head on a nearby post. The soldiers joined him, laughing loudly.

Fergus spoke quietly, "He says that man tried to tell him an old soldier and a boy killed his men and stole the girl, but he didn't believe him."

"Old?" Henno muttered. "I'm in my prime, I am."

The King rose and bowed mockingly to the head on the post.

"Now he's apologizing." Fergus muttered.

King Loiguire took his place back on his stump throne and stared hard at them. Henno could tell the boy was nervous, but was keeping a brave face and a straight back.

After what seemed like days, the King grunted and spoke.

Fergus translated quickly, "He says we killed his men so they deserved death, but the girl escaped us. She came to him willingly. We can't claim what we can't keep."

Henno was getting tired of all the talk, "Then tell him we'll fight for..."

"However," Fergus continued as the King was still speaking, "he will allow us to trade for the girl."

Fergus listened for a bit as the King laid out terms. The longer the King spoke, the whiter Fergus' face got. "Oh. Oh my Lord. I...Jesus, Mary and Joseph." He mumbled.

"What is it, lad?" Henno growled. Money? They had coin. Another fight? Henno was ready. What had the lad so flummoxed? "Come on, out with it!"

"Uh...Just a moment." Fergus turned and spoke haltingly, almost pleading with the King who just shook his head and pointed at Volucer. The surrounding soldiers all grunted and nodding with obvious approval.

Henno caught the gist of the conversation. "No." He said flatly. "Not my horse. That is off the table." He waved his hands dismissively at the King. "Got that, you bearded baby-killer?" Fergus pulled Henno a few steps away amid growls of anger from the King and his soldiers.

"Listen to me, Henno..." Fergus began.

"I'll say it now, I'll say it with my last breath, NO!" Henno countered. "We don't know the girl wants rescuing. She came here of her own accord. She hit you with a rock so she could get here and you want me to give up the best horse I've ever had for her? That horse has saved my butt more than once and I won't abandon her to the likes of these barbarians!"

"Your loyalty does you credit, but the King doesn't want to keep Volucer." Fergus explained carefully as if talking to a child.

"Well, what does he want? If all he wants is to take her for a ride, how do I know I'll get her back?" Henno sensed Fergus was working up to a point carefully. "What's got you so flustered?"

Fergus took a deep breath, "Henno. First and foremost, please relax. I'm going to explain this to you as best I can, but it won't be easy. King Loiguire is a new king, the old King only recently died. The usual ceremonies are to be performed when they get back home. There is a tradition in Ireland going back many, many years. When a new king is crowned, he...takes a horse. It's...symbolic of the king's...power. A white horse such as Volucer is extremely rare. It would be a sign to his people that he is blessed by their gods, that they are all blessed...if...he...rides your horse." Fergus stopped talking and waited.

Henno stared back for a moment. "So what's the big problem? He rides Volucer around in circles for a bit, everybody cheers, we get the girl and away we all go. Right?"

Fergus waited.

Henno wasn't the brightest candle on the wall, but eventually he began to realize what they were talking about.

"You can't be serious." Henno whispered fiercely. "You're saying this madman means to...have my horse. Like that?"

"It's a tradition." Fergus began.

"I don't care if it's a bloody mandate from the Emperor himself!" Henno was beyond shocked. "What kind of monsters

does this island breed? No. How is that even...? I won't allow it!"

"Henno, I know it's unusual..." Fergus was obviously having a hard time justifying it.

"It's unnatural!" Henno felt his whole body clenching, his hands itched for the feel of steel. How dare this barbarian bastard think he can have his way with his horse! "I've fought and killed for this horse. She's been a loyal and trusted friend for months! You've hardly known this girl for a day and you think I'm going to allow..."

Fergus knew it was hopeless. He held up his hands to calm Henno before he worked himself up beyond words. "Alright. Alright. I don't want that either, I just had to convey the message. We'll find another way. At least we know he's willing to negotiate."

Henno was still fuming. "What about Barrel? He wants to rut a horse, he can do yours."

Now it was the lad's turn. "What? No! That's not...no!" He stammered. "Besides, he doesn't want Barrel. He wants Volucer."

"Of course he does!" Henno countered, "Why would he want that short-legged, squat pony when he could have a fine champion?" The look on Fergus' face was priceless.

Henno laughed. "Barrel is a fine horse, I'm just saying that if you're about that sort of thing..."

Fergus shook his head as if trying to shake out the whole conversation. "Let's just stop talking about it and see if we can come up with another solution."

"Tell him we want to see the girl." Henno offered. "At least we can find out if she wants to stay or go."

The King and a young warrior were in a heated debate. Henno guessed it must be the son who wasn't pleased at the prospect of losing his new plaything. They watched as the son ranted and raved, gesticulating wildly until the King won the debate with a humiliating slap across the Prince's face.

Henno nudged Fergus in the ribs, "See there? Respect your elders. Good lesson that."

Fergus looked at the angry scowl on the Prince's reddening face. "That doesn't look like respect to me."

"Tell him..." Henno was interrupted by a loud, familiar and unwelcome voice.

"This is the price for suffering the plague of Christians in our land!" Feyr called out.

The soldiers moved aside quickly as he strode into the circle.

"They bring lies, confusion and deceit. They turn us against the gods, they turn son against father, prince against king."

He preached to the assembled, switching from Gaelic to Latin, apparently for the benefit of their guests.

He stared at Fergus, the recognition was obvious. He pulled off the rag tied around his head exposing his damaged face.

Henno tried not to react, but heard Fergus gasp. It was

terrifying; Feyr had filled his empty eye socket with a polished black stone. It gave his already intimidating visage a wholly new horrible look.

The soldiers mumbled with a mixture of admiration and fear as he slowly turned, showing the new "eye" to everyone. He bowed to the king with a slight tilt of the head. Turning back to Henno and Fergus, he dramatically covered up his good eye as if using just the stone to see them.

Henno spit on the ground and held his left hand up as a sign to ward off evil. He could hear the lad next to him muttering a prayer. "Good lad, we need all the help we can..."

"Silence!" Feyr roared. He pointed at Fergus, more specifically, at Fergus' right eye. "I see you. You cannot possess the eye of the Old Ones. Return what you have stolen! The true gods demand it!"

He held out his claw-covered hand as if expecting Fergus to pop out his own eye and hand it over. Fergus stared back defiantly, then spit in Feyr's face and made the sign of the cross.

Henno couldn't have been more proud of his young protégé. He roared with laughter as the old priest roared with fury, "Didn't see that coming did you, old scarecrow?"

The priest dropped the hand covering his eye and slashed his clawed hand at Fergus. It raked across his chest and if he'd not been wearing good armor under his tunic, there was no

doubt he'd have a mortal wound. Still, the blow knocked him to the ground.

Before either of them could draw their swords, they were surrounded by dozens of others. A ring of various killing tools all poised to send them on to wherever at the whim of the King.

Feyr smiled as he spoke to the King. The King grunted in response. Henno and Fergus were stripped of weapons, armor and most of their clothing.

As their hands were bound, Henno shouted and Fergus translated adding a few choice insults of his own as he did, "Call yourselves warriors, do you? You're bugs, the lot of you! Cowards! Milk-sucking, puking babies have more balls than any of you! Face us like men! You're plenty brave when fighting girls and bound men! Come on! The two of us against any 4 of you! We win and we leave with the girl!"

The soldiers jeered and shouted insults back, some calling for the King to allow them to take up the challenge.

Suddenly, all fell silent as Sarah approached.

Fergus' mouth fell open in amazement. She was dressed in a magnificent green gown, her hair wreathed in a ring of wild flowers. Henno thought she looked like a queen of the forest.

"And what makes you think I would want to leave with the likes of you?" She said loudly.

The crowd roared its approval as Feyr laughed. "You see, Christians? She returns as Queen of this land! The Old Gods drew her here! To the truth!"

"Sarah!" Fergus called out. "What are you saying?"

Sarah slapped him hard across the face.

"My name is Sura!" She pulled the small wooden cross from her neck, snapped it and tossed it at him. "I renounce the false Christian god!" She rattled off a string of Gaelic which sent the soldiers into a wild frenzy of shouting.

She turned and walked through the cheering crowd.

Feyr leaned in close to be heard over the noise. "Tomorrow, you both will begin your journey to the afterlife as gifts to the gods. It will take days for you to die. Your pain will feed my soul and bind the King to me forever." He winked with his missing eye, a bizarre-looking act, Henno thought.

As several warriors dragged them away, Henno called out to Fergus, "Women! Don't worry, lad. Every time I fall in love, this kind of thing happens to me too!"

Fergus just hung his head in despair as they were dragged away.

#

Fergus sat in the dark trying to pray.

They were tied to stakes in the ground inside a musty tent. Outside, they could hear the sounds of the celebration going on. It was late, but the drinking, eating and singing was as loud as it was when they started.

It was useless, his mind kept coming back to Sarah. Sura? How could he have been so wrong about her? She renounced her faith, broke the cross. It just didn't make sense.

"How's it going?" Henno shifted trying to get comfortable.

"Any word from Jesus? If anybody ever needed one of those miracles you're always bragging about..."

Fergus sighed. "I'm having trouble concentrating with all that racket outside and you constantly interrupting."

Henno snorted. "Well, you're in a mood."

Fergus shook his head in disbelief. "Have you lost your mind? Pretending you're someplace else won't save you when they come for us in the morning."

"I'm not pretending I'm someplace else. I'm here, right now."

Fergus could hear the smile in his voice. "It's just that I noticed something you didn't."

He was interrupted by the sound of a knife slitting the back of the tent. A cut large enough for a young girl was made and a young girl crawled through. It was Sarah!

Henno chuckled. "Good evening, young Sarah. Or will you strike me unless I call you 'Sura' as well?"

"I'm sorry, Fergus. I had to convince him. The King. Did it hurt much?" She whispered as she touched his cheek where she'd slapped him. Her soft hand felt cool but made Fergus' skin feel hot.

There was so much he wanted to say! To ask!

"I...How?...Why?...Are you...?" Was the best he could manage?

Henno's quiet laughing was still irritating. "Breathe, lad.

She was just pretending, weren't you?"

Fergus sputtered, "How...did you know?"

Henno replied smugly, "That wasn't her cross she broke. It was just a couple of twigs tied up, right?"

"I couldn't bring myself to destroy the cross Murtach made for me. It meant so much." She explained, nervously glancing at the front flap of the tent. "We don't have much time. I'll explain what I can, but you must do as I say."

"Barring any other offers, I'd say we're likely to." Henno muttered.

Sometimes he can be maddeningly over-confident, Fergus thought.

"What's the plan?" Fergus found his voice at last.

"Tomorrow, at the second hour, Feyr will make a prediction which will come true. He will predict that the sun will be blinded by his new eye. The sun will go dark while he sees us all as a gift from the Old Ones." She whispered rapidly. So rapidly, that Fergus wasn't sure he heard her correctly.

"Wait, what?" He stammered. "He's going to block out the sun...with his eye?"

"Is he mad? Are you mad?" Henno's confidence was seeping away.

"This is your plan? Look, you're sweet, but lend us your knife to cut these ropes. There's a good girl."

"Quiet! Listen to me!" Sarah hissed urgently. "The sun will be covered! I've seen the books, the charts, it will occur! The

Druids have a system for plotting the path of heavenly bodies in such a manner. It doesn't matter how he knows, but he knows. He's not told anyone so he can make it appear as if he and the Druid gods are making it happen. At that moment, he will begin your sacrifice." She shivered in the dark.

Fergus' heart skipped. Was his death such a painful thought to her?

"Fergus," She continued, he loved how she said his name. "You must make the prediction before Feyr does. You understand? Before Feyr can announce the darkening of the sun, you must call for it as a miracle brought forth by the Christian faith. If he beats you to it, then you are doomed." She grabbed his tunic. "Do you understand me?"

"Yes, yes." He whispered, he could feel her breath against his face. "I understand."

Henno spoke up with not just a small amount of skepticism in his voice. "And assuming this magical event happens when it's supposed to, just what is it you'll be expecting us to do?"

"Lugaid, the Prince, knows his father means to keep me for his own." She continued. "During the confusion, a fight will break out. His men will see to it we're allowed to escape. You'll take me to Britain with you, to the nearest Roman outpost."

"Ah, there it is." Henno grumbled. "There's the price. 'We' now, is it? And while we appreciate you making the sun hide in the daytime and all, just why exactly should we trust you?"

"Henno!" Fergus argued, "She's risking her life to help us!"

"She also thumped you pretty well and is on her way to being crowned Queen of Ireland." Henno countered.

"I'm sorry, Fergus. I thought I could save the people of Denowhin. I didn't realize until it was too late that..." Her voice ended in a stifled sob.

Fergus wished he could hold her. "I believe you, Sarah." He looked at Henno. "I believe her."

"Right. Well, I'm not thinking with a love-addled brain, so I'll just ask again: Why should we trust you?"

Sarah rose to her feet. She put her shoulders back, lifted her chin and stared down at them both. Fergus thought she looked like a perfect statue honoring royalty and beauty.

"Because," She replied simply, "I order you to."

Henno was stuck dumb, for a change, but Fergus managed to whisper, "Who are you?"

She replied quietly, but with an ancient authority, "Aelia Galla Placidia, daughter of the former Emperor of Rome, Flavius Theodosius Augustus the First; sister to Flavius Arcadius Augustus, Emperor of the Eastern Roman Empire and Flavius Honorius Augustus, Emperor of the Western Roman Empire."

There was a breathless pause until Henno found the words to describe his feelings at the news, "Shit me out of a donkey's ass. Fergus, you sure can pick them."

#

Sleep was impossible, but Henno dozed for a bit while they waited.

The barbarian ritual of getting blind stupid drunk and shouting yourself hoarse went on all night. He shook himself to get some blood flowing. He could see Fergus rocking back and forth, trying to loosen the tight leather straps which bound him. It was useless, but he admired the lad's spirit. Sadly, he knew it was time to deliver a bit of bad news. He coughed to clear his throat. Mithras, he'd give anything for a bit of wine right now. Or even water! "Fergus. I need to explain what's going to happen next."

Fergus stopped rocking and looked at him expectantly,

"Breakfast followed by a hot bath?"

Maybe it's best I don't tell him, he thought. "No," he said aloud, "It's better you're prepared."

"Prepared?" Fergus was probably already guessing at what Henno was going to say.

"They'll be coming for us soon. And there's no way to say it other than to say it. We're in for a serious beating. They are going to want to soften us up for the ritual."

"I know." He replied calmly.

"These Druids want docile victims for their...you know?"

"Of course. I've been living on this island for quite a while. I understand their rituals. We just need to ride it out until we see the right moment to bring forth the miracle Sarah, I mean Galla, told us about. I still can't believe she's the

sister of the two Emperors." He shuffled around trying to get more comfortable.

"You sound pretty calm about the whole thing." Henno wasn't convinced the lad really understood what was coming.

"Henno, I was a slave for years. Beatings were a way of life." He said glumly. "And your method of training soldiers includes liberal use of your vine cane and boot, you might remember."

He grinned. "I can take it."

Henno shook his head sadly. "It's not the same. A master beats a slave to break his spirit, not his bones. A slave needs to work, so you can't damage them too badly. When a soldier is being trained, a good smack is used to make him focus. It's designed to toughen him up, not break him down." He took a deep breath and added, "This is an entirely different situation."

It broke his heart to see the lad figure it out.

"We're not expected to survive, so they don't have to hold back." Fergus whispered.

"Aye," Henno replied with as much power in his voice as he could muster, "but listen to me, Optio, and listen well.

They'll wear their fists down to stumps before they break us. The more they give, the more we want. We take the pain like it was a gift. Whatever happens, you've got to remember one thing: stay awake. The pain will make you want to embrace the darkness when it's offered, but you have to push it away. I won't be able to make myself understood, I don't speak their

barbarian tongue. You've got to call out the prophesy as soon as we're taken before the King and his soldiers. Otherwise, we're both done. You yell, scream, cry, whatever it takes. Like you said, all we have to do is ride it out. Right?"

He saw him sit up as straight as the bindings would allow, stick out his chin before replying loudly, "I hear and obey, Centurion!"

Henno smiled. "Good soldier."

Now if only he can take his own advice. He knew they were both in for a thumping that will make the gods weep for them.

Just stay awake, lad, and we might just live through this.

#

Fergus had never felt such awful pain in his life.

Henno had tried to prepare him, but nothing in words could've prepared him for the constant agony he was experiencing.

Heavy, sharp blows came from every direction.

It was as if he was under a waterfall of stones and lying on a bed of broken pottery.

The barbarians burst into the tent a bit after dawn. Drunken, shouting louts who stumbled and fought amongst themselves to get at the two victims. They dragged Fergus and Henno by the hair, by the skin; pulling, tearing, shoving, punching and kicking.

He did his best to cover up, but his hands were still bound behind his back. It was merciless, inhuman and insane. It wasn't just one hard punch which left a sore spot, it was a

rain of continuous punches and kicks to dozens of sore spots over and over. He felt a rib go, a muscle tear then his eyes were nearly swollen shut.

He tried to see where Henno was and a foot or a fist snapped his nose with a loud crack. He was constantly spitting out blood so as not to choke.

He screamed in agony, much to the delight of his tormentors.

He heard Henno screaming too. Thank God, he thought, he still lives.

He felt himself going numb. Thank the Lord, he thought, please let the pain end. Even death was preferably to this. Please Jesus, let me rest. He couldn't see, he felt the darkness reaching out to him.

He tried to push away from the warm, numb quiet of the darkness, but something hit him hard in the temple, rocking his head to the side. He fell against a rock; his thoughts swirled.

He saw a sun-kissed pond with bright flowers drifting by. He felt the coolness of the coming night as the sun dipped below the water.

He heard his mother's voice calling to him. And his father!

How wonderful it will be to see them again. He tried to follow their voices, but it was getting dark.

So very dark...

#

Henno had been hurt many times in battle. He'd been stabbed, hit with arrows and darts. He'd had limbs broken; his left arm had been shattered twice by heavy blows while in the shield wall. He fell once while scaling a fortress in Carthage and broke his foot. He'd been burned badly, when he'd taken a dose of hot sand while attacking another fortress. All in all, he'd pretty much had it all done to him at least once.

But this kind of beating was a rare thing.

He'd been tortured before. He liked to brag that the enemy hadn't broken him, but he had wailed like a stuck pig. He didn't like to admit that part when he retold the tale of being captured by the Picts, but those boys knew their business.

The Picts paled in comparison to the Irish when it came to dealing out pain.

It was almost like a choreographed dance. As he was tossed around, picked up, kicked, slapped and punched, there was almost a rhythm to it. It was probably the delirium from the constant pounding to the head, but he thought it was much like they were playing a tune on him.

A nasty, painful tune of hopeless misery.

He heard Fergus crying out in pain. He tried to call out encouragement, but every time he took in a breath, someone punched it out of him. Soon, he was crying out the same song of agony.

'Just ride it out, lad. Ride it out!' He called out in his mind.

He had one good eye still open enough to see. They were being herded by the gauntlet of attackers toward a large circle of soldiers. The King sat on a stone watching as he drank from a horn, laughing as the golden mead dripping down his beard. They all laughed. Even Sarah, no Galla, stood next to the King laughing along with the rest.

Had she been truthful? Or was this just some sick barbarian jest to give them false hope only to watch it torn away? He saw two sharpened stakes wickedly jutting up from the ground in front of him and he felt a despair unlike he'd ever known. It must've been a lie. How could that wisp of a girl be the sister of the Emperors? She looked down at him, her face twisted in an evil laugh and he knew they were doomed to die a terrible and painful death. Damn him for a fool, how could he have believed her? When in his life had trusting a woman ever worked out for him?

Then, one of those miracles he'd been hearing about happened. She looked around quickly to make sure nobody was watching her then gave Henno the briefest of winks.

It was real! They had a chance!

"Now!" He croaked. Even he was having trouble hearing himself, but Fergus was right next to him. They'd been thrown at the feet of the King, the Prince and Galla. The lad was lying very still.

Very, very still.

Henno began to panic.

He saw Feyr, dressed in a robe of blue feathers, his black eye staring at the sun as he made his way slowly toward the circle.

"Fergus!" He spewed a stream of blood as he struggled to call out. Fergus wasn't moving.

Galla saw what was happening. Feyr was nearly there, some of the soldiers were moving aside to allow him into the circle, cheering his approach.

She called out in an angry shriek, "Faithless ones, base Christian unbelievers! Arise! See as your death approaches! Arise! Arise, I command you!"

The King took up the chant and the drunken soldiers followed his example, but Galla's plaintive voice rose above all the others, "Arise! Arise!"

Fergus stirred. At least he lived!

Henno took a deep breath and shouted louder than any Centurion had ever shouted on any parade field. He roared, "Strap up, Optio! Now, Fergus! Now!"

Fergus coughed up a mouthful of blood. As Feyr strode manfully into the circle, he raised his arms for quiet and the soldiers fell silent.

The Druid Priest tilted his head back to speak to the crowd.

#

And Fergus called out in Gaelic with a voice which shook the clouds, "Behold, we are the true messengers of the Lord God, the God of all creation. We come to you this day to bring you the word of the Lord God Jesus Christ. His holy power over all of you is that of love and forgiveness."

Feyr smirked at the boy's pathetic attempt to scare them all, but what he heard next made his face go white with fear.

Fergus' head was pounding, he felt like he was being twirled through the air, but he continued, "If you ask for his blessing he will give it. If you forsake his love, he will take the sun from your land and you will be plunged into darkness forever!"

Feyr screamed in frustration, "No! It is not true! He lies! His god will not..." But before he could continue, a great moan erupted from the assembled men.

The sun was slowly being covered by a large black stone.

Fergus got to his knees, squinted hard until he managed to see out of one eye.

He heard Henno call out next to him, "You see that? Keep it up, lad. I don't know what you're saying, but you've got them on the hook!"

Fergus leaned against the wooden stake which was to be used to impale him, using it to get to his feet as he shouted, "We are the Shepherd's Wolves, His holy soldiers come to deliver you either eternal life or eternal pain. You have insulted our God

with your violence on His holy messengers! Beg and we will ask the Lord to be merciful!"

Henno was laughing so hard, Fergus was afraid he might have gone mad until he found himself laughing just as hard.

"Go home, scarecrow!" Henno shouted and they both started howling like a wolves over the chaos.

Feyr rushed at Fergus, but several soldiers jumped out from the crowd, most likely the Prince's men, and blocked his way.

"He lies!" Feyr screamed. "This is the work of the Old Ones. The Forest Gods of your fathers and your father's fathers! The Christians are deceiving you!"

But his screams were in vain. Even the ones who could hear him over the shouts and cries for mercy didn't believe him.

The King watched in amazement as men began tossing their weapons down and threw themselves to the ground in supplication. Fergus stood as straight as he could. He saw Henno struggling to his feet. Lugaid, the prince, gave a signal and a dozen men rushed through the crowd, pushing and shoving. The commotion built into a full scale riot.

Men were begging, pleading and threatening the King, Feyr, Fergus, and each other while some just fell to their knees sobbing.

The sun was completely covered now. It was a terrifying sight. Fergus couldn't believe his eyes. This was truly the work of God. But how would a Druid know of it?

His admiration for the Lord's work was broken as he felt someone gripping his wounded shoulders. Suddenly, his hands were cut free and he was dragged painfully away. Henno was beside him, two warriors had tossed fur cloaks over their heads and were shoving and carrying them through the swarm of confusion.

"This way!" Galla called out in his ear. "Keep moving!" She was covered in a cloak too.

Several large warriors pushed and shoved their way through, leading them away toward the tents. Fergus could hear Feyr screaming among the others, but nobody seemed to be paying attention. He thought he heard the King calling out too, but they kept moving quickly.

"Not so bad, eh?" Henno grinned at him through a mouthful of bloody teeth.

"You're completely mad," Fergus coughed. "You do know that, right?"

Henno spit out a tooth, "And I thought this was a bad idea!" He laughed.

They rounded one of the larger tents to find Lugaid holding several horses and much to Fergus' relief, Barrel and Volucer. Henno was obviously relieved as well, "Good thing!" He called out as he climbed painfully onto his horses back. "I wasn't about to leave her for these bugging bastards! Right, girl?" Volucer tossed her head, anxious to escape all the noise. The daytime darkness was making the horses skittish. Fergus pulled

himself up on Barrel, she danced sideways a bit nearly causing him to fall off, but he held on.

"Easy, friend," He spoke soothingly, "We want to go as much as you do."

Prince Lugaid spoke rapidly to the warriors who'd accompanied them, "Return to the King, tell him I've given chase to the Christians. Tell him I've gone south and to send men to help me. I'll meet you at the fork of the river in two day's time."

The men nodded and ran off.

A bit of sun was starting to peek out from one side of the dark rock. Without another word, Prince Lugaid turned his horse west and rode hard, Galla right behind. Henno and Fergus didn't hesitate, but rode after them.

They'd had so much trouble just getting out of Ireland, Fergus thought, things were bound to be easier once they got to Britain.

Chapter 24 - The Race to the Coast

They rode hard for several hours. The sun seemed angry at being defaced and was now determined to make up for lost time by bearing down viciously only on them. Fergus felt like he was being held directly responsible; his head was swimming, his mouth was parched, as they pushed on weaving their way around marshes and hills, opting for speed over cover.

Lugaid had ordered men loyal to him to ride south to fool anyone who'd be tracking them. Fergus wasn't convinced the prince could fool a mosquito into biting him, much less King Loiguire. Certainly not Feyr. The Prince reminded him of many Irish warriors he'd met; brave, eager to fight with little provocation but more prone to action than planning. Their priorities in life were fighting, drinking and then drinking and fighting. Maybe it wasn't fair to paint them all with such a large brush, but the longer he watched Lugaid ride with Galla, the more resentment he felt.

He watched as the Prince and Galla rode together. She laughed at something he said, her brown hair flipping in the wind, the lyrical sound of her mirth made his stomach clench. He and Henno were keeping pace a bit behind them. The older man noticed and gave him a nod.

"Don't get all moony-eyed over her, lad." He grinned. "She's well out of your neighborhood."

Fergus acted indifferent; poorly. "I don't know what you're talking about." He snapped.

Henno backed off, but not much. "My mistake then. Must be all the blows to the head got me seeing things."

"Speaking of which," Fergus wanted to change the subject. "Are we planning on stopping soon?"

Henno hooted loudly. "Need a break, do you?" Fergus was hurting, but he was genuinely more concerned about Henno. The man's face was a bloody pulp. His nose was still twisted to one side, eyes nearly swollen shut, hands broken and who knew what else. He knew he must look just as bad, but being young he knew he would heal faster. Not that it seemed possible now, considering how much pain he was in.

He knew he'd never get Henno to admit how badly he was hurt. The soldier in him was too stubborn. There was only one way to get time for them to rest.

"Yes, I really need a break." Fergus admitted. "I feel like I'm going to fall out of the saddle any moment."

Henno took in a ragged breath, which if he didn't know better, sounded like a sigh of relief and tried to whistle. The whistle was lost in a spray of blood.

"Mithras!" He muttered and called out to the two ahead. "Ho! Head to that stream! The boy needs a few bones set!" He gave Fergus a wink or at least it seemed like it considering the huge purple bruised eye was barely open anyway. "We'll get you

fixed up, get a bit of grub in your belly then be on our way. Right?"

He glanced at Lugaid and Galla to make sure they were far enough away and spoke quietly to Fergus. "You did well, Optio. I'm proud of you. That was as bad a beating as I've ever been handed. You took it like a true Legionnaire. Stilicho himself would've been proud of you and if I had a golden torque, I'd award it to you."

Fergus felt a surge of pride unlike he'd ever felt. He was glad for the severe swelling of his eyes and face, it hid the tears welling up.

He grumbled in his best approximation of Henno's gruff voice, "Don't go getting all sappy on me. I was just doing a soldier's job is all."

Galla and Lugaid turned in their saddles as Henno's loud laughter echoed around the meadow.

Fergus smiled. A bit of grub and some rest would do him fine.

#

The warrior was on his knees before King Loiguire, begging for mercy.

"Please, my king!" He wailed like a woman, "I had no choice. The Prince ordered me..."

"Can a prince order a man to betray his king?" The King roared. The assembled soldiers shouted for the traitor's death.

The King wasn't fooled for a moment. He knew others in the crowd sided with his son against him. He'd find them too. All of them. And maybe a few more besides who he felt were a threat for other reasons. Or who had land he wanted. Or women he wanted.

Never waste a good conspiracy, he thought. Another lesson from his father.

At a nod, the screaming man was hauled away to be tortured by Feyr and his Druids. Despite the loss of faith after the botched sacrifice, the King knew he could rely on the old wizard to drag all the information the man possessed out one painful bit at a time.

Feyr remained behind. Look at him, the King thought, still acting all-seeing and all-powerful even though he'd been humiliated by the boy and his Christian god in front of all of us.

"What is it?" The King grumbled, not even looking at him as he drank beer from the skull of a long-fallen enemy.

Feyr glared around the circle of smirking, muttering soldiers. His Druids stood ready to defend him, but the King wondered just how difficult it would be to bring them over to his side. No, he thought, they may have lost faith in Feyr, but being a Druid was a faith one didn't walk away from.

"Well?" The King barked, "You want to say something, scarecrow?"

Feyr's eyes blazed fire at the King's insulting use of the name Henno had used. Loiguire chuckled and his men did the same. You've gotten too sure of yourself, old man. There is only one king of this land.

Feyr raised his chin defiantly. "I would speak with you alone." The look on the king's face prompted him to reluctantly add, "My...King." With a slight tilt of the head. It was as close to a bow as he'd ever gotten from the Druid. The King belched loudly and rocked to his feet. He lurched toward his tent waving for Feyr to follow. It was more comfortable in there anyway.

"Inform me as soon as the riders return with my son!" He called out. Two warriors stood guard at the tent's entrance. They were both looking sick from the night before, but he knew he could depend on them.

He dropped heavily onto the couch he'd taken from a Roman caravan a few years back. He thought it gave him a royal look. Feyr stood before him, still looking angry and defiant. In the back of the King's mind, he wondered if he had anything to be concerned about. His hand touched the hilt of the knife hidden in the folds of the cushion while he filled his skull mug again with his other hand.

"I'd offer you some," He grinned, "But I've only the one skull."

Feyr ignored the jest. No sense of humor this one. "You are a fool." He snarled.

"You dare speak to me with such..." The King gripped the knife, but kept it hidden.

"Silence!" Feyr hissed. He was keeping his voice low. He obviously wanted to keep the conversation secret from the guards just outside, but it didn't make the insult any less infuriating. "You send troops to the south? Don't you realize the Prince has stolen...?"

"Of course I do, you old fool!" He hissed back, also keeping his voice low. Now it was Feyr's turn to take offense.

The King continued, "The soldier's I sent south are after the traitors who conspired with him. The bulk of the men I sent are going east. They will be brought back to me. The Prince and his two Christian conspirators will be hung from posts to watch as I take the girl over and over. When I'm done with her, the dogs can have her. Or you Druids, it's all the same to me." He drank again, his smug laugh muffled by beer and bone.

Feyr spoke with a calm that chilled Loiguire like a cold wind.

"You think because I was betrayed by the girl that I am weak?"

His voice seemed to fill Loiguire's heart, shutting out everything else. "You do not know the power I wield. The Old Ones laugh at the Christian god. At a word from me, you will rot from the inside. You will be filled with corruption, you will shit worms and finally die thanking me for releasing you from the pain of your life." His one eye was blood red and the other was dark and endless.

Loiguire tried to swallow, but couldn't. His beer dribbled out of his mouth.

"What...do...what do you want me to do?" He gasped.

Feyr smiled, but it just made his face look more threatening.

"Send riders to the eastern coast. To Menapia. They mean to make a crossing to Britain."

"Why not just let them go?" The King whispered, regretting it as soon as he spoke.

Feyr took a step toward him. The King gripped the knife, wanting desperately to bury it deep into the old man's chest, but too terrified to move.

"I will not allow them to escape our wrath." Feyr stared down at the King. "If you think I can be killed by your hand, then pull that pitiful blade. I will make no move against you."

The King's hand slide away from the hidden knife.

"I will do as you ask." He whispered.

Feyr chuckled, it sounded like rocks falling. "Ask?" He turned to leave but stopped at the tent's entrance. "Do not believe for a moment that you are King by right of birth. You became King because and when you were chosen to be. And when it is time for your son to serve our whims, it will be because the Druids decide."

He left taking the chill air with him. The tent felt smothering hot. The king drank the rest of his beer down in one pull, poured himself another and drank it down without tasting it.

#

Henno was trying to shut out the cold, but the young lad next to him kept chattering away.

"How...is this...helping?" Fergus rattled.

They both sat up to their necks in the freezing cold rushing stream. Henno ducked under the cold water again. He was tired of explaining it. He was numb with the icy coldness of the fresh mountain water, but still gasped when his head submerged. He could tell Fergus had done the same thing. Mithras, but he hoped the boy wasn't going to try to keep asking the same annoying questions underwater!

The cold made it difficult to hold his breath for long, as did the broken ribs. They both surfaced at the same time gasping for air.

"How...is...?" Fergus sputtered, his teeth rattling.

"For the love of Mithras! How many...times...do I have to...explain it?" Henno yelled through his own rattling teeth.

"Don't call...on your...blasphemous...cult...Henno." Fergus chided, his face was less swollen, but starting to look a bit blue.

"Enough of this. Let's...get to...the fun...part." Henno tried to grin, but his teeth were chattering uncontrollably. He actually hated this part.

All in all, the damage could've been much worse. No broken limbs, that was good. They both looked like they'd tried to stop a runaway chariot the hard way, but he was relieved to

find no serious injuries. He pushed away the memory of the vicious beating and set his mind to the task at hand.

It was important to get the swelling down as much as possible before trying to reset a broken bone. The ribs would be bound tightly by strips of cloth the girl was preparing now, but the rest had to be tugged and yanked back into place. The cold water would numb the pain somewhat and decrease the swelling to make it easier, but Henno still knew it was going to be rough for them both. Mostly for himself since the lad had no experience in these things. He would just have to ride it out as the young man tugged and fumbled to put the bones right. Mithras! What he wouldn't give for a jug of wine right now. "You sure...you don't have a...bit of...wine...with you?" He called out to Lugaid. He and Galla were sitting by a large fire waiting for Henno and Fergus to join them. Galla shook her head apologetically. They had their cloaks and clothes stretched out warming them for when they emerged from the cold water. They would need to be warmed up quickly or they'd get sick. Henno had seen friends die from cold fever. They choked and coughed until they drowned in the waters of their own making.

That's no way for a soldier to die, he thought.

"Alright now." He took in a shaky breath. "I'm going to start...with your nose." Fergus' nose was badly broken and, like his own, was pushed to the side. If it didn't hurt so damn much, it'd be funny, he thought.

He placed his hands on either side of the lad's broken nose.

"Now, pay careful attention. You're going to do this to me next, exactly like I do it. You ready?"

The lad took a deep shuddering breath, his lips moving in prayer. Henno pulled and shifted his hands quickly causing Fergus to yell loudly as his nose snapped back into place with a grating sound. It made Henno shudder; he hated that noise.

"Ow! I wasn't ready! I was praying!" He yelled. "I didn't say I was ready!" He was scrunching his face around his newly-set nose.

"Quit your yammering!" Henno yelled back. "Does it feel right or not? If not..." He was reaching up to try again.

"No! You got it!" Fergus said quickly. "I was just surprised, that's all."

He put his hands on either side of Henno's nose the same way.

"Like this?"

Henno shifted, trying to prepare himself. Jesus, Mithras or whoever's up there, please let the boy get it right the first time. "Put your hands up closer to the...OW!"

Fergus wrenched his hands while Henno was in mid-sentence. He had to stop himself from giving him a good punch in his newly-placed nose for the insult.

"I said...you need to...Alright then, I think you got it."

Henno admitted grudgingly. "Damn, but that hurts." He tentatively rubbed his nose.

"Reward of the courageous, I believe it's called." Fergus was smirking.

"Right then, let's play a tune on that broken thumb of yours."

Henno smirked back.

Back and forth they went; shouting in pain, cursing and praising each other. Finally, they were ready to dry off, warm up and get some food.

Galla averted her eyes shyly as the two men dashed for the hot fire and warm clothes. They dried themselves quickly and pulled on as much clothing as they could. Henno's ribs felt like broken pottery rattling in his chest, but the tight cuirass helped.

Prince Lugaid was munching on a hunk of deer meat. He'd brought down a doe while they were freezing their asses off. Henno and Fergus eagerly sliced off chunks, eating ravenously. Henno realized how long it'd been since he'd eaten. The meat was pure, bloody and delicious.

"Looks like you're good for something then." He nodded at Lugaid, knowing the Prince didn't speak a word of Latin. He grunted at Galla and she translated. The Prince smiled proudly.

"I told him you congratulated his prowess with a bow." She smiled at Henno.

"Just like a politician's daughter." Henno grunted amicably as he sliced off another big chunk of meat. Fergus was doing the same. "Always talking out both sides."

She narrowed her eyes at Henno. Fergus interjected. "I'm sure he meant no disrespect, Lady Galla."

"No, of course not." Henno replied around a mouthful of meat. He swallowed and added, "Domina."

That was going to take some getting used to.

"I always liked Emperor Theodosius." Henno continued, "Good soldier, he was. Knew his business. Learned it from his father, Theodosius the Elder, another good soldier. Your pop, he knew how to kick ass." Henno raised a chunk of bloody meat in a toast. "Here's to him."

Lugaid, not understanding a word, thought Henno was praising his hunting skills again and grunted out his thanks. Then yawned as if bored with the whole exchange.

Fergus started stammering, "He...doesn't...he means that...Domina."

Galla laughed and Fergus looked like he was swooning. I hope I never looked that silly when I'm lusting after some wench, he thought.

Galla smiled and he had to admit, she was a looker.

She handed them both mugs of hot tea, laughing lightly as though they were all on a rustic outing together. "It's alright, Fergus. I think we should dispense with the usual formalities of my rank for the remainder of our journey." She gave Henno a bright smile. "I'm sure my father would be proud of being thought of as an 'ass-kicker' by a soldier such as

our friend Henno." She laughed again and Henno thought if she ever served it up, he'd take a bite for sure.

Fergus quickly interjected, "I've always thought your father a hero of the faith!" Realizing he sounded a bit too eager, he added sheepishly, "He brought Christianity to the Empire and fought to preserve it."

Lugaid yawned again. He looked drunk. That bastard had a skin of wine squirreled away! How selfish. He let Henno and Fergus go about all that without sharing a single drop. Typical barbarian.

He drank a bit more of the tea Galla had served them. It was a weak flavored brew, but it was hot. It reminded Henno of something he'd drunk before, but couldn't place it. As his belly filled and warmth crept back into his body, he was feeling a bit sleepy himself. He shook it off. They needed to get going soon. Maybe a bit more meat.

"Grab some of the bloody bit, lad." He advised Fergus. "The blood helps you heal." He noticed Fergus was starting to get a bit droopy-eyed. "Hey, don't get too comfortable. We need to put some ground between us and them following us."

"I'm fine." He shook himself and sat up a bit straighter. "I'm not sleepy."

"So, Galla," Henno was curious. "How about telling us the real story? You certainly aren't some poor slave girl rounded up by pirates with her grieving mother and father."

He instantly regretted his harsh words. Not because of her station in life, but because he knew she must've lost people close to her. He spoke before Fergus' head exploded with embarrassment.

"Forgive me, Domina." Henno said respectfully. "I'm an old soldier. I'm used to speaking plainly and roughly to other soldiers and women who...well, women who don't mind us. I mean no disrespect. I just want to know how you came to be here." She smiled and Henno found himself admiring the young girl. She was special. If he'd been Fergus' age, he'd most likely be just as enamored of her. Even so, she made him proud to be a Roman; proud to be a citizen of an empire that bred such royalty as she.

Her face darkened as she told the tale. Henno noticed that Lugaid had reclined and was dozing by the fire. Pampered prince, he thought. Even a barbarian prince must get special treatment. He yawned himself. The fire was seeping into his bones.

"There were rumors." Galla began. "Rumors of rebellion in Britain. General Marcus was building alliances, moving money and goods." If she noticed Henno and Fergus exchange a quick glance at that, she gave no sigh. "My brother Honorius sent his most trusted general, advisor and friend to stop the usurpation before it began. General Stilicho would covertly bring a legion to Britain. It was a massive undertaking to move an entire legion in secret."

"The Tenth?" Henno interjected.

"How did you know?" Galla was shocked.

"I served in the Tenth. Some of them were sent here." He replied with a glance toward Volucer. "It's another story. Continue." He quickly added, "If you please, Domina."

She gave Henno a hard look but then continued. "I convinced my brother to send me as well, as his voice in Britain ahead of the Legion's landing. If I couldn't convince Marcus to stand down, then Stilicho and the Tenth Legion would."

Fergus nodded, the fire was having an effect on him as well. Maybe they could bed down here for the night. Henno thought it was getting late in the day. If the Prince's men had done their jobs, and there was no reason to doubt them, they'd be safe enough for the night.

His thoughts were interrupted as the girl continued.

"In route to Britain, we were boarded by pirates. We were traveling incognito so as not alarm Marcus. Only a few of my most trusted servants were aware of my true identity."

She paused, wipe away a tear and continued.

"They posed as my parents, I took the name Sarah. We were sold as slaves and eventually brought here, to Ireland. Murtach, the farmer who bought us was a good man. He converted to the Christian faith. Eventually, we told him that I was the daughter of a wealthy landowner in Britain who would pay a healthy ransom for my return. He agreed to help us."

"For a price." Fergus slurred.

The lad was getting soft, Henno thought as he yawned expansively.

Galla smiled. "The rest is as I told you. Loiguire resented Christians living so openly in his land."

She looked at Fergus who looked back with droopy, love-filled eyes. "You look tired, my brave rescuer."

Fergus grinned like a puppy. "And you look beautiful."

Henno frowned. Did he have a wine-skin hidden somewhere, too?

He gave the lad a shove. "Hey! Keep civil there, you." He admonished. "She's a daughter of the frigging emperor, she is!" Henno was having trouble concentrating. "I mean, sister. Sister to two emperors! One in the east and the other in the...east."

Mithras, he was getting tired. He should see to the horses and put his head down for a few hours at least.

Fergus rolled over with the gentle shove and didn't get back up. His eyes were closed in sleep.

Henno grinned stupidly at Sarah. Lady Galla, he reminded himself, but if she wasn't royalty, he thought, what he would do with a bit of tail like that. Wild brown hair, pale skin, those freckles on her chest that he knew went all the way down to her...was she saying something?

"Huh?" He said with as much effort as he put into anything he'd ever done.

"Sleep, brave Centurion." She soothed. Her voice dripped like honeyed poison. "Sleep and tomorrow we shall be free."

Was she still talking or was someone singing?

He had a brief jolt of concern that this wasn't a good idea.

Then, the warm fire rocked him to bliss.

#

Fergus woke slowly. He heard the birds singing, felt the cool morning mist on his face and could even smell meat cooking.

His body ached, but not nearly as much as it had when he'd dozed off. Amazing what an hour or so of kip can do for the body.

He stretched, feeling his muscles warm as he let himself ease slowly into waking. His shoulder gave a sudden jolting pop but stayed in place. He felt his nose. It was still sore, but where it should be.

He groaned as he rolled over and sat up. His ribs grated against each other and his whole midsection, despite being tightly encased in bindings and his cuirass, still felt like one huge bruise.

All in all though, he was surprised at how good he felt. He hoped the broken nose would give him a new, dangerous look. Maybe it'd even attract the attentions of...

He stopped. The fire was down to a bed of coals. How long had they been asleep? Henno was just waking next to him. He seemed to be struggling to wake as was Fergus.

Galla was peeling dried strips of meat from a rock in the coals. She gave him a warm smile. It's like watching the

sunrise, Fergus thought. Then, with shock, he realized where the sun was!

It was rising! How was that possible?

"Galla!" He caught himself, "I mean Lady Galla, how long have we...is the sun rising? We slept all night?"

Henno rolled over and farted loudly. "Keep the noise down, lad. We'll have a bite or two more of that deer meat before we get started again. Wake me when you've unpacked the horses."

Galla was wrapping the dried strips of meat in green leaves and stuffing them in a pouch for later. "No need to worry about the horses. I unpacked, combed and watered them last night. They're packed up and ready to go now." She said brightly.

"There you are then," Henno mumbled. "There's a good...last night?"

He sat up quickly and scanned the sky. "It's dawn!" He shouted. "You let us sleep all night?"

"I did more than 'let' you." She looked at them as if they were unruly schoolchildren. "The herbal brew I gave you last night? It's a potion to put your mind and body in repose. It's quite medicinal."

Henno was on his feet, but having trouble maintaining his balance. Fergus noticed Lugaid was still asleep, not stirring despite Henno's shouting and stumbling around the campsite.

Henno was having as much trouble holding his temper as he was his feet, "You drugged us? We're being chased by an army of

angry, horse-raping Irish warriors, not to mention the blood-drinking Druids, and you drug us? Are you insane?"

Fergus didn't trust his balance yet, just sitting up was enough of a challenge for now. He nudged Lugaid with his foot, still no response.

"Domina Galla?" Fergus wasn't sure he wanted to know the answer to this. "Prince Lugaid isn't moving. Is he...?"

"You killed him?" Henno exploded "As if they didn't have enough reason to hunt us!"

He sat down suddenly and tried to put his boot on. The simple task seemed to be beyond him.

Fergus felt just as wool-headed. Why couldn't he wake up?

"Don't be silly, he's not dead." Galla was pouring more of the hot brew into two small cups. "I just gave him more of the mixture than I gave you two. You slept soundly for a night, he'll sleep soundly until..." She paused. "I suppose it should be tomorrow morning. Tomorrow afternoon perhaps."

"He's not dead then?" Henno heaved a rock by Fergus' nose thumping the Prince in the backside. He snorted, mumbled something but didn't wake.

"We need to go." Fergus was trying to stand, but tumbled over to his side. "How long before we're able to ride?"

She had two cups in her hands, the liquid steaming in the morning air. "Not long after you both drink this. Go on now, while it's nice and hot."

Fergus hesitated, but Henno flatly refused. "Not on your life! Who knows what's in there. I don't go for potions. When I want a drink, I drink wine and a bit of water now and again, but...what was the question again?"

Galla smiled patiently, "It's just the effects of the sleeping elixir." She handed them both a cup. "Drink this and it will clear your heads. Hurry now. Fergus is right, we should be going. I saw riders on the far ridge."

"What?" Henno shouted. "Why didn't you say so?" He tossed the steaming brew back in one big gulp and struggled to his feet. "Come on, lad! Drink up!"

Fergus sipped the hot potion, it was bitter. Not bad, he thought, draining the rest of his cup. Henno lurched to the edge of the clearing.

Fergus yanked on his boots and got to his feet. His mouth and throat had a minty, lemony flavor that was tingling. Whatever that brew was, it was refreshing.

"Anything?" He called to Henno.

"Not a...there!" He pointed. "Riders to the west.

About...maybe a mile. They've stopped. Probably lost our trail in the marshes. Yes, definitely. Best not hang around though. Best get moving." Henno was speaking quickly, almost nervously. "No sense in hanging around. Let's go!"

Fergus was checking the horses. His head felt like he had bees buzzing inside. Odd that he felt no pain. He tugged his nose. No, no pain at all. That should hurt. That should've hurt

quite a bit, but it didn't. Odd, that. He wondered if Henno's nose hurt when he tugged it.

"Henno!" He called out as he darted from horse to horse, checking their cinch straps and hooves. "Does your nose hurt?" "My nose?" Henno was strapping on his sword, but kept fussing with the belt. He gave his nose a tweak. "No!" He laughed. "It doesn't. Amazing! In fact, I'm feeling great!" He threw his head back and howled loudly. "Let them come!" He roared.

Fergus' heart was racing, he was breathing rapidly as if he'd been running in full gear. What was going on?

Then, it hit him.

He turned to Galla and saw the embarrassed look on her face.

"What was in that? The cup. Both of those cups? You just gave us..." He shook his head, trying to clear it. He felt like he couldn't stop talking.

"I may have over-estimated the dosage." Galla admitted as she whipped her cape across her shoulders. "It's a tonic. Quite stimulating, isn't it?"

Henno ran passed them to the horses, "Isn't what? A what? Are the horses ready? They look ready to me! Let's be off!" His words were running together so that it was hard to understand one from the next. "Volucer! Good girl! Feel like a run? I feel like running. Want to race? Let's race! Come on! Mount up!"

He bounded onto Volucer's back but looked ready to outrun his horse in a foot-race.

Fergus tried to calm his beating heart, but felt like it was going to burst out of his chest. He swallowed, trying to keep his voice quiet and respectful, "Lady Galla, sister of the most honorable two Emperors of Rome, daughter of Theodosius the Great, who was truly a great soldier in Christ, I love God, don't you? And Jesus. He's the son of God but his mother was a virgin. I'm a virgin. Are you a virgin?"

He clamped his hand over his mouth as Galla looked shocked.

"I'm so sorry!" He spoke through his fingers. "I can't stop talking. Am I going to die?"

She laughed, "No, but Henno is right. We should leave now. Can you ride now?"

Fergus kept his hand over his mouth tightly to stop saying anything else stupid. "I love you." He blurted. Then he ran to Barrel and vaulted so hard he nearly jumped over the horse completely. Barrel gave him a look and snorted.

Henno was riding in a circle around their camp singing a marching song.

Fergus immediately forgot his embarrassing admission to Galla and kicked Barrel into a gallop. "I thought you wanted to race!" He called out over his shoulder.

Henno laughed, "Take a head-start then, you need it!"

He reared Volucer dramatically. "Coming, your ladyship?"

Galla gave Lugaid's horse a slap on the rump sending it off south and rode by Henno after Fergus. "A race, is it?"

Henno gave Volucer the kick she'd been waiting for and the white champion took off like a cloud on fire toward the distant ridge. Fergus could hear him singing with joy at the top of his lungs:

Hey-Yah! Hey-Yah! The soldier's life for me!

No rest, no love, no pay today!

Hey-Yah! Hey-Yah! The soldier's life for me!

Foot sore, back sore, so give me more!

Hey-Yah! Hey-Yah! The soldier's life for me!

#

The morning was a blur. Fergus could only remember laughing and singing as they rode like banshees over the Irish countryside. It was a glorious feeling while it lasted. Around mid-day, he felt like he was swimming in mud. It started with a headache. Then his nose began hurting, then the pain spread throughout his body. Soon, he felt like a giant had stomped on him. Breathing was a chore. His head pounded, even the sunlight hurt his eyes. Henno was obviously feeling just as bad. "What's happening to me?" He groaned. "I was feeling so good just a while ago, now I'm feeling as bad as you look." "Good thing you're not feeling as bad as you look," Fergus shot back irritatingly. "Else you'd be dead." Henno ignored his grumpy retort. "What are they teaching the ladies of the upper classes these days?" He lamented. "I

always thought it was how to run a household of slaves, sit up straight and be respectful to their husbands, but apparently it's mostly how to brew up elixirs. First, Ruttella and now...your ladyship." He forced a smile as Galla approached within hearing.

"It looks as though the effects of the tonic have worn off." She commented brightly. "If you like, we can stop and I can brew up another..."

"NO!" They both exclaimed.

Fergus continued apologetically, "Thank you for your kindness, Domina, but we'll be fine."

Henno winced as he rubbed the bridge of his nose, "Right.

We've had plenty of your brews to last us. Better just deal with it on our own now."

He scanned the countryside ahead. "Besides, we're not far from the coast now." He snorted out a stream of snot and clotted blood from his nose. "Can you smell the sea?" He sniffed the air. "We're definitely close now."

Fergus cleared his nose as best he could, but to the side so as not to offend Galla. "I can smell it. Yes."

"Follow your nose then, lad!" Henno called out suddenly. He nodded behind them. "We're off!"

Fergus looked, but knew already what he would see. Way back, just cresting a hill on the horizon he could barely make out movement and there! A flash of metal.

It must be Loiguire's men!

Galla didn't bother looking, she just gave her horse a kick.

Henno was leading the way, Volucer picking out the best route,

Galla followed and Fergus was behind.

He hoped they could find a ship ready to board. Otherwise,

there would be no place to hide.

Chapter 25 - The Village of Menapia

Henno and Fergus had put on their monk robes again. Lady Galla wore one borrowed from Fergus. With the hood up, from a distance, she would pass, but there was no disguising Volucer. Henno knew they'd have to get out of sight and fast.

He set a fast pace, keeping to the lowlands and using the trees for cover. Another quick look back confirmed they'd not been spotted, but their pursuers were definitely headed in the same direction.

"There it is!" Fergus called out. The port town of Menapia was just ahead.

Not much to it, but there were several good-sized ships docked. One looked mostly deserted, the other was a hive of activity. They must be making ready to sail.

"Bit of luck!" Henno shouted. "The far one. They look ready to set sail."

They rode straight into town heading for the ship. The horses splashed through the muddy street causing locals to scatter and curse them loudly.

"Apologies!" Fergus yelled.

"Don't worry about them!" Henno laughed, "We won't be here long!" He hoped.

They stopped near the gangplank. It was a big enough boat, certainly large enough to hold the three of them and their horses. There looked to be large cages of animals already on

deck. It's going to be a noisy and smelly trip, Henno thought.

He heard the sailors shouting to each other in Gaulish.

He jumped down from Volucer. "They're Gauls." He told the other two. "Stay here, keep your heads down. We've got a bit of time. I'll talk to the Captain and convince him to take on a few poor monks sworn to poverty on a pilgrimage to Britain."

"What if he's not interested in the problems of three poor monks?" Fergus asked glancing back the way they came.

Henno winked, "Then I'll just have to bribe him with a fist full of gold coins." He jangled the heavy pouch on his belt.

"Stay put and try to look religious! You're making me nervous with all your twitching around. And you," He whispered to Galla, "Keep that hood up and your head down!"

Henno strode confidently along the dock. The sailors all eyed him suspiciously as they went about their business of loading the large ship with last minute items. It was fitted with sails as well as ports for oars. Must've been bought or captured from a Roman outpost, Henno thought. It had been repaired many times, much of the wood looked new and there was a gaudy figurehead at the bow. A large carving of a fish with exaggerated female breasts was leaping from the wood.

Henno shook his head with confusion; he would never understand Gauls.

He picked out the captain immediately. He was the one shouting and not working. He was a large man, about Henno's age with the look of a man at home on the water. His sunburned skin

looked as tough as leather. His voice was loud and he was obviously accustomed to making himself heard over the crashing waves of the open sea.

"Ho, Captain!" Henno called out in Gaulish. "What name might this fine, proud ship be given?"

The captain was chewing some kind of dark root. He spit a stream of black over the side as he slowly turned to respond. His teeth were stained and chipped. He gave Henno and the two by the horses a deep appraising look before dismissing them with another bite of the wicked-looking root.

"Away with you, wizard. We've no need for blessings and no coin for beggars." He spit at Henno's feet and went back to yelling at his men.

Henno forced his face to maintain the wide grin, reminding himself that he was a holy monk and they were being pursued. As much as he'd enjoy it, tossing the captain over the side of his own ship would not solve their most immediate problem.

"Good Captain," He said through a clenched jaw as he stepped over the impressive puddle of black spittle at his feet. "We would happily provide a blessing at no charge to you. And we don't seek your coin, but would provide it for passage to Britain." He stretched his grin out as far as he could.

Probably makes me look like a lunatic, he thought.

The Captain eyed him suspiciously. "And what coin would that be then? I'll see the color before you take another step our way."

Henno noticed his fingers sported an expensive set of rings and he wore a fine belt with a gaudy silver buckle over his rough work clothes.

He could be bought, but not cheaply.

Henno fished into his pouch, letting the sound of clinking coins work their magic before producing a gold solidus. He twirled it enticingly between his fingers.

"I've always been partial to the color of gold. You?" Henno smiled.

The Captain's eyes gleamed as he watched the gold coin. But, in the spirit of proper haggling, he forced himself to spit again as if the paltry sum was an offense.

"What good is a single coin?" He grumbled. "It'd die of loneliness in my empty coffer."

Henno nodded as if considering. He was doing his best to act disinterested, but he knew the longer they stood around in the open like this, the more likely they were to be caught by their pursuers. He eyed the other boat. "Do you know the captain of that one?"

His haggling opponent spit with disdain. "That tub?" He snorted. "A fine ship if it's death by drowning you're seeking." He looked skyward for guidance. "If it'd save you from a watery grave, I suppose I could make room. Three of you, three solidi."

"Done!" Henno tossed the coins to the Captain, who snatched them out of the air with practiced ease. "Fergus! That is, Brother Fergus! Bring...the other brother and the horses up!"

"The horses?" The captain acted surprised. Henno sighed, he'd fallen for the oldest haggling move like a dumb amateur.

"Yes, the horses too." Henno fished in his pouch. "Another for the horses and we want fresh water and hay daily."

Fergus and Galla were leading the horses toward the gangplank. Galla was keeping her head down, trying not to attract attention when the captain suddenly tossed the coins back to Henno. They clattered on the dock at his feet.

"What's wrong?" Henno exclaimed. "We had a deal."

"You think an old salt like me can't tell a girl's walk when I see one?" He pointed at Galla. "I'll have no females onboard my ship. They're bad luck and the crossing is dangerous enough without having to worry about my men getting their fur up over some tart. Leave the whore behind if you want to cross."

Galla raised her head at that, her eyes flashed with fury, but it was Fergus who spoke up. "How dare you! You can't speak to..."

Henno shouted over him. "Yes, he can!" He kept his voice low to his two companions. "Stand there like a couple of happy Christian statues or we'll be turning on Loiguire's spikes before dawn."

"Friend Captain," Henno wanted to smash his face in. "I am Brother Henno and you are...?"

"Preparing to set sail. Now, get your asses off my dock before I have my men whip the feathers off you!"

Henno exploded! All pretense of holiness dropped as he prepared to teach the Captain a hard lesson in respecting other's religion.

"Whip me?" He shouted. "Whoever raises his hand to me will be eating it!"

"Perhaps I can be of some assistance, Captain Talios." A voice rumbled from behind them.

Henno turned to see one of the many people he'd hoped to leave behind when he left Ireland.

Vibius Claudius Gratian.

#

Fergus thought they were doomed once he saw Henno lose his temper with the Captain. Now he knew they were doomed.

Gratian! Why now?

The fat merchant waddled by him with barely a nod of recognition as he approached Galla. His servant Pug was with him looking every bit as shocked as Henno and Fergus.

"Lady Galla," He rumbled as he bowed. "I had the fortune to meet you briefly at your 10th birthday party in Ravenna. Your father was a most gracious host and a most generous Emperor." Fergus couldn't believe his ears. He recognized the Emperor's sister! Truly and completely doomed.

Galla stammered, "You mistake me, sir. My name is Sarah and I'm..."

Gratian laughed, "Do not fear, good lady. These peasant sailors don't speak a word of Latin. One of their more redeeming qualities of which they have few." He brushed a beefy finger on the side of his nose, "Whatever your reasons, your secret is quite safe with me."

Henno and the Captain were alternately glaring at each other and at Gratian.

"Brothers Fergus and Henno! Most fortuitous to find you here. Of course you will accompany me on the trip to Britain. I won't hear otherwise."

He spoke in Gaulish to the Captain, who shook his head stubbornly until Gratian's voice took on a distinctly threatening tone. The captain finally relented with a brief nod while Henno gave him a smirking grin.

"I told him he would take us all or none of us." Gratian grandstanded. "He's not about to make the crossing with an empty hold."

Several of the sailors had stopped working to watch the exchange, now very aware of Galla's gender. A few babbled in complaint to the Captain until he finally shouted at them. They shuffled away giving her daggers with their eyes.

Henno translated. "The crew thinks the voyage will be cursed if we bring a...Sarah...onboard."

"Nonsense!" Gratian announced leering at Galla. "A beautiful woman is a blessing."

Everything Gratian said made Fergus' stomach queasy. He always sounded hungry for what was on another plate.

"If it's a choice between a mutinous crew and an empty cargo hold..." Henno began, but the Captain had apparently come to a decision. The Captain called out to his crew and they cheered his suggestion.

They lined the sides of the ship to watch.

Henno tried not to laugh, then gave up trying. Gratian took a deep breath and rubbed several of his chins.

"What is it?" Fergus asked.

Captain Talios tugged the bottom of his tunic free from his belt. Pulling the bottom up to his shoulder, he exposed the right side of his chest.

He waited.

Henno did his best to speak respectfully but there is nothing harder than trying not to laugh. "Domina..." He began stifling his guffaw, "In order to break the curse which all women...they believe...bring to an ocean voyage...he requires...they all require that you..." He broke down, doubled over laughing unable to continue.

Captain Talios waited patiently as he pointed to his right nipple and made a kissing sound.

Galla went white. "You can't be serious!" She could barely get the words out.

Gratian's voice was thick with desire, "It's a well-known custom for averting evil among the Gauls. He's quite adamant about it. We wouldn't want to miss the tide, would we?"

Gratian was obviously interested in seeing such a disgusting act. The pervert would like nothing better than to see such a perfect creature debase herself, Fergus thought. With a very reluctant heart, he realized he was familiar with this Gaulish custom to ward off evil curses too.

"Ask him," He said, already knowing the answer, "Ask him if the curse is broken by a virgin's kiss."

Henno guessed his intentions and roared with unbridled laughter as Gratian asked the question. Captain Talios shrugged as if to say, Whatever gets us off this dock and on our way.

Fergus was already feeling a bit seasick at the thought. He approached the filthy Captain who again pointed at his nipple and made a kissing sound. Fergus nodded, bracing himself with a quick prayer.

"You are the bravest man I've ever known, Fergus." He heard Galla whisper which sent Henno off on another convulsive spasm of laughter.

Captain Talios became impatient. He grabbed Fergus' head, pulling it to his chest. Moaning loudly as if in orgasm, he rubbed Fergus' face up and down his chest as the crew cheered. He felt like he was going to throw up and finally pushed himself free.

Fergus knew he was infested with fleas now. And most likely a variety of other diseases which will eventually kill him.

The Captain stuffed his tunic back in his belt and shouted at his crew. They all jumped to their tasks to get the ship underway.

Gratian imperiously offered his arm to Galla. "Lady, if you will. The men can see to the horses."

She declined with an imperious look of her own. "I will see to my own horse. Thank you."

Gratian bowed then waddled aboard, the gangplank bending dangerously with his weight.

As she passed Fergus, she looked like she might kiss him on the cheek. Instead, she patted him on the shoulder.

"Thank you, Fergus."

As she led her horse aboard, Fergus thought it was worth it. Barely.

Henno was biting his lips to keep from laughing.

"I think we should get in a bit of sword practice." Fergus said, his frustration at his friend's mocking showing.

"Not me, brother." Henno replied as he led Volucer up the ramp. "Any man who'd do what you just did is far too dangerous an opponent."

He began singing a Gaulish sea chant which was met with a cheer by the working sailors who soon joined in. The boat still resounded with loud, brash singing as it pulled away from the dock a short time later.

Fergus stood at the stern watching as they rolled out with the evening tide. He'd been brought to Ireland what seemed now like a life-time ago. He remembered the despair at seeing his mother and father killed, being torn away from the only home he'd ever known and dragged in chains to this faraway land of laughing warriors. In finding his spiritual way in Christ, he'd come to realize that home was not just a place, but a feeling. A feeling of love, acceptance and fellowship. In many ways, Ireland was his home and despite his joy at the prospect of returning to the land he'd grown up in, he also felt a sadness.

He would return to Ireland. It had become a part of him and him a part of it.

As he ruminated about all the things he would miss about the beautiful island of green, he realized he was glad to be leaving at this particular time.

Just as the coast was slipping away in the setting sun, he could see a band of armored warriors riding into Menapia.

Chapter 26 - The Voyage to Britain

The ship was called "Cup-Bearer". Captain Talios said he was in a tavern when the name came to him. He told them the trip to the coast of Britain would take 3 days, a bit less if they got lucky.

After they made sure the horses were secure in the cramped stables below deck, Henno, Fergus, Galla and Gratian tried to make themselves comfortable while staying out of the crew's way as much as possible.

The Captain insisted Galla take his quarters. In fact, he insisted she stay inside and out of sight as much as possible. If Fergus hadn't interceded, he probably would've locked her in. The lad took it upon himself to be her personal bodyguard by setting himself down by her door. Henno imagined he'd not move for the entire voyage.

Later that night, Henno and Gratian sat at the bow having made a couple of seats out of the thick lengths of coiled ropes. The merchant had generously brought out an excellent amphora of wine which he shared. The sea was calm, the stars were bright, Henno was drinking free, fine wine and all was right with the world.

"I hope you will forgive my rudeness at our last meeting, Brother." Gratian said looking a bit embarrassed.

Henno wasn't sure how to respond. Did he know he had been rutting Ruttella in the garden? If so, he seemed very unconcerned about it. Best to keep as quiet as possible. He shrugged and waved his hand as if dismissing the apology. "The Christian faith is known for its capacity for forgiveness, but no, I was very inhospitable." Gratian continued. "I woke the next morning in my library. I don't recall much after dinner. My good wife...you remember Ruttella?"

Henno nodded. Good? She was damn good, that's for sure.

"My wife said she entertained you but you had to leave at first light." He grinned. "I always seem to drink too much when we have guests. I nearly always end up passed out before the evening is over." He chuckled. "Ruttella says it's because I love meeting people and am too generous with my wine."

Henno smiled and nodded amicably. Perhaps, but also because the sexed-up she-witch drugs you so she can have her way with the guest of her choice. He took another swig of the wine before passing it back to Gratian. Mithras, that's a relief.

Henno was afraid he was going to have to toss the cuckold over the side. No small feat, he'd probably have hurt his back in the process too.

"Ah, well." He sighed. "She exhausted herself to keep me entertained, I assure you. She's not accompanying you on your trip?"

Gratian glanced around making sure they were alone.

"Alas, no. My...mission is a private one." He stared at Henno as he drank again from the wineskin as if trying to decide something. Henno hoped his tongue had been loosened by the wine. It would help he and Fergus to know what this fat, drunken fool was up to.

Henno acted disinterested. "Of course. I don't mean to pry." Henno replied casually. "The sky is so clear tonight. I pray to Jesus and his...helpers that we have good weather for our trip." He made the sign of the cross, closing his eyes as if in prayer, but was actually thinking, Come on, you fat pervert, start talking.

Gratian pretended to look up at the sky while watching Henno out of the corner of his eye. He took another big drink and shifted his large ass a bit closer.

"A Christian priest such as you is sworn to secrecy, is that not true, Brother Henno?"

His breath smelled like wine poured over horsecrap. Henno struggled not to gag.

"Of course, friend Gratian." He managed. "If you have something you need to confess in order to receive forgiveness, I will hear you." Henno brushed his finger alongside his nose and added, "Our scriptures teach us that we must keep all secrets, no matter how interesting they might be to others. We must keep them...you know...secret. It's written in the sacred scrolls of...God." He shouldn't have drunk so much wine without eating.

"It is?" Gratian burped a noxious blast in Henno's face.

"Sorry." He mumbled.

"Yes, it's written in the scared scrolls. Near the back."

Henno gagged a bit and continued. "So, what is it you would like to tell me? In complete secrecy, of course."

Gratian leaned in even closer as Henno struggled not to lean back.

"There is a wind blowing through the empire. And it blows from the west." Gratian said solemnly. He handed the wineskin over and leaned back with a wink.

Henno stared.

When no more information was offered, he took a drink and asked, "That's it? That's the big secret? Am I supposed to know what that means? Because honestly, I don't have a clue. Is it a code phrase?"

Gratian leaned in again. Henno groaned inwardly. Even on the open ocean, his stink was nearly overpowering.

"I'm trying to be cautious, Brother." Gratian muttered just over the sounds of the crashing waves. "You've heard of General Marcus Buteo? The Hero of Britain?"

Henno snorted derisively, but covered by pretending to cough. Hero of Britain? That's a laugh. The Marcus Buteo he knew was a greedy, power-mad bastard who'd kill his own mother for a sesterce. Now maybe he'd find out what Marcus and Gratian were up to.

"Of course!" He exclaimed like a teen gushing over his favorite gladiator. "Who hasn't heard of the brave General Marcus? They call him the Hero of Britain, you know."

"Yes, I know." Gratian paused. "How is it that you and your young friend are traveling with the sister of the two emperors?"

Damn him! Now he's gone all suspicious. What does this have to do with Marcus?

When in doubt, use the truth. At least as much of it as will do.

Henno feigned embarrassment. "I'm reluctant to admit it. Young Fergus and I had the conceit to think we could convert King Loiguire to Christianity. His Druid priest Feyr took exception and we were...detained. Lady Galla had been taken prisoner as well, but the King's son fell for her. With his help, we managed to escape. We agreed Britain would have better opportunities for us. Especially considering..." He let his voice trail off as if he caught himself talking too much. Take the bait, will you?

And like a large-mouth frog after a fly, he chomped. "I think we will have to trust each other. If we pool our information and resources, it would be to our mutual advantage. After all, being the traveling companion of a member of the royal family gives us access we might not have on our own."

Henno hesitated. "I think it's best for all of us to keep her real name and position to ourselves until she's safely in the hands of a few hundred Legionnaires, don't you agree?"

Gratian agreed just a bit too quickly to suit him, "Of course! Yes!" He exclaimed. "We wouldn't want anyone to think of holding the poor girl for ransom."

You mean like you're already thinking, Henno thought. Who holds this dog's leash?

"No, I'm sure there'll be plenty of reward to go around once she's safe in the arms of the empire again." Gratian concluded with a very convincing smile.

All this talking made Henno feel tired all over. Since he left the service of the Legions, he felt like he was required to use words more than weapons. As he nodded at Gratian, letting the bloated pig think he'd found an ally, he couldn't help but think he'd rather just punch him in the face a few dozen times.

"Exactly, my friend," He replied clenching his teeth in his best smile, "Although our reward will come in the next life when we join Jesus in his...castle in the clouds."

Gratian burped again as he finished off the wine, "I'll take it wherever I can, Brother!" He laughed loudly, good wine being wasted as it dribbled down his chin.

I'll bet you will, you walking grease-stain, Henno thought as he kept his face locked in a big grin.

"Now," Henno asked, "Tell me about this big wind from the west."

#

Fergus sat on the hard wooden floor with his back to the door of the captain's quarters.

Galla could sleep easy with him on guard. He shifted a bit, but there was no way to get comfortable. That's good. He didn't want to fall asleep; he was on guard duty.

From where he sat he could see the sailors who were not on watch curled up on the floor or gambling. Some of them glancing his way every now and then. Or glancing at the door, more like it.

His hands sought the reassuring feel of the dagger strapped to his belt on one side and the short-sword strapped to his back, both hidden by his heavy robe. He met each man's gaze with an unblinking stare. Not a direct challenge, just an acknowledgment. As if to say, "I see you. I know what you're thinking." One by one, he stared them down.

Like a wolf, Fergus thought. Perhaps Brio was right. I am changing.

He closed his eyes to pray letting the gentle rocking of the ship focus his thoughts. He whispered quietly, "Lord, I want to serve you. Guide my heart. I know this is a cross-roads for me. Am I strong enough to serve you and only you? Or is it your will that I take a wife?"

He had deeply confusing emotions for Galla and also knew in his heart that she would never be his. They were, as Henno put it, from "different neighborhoods". As much as he longed for her, as much as he wished for it, it could never be.

But if he had these feelings for her, does that mean he could have them for another? Would he really be able to pledge his life in service to God?

As was sadly always the case, he received no answer. The silence was either the answer he sought or a sign that more patience was required. He sighed, "Amen."

In any event, nobody was getting by him. He opened his eyes in narrow slits, but none of the soldiers were looking his way. A lamp hung in the rafters gave off a weak light, creating shifting shadows as it swung with the rocking sea.

He grinned. They know I'm on guard over here. To get to her, you go through me. If...

"AAAAAH!" He shouted in surprise.

His self-affirming tough-talk was interrupted as he fell backwards.

Galla stood over him in the doorway.

"Fergus? What are you doing?" She held a small lantern. An angel couldn't look more beautiful in full daylight than she did in the warm glow of the golden flame.

He heard a few snickers coming from the direction of the sailors, but pretended he didn't as he jumped to his feet.

"Dom...I mean...Ga...I mean Sarah!" It was so hard to remember everyone's hidden story! He was convinced the Lord wanted us all to be truth-sayers since it just makes life easier.

She smiled with a twinkle in her eye. "Were you guarding my door?"

Fergus tried to reply in a bold, confident way. The way he knew Henno would reply.

"Um...well...I was walking by...I thought maybe...yes. Is that okay?" That didn't come out the way he wanted.

"Maybe you'd better come in." She stood back opening the door. The small, straw-stuffed bed dominated the room. Fergus' eyes went wide, his mouth went dry and he found all he could do was shake his head.

"It's fine. We need to talk." She grabbed his tunic and tugged. Her fingers brushed against the armor underneath. He hoped she mistook it for hard chest muscle.

She latched the door behind and waved at a stool. Fergus sat immediately, feeling somewhat like a trained puppy, but not caring. She sat on the bed across from him.

She nodded at an amphora of wine. "Would you like some? With Gratian's compliments." She shrugged as if any compliment from him was to be taken with a bit of salt. "It's actually not bad." She seemed nervous about something.

He accepted the offer, wishing he could water it down without looking like a child. It was rather strong. "Thank you, My L...I'm sorry. What should I call you now?"

"Let's agree on 'Sarah' until we get back to Roman soil." She said distractedly.

"Very well, Sarah." Fergus took another sip. "You said we needed to talk."

She began pacing in the small room, using the low ceiling for balance against the rolling of the ship. She waved Fergus back to his seat when he rose. It felt wrong to be sitting while a member of the royal family stood, but he did as commanded.

Now that things had calmed down somewhat, he realized he was seeing her in an entirely new way. Not as the helpless slave-girl, but as a powerful young woman who was used to having her every whim obeyed. He wasn't sure yet which he preferred.

"First, I would like to apologize to you and Brother Henno for drugging you both. Twice." She apologized formally, the way he expected a royal to, but she was still nervously working her way to something else. Fergus decided he should just sit very still until she got there. After all, this young woman could have him tortured and killed with a nod of her beautiful head.

"I promise to you, I won't ever do that again. Unless you give me your consent, of course. I've some skill in healing. One of my teachers was...that's not important now." She took a big swallow of her wine. Fergus felt it was good manners for him to do the same.

"I promise too." He filled in the awkward silence with the first thing that popped in his head.

She gave him a confused look. "Promise to what?"

He should not speak. Ever. "I meant I promise not to do anything without your consent."

She took a deep breath. "That's what I wanted to speak to you about. I know you're sworn to your faith and that prohibits you from certain...relationships..." She waved her hands helplessly as she struggled with the words.

And as Fergus struggled with breathing. Was she going to ask him to have...relations? Just as he felt like he was getting his feet on solid ground, the world lept up to punch him in the gut. The ship rolled deeply, cutting her off as she groped for a handhold.

"I'm not a monk!" He blurted out the words once again wishing he hadn't.

"You're not...? I thought you and Henno...? What are you both then?" She sat on the bed again. Fergus could smell her hair, it smelled like fresh straw. It could be the mattress, but he was trying not to think about the bed.

He had no wish to lie to her, so he avoided discussing Henno's situation for now. "I'm a novitiate. I'm studying to be a monk one day. I've taken no vows, but pledged myself in the service of God and hope one day to be accepted by the order." He added sheepishly, "They seem pleased with my progress and I expect to take the vows on my return. If...when I return."

"I see." She stood again, waving him back down again. "That doesn't change what I'd like to propose."

Fergus' throat felt like it was closing up. Was he really going to do this? He'd never done this before, so he wasn't even sure he knew how.

"Once I'm finished with my negotiations with General Marcus, I will be returning to Ravenna. My brother, the Emperor Honorius, expects me to marry one day. While those plans are being made, I would like you to consider an offer to serve in my household. I know it may be an unusual request to make of one so inexperienced, but I see something in you, Fergus. A strength. You would find me a willing participant and a generous one." She gave him a big smile. "So? Would this arrangement please you? Henno too, of course, if he's willing."

Fergus felt like his heart was going to explode. She was asking him to be her personal love slave? A concubine? A man-whore? He began breathing rapidly. He wasn't sure how to respond. She was the most beautiful woman he'd ever seen...but Henno too? How does that work? Alternate nights? At the same time? His brain was racing. The ship lurched again almost tossing him off the stool.

He looked at her, his mouth moving like a gasping fish.

"Are you ill?" She asked. How could she so calmly make such a bizarre request?

"I wish I was." Fergus began. "I wish I was dying. A fever dream would explain the confusion I'm feeling. How can the world be so beyond my understanding? I know I'm a simple

country boy, raised in the Roman wilderness, but has the Empire fallen so low that such arrangements are made so causally?"

Every blow, every cut he'd received at the hands of Loiguire's men couldn't hurt him as much as she just had.

She looked surprised at his reaction. "I'm sorry, Fergus. I thought you were able to make such choices on your own. Should I contact your abbey for permission?"

Fergus stood so suddenly, he knocked the stool over. "No! Of course not! Why would you think...? This is wrong."

She was getting irritated and deep down, beyond his shock and anger, Fergus knew incurring her wrath was dangerous, but he didn't care.

"What's wrong with you?" She asked. "I thought you'd be honored to be asked to serve as my household priest. Do you speak for Henno as well?"

What? Her priest? Why had God given him so much to misunderstand?

"Your priest? You want me to serve your household as your priest?"

"Of course. There is an abbey nearby, but I would prefer...wait. What did you...?" Suddenly her face flushed with anger and embarrassment. "You thought I was...?"

"No!" Fergus stammered. "A priest! That's what I thought...it's just that I'm not...not yet...so...I was..."

"How dare you!" She fumed. "Get out!" She picked up a wooden bowl and threw it at him.

Fergus ducked his way quickly to the door, still stammering.

"I'm sorry, La..Sarah! It was..."

He ducked again as a wooden spoon flew at his head.

"Out!" She screamed, slamming the door behind him. He could still hear her raging thought the heavy wood.

Once out in the passageway, he heard a few snickers and chuckles from the sailors. He ducked his head in embarrassment, moving quickly up the stairs to the deck followed by catcalls and mocking kissing sounds.

Maybe he could just jump overboard.

#

Henno's mind was racing.

It was as if the whole empire had suddenly become a huge game of Black and White. He could picture a large map of the empire, divided up into squares with thousands of little black and white game pieces everywhere.

He couldn't believe what Gratian was telling him. Galla and Stilicho had part of the story. They thought Marcus meant to set himself up as ruler of Britain, but the greedy bastard had higher ambitions.

He wanted to overthrow Emperor Honorius and rule the Western Empire. Henno could easily dismiss it as more over-reaching from another usurper doomed to failure except for one thing:

Marcus has the backing of Arcadius, Emperor of the East, brother of Galla and the Emperor Honorius.

As Gratian boasted of his involvement, Henno pushed his way through the wine-induced fuzziness to keep the game pieces separated into white pieces and black pieces.

Emperor Honorius sent Stilicho and the 10th Legion secretly to Britain as a means to reinforce his "request" to affirm Marcus' loyalty. His young sister, Lady Galla, was to deliver the request. Gratian didn't know anything about the 10th massing in Britain, so maybe Marcus didn't either.

If anyone could move a legion secretly, it was Stilicho, Henno thought. Despite their recent rift over Volucer, he still admired his former commander.

However, Honorius didn't hold all the game pieces yet. He didn't know his other brother Arcadius plotted against him. Emperor Arcadius sent Gratian to act as his messenger with gold to buy the loyalty of the local British Roman auxiliaries. When Honorius pulled the Legion Regulars back to Rome to defend against the Visigoths, he left the barbarian auxiliary troops behind.

He left them behind and he left them angry about it.

Most had been promised Roman citizenship after their hitch was up. Nobody mentioned the deal could be yanked at the whim of the Emperor. Typical, thought Henno, the names change, but the emperor's priorities never do. Say what you have to, take what

you want and damn the plebes. Royalty reminded him of spoiled children.

Marcus must have promised them much and Gratian was delivering his promise. In gold supplied by Emperor Arcadius.

Gratian yawned expansively. He looked like a bear getting ready to sleep for the winter.

"So, Brother Henno. Do you understand now which way the wind blows? Can we count on you to be loyal to the Empire and the true Emperors then?" He asked sincerely, but Henno knew Gratian just regarded him and Fergus as two more game pieces. They obviously had the trust of Galla which made them useful to Gratian. He would toss them aside once they were no longer useful. Galla was walking right into a trap. With the emperor's sister held hostage, Stilicho wouldn't move against Marcus.

"Of course, friend Gratian." Henno smiled. "I am first and forever loyal to the Empire and the true Emperors."

Black pieces. White pieces.

And two wolves.

#

"How could you be so stupid?" Henno shouted.

They were on deck at the bow of the ship. It was cold out on the open but Henno didn't feel it, he was burning mad. He expected young men in love to lose all reason, but this was beyond it!

Fergus put his hands in his head moaning. "I don't know. It just seemed like she was asking me to...be...her...I can't even say it."

"Now you can't say it!" Henno smacked his head. "In front of her, the sister of the Emperors, you can say it though."

"It's a terrible mistake. I know. I have no excuse other than my complete lack of experience with...females." The poor lad looked ready to dive overboard.

Henno couldn't help but commiserate. "Easy now, lad." He sat down next to the dejected youth. "You're hardly the first man to say something stupid to a pretty girl. And for what you lack in experience, you make up for in your choice of females." He laughed nudging Fergus with his elbow. "The Emperor's sister, no less."

Fergus grunted with a pain at the nudge to his battered ribs.

"Don't remind me. I'll be lucky if she only has me beheaded."

Henno continued. "A man-whore? You?" He gave Fergus another smack to the back of the head. "I'm sure she was just shocked. She's over it by now. I'll talk to her in the morning."

Fergus looked up sharply. "No!" He begged. "Please, don't say anything to her. You'll only make it worse. I shouldn't have told you."

Henno was spreading his cloak down preparing for sleep.

"Shouldn't have told me? Are you daft?" He tossed Fergus his kit. "You will always tell me about ridiculous things you've

done. Life is too short not to share our embarrassing stories among friends. That's an order, Optio. Right?"

He could see the lad was grinning. He'd be alright after a good night's kip.

"I hear and obey, Centurion." He spread out his cloak, setting out his sword by his right hand.

It had been a long day. He was getting tired. One of them should stay awake, but the hushing sea and the rocking boat was getting to him. Mithras, but he ached. He worked his jaw around with a big yawn feeling it pop and crack.

"I must be getting old." He muttered. "I remember when a day or two after a good beating and I was right as Romulus. I'm feeling a lifetime of abuse tonight."

Fergus stood with his back to the sea facing the length of the boat. "I'll take first watch. No arguments."

"Wasn't going to." Henno yawned again. "Gratitude. Wake me when you're getting tired. We won't have much to do for the next few days, so we'd best heal up." He rolled himself in his cloak and let sleep take him.

#

Henno woke to the sounds of the ship coming to life. Sailors shouting for breakfast, the animals calling for water, gulls calling for scraps, the sails calling for the wind, the Captain shouting at everything.

Fergus was still standing in the same spot watching all the activity. The sky was gray as the sun was just beginning to break above the water.

"Why'd you let me sleep so long?" Henno grumbled. He felt rested, but his body still ached. He rose to his feet and stretched, squeezing out the soreness.

"I didn't feel like sleeping." Fergus replied.

He looked tired, obviously still concerned about his gaff with Galla. Henno wasn't exactly looking forward to talking to her about it, but it was best to get all this over with. There were much bigger concerns now than the love-play between two youngsters.

It reminded Henno of a play he was dragged to by an old girlfriend. He sat outside in the sun for hours to watch a bunch of prancing actors sing and shout about how much they secretly wished to be with each other. He didn't understand any of it. If everyone just said what was on their minds and jumped in the sack with whoever they wanted, the whole thing would've been over in a heartbeat. Playwrights should spend more time talking to real people, he thought.

"Quit worrying about what's done. I said I'd fix it and I will. We've got to figure out how we're going to handle a much more important situation than that."

Henno dug through his pack and pulled out some dried meat.

"Here, sit. Eat."

They gnawed on the tough meat watching the sailors go about their daily chores. Henno went over the information he'd gotten from Gratian the night before. The longer he talked, the whiter Fergus' face got.

"Why didn't you tell me all this last night?" Fergus asked.

"You let me prattle on about that nonsense with Galla? There's a plot to overthrow the Western Empire, another civil war brewing and we're smack in the middle of it! I need to see to Galla. There's no telling what Gratian will do to her!" He started to rise, but Henno shoved him back down.

"Calm yourself." Henno explained around a mouthful. "He needs Galla as a bargaining tool. He'll deliver her safe to Marcus. He needs her safe and he needs us to keep her feeling safe. You go running down there all full of vinegar he'll know you don't trust him."

"But I don't trust him!" Fergus exclaimed. "Do you?"

"Of course I do," Henno replied. "I trust that bloated pig to do what's best for him. We know exactly what to expect from him."

Fergus shook his head. "But she's in danger..."

"Not right now. Not until we get to Marcus." Henno was trying to stay patient. "You've got to stop thinking with your loins."

"It's not like that!" Fergus exclaimed.

"Of course it is!" Henno laughed. "I've been there plenty of times, lad. I know the look. You've got to remember one thing: she's royalty."

"You think I don't know that?" Fergus replied glumly.

"What I mean is, they're a different breed than the likes of us." Henno struggled for the words. "Those who've been granted that kind of power aren't like regular people. They've been touched by the gods."

"There's only..." Fergus began.

"I'm not trying to start a religious argument here." Henno interrupted. "I'm making a point. She and her family, they've been raised to use power. Real power of life and death on a larger scale than you or I will ever see it. Her family goes back generations, to the founding of Rome itself. Great families like hers, they breed great leaders. They're touched by greatness. It's in their blood."

"What are you getting at?" Fergus was following him, but a step or two behind.

Henno went on. The lad needed to understand this.

"What I'm trying to explain is that you think you've fallen for a pretty girl. All those emotions, all that attraction is not to her, but to generations of power. We're like moths dancing in the firelight. We don't know what the light is, but we're drawn to it."

"And it burns." Fergus nodded. "I see what you're saying, but..."

"Listen well. I need you focused and steady for what comes."
Henno spoke gravely. "If you're all cow-eyed, you're useless. We're a two-man shield wall, you and I and I need a cold, hard soldier at my side, Optio. One I can depend on. We're wolves, not pups. Right?"

Fergus nodded. "Wolves. The Shepherd's Wolves, Centurion." He smiled.

"The Shepherd's Wolves. I like it." Henno grinned back. "Don't worry. Once this is all over, we'll go find a house of whoring and you can fall in love for a night. Or an hour." He laughed loudly at the shocked look on the lad's face.

"But I...no..." Fergus stammered.

"Lad, you're just too easy." Henno laughed rising to his feet.

"Relax. Have some more deer meat. I'll see to the horses and grab us some hot grub."

"You're...going to talk to her too, right?" Fergus asked sheepishly.

"Yes," Henno sighed. "I'm going to talk to her. Believe me, after I tell her what's going on, the last thing she's going to be concerned about is your dumb words."

"Are you...are you going to tell her everything?" Fergus asked.

"Optio, you're the only one I tell everything." He gave him a wink and headed below decks.

#

Henno was impressed to see Galla was already up and tending to the horses. He watched as she spoke soothingly to them, feeding them oats from her hand. Volucer snorted when she saw him. Galla turned suddenly, surprised by his presence.

"Oh! I didn't hear you come down." She smiled with a touch of embarrassment. "I was talking to them. My father always said they understand everything. Do you think so?"

She's a sweet one, Henno thought. I can see why the lad is smitten.

"Who am I to argue with an Emperor?" Henno grinned as he fed some oats to Volucer. Barrel head-butted him for more.

"Hey!" He laughed. "Wait your turn!"

Galla stroked Barrel's nose and put more oats in the trough for him which he eagerly chomped on. Henno stroked Volucer's back with a handful of hay while he tried to think of a way to start the conversation. The big mare grunted with satisfaction. Galla began doing the same to the horse she brought onboard.

"I had a talk with..." He began.

Galla interrupted him immediately. Turns out he didn't need to worry about how to start this conversation.

"He told you everything? He's a fool. He's a brash, young, stupid fool!" The words rushed out so quickly, Henno had trouble picking one from the next. "How could he, in his wildest dreams, think something so absurd? Does he think I'm so hideous I would have to hire...companionship? What kind of

person needs to...pay...that I would have in my employ...I don't know what kind of woman he's accustom to but..."

"That's the problem." Henno jumped in before she worked herself into a full-on rage. "He's not accustom to any kind of woman and certainly not one as...highly-placed as yourself." She was still fuming, he could almost see steam coming out of her nose. "That's..."

"That's what he is, Sarah, if you will. You hit it. He's brash, young and stupid. And a bit foolish. What man isn't at his age?" Henno continued softly as he stroked Volucer's coat. "He meant no disrespect. In fact, his reaction proclaims his respect for you. He was shocked that someone so reputable and beautiful would make such an offer. The lad thinks he's in love with you. No man's in his right mind when he's all bollixed up with love humors."

She shook her head as she continued to rub her horse down fervently. "Nonsense. He's a monk. He's sworn to..." She stopped herself. "He's not though, is he?"

"Not yet, no." Henno replied. "But he will be. Provided he's not distracted by...well, let's just say he's got a path to follow. We all do, but Fergus is going to do great things."

"Yes. I've seen that in him too." She said quietly. "And you?" Henno smiled, feeding Volucer another handful of oats. He shrugged. "Me? I'm his strong right arm. I'm going to make sure he lives long enough to do those great things. Whatever

they are." He spoke soothingly to his horse. "Isn't that so, girl?"

Volucer snorted in response making them both laugh. That's done, he thought. Now, onto truly important matters.

He looked around the hold to make sure they were alone.

Gratian was most likely still asleep or eating. He was sure the ship would roll to one side or other when the fat beast walked the decks. They could talk in private for now.

"There's things you need to know." He told what she needed to know. There's no need to tell her now that her brother Emperor Arcadius plotted to overthrow her brother the Emperor Honorius. Henno was concerned she'd be unable to conceal her anger and take it out on Gratian. It was important that they keep the upper-hand by not showing all their pieces on the game-board for now.

All she needed to know was that Gratian couldn't be trusted and that Marcus would hold her hostage as soon as she was within his grasp.

She let out an exasperated groan as she looked to the ceiling for guidance.

"Men!" she half-laughed, half-shouted in that way only women can do effectively. "You're all alike. No matter what age, station or place of birth. You all think you're so smart. Honestly, do you really think I don't know that? Of course, he'll hold me hostage! Why wouldn't he?"

Henno was trying not to show his growing impatience with being called out by such a young girl. No matter whose sister she is, he didn't like it.

"You make it sound like it's all part of the plan." He grumbled.

"Of course it is." She whispered. "But Marcus doesn't know General Stilicho will be at my back with the 10th Legion, does he? What does Marcus have? A cohort or two of auxiliaries? The dregs of British barbarian troops, not good enough to join the Legions or the local warlords. He might have an impressive body of men by the standards of the feuding British tribes, but when faced with a real Legion he'll be at our complete beck and call."

She spoke so smugly, even Henno wondered if she was right.

"Gratian will deliver me safely to the traitor's hands, I'll deliver the terms of his surrender and my brother's Legion will have another victory." She smiled as if the triumph was already a part of history.

Except that Gratian was delivering a payment of gold sufficient to buy a much larger force than a few cohorts. The 10th would be facing thousands of Roman-trained auxiliaries and local warriors, bred for battle and trained in the Roman fashion of fighting. They would be angry at the insult paid them by Honorius and would happily fight for the gold paid them by Marcus.

A well-trained and motivated army fighting on its own soil. The great Caesar himself had not been able to conquer Britain against such soldiers. And Caesar had not fought against British warriors who fought with Roman weapons, using Roman tactic and who were led by a Roman general. A Roman General with the Emperor's sister as hostage. Fergus was right, it would be another Civil War.

#

Henno returned with a couple of bowls of hot beans. He and Fergus ate on deck while Galla reluctantly agreed to stay in her cabin as much as possible.

They ate hungrily. The hot beans a welcome change from the leather-like dried meat.

Fergus shook his head as he spoke with a mouthful. "We can't let her do it, of course."

Henno replied with an equally full mouth. "Try telling her that."

Fergus swallowed. "I think it's best I speak to her as little as possible."

Henno laughed. "You need to stop elevating your place in the world, lad. Everyone's long forgotten things that happened as long ago as yesterday. What we need to do is..."

He was interrupted by several sailors nearby making kissing noises in Fergus' direction. The boy scowled back at them which provoked laughs and cat-calls. One, the biggest one Henno noted, called out to him.

"What did he say?" Fergus asked through clenched teeth.

"Nothing. Pay him no mind. Finish your breakfast." Henno pretended to ignore the sailors, but was actually keeping one eye on them. The big one stepped closer, egged on by his laughing friends, and called out again.

"Henno. If he takes one step closer..." Fergus was building up to doing something stupid.

"Let's remember we're peace-loving Christians. What about forgiving your enemies?" Henno smiled at the sailor, who ignored him.

"How can I forgive him if I don't know how he's insulting me?" Fergus countered.

Henno had to agree, he had a good point.

"It's nothing really. In fact, depending on how you look at it, it's actually a compliment..." Henno jammed another spoonful of beans in his mouth. It was starting to look like breakfast was over.

"Tell me." Fergus demanded. "I promise not to do anything un-Christian-like."

"Well," Henno replied as he chewed. "All he said was that of the two pretty girls onboard, he thinks you're the prettiest." Henno tried to smile without laughing. "So, when you think about it..."

Before he could stop him, Fergus whipped his wooden bowl at the grinning sailor. It spun like a discuss, spewing beans in a wide arc before hitting the man in right in his mocking

teeth. Beans and a few teeth hit the deck as the injured sailor clutched his face shouting in fury.

With his friends calling for blood, he moved at Fergus. The lad was on his feet in a flash with Henno leaping between them.

"Careful now!" Henno shouted roughly pushing the two apart.

"We're slightly out-numbered here, lad. Let's just forget about it."

He turned to the sailor and spoke quickly in Gaulish, "My young friend here misunderstood your words, friend. He is young. Let's not spoil the day with..."

The sailor shoved Henno's arm aside and growled. "Stand aside, priest! Let him answer for his actions like a man, if he is a man."

Fergus pushed forward, but Henno held him back. "What did he...?" The lad barked never taking his eyes off the bleeding sailor.

Henno replied. "He said he's sorry for insulting you. He wants us all to be friends and..."

"No he didn't." Fergus growled. "I may not understand the words, but the manner was clear enough. Tell him I want to fight him. Come on! You want a kiss? Come take it!" Fergus shouted the last at the sailor who lunged forward again. Henno stayed in the middle and pushed them apart again.

The sailor moved back and rumbled out his challenge to the delight of his friends. "Club, blade or bone. Matters not to me. Let the girl decide."

He pulled off his tunic and stood ready. His upper torso was a mass of muscle, covered with scars. Henno could see this man enjoyed dueling and was used to winning. Fergus wouldn't stand a chance.

Henno turned to Fergus. "Well, it's a fight you've got then. He's letting you choose the weapon." Henno didn't like this. No matter who won, it wasn't going to be good for them. Fergus wins, the sailors won't like it. The sailor wins, Henno won't like it. If only...he had an idea.

"You want to do this?" He asked Fergus. The lad responded with a short nod. "Then, I'll choose the terms. You trust me?"

"Of course." Fergus replied earnestly.

"Then here's how we're going to do this." Henno explained quickly.

He hoped this would work. Otherwise, it was going to be a very difficult few days.

#

Fergus was terrified. He was doing his best not to show it, but he was sure his fear could be seen by everyone. He trusted Henno, but this was madness.

Then again, perhaps less mad than fighting a duel with a man twice his size who was most certainly an expert fighter.

They stood on either side of the ship. Fergus stood on the starboard side while his opponent, whose name was Kurnin, stood on the port side. They glared at each other, waiting for the contest to begin. Kurnin was drinking from a wineskin with his friends as they laughed loudly at Fergus and Henno.

Captain Talios found the event entertaining enough that he allowed the rest of the crew to stop working and watch.

Gratian had finally lumbered his lazy carcass out of bed. He stood next to Henno while working his way through an entire loaf of bread.

"The good Captain is giving decent odds, Brother" Gratian asked. "I wagered a siliqua on our young friend."

Fergus wasn't flattered by the small wager.

Neither was Henno. "Are you sure you can afford it?" He growled.

Gratian spoke as if Fergus wasn't standing right next to him.

"The Gaul has an obvious advantage. My wager is simply a token." He turned to Fergus. "No offense, young priest, but you've little chance of surviving and even less chance of winning. I just can't bring myself to bet on a Gaul over a Roman. It's out of respect for the Empire, you see." He smiled as if this was sufficient explanation.

Fergus' dislike for the bloated pervert was growing into a real, burning hatred. It must've showed on his face, Gratian took a step back before waddling away to find a good vantage place to watch.

Fergus took a deep breath and prayed for patience when dealing with people like Gratian. He also prayed for the courage and strength it would take to be victorious in this contest. Vain as it was, he desperately wanted to win. Pride may be a sin, but right now it might just save his life.

Henno interrupted with much-needed advice and encouragement.

"Forget Gratian. He couldn't climb out of bed without help."

He grinned. "Now see why The Hang is one of my favorites?"

Fergus was suddenly loving every agonizing moment he'd spent under the grueling discipline of Henno's training. Especially The Hang.

Like most deadly activities foolish men engage in to prove one point or another, the contest he and Kurnin would engage in was a simple one.

It was a race.

Long ropes ran from the sides of the ship to hold the sails in place. Each would start at opposite ends, climb up to the top spar, go across one of the cross-beams and climb down. The first to touch feet on the other side was the winner.

Fergus was looking at the top of the mast. "This is a bad idea."

Henno jerked his thumb at the massive Kurnin. "You think you'd have a better chance going toe-to-toe against him? He's at least 3 times your size."

"I was thinking twice my size, but I see your point." Fergus pulled off his tunic. He still had a mean-looking bruise on

one side but overall was feeling lean and strong. He began limbering up. His hand was tightly wrapped. He hoped his thumb wouldn't give him any problems. He flexed his hand; feels good.

Henno spoke quietly with a big grin. "His advantage in a fight is his disadvantage in a climbing contest. His size will work against him."

"That would sound reasonable except that he lives on this ship and probably climbs these ropes every day." Fergus responded eyeing the climb again. "Also, I doubt he's got a fear of heights."

"No, I've been watching the crew since we came aboard. He's one of the rowers. I bet he's never..." Henno stopped. "Wait, what? Fear of heights? You?"

Fergus nodded grimly. "Although to be fair, it's more a fear of falling."

"This is no time for joking, lad. Why didn't I know this?"

"This is the first time the situation has..." Fergus began.

"From now on, don't ever not tell me something!" Henno snapped.

As Fergus was trying to unknot that sentence, Kurnin took another big drink of wine and called over to Fergus. Whatever he said, it provoked more raucous laughs from his friends.

"He said..." Henno began to translate.

"I really don't care." Fergus replied. "I'm ready."

Henno slapped Fergus on the shoulder. "Time to climb, lad."

He tried to sound reassuring, but Fergus could hear the concern in his voice. "The tricky part is where you cross at the top spar. If he takes the left one, you take the right." Fergus rolled his eyes.

"Alright, alright." Henno snapped. "I'm just trying to help." Kurnin and his friends began yelling impatiently. Henno shouted back in Gaulish something which had a 'shut your bean hole' sound to it.

"Do you want to say a small prayer before we start?" He asked. "No," Fergus replied smiling. "I'd like to say a long one. One that lasts the remainder of the voyage."

He saw Henno trying to laugh, but his eyes told Fergus he had regrets at pushing for this suggestion.

"You're right, Centurion." Fergus said quietly. "No matter what happens, this is better than fighting him in a duel." Henno nodded, his loud bravado firmly back in place. "I know I'm right! We can't have you killing a member of the crew! Now, get on the railing, Optio!"

Fergus grinned with a confidence he wish he felt and took his place standing on the ship railing, grasping the rope he'd climb with both hands. Kurnin did the same, although he looked a bit unsteady. The wine may have helped his courage, but at the cost of his balance.

Fergus looked down at the deck four feet below him. It already looked too far away and much too hard.

Captain Talios asked if both were ready and they nodded their assent. He shouted and the race was on!

Fergus gritted his teeth as the thick rope cut into his hands. The bristles of the woven hemp felt like a thorn bush with each hand-hold. The stinging, salty seawater the rope was soaked with didn't help much either. Still, he was moving up quickly, using his arms and feet to help him. He glanced at Kurnin and saw the big Gaul was struggling, swinging awkwardly as he pulled himself up.

Higher and higher they climbed. Fergus tried to focus on the top, but that only made him realize how difficult it was going to be to make his way from the rope to the heavy wooden cross-beam. He felt himself slowing down and pushed himself to keep climbing. Across the way, Kurnin was a length behind, but gaining.

The sailors were cheering loudly and stomping their feet apparently to get Kurnin into a rhythm of climbing.

"Pull, lad, pull!" He could hear Henno shouting over the others.

Fergus knew he was trying to give him encouragement, but it only served to remind him how high up he was getting. Henno's voice sounded much, much too far away to suit him.

Then he made the colossal mistake of looking down to see how high up he was.

His head spun. It looked like miles!

He felt his hands going numb. Kurnin was still climbing clumsily, but steadily making his way up. As Fergus hung there, out of the corner of his eye, he saw the big bully pass him. His fingers felt weak. He knew the longer he hung there, the harder it would be to get moving again.

He looked up and saw the impossible distance he still had to go. Then the dangerous climb to the cross-beam, not to mention having to pass Kurnin. No, it can't be done. He should just give up and admit defeat. He felt himself slip a fraction and a wave of fear washed over him. He was frozen, afraid to move up or down.

He took a deep breath and asked God for help.

"Fergus!" He heard Galla shout. "Come down here immediately!" She had come on deck and was now stamping her foot in anger. He couldn't back down now! Not in front of her!

Just one hand at a time, he thought.

His hands began to move again. He pushed with his feet and pulled with his arms. Everything hurt. Even his nose, for some reason.

Gulls which followed the ships for scraps were swooping in and out around the two as they climbed. Fergus kept his eyes locked on the rope in front of him. Just one hand at a time. He heard Kurnin cursing drunkenly and saw him swatting at one of the gulls, almost losing his grip as he did. Fergus kept moving and saw he was ahead now. He must be close to the top, but he didn't dare risk taking his eyes off the rope.

#

Gratian grimaced at yet another loud shout from the barbarian crew as they watched the climbing contest between the young priest and one of their own. Shame, he thought as he drained the last of his wine, for one so young to throw his life away so easily. So young and so...interesting.

"Slave!" He bellowed. Why was his wine cup empty? Why do they make him beat them?

Where is that idiot? He never bothered learning the names of any of his servants. What possible reason was there for a slave to have a name anyway?

He sat on a thick cushion at the aft of the ship. It wasn't comfortable, but it was better than his cramped quarters below. He saw the girl shouting angrily at the boy then make a big show of leaving the deck.

Spoiled, little royal brat. Your day is coming. In the meantime, enjoy the larger cabin while I despair in mine.

Pampered, privileged, patrician snob, I'd like to...where was that idiot slave with his wine? If he had to get up and go looking for him, the beating would be much more severe.

He sighed as the sailors cheered wildly yet again. Glancing up he saw the two contestants working their way up the ropes on either side of the ship. Such effort. It's an obvious difference between us and them, he thought. Barbarians expended such huge amounts of energy in various pursuits of

pleasure while an intelligent, cultured man could simply sit back and let pleasure come to him.

Where was that idiot slave with his wine!? He cursed while lumbering to his feet.

"Slave! Damn you!" His angry shout was lost in the caterwauling of the audience as they allowed themselves to be carried away by their base passions. They are little more than animals.

He cursed loudly again as he saw his useless slave scurrying toward him with his amphora of wine. He'd gone to the trouble of getting to his feet for nothing!

The slave cowered, "I'm sorry, Master. I..." Gratian cut off his pathetic begging by hitting him in the side of the head with his wine cup.

"Quiet, fool!" He shouted, "Fill it!"

The slave rushed to comply, pouring the wine with shaking hands. Gratian caught him glancing up and reveled in the fear he saw in the slave's eyes. As well there should be, he thought.

He tilted his head back as he drained the wine from his cup and felt a curious stinging sensation in his neck. It felt like a bug bite or a rash. He wiped at it and his hand came away covered in blood.

Gratian dropped his wine cup and clutched his throat. Blood poured down his arms in long spurts. He tried to scream for help, but all the crew was fixated on the contest going on

high above. His scream was drowned in a gurgling whimper as air mixed with blood vented from the cut in his windpipe.

He reached out to the slave who had taken a few steps back and stared at Gratian with wide eyes. It was then Gratian noticed the razor in his hands. Why? Why would he do this?

The slave snarled with a mix of pent-up anger and ran at Gratian. He was shoved over the side of the wooden railing, his expensive robe tearing on the rough wood.

The water was cold. Gratian couldn't swim, of course. He damned his cultured upbringing. Why couldn't his parents have allowed him to be more like the slave children who'd frolicked in the seas around their villa? His heavy robes weighed him down. He tried to hold his breath as he thrashed uselessly, but the cold saltwater poured in through the rent in his throat. It filled his nose, his throat, lungs and gut.

He couldn't accept what was happening to him until he saw the looming shape of the ship slip away as he sank deeper into the dark, cold sea.

The icy water filled him. He stopped thrashing.

As the light faded, his last thought was that for the first time in his life he finally felt full.

#

The voices below sounded far away to Fergus, mixing with the crashing waves. The gulls mocking calls, the blowing wind and Kurnin's frustrated bellowing filled his ears. This high up

every pitch of the ship threatened to whip him off into the ocean below. He kept pulling and praying.

Finally, he bumped his head on the block which secured the thick rope to the cross-bar. He was breathing heavily, more from fear than from exertion. How can he climb up there without falling? As he hung there looking for a safe solution, he saw Kurnin reach the same spot on the other end. The giant didn't hesitate, but began trying to throw his leg over. He missed on the first few attempts, but Fergus hooked his leg on his first try.

Grabbing at anything he could, he pulled himself over the top. He was now lying across the big beam which held the top of the sail. Blood flowed painfully and blessedly back into his hands as he lay there.

Then he felt the cross-beam shuddering and he knew Kurnin had climbed to the top at the other end.

Get up! He had to keep moving.

He pushed up to a sitting position, his legs straddling the double beams. Each beam ran on either side of the main mast. He was facing the wrong way and slowly turned himself around. Kurnin was already on his feet and shuffling along the beam on Fergus' right.

Fergus was shaking as he got his feet under him and slowly started to stand up. There were ropes from the cross-beams to the main mast, but they were far apart. He'd have to move quickly to keep his balance.

A gust of wind hit him as the ship lurched on a wave unexpectedly. His foot slipped! He twisted and grabbed out, catching one of the ropes before he fell to his death. He kept his feet on the cross-beam, but his hands didn't want to let go of the life-saving rope.

He forced himself to release the rope and holding his hands out for balance, he moved forward. He kept his feet on the beam, shuffling his right and dragging his left.

Kurnin was approaching the main mast already. He would pass Fergus and have a head-start on the way down. The big sailor was grinning with confidence. He kept moving forward, trying not to lose his footing.

He looked at Kurnin again, he was sliding around the main mast as Fergus was approaching. He had a dark look in his eyes, his smile was a vicious snarl. Fergus knew the sailor planned on giving him a shove when he got close enough. His only hope was to reach the next rope and hang on as hard as he could.

Kurnin was moving quickly now, eager to see his opponent fall to his death. Fergus could hear him muttering something; a curse or a promise. Whatever it was, he hated that this was the last voice he would hear.

Fergus grabbed the next rope just as Kurnin reached him. He could hear the shouting voices below, but couldn't make out any words. Kurnin reached out to grab the rope, but a gull swooped in and he flinched.

His foot slipped! He went over screaming, his eyes wide with fear.

Fergus didn't hesitate. He whipped his free hand out and caught Kurnin's. The weight of the big man pulled him off his feet but his hand remained tight around the rope.

Years ago, he remembered one of the other slaves told him of seeing an execution of a prisoner in the Coliseum in Rome. The man had his arms tied to two elephants and they pulled him apart to the delight of the thousands in the audience.

Fergus couldn't imagine what that felt like until now.

Kurnin was screaming in terror, flopping around like a hooked fish, while Fergus hung on for both their lives.

"Hold...still...you...little...girl!" Fergus grunted between clenched teeth.

Kurnin apparently understood the meaning, if not the words, and his frenzied jerking slowed to shaking and whimpering.

Fergus' arms were on fire. He knew he couldn't hold on for much longer. If he could just get his leg over the cross-beam, he might be able to...no! His foot slipped off! His hands slipped down the rope a few inches causing Kurnin to plead and scream.

Fergus knew he had only one more chance. He took a deep breath and swung his leg up as hard as he could.

His foot was over the cross-beam! He kept pulling until he was able to slide over. He let go of the rope and wrapped his arms

and legs around the wide wooden beams. His left hand still gripped Kurnin's but he could feel their hands slipping. He locked eyes with the terrified man. "Climb!" He shouted. "Move or die!"

Kurnin understood and began climbing Fergus' outstretched arm like a rope. He felt his skin pulling, his muscles tearing as the big man grasped desperately. Finally, he was able to get to the cross-beam too. They lay there, panting for air.

Fergus was sure he was going to toss up his breakfast. His throat burned, his arms were lifeless and his gut was churning more than the ocean around them.

Then he realized Kurnin was speaking to him. More than that, he was laughing. Fergus' first thought was the man had gone mad, then he joined in. They both laughed manically. Neither had any right to be alive, but reveled in the insanity of their survival.

Kurnin worked himself up to a sitting position and motioned for Fergus to continue the race. He can't be serious!

Fergus shrugged. "Why not?" He said.

He cautiously stood and made his way to the other side while Kurnin just sat and watched. Not until Fergus was nearly to the deck again did he start making his way back down. Fergus dropped from the rope and stood leaning against the side of the ship so as not to fall to his knees.

He was surrounded by grinning shouting sailors. Henno pushed his way through and slapped him on the back.

"See?" He shouted gleefully. "I told you! Much better than fighting a duel. Right?"

Galla pushed her way through and slapped him across the face. With a petulant flip of her hair, she pushed her way out again and stomped back to her cabin.

Henno laughed, "I told you she'd forget all about what you said!"

Fergus' face stung where she'd slapped him, his whole body felt like he'd been slapped by a giant, but he couldn't stop grinning.

Then the crowd parted as Kurnin strode across the deck. He stood straight and spoke formally.

Henno translated. "He says he owes you his life. He doesn't want to be in the debt of a Roman, so he's asking what you want as payment."

Everyone was quiet as they watched to see Fergus' reaction.

Fergus could only think of one thing. He pointed to his nipple and made a lewd kissing noise.

Kurnin's eyes went wide with shock and Fergus was afraid he'd pushed things too far. Then the big man's face burst with laughter and the rest of the group joined him.

When the act was completed, the Captain began shouting and kicking his men back to work. Kurnin handed Fergus a ladle of water with a grin before getting back to his oars.

"Looks like you've made a friend." Henno laughed.

Fergus drank deeply. "Speaking of friends, where's Gratian?"

The looked around, but the merchant was to be seen.

Henno took the ladle from him. "Probably off spending the vast fortune he won."

Fergus thought it was odd. Where was Gratian?

#

"There's only one place he could be." Henno said gravely. "And we both know it."

He and Fergus had searched the ship and Gratian wasn't on it.

If he's not on the ship, Henno thought, then he's in the water.

Fergus searched the horizon. "Shouldn't we tell the Captain to turn around? We can't just leave him out there!"

Henno admired the boy's generous nature if not his optimism.

"Lad, I wish there was something we could do, but he's gone.

Even if we convinced the Captain to go back, what chance do you think there is that a pampered lump like him could swim?

In cold waters like this? No. He's gone." Henno scanned the

seas behind them with a slight shudder. "Not an easy death,

that's for sure. I wouldn't wish it on anyone. Not even a pig like him."

They were silent for a bit. Fergus closed his eyes and was muttering in prayer.

"You praying? For him?" Henno asked.

"Yes," Fergus replied, his eyes still closed. "I'm asking God to accept the poor sinner into his care." He opened one eye at Henno. "And you should, too."

Henno spit over the side. "Not bleeding likely."

What good is it to ask Jesus to accept an evil person like Gratian into his kingdom? Seems like if someone like that can make the cut, then what's the point of worrying about always doing good all the time?

"So what good is...?" He started to ask, but Fergus shushed him as he continued to waste his time.

Henno rubbed the top of his head. The hair was starting to grow back and it itched.

Finally, Fergus whispered his "Amen" and looked at Henno.

"What are we going to do?"

"It's a problem, there's no getting around it." Henno considered the new turn of events. "He was our way in to Marcus. With Gratian gone, we don't know who he was meeting to get the gold."

"Why is that a problem? No gold, no auxiliary army. No army, no rebellion." Fergus asked.

"You're not thinking it through, lad." Henno sighed. "You think all those troops are just going to throw up their hands and go home? No. They'll most likely attack Marcus' estate and take whatever they find there. Including all the items you and I have been sent to get. If it glitters, they'll take it. If it burns, they'll burn it. Our whole trip will be wasted."

"The Gospels of Peter, Andrew and Matthew were listed as among his collection." Fergus whispered. "They can't be lost."

"Then we need another Gratian." Henno replied.

Henno shook his head. It all seemed hopeless. Then, he noticed the boy's face was split with a big grin.

"I've got a really bad idea." He said.

"Those are my favorite kind." Henno replied, "Let's hear it."

#

"I won't hear of it!" Pug wailed with his hands firmly clamped over his ears. "No! You'll get me crucified!"

They had pulled Pug to the aft of the ship, away from the rest of the crew. Fergus and Henno stood over the kneeling slave while he begged not to be involved in their bad idea.

Henno slapped his hands away. "Now you listen to me, you simpering little snot-ball!"

Pug stared back in mute shock as Henno grabbed the slave's tunic and shook him.

Henno continued. "Crucifixion? You'll be lucky if that's all you get. Your master is dead and who do you think people will say did it?"

"She made me do it!" Pug shouted. "She put a curse on me and said if I didn't do as she commanded, I'd die! I had no choice! Can't you understand?"

"What?" Fergus exclaimed. "You killed Gratian?"

"I was just bluffing." Henno muttered. "You really did it? You got more stones than I thought."

Pug continued babbling hysterically. "I had to. She said she'd turn me to a shade if I didn't obey. She promised me my freedom! Please, just let me go when we reach land! I don't need any gold. I just want to go free!"

Henno grabbed him by the hair. "What do you know about the gold?" He demanded.

"Nothing!" Pug wailed. "I don't know anything about any gold!"

Fergus obviously didn't have the stomach for interrogation.

Mithras, this is nothing, thought Henno. I'm not even warming up. "There's no need for..."

"Don't lie to me!" Henno went on, ignoring Fergus' nervous interruption. "I've never met a slave yet who didn't know all the sorted details of his master's house!"

Pug glanced from Henno's angry face to Fergus'. "I...I...only know he was supposed to meet a...man."

"Who?" Henno roared at him. Fergus pulled him away to speak privately, leaving Pug crouched on the deck watching them as he shook with fear.

"What are you doing?" Henno barked. "I'm just starting to crack that nut."

Fergus spoke quietly. "He's not in his right mind. He killed his master out of fear. A fear that was built over years of shouted abuse and threats. Maybe we don't need to bait him again by replacing his master with similar treatment."

Henno glanced at the cowering slave who was pretending not to be straining to hear their whispered conversation. "You have a

point, lad. Once a dog tastes fresh meat, he's spoiled for it."

He turned to smile at Pug. "Sorry, friend. Lost my head there." He called out in a friendly voice.

He and Fergus approached the slave again, this time with big smiles and open hands.

"Friend Pug." Fergus began. "Forgive us both. We were just shocked to hear that Gratian had pushed you to such a state with his evil treatment. I hope you can forgive us."

"I had to." Pug repeated.

"Who can blame you?" Henno smiled. "He was a beast. He deserved it. The lord Jesus will bring him an eternity of torment for the way he behaved toward you."

Fergus shook his head with a frown.

"What?" Henno asked. "You think he won't? I bet he sticks Gratian on a pillar of spikes and..."

Fergus got that frustrated look on his face as if he was trying to untie a complicated knot, "He doesn't...I keep trying to tell you..." He sighed.

Pug stood and gave them both a confused look. "Are you sure you're both priests? You talk differently than any Christian I've ever met." He nodded at Henno. "And you and Ruttella. She may have drugged you, but you were more than willing to..."

Fergus quickly interrupted him. "It's not important now. The important thing is that you are free. Free to live your life, make your own decisions and make your own mistakes."

"What does that mean?" Pug asked nervously. "What do you mean, my own mistakes?"

Fergus shrugged his shoulders as if not entirely sure himself what he meant. "Well, it's just...Ruttella made you do this, you said?"

"Yes!" Pug replied. "She put a curse on me. If I didn't comply, she see me dead!" He glance around nervously as if she was watching. "She uses Pagan magic." He whispered.

Fergus and Henno exchanged a quick glance and unspoken question. Ruttella and the Druids?

"Then wouldn't you be better off getting as far away from her as possible? Going back to your people in Ireland would only give her the opportunity to use you again." Fergus continued. "Seems to me you should be using everything you know to your best advantage. We can protect you, of course, with the power of our faith, but we need to know we can depend on you."

Henno tried not to smile, the lad was good.

Pug considered his words carefully before replying. "You mean Christian magic is stronger than Pagan magic?" He asked dubiously.

"Of course it is!" Henno exclaimed before Fergus could reply.

"Their god walks on water, comes back from the dead, makes fish out of rocks, wine out of dirt and slays entire armies with a wave of his hand. You ever hear of a Druid doing any of that?"

Fergus had that look again, but Pug seemed convinced. "No, I have not." He mumbled. "And your magic can lift the curse from me?"

"If you help us, Friend Pug," Fergus smiled, "Then we'd be happy to help you. And put a few extra coins in your pocket as well."

Pug licked his lips with greed. "What do you want from me?" He asked and Henno knew they had him.

#

Galla, on the other hand, was not as easily convinced.

"Are you both mad?" She asked. She's not angry, Henno noticed. She asked the question with serious curiosity. He thought it was more unnerving than if she was yelling. It's almost as if he should be asking himself the same question.

Fergus seemed to be over his silly crush. Fear of a painful death has always been a tonic for a variety of lesser emotions. "We're not mad. This is our best course. Pug is our only chance to get through this."

They were all jammed together in Galla's borrowed quarters. Pug grinned foolishly when Galla looked at him. He was wrapped in one of Gratian's brightly-colored tunics which looked as though he was wrapped in one of the ship's sails. She looked at him for a moment until the former slave dropped his eyes. Then, she slowly turned her gaze on Fergus. He held her eye, but was clearly nervous by her unblinking stare.

"It's quite simple..." He started. He stopped when she imperiously held up her hand. Henno thought she could halt the path of the sun with such a grand gesture.

"If you will allow me the courtesy of explaining it in my own fashion." She continued as she was not really asking anyone's permission. "You expect this...Pug to play the part of Vibius Claudius Gratian, a former Senator, a wealthy, educated Patrician who lived in the royal court, a man who once held the confidence of my father when he was emperor and who now is on some kind of mission for a secret society of wealthy Roman factions?"

"There is a remarkable resemblance." Henno remarked unhelpfully as he tugged on Gratian's toga. He thought it was funny even if nobody else laughed. They had judiciously decided not to let Galla know Pug had also murdered Gratian. Galla ignored him and Henno ignored the glare Fergus was sending his way. "No sense in covering it with flowers, lad, he's..."

"A slave?" Galla continued over him. "An uneducated, underfed, unwashed slave."

"Former slave, with respect. As am I and as you are." Fergus was getting a tense tone in his voice. That's not a good thing.

Galla's eyes flashed. "I was never a...!"

Henno interjected. "Here's the nub of it. He knows all the details of Gratian's plans. We can't pretend to be Gratian.

The lad here is too young and I've got my head shaved to ...because I'm a priest." He added quickly. Galla gave him a glance that told him he's still not mastered the art of pretending to be a monk. Why does everyone find it so hard to believe he's a bloody Christian priest? People are just too damn suspicious these days.

She apparently left her suspicions unasked for now. "And why is Gratian so important? I thought he merely planned on siding with General Marcus in order to curry favor with the new British governor. What is this mysterious meeting all about?" Fergus and Henno exchanged a quick glance. "Better tell her the whole thing, lad." Henno said as he gripped Pug's arm. "Me and his lordship here will go back to his cabin and see if we can find something that's a better fit. Come on."

He pushed Pug out into the hallway.

As he closed the door behind him, he hoped the lad was able make her see the sense of it all. She's a royal, he thought, she must be used to hearing about palace intrigue and betrayal by family members by now.

#

"That's completely absurd." She shook her head dismissively. Fergus sighed. So much depended on her cooperation. He had to convince her.

"My brothers love each other." She continued. "Arcadius would no sooner plot to overthrow his younger brother than..." She stopped. She whispered one name. "Aelia"

"Who?" Fergus asked. Then he remembered. "Aelia Eudoxia? Emperor Arcadius' wife?"

Galla was speaking to herself more than to Fergus. "She wants to rule the whole of the Roman Empire through Arcadius. To do that, she must destroy Honorius. She can't defeat Honorius while General Stilicho lives." She looked at Fergus as if he just entered the room. "Stilicho is walking into a trap, isn't he?"

Fergus nodded. "Yes. Unfortunately, you're to be the bait." He fumbled. "Not the bait exactly. What do you call someone who's being held against their will and their safety is being used as a bargaining chip against someone else."

"Are you saying I'd be a hostage?" Galla offered. "Imprisoned by General Marcus to keep General Stilicho from attacking?"

"Hostage!" Fergus shook his head in frustration. "I don't know why I couldn't think of that word. You know, how sometimes you can't think of..."

"Would you please try to stay focused?" Galla sat down on the bed. Fergus quickly took a seat as well with a mumbled apology.

"Sorry, I'm still feeling a bit light-headed from the...climb."

She narrowed her eyes at the reminder, but continued unraveling the plot out loud.

"Marcus is paid by Arcadius to secretly raise an army of Roman Auxiliaries and local barbarians. He knows Honorius will send

Stilicho with a legion to quell the rebellion." Her eyes were flashing like a night fire. "No. This isn't Arcadius' doing. He's not smart enough. He's been turned against his brother by Aelia."

"Would an emperor be so easily swayed by his wife?" Fergus asked.

Galla's hard look told him he'd chosen his words poorly.

"Not because of her being a she, but I didn't...does he always do what she tells him?" He knew he was making it worse.

Galla replied icily. "Some men are more open to the wisdom of women than others." She softened as she added. "My father told me once that my two brothers would make one fine emperor. Now I see what he meant. Honorius is stronger; Arcadius is smarter."

Fergus stayed silent as she ran over the points in her head. He could definitely see himself being open to the wisdom of a woman as intelligent and beautiful as...he realized he was staring when she gave him a sharp look.

"I don't understand." He said quickly to cover up his staring.

"What does this have to do with Arbogast? He and Eugenius were defeated by Honorius so Arcadius could become emperor in the East."

Galla stared at him as if he was speaking Greek. "Don't you know? I thought everyone knew Aelia was Arbogast's sister."

Fergus' head was starting to hurt. "General Flavius Bauto, your father's general was the father of Aelia, but you're

saying the rumors are true? He's the father of both Aelia and Arbogast?"

Galla nodded. "The marriage to Aelia was arranged by my father to solidify Arcadius' power in the East where Arbogast was popular. Aelia always hated Honorius and Stilicho for humiliating her brother with such a defeat. They bribed Marcus to turn traitor, did you know that?"

Fergus felt his face flushing. "I may have heard that somewhere." What would she say if she knew Henno was the one who'd delivered the bribe?

"But why Marcus?" He continued, "Why make him emperor? He's the one who betrayed Arbogast and Eugenius at the Battle of Frigidus. He's the one who took the bribe from...that was offered to him to fight for General Stilicho."

She was becoming impatient with him. "Honestly, Fergus. Can't you see? With a new army in Britain, they can march on Honorius in the west and force him to step down. The first step was getting Stilicho here so they can hand him a humiliating defeat."

"And the key to defeating Stilicho," Fergus continued, trying to show her he's not as thick headed as she thinks, "is to have you as hostage."

"Yes, he's always been in love with me." She added casually.

"He'd never move against Marcus if I'm threatened."

Fergus suddenly hated Stilicho. He was in love with her? By what right does...? More right than I have, he corrected himself sullenly.

"What?" Galla was staring at him. Had he said something out loud?

"Nothing." He said quickly. "Obviously, we can't let you anywhere near General Marcus. As soon as we land, we'll find you transportation back to Ravenna. It's the only..."

"No." She said firmly. "I must continue on to deliver terms to General Marcus as planned."

"But you'll be held hostage!" Fergus argued.

She smiled. "I'm not afraid." She reached out and Fergus felt the warmth of her fingers brush down his cheek. "You'll be with me. And Centurion Henno will be with you."

Fergus did his best to hide his surprise, but failed.

She smiled wider at his shocked expression. "Roman Legionnaires have protected me my entire life. You have the makings of a soldier, but he was made by a lifetime of soldiering. I don't know what you two are, but two simple, quiet monks you are not. I know you will protect me and when the time comes, you'll see that we escape safely."

Fergus tried not to succumb to the giddy emotion her touch and smile welled up inside him.

"Sarah...Lady Galla, it's not that easy. We'll be walking right into a trap. It will take a miracle to get us out safely."

"Then pray for a miracle, my young monk." She said sweetly.

Chapter 27 - The Port of Deva, Britain

The rest of the voyage was uneventful. Considering the excitement of the first few days, nothing short of a prolonged battle with pirates followed by an attack by sea monsters would've gotten Henno's attention.

He and Fergus spent their time recuperating while Galla spent her time schooling Pug, their new 'Gratian', on the fundamentals of being an upper class snob. She lectured him for hours on topics such as court etiquette, the histories of the great families of Rome and how to host a banquet while Pug stared at her with all the understanding of a sack of wood chips.

Henno knew she was confusing him. He finally pulled Pug aside and made it simple.

"Listen to me, gravel-head," He growled. "This is all you have to remember: Kick the asses beneath you and kiss the asses above you. Got it?"

Pug nodded with a big grin. He got it.

He thought they might have some trouble with Captain Talios regarding the disappearance of Gratian, but the good Captain wasn't interested in getting the reputation for losing passengers of high birth. Henno added a few coins to the already outrageous sum he was charging Gratian and suddenly Pug was treated like royalty.

Pug was getting starting to understand his new role. Maybe a bit too well. He approached Henno and Fergus as they stood watching the port city of Deva slide toward them across the rolling seas.

He cleared his throat with an impatient rumble. No longer scurrying and begging forgiveness. He'd apparently been enjoying his former master's wine collection if his slightly slurred speech and grape-colored stains were any sign.

"I have realized a small problem in our otherwise excellent course of action, my friends." Pug smiled insipidly when Fergus and Henno turned from the railing.

"Is that so?" Henno had come to realize why Gratian like hitting Pug so much. "And what might that be?"

"I should have a servant." Pug answered smugly. "It's no less than someone of my rank deserves." He sniffed as if he detected an odor coming from Henno and Fergus which he found offensive.

"You should, should you?" Henno's fists were balled up and ready to fly. This little shit-stain could use a thumping!

"I'll give what you really deserve!"

Fergus stopped him by grabbing his arm. To his credit, Pug didn't back down or run away as he would've a few days ago. He stared at Henno with an incredulous look on his face. Too much like the real Gratian would've, thought Henno. This is a whole new level of bad ideas.

"Henno!" Fergus called out. "Calm down. He's right. We've got a replacement 'Gratian', now we need a replacement 'Pug'."

Fergus added, "Unless you'd like to do the honors, of course."

"What?" Henno roared so loudly Pug took a small step back.

"I'll just leave you two to attend to this matter then, shall I?" He sounded a bit like the old Pug, but added with a

distinct snobbish air, "Let me know as soon as you've made the proper arrangements for my departure from this vessel."

He didn't scurry away, but he definitely didn't waste any time either.

"I think that little shit is taking this all a bit too seriously." Henno growled. "He needs taking down a peg or..."

"He's doing what we asked him to do." Fergus said. "When he's playing the part in front of Gratian's contact at the port or in front of General Marcus, you'll be glad he's so convincing."

"I guess you're right." Henno admitted. "But we still need a 'Pug'. Any suggestions?"

Fergus nodded reluctantly.

#

Kurnin stared down at Henno with a very unslave-like glare.

The ship was docked at the port of Deva and the rest of the crew was busy unloading or a variety of other chores Captain Talios was bellowing about. Henno had a proposal for Kurnin and was trying to make himself understood by the big sailor.

When Kurnin spoke it sounded like a bear's low growl. "I owe nothing. I paid the life-debt by debasing myself. Now, you ask me to leave the life of the sea and become a slave? I should kill you for..."

Henno didn't like being threatened, but didn't like being killed either. Part of him wondered what it would be like to go toe-to-toe with the younger, stronger man, but another part of him thought now wasn't the time to find out.

"Hold, friend Kurnin." Henno forced a smile as he replied in Gaulish. "We're not asking you to pay a debt or leave the life you love or even to become a slave. We're asking you to help us on our brief journey, for which you will be paid handsomely. A slave? You? Never. Would half a silver every day call you inland for a short trip?"

The big man chewed on a chunk of cheese approximately the size of Henno's head as he considered. In a week, he'd earn more than a month at sea. He jerked his thumb at Pug.

"He, the slave, is now a master?" He rumbled skeptically. "And I would serve him as a slave would?"

Henno was trying to keep his temper, but it wasn't easy. This was the fourth time he'd attempted to explain the offer to the sailor. Maybe it would be easier to fight him.

"Not exactly." Henno said through gritted teeth. He thought of something! "Have you ever seen actors on the stage? Costumed dancers in the arena perhaps?"

Kurnin brow creased as he slowly flipped through the memories in his head. "I saw a man pretend to be a lion once. And another man pretended to slay the false lion."

"Yes!" Henno exclaimed. "You will pretend to be a slave when others are about, but you are no more a slave than the actor was a lion. You see?"

"Yes! I see!" Kurnin grinned. "I will do it!"

"Finally!" Henno sighed. "Now we can..."

"Do you want to hear me roar?" Kurnin roared in his best attempt at sounding like a lion.

Henno squeezed his eyes shut and seriously considered praying to Jesus. Instead he took a deep breath and waited patiently for Kurnin to finish so he could try again.

#

"Is someone roaring? Sounds like someone pretending to be a lion." Fergus asked.

Galla didn't respond. They were down in the animal stables, packing up their things in preparation to leave the ship.

She was still angry with him over his rope-climbing competition. For some reason, she felt it important to treat Fergus like a child. He was getting tired of her cold attitude.

Apparently, women don't understand these things. He'd been insulted and it was important to stand up for yourself.

Besides, since the contest, they'd all been treated with much

more respect. Galla included. Did his efforts count for nothing?

Galla silently brushed her horse while Fergus was loading their gear. He got more and angrier as he stuffed the saddlebags of Barrel and Volucer. The horses sensed his growing anger. They stamped and snorted, eager to leave the confines of the stalls. Volucer was especially keen. He nipped at Fergus a few times in nervous agitation. The mare was always a bit on-edge whenever Henno was out-of-sight.

"Easy, girl," Fergus soothed her by rubbing her nose. "He's tending to other matters. He'll be along shortly." She calmed, bumping Fergus with her massive head as an apology.

"You're good with them." Galla said, still not looking at him. "I suppose that says something in your favor."

"Enough!" Fergus snapped.

Before he could stop himself, the words rushed out. "Have you no pride? Henno and I killed men to rescue you. Put ourselves in dire jeopardy to come to your aid a second time, despite you having struck me from behind! You act as though I owe you something. Is this the flower of Roman royalty? Is this the blood from which our future leaders will spring? If so, I say Rome will fall and Rome should fall if there is none but your kind to lead it!"

Galla's mouth was still open as he tugged Volucer and Barrel up the ramp to the main deck.

Fergus decided a vow of abstinence was becoming less and less of a hardship.

#

Henno, Fergus and Pug were sitting at a table outside a port tavern.

The tavern's old owner had taken the sign down when he left. The new owner hadn't bothered to replace it fast enough to suit the locals, so its original name long-forgotten, it simply became The No-Name Inn.

They'd been there all day and it was starting to get dark.

Galla was staying in one of the several rooms they'd rented nearby with Kurnin standing watch outside her door. Fergus didn't like leaving her in his care, but Henno said he could be trusted. Fergus glanced down the street and saw the recently-recruited sailor standing in the doorway. He looked fierce enough anyway, despite the way he kept swaying slightly from side-to-side. They were all doing it. After several days at sea, it took a while to get accustomed to standing on steady land again. Kurnin caught Fergus staring at him and gave him a nod.

"He'll be true as long as the gold lasts." Henno said as he chewed the last of the cheese.

"I'm not worried about him." Fergus muttered at his half-eaten bowl of stew.

It didn't have a name, but the tavern had plenty of hot food and a variety of wines from all over the empire. It also afforded the best view of the main street.

They were keeping watch for Gratian's contact who would be driving an ox-cart and wearing a green and brown cloak.

Gratian was apparently also supposed to be wearing a similar cloak and Pug had his draped across his shoulders as he fanned himself like an emperor. He looked like a child poking his head through a tent. Everything Gratian owned was huge, yet Pug continued to act as though it was tailored just for him.

"Should we all be at this table? Together, I mean." Pug was fanning himself with a perfumed handkerchief. Fergus had to admit, the way Pug was taking to his role was comical at first, but now it was getting annoying.

Henno was a harsher critic of his performance.

He waved Pug closer and spoke quietly. "First, I'm going to jam that fruity-smelling rag up your ass. Then, I'm going to shove my fist down your throat until I can yank the damn thing out and show it to you."

Fergus was trying not to laugh. Pug was trying not to piss himself.

"Henno, he just means..." Fergus gave up not laughing.

"Then, I'm going to make you eat it and reverse the whole game." Henno concluded. "Ah!" He shouted with glee as the serving girl approached with another tray of food and another jug of wine. "I've missed you!"

She gave him a well-practiced wink as he tossed a generous number of coins on the tray.

"Bless you, holy man. I'm always in need of...religious instruction." She cooed seductively, somehow making the words "religious instruction" sound like a sinful act.

"Are you now, girl?" Henno returned her wink with one of his own. "Never let it be said that a priest such as myself ever...shit!" The last was from Fergus' well-placed kick to his shin under the table.

"More fresh fruit then." She gave them all a confused look and moved away quickly.

Henno drained his wine and poured himself another as he watched her, parts of her, sway through the crowd.

"What'd you go and to that for?" He growled at Fergus with real anger in his eyes.

Fergus held his gaze. "You're drinking too much."

"Aye. And what if I am?" Henno shot back. "It's the only vice left to me in this get-up." He tugged at his monk's robe. "I feel like a eunuch dressed like this."

Pug laughed, trying to gain Henno's favor, but it backfired. Henno stared at him as if he'd just coughed up a hard-boiled egg.

"Sorry." Pug stammered. "I thought you were...making a joke. It was...funny?"

Henno tugged a pinch of bread between his fingers and held it up to the wide-eyed Pug.

"I once pulled a man's nose off." He said as he carefully ate the bread. "I just tugged and twisted until all he had was a hole in the middle of his face."

Pug swallowed. "I have to use the privy." He squeaked.

"You're not going anywhere." Henno smiled. "Keep your legs crossed, your mouth shut and your eyes open."

Fergus was scanning the street, watching the people as they went about their daily business.

The port was a busy one and the small town of Deva which surrounded it had all the usual vices and services required by men who've been at sea. Women whose company was for sale; merchants haggling over prices of a variety of goods from all over the empire; various people of high-birth and low, looking for opportunities of all kinds.

He was in Britain again. The land of his birth. He was on Roman soil again. Everyone he saw was a Roman. Just like he was.

He had to keep reminding himself of these facts since he kept feeling like when he'd left Ireland, he'd left home. He thought just stepping on the soil of his homeland would bring back the warmth and love he'd known years ago. He shook his head at his own youthful optimism. Silly, he thought. Life moves forward, never back.

Henno slurped down the last of his stew and burped loudly.

"How much longer do we wait?" He grumbled. "Are you sure you got all the details right?" He gave Pug a hard glare.

He nodded. "Yes, as soon as Gratian...I mean, as soon as I made port, he...I was to send word to the town magistrate that I had arrived. Then our contact with the..." He dropped his voice to a hush, "...gift would join us here."

They'd sent one of the young wharf rats out with the message. All they could do now was wait. Fergus hoped it wouldn't be much longer. Henno was obviously chomping at the bit.

A bored Henno was a bad idea in the making.

"Are you Vibius Claudius Gratian?" A gruff voice asked.

They turned to find a tough-looking short man flanked by two tougher-looking large men staring down at them. All three were wearing cloaks that were faded red, certainly not green and brown.

The short man was asking Pug but he was frozen. He looked helplessly at Fergus.

Fergus nodded at Pug.

Pug nodded to the short man, his eyes wide with fear. This is off to a bad start, Fergus thought.

"Well?" The short man barked, causing Pug to jump. The reflexes of a slave are hard to quell. "Speak up!"

Henno rose to his feet with a menacing growl. "Watch yourself. You're speaking to a wealthy, powerful friend of mine. Who are you to be demanding who he is or who we are and who are you anyway?" The wine and boredom had obviously made him eager for a fight.

The shorter man snarled with the confidence of someone with official rank and who's flanked by bigger men.

"Take your seat, monk. You're speaking to Victus, Town Guard."

He said it as if he was doing them a favor just by speaking to them. "The magistrate wants to see Gratian. Now." He put his hand on the hilt of the heavy club he wore on his belt.

"Finally!" Henno grinned at Victus. "You only had to say." He brushed his nose with a conspiratorial wink.

Fergus was relieved too. He didn't like sitting around waiting for some secret contact to give them the pass-phrase. Dark beginnings led to dark endings. Still, why three town guards? Were they expecting trouble? Wasn't the magistrate waiting to hear from them?

"You seem keen." Victus looked surprised. Fergus, Henno and Pug were gathering their belongings. "Wait, just him. Nobody's looking for you two priests. Let's go." He gave Pug's robe a tug. Pug rose obediently. All pretense of being a member of the patrician class had vanished.

"He's our friend. We want to come with him." Fergus explained.

"We're together, you see? The magistrate is expecting all three of us." He tried winking but it felt awkward. He was never very good at winking.

"He didn't say anything about anybody else. I've got my orders." Victus was looking more and more confused. "You want to go with him? You're sure?"

"Why not?" Henno asked suspiciously. "What are your orders?"

"Almost forgot." Victus snapped his fingers and the two larger men grabbed Pug's arms.

He pulled out a small parchment and read formally, "Vibius Claudius Gratian, you are bound by order of the Emperor Honorius, the senate and the people of Rome for murder, conspiracy and kidnapping the Emperor's sister."

Pug lost the battle not to piss himself. The two big men on either side of him stepped back with disgusted looks but held on to his skinny arms tightly.

Pug wailed loudly, "But I'm not..."

"Not guilty!" Fergus interjected. "He's not guilty! You're making a mistake!"

Henno's eyes went cold as his hand was moving for the short-sword strapped to his back.

"You should listen to the lad." Henno's voice sounded like distant thunder.

Fergus put out his hand to stop him. He saw Kurnin watching the scene from across the street. He gave the big man a quick head shake.

"Brother Henno." He said quietly. "We must pray for our friend's safe return."

Henno locked eyes with Victus and for a tense second, Fergus was afraid it would come to blows. There was no sense in it. They were in a public place and didn't have all the facts. The smart thing to do was to wait. Henno dropped his eyes and clasped his hands as if praying.

Victus smirked. "Thought so." He looked at his two companions.

"All the same, these priests. All bark, no balls."

Fergus saw Henno's hands tighten, his knuckles white as they shook with rage, but he kept his head down.

"But you can't just let them take me!" Pug cried. "It's not right! I'm not..."

"Of course, you're not afraid. You have nothing to fear."

Fergus interrupted. "You are a law-abiding, loyal subject of the Emperor. A man of wealth and influence and not some commoner who behaves like a runaway slave. Your friends are always with you."

Pug realized what Fergus was trying to get through to him: No matter what Gratian is charged with, he'll be treated better as a member of the upper-class than he would if he reveals he's really a runaway slave masquerading as his master. The master he'd murdered.

He nodded, clearing his throat. "Very well. See to my servant and...see to..whatever you else you need to do...to..." He was yanked away while he stammered.

"Enough of your bossing folks around." Victus barked. "Let's go! Move aside there!"

They pulled a limp Pug away through the crowd of onlookers.

Henno unclasped his hands, Fergus could almost hear them creak as he pried them apart.

"Saved his life, you just did." Henno said as he watched the Town Guard haul Pug down the street.

"I just hope he keeps his mouth shut while we try to come up with a plan." Fergus replied.

"I was talking about that loudmouth Victus." Henno growled.

"I've already got a plan for him."

"What are we going to do about Pug?" Fergus asked patiently.

"We can't just leave him."

Henno glared around at the onlookers until they all went back to their own lives before he responded.

"Grab your kit. We'd better go see the Domina. I bet she'll be surprised to hear she's been kidnapped."

Fergus gathered up his things and followed him across the street. Every time Henno referred to Galla as "Domina" it sounded like a joke which was odd considering her station. He wasn't looking forward to seeing Galla again, but Henno was right. It was the logical next step. Hopefully, she'll be distracted enough by the most recent news to ignore his most recent stupid remarks.

#

"Anybody try to get in?" Henno asked Kurnin in Gaulish.

The big man shrugged as he followed them up the creaking stairs.

"I've seen nobody." He stopped Henno at the top of the stairs.

"What about my 'master'? If he's been carted off, I still want paying. Full price, too."

Typical Gaul, Henno thought. It's always about the money.

"Don't worry. We won't mess you about. No matter what, you'll

get what we agreed on." This seemed to satisfy him for now. He gave a curt nod and fell silent again.

"What was that about?" Fergus asked.

"He just wants to make sure he's getting paid if Pug gets hung up on a cross." Henno replied.

"You think that's going to happen?" Fergus asked.

More forgiveness, Henno thought. The lad's actually concerned about the little weasel.

"I hope not." Henno replied honestly. "If he gets the block, we're most likely next."

Before he knocked on the Galla's door, he noticed Fergus fidgeting nervously. "You didn't?" He asked. "Again?"

Fergus sighed. "I may have indicated...I probably shouldn't have...but I said that she..."

Henno laughed. "Don't worry, lad. She can only have you killed once."

Henno knocked. They heard Galla's voice from the other side of the door. "Enter."

Henno pushed the battered wooden door aside. Typical royal, he thought. 'Enter' she says, like we're knocking on the palace door itself.

Once he saw her standing in the sunlight streaming in from the large window, he had to admit it: she could make a monk forget his vows. She was wearing that green dress. The one she was wearing at what was supposed to be him and Fergus' execution. Maybe it was because, at the time, Henno thought it was the

last woman he'd ever see, but there was something about the memory of her, surrounded by the dawn mist and screaming barbarians that lit a fire in him.

Get a hold of yourself, Centurion! This is what the salt air and a lack of female companionship does to a man; clouds his judgment. Be here now, he thought.

Kurnin leaned against the doorway, knowing he wouldn't understand a word of Latin. He was content to make sure they weren't interrupted.

"Domina." Henno began. He'd intended it to sound sarcastic, but it came out with the respect and admiration due her station.

"Centurion Henno. Novitiate Fergus." She said formally.

"Please, be seated. I'm glad you're here." She intoned as if she'd summoned them.

"We have a problem." Henno began. He knew Fergus would most likely want to stay quiet. The lad was staring at the floor. She waved him off with a royal gesture and continued. "I have been remiss in my duties. I have failed to properly acknowledge your role in my rescue and for that I would like to..." She paused with the proper dramatic flair. "Apologize." She finished with an eyebrow arched at Fergus.

Fergus looked up and met her eye. They stared at each other for a beat until Fergus nodded. It was a small gesture, but Galla visibly relaxed.

Henno was hugely impressed. They weren't in the same neighborhood, but the lad had obviously moved up a few streets.

"Gratian has been arrested." Henno said flatly into the silence.

This seemed to snap Galla back to more important topics. "For what?"

"Murder, usurpation and your kidnapping." Fergus found his voice finally. "By order of your brother, Emperor Honorius."

"How did this happen?" She demanded.

Henno couldn't help but answer first. "Does that matter now?"

He snapped. "It happened. What we need now is for you to come with us to the Magistrate and show him you've not been kidnapped by anyone. Not anymore, anyway."

"Of course." She replied. "Lead the way."

Typical royal, Henno thought. Like I know where the Magistrate's office is.

#

The dock worker spit before scowling and pointing. The local center for all bureaucratic incompetence and graft stood on a hill overlooking the port. Henno suggested they walk while Kurnin fetched the horses and met them there.

It felt good to stretch his legs after being stuck on a boat, even though the voyage was a brief one. Henno had served on ships occasionally and never cared for it.

The sea battles he took part in were terrible. The air was full of smoke and heat; the water full of blood and drowning men. He suppressed a shudder at the thought of Gratian's drowning. Henno could swim like a fish, all Legionnaires could, but he remembered the sight of men hitting the water in full armor. He remembered their terror-filled eyes and water-filled mouths, screaming silently as they sank like rocks beneath the churning waves.

He pushed the memory away. Be here now, he reminded himself. It was late in the day and getting cooler as the sun dropped below the waves. The wind coming from the water gave the air an added chill, but they were soon warm enough as they marched up the hill to the Magistrate's office.

Henno noticed Fergus and Galla were quiet enough. He tried to lighten things with a marching song, but nobody else seemed to be in a singing mood.

The mud and stone building was of the usual design for Roman offices. It gave off the impression that while it was open to the public, you're not welcome.

The harried clerk who greeted them was more rat than man. Thin arms full of scrolls with a nose that was twitching constantly. Probably all the dust, Henno thought. All this parchment in one place, it can't be healthy.

"Who are you?" He continued as if no answer would be good enough. "The Magistrate has no appointments today. Come back when..."

The rat-clerk squeaked with anger as Henno pushed his way by and marched straight into the main office with Galla and Fergus close behind.

Galla stood in front of the Magistrate of Deva, Tiberius Genicus Bourus. He was the product of generations of Roman bureaucracy; another rat-like, officious number-cruncher. A man only in the strictest sense as he reproduced not sons, but sums.

Henno despised such men. They were good for only one thing: starting fires. They were like kindling: weak, brittle and dry. They didn't know the worth of a man, only the cost.

He sneered at them as he spoke. "How dare you barge into my offices like this?" Henno realized the sneer was a permanent fixture on his face. "Who are you?" He waved the jabbering clerk away before he could make his feeble excuses.

His question was directed at Henno, but this was Galla's stone to toss.

She raised herself up and with a grand tone, made her announcement, "I am Domina Aelia Galla Placidia, sister to Flavius Honorius Augustus, Emperor of the Western Roman Empire. You will release Vibius Claudius Gratian to me immediately. The man is innocent and I require his assistance on a mission for the Emperor. I speak with his voice."

Bourus was suitably impressed. He threw his bald head back and cackled like a chicken.

"Begone little girl! And take your two priests with you!" His laugh had no joy in it. Only cruelty. "If you think for one moment, I'd believe a dirty wharf-tart like you is the sister of the Emperor..." He flicked his bony hand at them in dismissal. "Go! Before I call the guards and have you beaten into the streets!"

He was already back to squinting at his endless rows of numbers as he chuckled to himself.

Galla turned to face Henno and Fergus. Her face betrayed no anger, no emotion of any kind at the insulting way she'd just been spoken to.

"Henno. Fergus," She said quietly, "I order you in the name of the Emperor to kill this man and any who stand in our way as we free the prisoner."

"Strap up, Optio!" Henno shouted.

Bourus' cackle was cut off as he looked up just in time to see Henno bound across the floor and grab him by the throat. He squeezed the thin neck tightly with his left hand while he whipped out his gladius with his right. In a flash, he jammed it in the little man's heart. He was dead before he could comprehend the depth of his mistake.

Fergus whipped out his sword and shield from the straps on his back. He was shocked at the order, but his training kicked in at Henno's shout.

Henno gave him a wolfish grin as he wiped his blade clean on the dead Magistrate's robe.

"I've always wanted to do that. I figured all they had was dust in their veins." He dropped the corner of the robe he was using. "Looks like regular blood to me."

Fergus was recovering from the surprise. "We need to find Pug and get out of here."

Henno pulled out his small shield and pointed at the door they'd come through. "Let's ask him." He gave Fergus a nod and the lad moved quickly to the side of the door. "Hey clerk! Get your bony ass in here at the double!"

The clerk burst through the door with an armload of scrolls. "I told them not to...by the Gods!" He dropped the scrolls just as Fergus grabbed him by the hair and covered his throat with his gladius. He squeaked like a rat as he felt the cold steel and saw his boss dead on the floor.

"Speak." Fergus growled. Pretty good growl too, Henno noticed.

"Where are the cells? How many guards? Who has the keys?"

The clerk whimpered as snot and tears poured down his face.

"Uh...please...far end of the courtyard...four guards on duty...Victus...Victus..." Fergus clouted him in the head with his shield and the clerk went down cold.

"Domina, wait for us by the gate!" Henno barked. He was all soldier now; following his orders without hesitation or deference. "Optio, you're with me. We move fast. Any tries to stop us, they die. By order of the Emperor himself, no less!" He gave Fergus a wink.

"I hear and obey, Centurion." Fergus saluted solemnly. "For the Emperor!"

Galla nodded with approval and left them to their business.

#

Fergus peeked over the small window cut into the heavy wooden door which lead to the cells. He saw the four guards, including Victus, playing dice at the end of the corridor.

"All four are together. Far end of the hallway." Fergus whispered. "Should we try to...?"

Henno had his own plan. He gave a ferocious shout as he kicked the door hard enough to knock a wall down.

But not this door. He winced in pain as the door held fast.

"Shit!" He muttered. "That's one tough door."

From inside, they heard Victus shout. "Who's out there?" Then to one of the guards, "Go see who it is. My roll."

They heard the reluctant stomping footsteps as one of the guards approached. Henno hid his sword and shield behind his back, Fergus did the same. They stood where the guard could see them both. Just two humble monks waiting patiently to be allowed inside.

They lowered their heads. Henno whispered quietly, "Remember the attack at the monastery? Same move. Wait for it."

Fergus nodded. Despite the thundering of his heart, the tightness in his throat and the churning in his belly, he was enjoying this!

The guard frowned at them through the small window. "What do you want?"

Henno mumbled something unintelligible.

"I can't hear you." The guard sighed. "Hold on." He unbolted the door.

As soon as they heard the bolt slide free, Henno and Fergus moved as one, kicking the door as hard as they could. The guard was knocked off his feet. In fact, he was tossed backwards and landed heavily on his back with the wind knocked out of him.

Fergus got to him first with a hard kick in the head. He was out.

He and Henno faced the next three. Victus and Henno locked eyes.

Fergus felt compelled to make it official. "By order of Aelia Galla Placidia, who speaks with the authority of Emperor Honorius, you are compelled to stand aside. We are here to free Vibius Claudius Gratian and any who opposes us will be executed without trial."

Fergus said it with such sincerity that the guards paused. He thought they might actually comply, but then it happened.

Henno would later claim that Victus moved first, but Fergus had the impression it was a mutually impulsive act of violence. They raged loudly and jumped at each other. Fergus was right behind, howling like a rabid wolf.

The Town Guards were little more than street thugs who bullied and bribed their way through life. They should be no match for a coordinated attack by two well-trained soldiers. Still, if Henno was making good his promise to teach Victus a lesson, then Fergus would be facing two opponents.

But Henno wasn't about to let that happen.

He dodged a sweeping blow from Victus' club and gave the heavy table the men had been playing dice at a big kick. Even as it slammed one of the guards into the far wall, Fergus could see Henno grimace in pain. Kicking the door must've hurt his foot and giving the big table a kick worsened it. He limped slightly as he resumed his battle with Victus, obviously trying to hide his pain.

The guard who'd been on the receiving end of the table made no such effort. He shrieked loudly as he clutched his back and slid to the floor.

The last guard was a fat, slobbering lout. He faced Fergus and gave him a drunken snarl.

"Drop it, Priest!" He shouted. He snatched an old spear from the rack and brandished it with skill. He held it tight against his body, the point aimed for Fergus' eyes.

Fergus held his small shield ready to block the blow, but could tell the guard was ready for him. The circled each other in the small space, the guard moving the point in small circles at his face, jabbing out, testing Fergus' reactions.

The guard grinned slyly, he knew he was faster than Fergus and Fergus knew it too.

The guard had the reach with the long spear, the faster reflexes and time. The longer they were there the bigger the chance others would join the fight. The prisoners were shouting for blood. Screaming their anger at their keepers and goading Henno and Fergus to finish them.

"Quiet, you fools!" Fergus shouted.

He was distracted for a moment as he glanced around the prisoner's shouting faces looking for Pug. The guard jabbed quickly and Fergus only just dodged the blow. It caught briefly on his hood and he had to dance backwards to free it, almost slipping on the damp rock floor.

The guard slid his right foot back preparing to charge.

In desperation, Fergus latched on to the trick he'd seen used by the knife-wielding Gaul the night he and Brother Brio first met Henno. He'd feint high and switch to a low thrust.

It hadn't worked on Henno, but this lout was no Henno.

He hoped.

Fergus raised his sword high, the pommel close to his ear with his shield kept tight and low against his body, inviting a high thrust from his opponent.

They shouted and jumped at the same time.

#

Henno and Victus were trading blows up and down the hallway leading to the cells. He knew if he let his opponent get by

him, he'd sound the alarm. Who knows how many others are around? Mithras, but his foot hurt! He stayed on his toes, the heel of his right foot throbbed painfully. He couldn't put his weight on it and it was throwing off his balance.

Just don't let him see you limping, he thought, finish the fool quickly.

Victus had grabbed up a wooden stool in one hand and with his heavy club in the other, he'd managed to keep Henno's jabs at bay. Henno had maneuvered the fight down the hallway to give Fergus a bit of room. He could see the lad was holding his own against the half-drunk guard he faced. Good soldier!

"Now you little shit, you can feel my bark!" Henno shouted. As he said it, he thought it didn't quite sound as intimidating as he'd intended, but it got the point across.

He stepped forward quickly, ready to punch forward with his shield and run the runt through with his gladius when he suddenly felt someone grab his legs!

The guard who'd answered the door! Henno had backed up right to where he'd been lying. Idiot! Now the bastard had wrapped his arms around Henno's legs and was holding fast.

Victus saw his chance. With a triumphant shout, he ran at Henno. He looked up just in time to catch a glancing blow from the club. He'd rolled his head at the last moment or it'd have caved in his skull. The next blow was sure to. He felt the guard grabbing at his sword arm as the room spun. He tried to

shake his head to clear it as he saw Victus grinning, his arm pulling back to give him the killing strike.

This was it. The long wait was over.

Victus shouted. Not a war-cry this time, but a blood-covered shout of pain. The dull metal spear tip just protruding from his chest like a tiny mushroom.

Henno squeezed the ring on his shield and the blade edge slipped out. He chopped it down on the guard's arm nearly severing it completely off. Once the screaming guard fell back, Henno used his shield blade to slice Victus' throat. His head flopped back, his eyes still shocked with what was happening.

Henno had the one-armed guard dead before Victus' body hit the stone floor.

Fergus stood over the body of the fat guard. He gave Henno a satisfied grin.

"You looked like you were a bit tied up." He said with a touch of sarcasm.

"You're much too pleased with yourself." Henno barked in true parade-ground fashion. "Any soldier under my command should've been able to put a spear completely through an enemy from that distance. That was a weak throw, Optio!" He added with a grin.

"But a welcome one. Gratitude."

The rest of the prisoners were pleading to be released. Each crying out a heart-rending tale of innocence and betrayal.

Fergus looked at all the begging, dirty faces. "Where's Pug?" He asked.

Henno looked around quickly. "Pug! Gratian! By the gods, whatever you're called now, where are you?" He shouted angrily.

The guard with the injured back moaned in pain. Henno was on him in a flash.

"Where is he? Gratian?" He shook the guard roughly causing the man to scream.

"Jupiter's eyes! My back!" He bellowed. "I can't feel my legs! Get a healer, I beg you!"

Henno slapped him hard across the face. "I'll get you all the help you need, but tell me where Gratian is! Now!"

The guard spit blood on the floor before answering. "They took him. Just before you got here."

"Who took him?" Fergus asked.

"The soldiers. From the fort. Marcus' men." He scowled at Henno and Fergus. "What kind of priests are you anyway?"

"The Irish kind." Henno growled before slitting his throat.

Fergus shouted. "Henno! Why did you do that? He was injured! You just killed him!"

"He'd starve with a broken back, lad." Henno wiped his blade on the dead man's tunic. "I did him a kindness."

Fergus nodded at the shouting prisoners. "What about them?"

Henno shook his head. "Never met a prisoner yet who was guilty." He raised his voice above the clamoring. "Sorry,

boys! We're on orders from the Emperor! Fortuna smile on all of you!"

The begging and pleading swiftly changed to cursing and threatening as Henno and Fergus rushed out.

#

Henno scanned the court-yard. All quiet. Even the sounds of the shouting prisoners had raised no alarm. It was dark now, but the moon was high enough to give them a good view. His leg hurt like fire, every time he stepped he got a spear of pain that shot up to his back. He could feel a lump swelling where Victus' club had connected too. His right eye was blurring.

Best not to let the lad know how much he's hurting right now. All this was so much easier when he was younger. Maybe he was getting too old for all this sword and shield business.

No time for doubt. Be here now. Fergus and Galla depended on him. The Empire was depending on him and, if those odd monks were to be believed, so were countless future generations.

No pressure then. Strap up, Centurion!

"Looks like those were the only guards on duty." He said.

Fergus didn't reply. "Bit of luck there."

Fergus moved quickly and silently toward the front gate.

Henno caught up with him. "What's with you?"

"We didn't have to kill those men!" He replied angrily, his teeth clenched tight.

Henno grabbed his arm and spun him around. "Yes, we did, Optio! We were under orders!"

Fergus tried to pull his arm free, but Henno hung on.

"It's not right!" Fergus protested. "It's not..."

Henno gave him a hard shake. "Right? Since when is an order right or wrong?" Henno was nose to nose with him now. This was important. "Listen to me, lad. A soldier can take no responsibility or offer any resistance when given an order. It's just done."

"You're very selective about what orders you follow, Henno."

Fergus yanked his arm free.

"What's that supposed to mean?"

"When we were in Ireland, you didn't bother with a thing she said, now..."

"Ireland is a savage land outside of the Empire. In Ireland, she was a captive slave girl we rescued. She's on Roman soil now. We're in the Empire now, Optio. It's different. She's different." Henno explained.

He could see in Fergus' eyes that he had seen it too.

"You're right." He said. "As soon as we landed, I could see it. She's colder now. Something changed in her." He looked at Henno. "I see what you meant now about moths dancing in the firelight."

"Good lad." Henno smiled. "Good soldier." He rubbed his right eye. He could barely see out of it.

Fergus noticed the pained expression. "Are you alright?"

"I'm fine!" Henno snapped. "Just caught a bit of wood from that bastard's swing is all. Don't worry about me."

Fergus eyed him skeptically and was about to say something else when a bell started ringing in the town.

"We'd better..." Fergus was interrupted by loud shouts coming from just beyond the front gate. They could see flicker torchlight approaching.

"Sounds like that clerk you clobbered ran for help." Henno admonished. "Next time..."

"I'll follow orders." Fergus finished. "We can't get out that way."

Henno pointed toward the wall opposite the gate. It was covered with vines. With a bit more luck they should be able to get over it. He groaned at the thought, but resolved to make it unaided.

Fergus nodded and they ran quickly and quietly to their escape.

He paused, did someone call his name? Henno hissed at him to follow and he ran on.

#

Galla nodded with approval and left them to their business. She stepped over the unconscious clerk and walked quickly back to the front gate. It was still open, she could detect no activity which would indicate an alarm had been raised. Good, she thought. They will move quickly to free our "Gratian" and we will be on our way. Back on the mission my brother, the Western Emperor, had sent her on.

My brother, The Emperor. She still had trouble seeing him that way. To her, Honorius was still the laughing, crying, shouting little boy she'd known her whole life. Arcadius, her other brother, The Emperor of the East, was always the angry one. A better soldier, but a weaker emperor. Father saw it and Arcadius was shamed by knowing his father saw him as the weaker of his two sons.

Their father had fought a war to place his sons on equal thrones, but everyone knew he favored Honorius. Had it been possible, he'd have made Honorius sole Emperor of the combined empire, but that would only have brought another civil war. Like a new Solomon, he split the empire between them. Arcadius was placated, there was equal rule. And there was peace. And it was her role to make sure the Western Empire stayed at peace. General Stilicho had his legion, she had the promise of an Emperor.

She could still hear her brother's words to her the day he told her of his plan.

"If the promise of peace and prosperity doesn't compel Marcus to remain faithful to his Emperor, then the threat of blood and death will." Honorius told her.

But even the great hero, General Flavius Stilicho couldn't win with only one legion against five. They had to find the gold. Without it, Marcus would not be able to buy the loyalty of the auxiliary legions who fought only for pay. Marcus' rebellion would be over before it started.

No, another civil war now would upset all the plans we've made so carefully. How could Aelia be so blind? She thought. She will pay for her betrayal. Fergus and Henno have come much too close to discovering the real plot. She'd been sorely tempted to tell Fergus everything. The only thing that stopped her was the knowledge that it would only put him in more danger. No, the time is not right. The plan has changed, but the goal remains. She would not fail the Empire. One step at a time, she thought. We will save the Empire from itself, one step at a time.

Kurnin was waiting with the horses just outside the gate where they'd left him. His years of service at sea gave him a heightened awareness of things. A shift in the air, a strange sound or perhaps it was her quick gait and serious expression. Whatever it was, the big man had climbed into his saddle and was holding the reins of the other horses in preparation for a fast get-away.

"Good." Galla told him as she climbed onto her horse. "We will wait here for the others."

Kurnin shrugged and muttered something in his native language. Galla chided herself for forgetting he didn't speak Latin. How could anyone not speak the one language needed to speak in the civilized world? No matter. He understood her actions and waited with her.

She was watching the gate impatiently when a thought whispered in her head. "He's so young. I hope he is up to the task before him."

She shook herself. She shouldn't be thinking of Fergus in that way. It's not...appropriate. He's sworn to serve God. To love God and God alone. She admired his dedication. And his eyes. He had such pretty brown eyes, like a young stag. So intense, yet warm and...no! She had no business thinking of another in that way. Now is not the time to be young and emotional. She was a Daughter of the Empire. She was on a mission for the Empire. She gripped the reins of her horse tightly, the leather cutting into her palm painfully to distract her from distracting thoughts.

She watched the gate and prayed quietly for his safe return. For all three's safe return, of course.

Kurnin mumbled something in his guttural, barbarian tongue. Galla waved her hand at him without turning.

"I have no idea what you're trying to say." She said irritably. "Be still. We'll leave as soon as they return." Kurnin mumbled what sounded like a curse. How dare he! Despite the fact he doesn't know her language, he should know her meaning!

"Be silent!" She whipped around angrily.

And saw the arrow sticking out of his chest.

He reached out toward her, a pleading look on his face when two more thumped into him. He fell off his horse. Dead.

Before she could react, several soldier jumped out of the darkness and grabbed her horses' reins. They appeared from the bushes on either side of the road as if by magic. They wore a mixture of Roman armor and animal skins and shouted in some wild, barbarian language.

Auxiliary soldiers! They must be Marcus' men!

She shouted with a commanding, if just a little scared sounding, voice, "Unhand my horse! I am..."

"Is that her?" An Auxiliary Centurion walked out, tossing the question back over his shoulder with a thick accent.

Pug came out of the bushes. He was grinning like a mad fool and pointing at Galla.

"Yes, Centurion." He was nodding. "That's her. The Emperor's sister. I told you they would come. Vibius Claudius Gratian never lies."

"You bastard!" Galla shouted at him. "You lying bastard!" She turned to the Centurion, her eyes burning with rage, "He's not Gratian! He's a slave we..."

"Silence!" Pug shouted.

Galla kicked out at the soldier holding her horse. Her foot caught him in the side of the head and he stumbled back, but before she could get away, Pug ran at her horse waving his arms and screaming.

The horse bucked and reared, tossing Galla heavily to the ground. Two more soldiers appeared. They rudely tied her hands

and feet while Pug whistled loudly. The sound of heavy plodding footsteps and creaking wheels could be heard.

One of the soldiers tossed Galla over his shoulder and marched her toward an ox-cart.

An ox-cart driven by a man wearing a green and brown cloak. The ox-cart carrying the gold to Marcus.

And now it would be carrying the sister of the emperor too! The soldier tossed her into the back among large wooden chests with heavy locks sealed with wax.

From the town, they could hear an alarm bell ringing loudly. "Fergus!" She shouted desperately, then screamed in pain as she felt a searing burn across her leg.

The ox-cart driver brandished his whip at her. He sneered as she tried getting as far away from him as possible.

"I can flick an eye out of your pretty little head before you can blink. Not one more squeak from you. Hear me?"

Galla nodded. She tried to look brave while was shaking with fear.

The driver snapped his whip and, true to his word, it cracked just between the two massive oxen with perfect precision. They lurched forward and Galla was rocked backwards as the cart lumbered off the road.

Pug was pulling on Volucer's reins. The big, white horse's head was lowered as she stared at the little man with obvious hatred. She planted her hooves solidly; he might as well have

been pulling on the moon. Barrel watched nearby with wide fearful eyes.

"Leave it, Gratian!" The Centurion bellowed. "We're off. The Town Guard is coming."

"No!" Pug shouted back, giving Volucer another yank. "She's priceless! She'd make a fine gift for General Marcus.

I...want...this...horse!"

Volucer's patience ended and she bit his arm. He fell back screaming, his forearm bleeding heavily.

The Centurion laughed and shouted to his soldiers in another language. They all laughed as Pug ran to his horse holding his bleeding arm.

"She don't like you!" The Centurion called out. "Best leave her."

Pug rode by the ox-cart and scowled down at the cringing Galla.

"Who needs that nag when I've got a fine mare like you to present to our next emperor?"

Galla didn't answer. How could she have let Fergus and Henno talk her into this absurd plan? As soon as the slave Pug was approached by Marcus' men he naturally betrayed them. What could they offer him that was better than the life of Gratian? He would have gold, prestige and the favor of a man who expects at best to be an emperor and at worst will have a massive army at his beck and call.

They'd given a slave a taste of the life of his betters and he wanted it for his own.

She had to have faith. Fergus and Henno would follow. Faith. All would be well. Faith in the two men who were God's soldiers. Faith in Henno. And faith in Fergus. Brave, sweet, strong Fergus.

She curled up into a ball, wedged tightly between chests full of gold, and prayed.

#

Fergus heard raised voices coming up the road, shouting and calling out for the town guard on duty in the Magistrate's building. When no answer was heard, they burst into the courtyard and made straight for the jail building.

"They'll be looking for us soon." He spoke quietly to Henno as they ran around villa walls, making their way back to the front. Henno was limping badly and blinking rapidly as if he was having trouble seeing.

"Just keep your eyes peeled." Henno replied. "Kurnin and Galla will have moved into the brush."

They rounded the last corner and saw Barrel and Volucer standing alone next to the gate, right where they'd been left. No sign of Galla or Kurnin.

"Why didn't they take Volucer and Barrel?" Fergus asked, but they both realized the only answer is that they were taken by surprise.

The townspeople were ignoring the two horses and rushing into the court-yard to make sure the prisoners were secure. Several went into the magistrate's office. One of them was the clerk Fergus had knocked out.

"Let's go." Henno whispered and they ran to their horses. Fergus moved to follow then stopped before he tripped over Kurnin's arrow-riddled body.

"Henno!" He hissed. "Here!"

Volucer stamped and whinnied when she saw Henno.

"Easy, girl." He soothed. "Easy now." He jumped on her back as she tossed her head, obviously ready to run.

"This just gets worse and worse." Henno muttered looking down at Kurnin's body. "I hate archers."

"I have to agree with your keen assessment." Fergus replied. They couldn't wait. The townspeople would be back out any moment.

Fergus vaulted on Barrel's back who also looked ready to go.

"How do we find Galla? Who took her?" He asked.

Henno scanned the ground, but it was too dark to see much. He patted Volucer's neck.

"Where away, girl?" Henno asked.

"You can't be serious." Fergus was sure Henno had gone mad.

"You're asking your horse where she went?"

Henno sighed. "It's too dark to track them. Volucer knows, don't you?"

Volucer gave Fergus a flick of her tail as she sprang into the bushes near the road.

"Told you!" Henno called out.

They headed into the trees. The night air was cold, the moon was bright and they had gotten away.

But where was Galla? Where was Pug?

Where was the gold?

Chapter 28 - The Road to Marcus

Volucer was obviously very pleased. Henno had returned and she was happily munching on an apple fresh from the tree.

"I thought you said she would know the way?" Fergus was angry. They were wasting time! Volucer had made a swift run straight to the nearest apple tree. "She's a horse, not a hunting dog! We need to find Galla! Whoever took her..."

Henno sat on a log, eating an apple of his own. Despite Fergus' impatience, he couldn't help notice his friend was having trouble chewing. It was as if the right side of his face had gone stiff.

Even his voice was slurring. "We know who took her, lad." He sighed. "It must've been the same soldiers who took Pug."

Fergus sat down. He watched as Barrel greedily finished off her third apple and was picking out her fourth. "We can catch up with them." Even as he said it, he felt guilty. Henno was in no condition to continue.

"Right." He spit out the rest of the apple. "Let's be off then." He tried to stand, but his leg gave out on him.

Fergus caught him and eased him to the ground. "No." Henno struggled to rise again. "You need rest. You're injured."

Fergus was frightened by the lack of resistance. Henno slumped to the ground, leaning against the log for support. He tilted his head back, pushing his hood away to look up at the stars.

His face was frozen in pain and very pale. A large purple welt had risen on the right side of his head.

"Any water left, Titus?" Henno whispered.

Now Fergus was truly scared.

Henno was badly injured. He looked deathly ill.

His hands shook as Fergus helped him drink from the waterskin.

He needed a healer. He couldn't go back to Deva, they'd put them both to the sword without question. What should he do?

What would Henno do if the situation was reversed?

Perhaps Henno would be strong enough to give Fergus a quick death and continue the mission, but Fergus couldn't contemplate such an act. He couldn't do it.

Henno slipped into a kind of sleep, his breathing labored and ragged, as if each breath was painfully difficult.

Fergus realized how long it had been since he'd prayed. There was a time when he prayed dozens, maybe hundreds of times a day. As a slave, alone in the wilderness watching over his master's flock, he'd prayed to God for salvation. It was a selfish act, but he had wanted desperately to be free again. When his prayers were answered by the monks at Folcutt, he knew he must atone for his selfishness and live in service of God.

Now, he knew he must ask God for another selfish favor.

He knelt beside his friend. Claspng his small cross between his hands, he prayed for the life of Tiberius Scorpanicus

Henno.

"Lord, I..." He began in a choked whisper. "I..."

He realized he didn't have the words. He didn't know what to say, how to ask, how to plead for his friend's life. How could his faith desert him now? When it is most needed.

Hot tears welled up in his eyes as he knelt. If he couldn't speak to God, then he would listen. He would wait. He waited for the Lord to either take him quickly or restore him because he didn't have the courage to kill his suffering friend or the knowledge to heal him.

He would wait.

He knelt next to Henno for hours, listening for God's voice but only hearing labored breathing and the night wind in the leaves.

"Stilicho..."

Fergus wasn't aware at first that he'd heard it. How long had he been kneeling on the ground? The first color of dawn was leaking into the night sky, turning it from black to dark purple.

"Henno?" Fergus asked. "Did you speak?"

Henno's eyes were open but he was so still Fergus feared he was dead. He coughed and closed his eyes again. Still breathing. Still living.

Volucer stood over them both, staring at Fergus. The horse was waiting for him to do something, anything, to help Henno.

Stilicho! It was his only hope! Somehow he'd have to get Henno to the General's camp. There would be healers. He would know

Henno and be glad to help them. Of course! Why hadn't he thought of that on his own? He'd wasted all night waiting to hear...but who had spoken? No matter. Whether it had been Henno's fevered plea, his horse's suggestion or the word of God, Fergus would find the camp and get Henno there. Somehow.

But how? As quickly as the spark of hope had ignited, it was snuffed out by the reality of his situation. He had no idea where the General was. How would he even get Henno there if he did? It seemed hopeless.

"Why?" He whispered. "Why have you sent us all this way only to fail?"

#

Henno was marching in full armor in the blazing desert sun. He should've been sweating buckets, but he felt great. He felt strong. He always loved being on the march. He wanted to sing a good marching tune, but what fun is it to sing alone?

It was then he realized he wasn't marching alone. A civilian marched beside him. No, not marched. The man was striding causally. Henno didn't want to get chewed out for breaking formation, but he stole a quick glance.

He was a young man, looked a bit Judean maybe. He wore a dessert robe that was a bit on the cheap, but it was clean and he was carrying a long walking stick like shepherds use. He was grinning at Henno as if they were old friends. He must be some local goat-herder looking for a few coins.

"What's your story then, sunshine?" Henno growled out of the corner of his mouth.

Henno couldn't help but smile when he heard the man's infectious laugh.

"A couple of my flock are lost." The young man replied pleasantly.

"Shouldn't you be out looking for them then?" Henno mumbled, trying to see where the road ahead was leading.

The young man laughed again. "They've lost their way, but they're not lost to me."

"Well, if I see a couple of stray goats, I'll be sure to..." Henno began.

"Not goats. Wolves." The shepherd replied.

The sun touched this one, Henno thought.

"I just thought I'd walk with you for a bit." The young man replied. "You don't mind, do you, Henno?"

"Suit yourself." Henno said. He was trying not to sound unprofessional, but he found he liked talking to the amiable young man. "How do you know my...?"

Henno's question was interrupted when he saw what was at the end of the road. They were approaching a column of soldiers. Roman Legionaries standing at parade rest. The sun and swirling sand was in his eyes so he couldn't see the soldiers clearly, but it looked to be nearly an entire legion.

As he and the shepherd approached, he heard a familiar voice shout, "Legion. Attention!" And the soldiers stamped to

attention as one. Impressive. Who was that Tribune on the horse?

Henno noticed the young shepherd was slowing his pace.

Still not breaking marching protocol by turning his head, he spoke out of the corner of his mouth. "You're not coming?"

"No." The young man replied with a smile in his voice. "I'll wait here. You go ahead."

Henno marched on.

The aquilifer held the eagle high so bright golden reflections radiated brilliantly all around the men who waited. He then raised the standard just enough to block out the sun behind them and Henno could see the men clearly now.

He recognized Titus. He was smiling at Henno. No anger, no guilt, just that old grin that said, "I've heard a new joke."

Then Henno saw Tribune Sullus on his magnificent black stallion was the one giving the orders. He nodded at Henno.

Henno saw others he'd known over the years. All gone, yet all here before him.

Then he saw the aquilifer, the one holding the standard.

It was his father.

He stood proud and defiant. He gave Henno a look from head to toe as if Henno was a raw recruit on inspection.

Sullus called out, "Legion! Face...right! March!" The soldiers faced right and began to march away.

Henno started to run to them, to join them, but his father stopped him with a cold look as he took his place at the head of the column.

"Father! Wait." Henno called out. "Let me come with you!"

"You're not one of us." He shouted back. "Not yet. Earn your salt, boy. We'll be here. We'll wait. Head to the east until you reach the river, then north. Understand? East, river, then north. Earn your salt!"

There was so much he wanted to say. He wanted to tell his father he was sorry. That he loved him, but the words caught in his throat. As the legion marched away, disappearing into the swirling desert sands, he heard his father's voice, "You're a good soldier!" and they were gone.

East, to the river, then north.

#

"Halt!"

Fergus was exhausted, but he was afraid if he stopped, he'd fall and never get up again.

The shout had come from some dark place ahead. He could see the high packed-earth banks of a Roman marching fort up ahead. Henno's mumbled directions had been right.

This must be Stilicho's marching camp. Fergus heard quick movements, the rush of feet as several other guards took up flanking positions.

"I said Halt!" The voice shouted again. "What's the password?"

"You must be joking." Fergus said as loudly as he could muster. "Do I look like someone who'd know a password?"

Fergus stopped and leaned against Barrel, who was leaning against him too. You know you've been on the march too long when your horse needs you to prop him up. Volucer was the only one who seemed unfazed. She tossed her head and snorted, but didn't disturb her cargo, which was still draped across her back and snoring loudly.

The soldier stepped out onto the road. He brandished a spear. Two more soldiers cautiously approached from either side of them.

"Who are you?" The first soldier shouted. "State your business."

Fergus sighed. "You wouldn't recognize my name. I'm a friend. Are you soldiers with General Stilicho?"

"We ask the questions, pup!" He shouted angrily.

As the soldiers got closer, Fergus could see they were in the armor and uniform of Legion Regulars, not Auxiliary troops. He decided to risk it. Not that he had much choice.

"My name is Novitiate Fergus." He replied calmly. All three soldiers were close now, their spears held tightly. They were very nervous as if expecting an ambush. Volucer eyed them warily as one circled to see the body strapped to the big horse's back.

"Who?" The soldier asked.

"I said you wouldn't..." Fergus sighed again. He longed for a bowl of hot anything and a dry bed. "We have news for General Stilicho. This man is injured. He needs a healer. Please. He was a Roman Legionnaire like you."

"Hey, Lentulus!" The one staring at Volucer called out.

"You'll never guess who's tied up back here. It's old Henno himself!" The man laughed and prodded Henno with his spear. Volucer snorted and whipped her head around, her teeth snapping at him, while still trying her best not to disturb Henno.

Lentulus laughed. "Good work, Novitiate Fergus. You've brought back a wanted criminal." He slapped Fergus on the shoulder.

"You're up for a reward from the old man, I'd say."

Volucer pawed the ground angrily. Fergus felt it too.

Criminal? Henno?

Lentulus stared in awe at the big, white horse. Despite the mud and grime, she was still an incredible animal.

"No. That can't be the horse, can it?" He grinned at Fergus as if he'd just found a bag of gold. "Boy, you are in for a big pay day."

"I don't understand." Fergus said as he brushed off the man's hand. "Henno's not a criminal. He's a decorated veteran."

Lentulus spit. "He's a murdering horse-thief, is what he is."

Fergus tried to calm himself. "We don't have time to discuss this! He needs a healer or he'll die!"

Lentulus nodded to the soldier next to Volucer. The big man took the reins from Fergus' hands. Volucer didn't like it but allowed herself to be lead with Barrel following.

Lentulus continued, "Don't worry. If I know the General, he'll want Henno healed up. That way he'll be fit enough when they crucify him. Come on."

He gave Fergus a prod with his spear and they headed toward the marching fort.

Fergus realized he was right in the middle of another very bad idea.

Chapter 29 - The Camp of General Flavius Stilicho

If he'd wondered before, Fergus had little doubt now at how he'd changed since he'd met Henno. Not long ago, standing before a man as powerful and heralded as General Stilicho would've made him stammer in awe.

Now, he returned the General's hard appraising look with one of his own.

Flavius Stilicho was a dangerous man. That would be obvious even if his deadly reputation hadn't been known throughout the Empire and beyond. A white scar stood out on his leathery face. It started just above his right eyebrow and cut down his cheek. Fergus noticed that the cut hit only the area of his face not covered by the helmet of a Roman soldier.

His arms bore the scars of battle too. His left hand seemed to be always curled and he tried to hide a limp, but it obviously pained him to stand for too long.

Fergus wondered if from now on he'd always take the measure of anyone he met by the scars he could see.

They stood in Stilicho's command tent. Located, as it would be in every temporary marching camp a Roman army on the move built, in the center of the camp.

Stilicho had been meeting with several of his officers when Fergus was ushered inside. It was sparsely furnished and, like its occupant, was cold and unfriendly. Also like its occupant,

it spoke of efficiency over emotion, but of pride, too. Spoils from his many victories were plainly displayed for any to see. A skull of some barbarian king, a broken sword, a gold wreath delivered no doubt at the hand of Emperor Honorius himself. This was a man who valued his victories as a miser valued his coin. Fergus prayed that he could use this to his advantage. Stilicho spoke with a voice accustomed to command but not accustomed to wasting time.

"Impossible." He said flatly. "The man is a civilian, guilty of theft and murder. He will be executed at my earliest convenience."

He picked up one of the dozens of parchments on his desk, frowning at its contents as if Fergus had never existed.

"Impossible." Fergus replied.

Stilicho looked up at him as if just as surprised he was still in his tent as he was by the impudence of the young man before him. The other officers glared at Fergus. At first impatient with his interruption, now insulted by his lack of respect to their general.

"You try my patience, boy." Stilicho snapped. "I've decided not to explore your involvement in the crimes Henno is guilty of only because you are the one who has delivered him to justice. And also because you have returned my horse to me. I don't like reversing decisions."

"Then you are not the man your reputation speaks of, General." Fergus spoke directly.

"With your permission, general," One of Stilicho's tribunes rose, "I'll toss this snot-nose out on his ass and we can return to business."

Stilicho waved him back to his chair. The angry, seasoned veteran sank back into his seat.

Fergus had hoped that mentioning the famous General's reputation would get his attention. His many victories were his weakness. A man known for always winning can't stand the thought of losing. Now he had the floor and he had to keep it. "A good leader knows a battle plan must shift with the changing events of the battle." Fergus quoted. "Henno always claimed that was one of your winning strategies, General. Is that not so?"

"I don't fault Henno's memory, boy." Stilicho replied. "Nor is mine faulty. I remember well the message he sent me after he killed 15 of my men. The broken messenger he sent relayed each word to me and I remember them perfectly."

Fergus tried his best to hide his shock. Henno killed 15 soldiers? How? And why had he kept this from him?

"If Henno killed..." Fergus started, but Stilicho wasn't done.

"He said I'd made a mistake by only sending 16 to kill him.

He'd be willing to forget my mistake if I forgot his. He said

he earned that horse and that if I don't forget him, he'll

remember me." Stilicho's growing rage was barely contained. A

man doesn't rise to his level by losing his temper, but he was getting close to it.

"Well, I don't forget and I'm going to make damn sure he always remembers me. He'll walk through the afterlife begging for my forgiveness." His left hand was now clenched into a tight fist, his knuckles white with the tension. Other than that, the rest of body seemed perfectly relaxed.

"Henno was defending himself, General." Fergus wasn't backing down either. "He was not lying when he said he didn't know it was your horse."

"It matters not." Stilicho answered, his cold reserve back in place. "He will be crucified. We have the time and the men will welcome the sight of the traitor getting what's coming to him."

"I think not." Fergus replied. "I think you will have your best healers return him to full health. You will return his horse to him, as well as his possessions and anything else he and I require to complete our mission."

Stilicho didn't waste his breath in reply. He just waited.

Fergus stood tall. "You will do this because General Marcus has the Domina Galla Placidia and you cannot attack while she is his hostage. Even if you were successful and she survived, Emperor Honorius would have your head for jeopardizing her."

Fergus paused. He could see he was right. Time for what Henno would call "the punch-line".

"And because Henno and I are the only ones who can bring her to you safely." He said, enjoying the looks of shock and anger his words produced among the officers.

Stilicho stood completely still while he contemplated. Then, after what seemed a year, he spoke. "And how do you plan on doing that?"

Fergus had not even a bad idea. "That is for Henno and me to know."

Stilicho held his statue-like pose.

Fergus smiled. "The events of the battle have changed, General."

Stilicho didn't return the smile, but Fergus could see his features shift from anger to acceptance.

He spoke sharply to one of the soldiers at the door. "Soldier! Get the First Surgeon to Henno. He's got work to do. Move!"

The soldier saluted. "I hear and obey, General!" He ran away quickly.

"Gratitude, General." Fergus said.

Stilicho snorted. "Don't thank me yet. Our First Surgeon is a butcher."

Fergus smiled, enjoying the looks on their faces as he did.

"He'll survive, General. We'll bring the Domina back to you safely and you'll have a victory against the usurper Marcus."

"You seem very sure of these things." Stilicho sat down at his desk. "Why is that?"

"Because I am God's strong right arm, General." Fergus replied confidently. "And Henno is my strong right arm."

#

The First Surgeon tutted and fretted as he examined Henno for at least the third time.

At first, Fergus was content to let the man do his work, but he was growing impatient with his apparent hesitation.

"Can you help him?" Fergus asked, trying to hide his irritation. "What is the delay?"

The First Surgeon was a large man, very fat, but he moved with a nervous grace which reminded Fergus of a young cat. His hands ran over Henno's body with disturbing familiarity; a press with the palm to the forehead, a squeezing of the upper arm, he even bent his ear to Henno's chest and listened for a very long time.

Finally, he sat back on the stool next to Henno's cot in the stuffy tent and took a gulp of wine before speaking.

He sighed, "I am a butcher."

"Don't say that. I'm sure all soldiers call the surgeon a butcher". Fergus replied. "It is not meant as disrespect, it merely..."

He held up a beefy hand. "No, I mean it. I am a butcher." He sighed again. "I only became the First Surgeon because nobody else wanted the job. I know how to cut meat, which is mostly what I have to do." He shrugged and had another drink.

Fergus tried to grasp the new events of the battle! How can this man help Henno?

"How is this possible?" He stammered. "You've no medical skills at all? Why are you the surgeon?"

The First Surgeon stared at Fergus for a beat as if the question was absurd.

"A limb is broken, I cut it off." He replied simply. "A man is cut, I sew him up. It's not all that different. Nobody likes their meat served with big ugly gashes. I raised sheep. I know how to heal, don't worry. This is easy."

"Sheep?" Fergus' voice was rising. "Sheep? This is no sheep! This is a man! What are you going to do to help him?"

"Calm yourself, youngster." He held up his hands smiling.

"Look here." He pointed to the ugly, purple swelling on Henno's forehead. "This is the problem."

"Of course it is, you idiot!" Fergus exploded. "A blind man could see that!"

The surgeon frowned. "No, he couldn't." He shook his head as if trying to explain why the blindness would prohibit a visual inspection would be too difficult. "It's the pressure. The bone of our skulls is not solid. Its parts, joined together like stones on a wall, you see? As we age, the join gets brittle. When your friend was hit, blood formed under the skin, raised up like an egg and is now pushing on his brain. Here." He tapped his own head, just above his right eye. "Once we decrease the swelling, he will be fine."

"And how do you plan on doing that?" Fergus had already guessed the answer.

"We drain the egg, of course." He was selecting his smallest knife from a collection. It was the largest small knife Fergus

had ever seen. The surgeon was indeed more used to removing than fixing. "Ah, this will do. Hold him still, if you please."

#

Henno woke slowly.

He had a blinding headache, which was good. It told him he was alive. He was having trouble focusing his eyes in the gloom. He was lying down. Something was pressing on his forehead; it felt cool, wet and comforting, so he decided not to slap it away just yet.

There was light from several oil lamps. At first the lights were just blobs of yellow brightness that hurt his eyes. Then, as he blinked and tried to focus, the blobs slowly sharpened into flickering points of light which illuminated the rest of his surroundings.

He was in a tent. That was good. Last thing he remembered, he and Fergus were outside.

He wasn't dead and he was in a tent. As long as he had breath, he could take care of the rest.

Then he saw someone approach. The face was in shadow at first, but he'd know that measured, soldier's walk with just a hint of a limp anywhere.

"Stilicho." He grinned up at his former commander. "Remember me?" His laughter broke down into a dry cough and someone pressed a cup to his lips. He drank eagerly while staring up at the dark face.

"Centurion Tiberius Scorpanicus Henno, you will address me correctly or I will have you flayed for insubordination."

"Is that right?" Henno asked. "I'm a civilian, old friend. A Roman Citizen. If you were going to do anything to me, you'd have done it by now. So, there's only one thing I want from you."

Stilicho's back stiffened.

"Seeing as how I'm already on my back, how about bringing me one of your favorite camp girls?" Henno gave his old commander a wink.

Henno thought for an instant he'd gone too far. The General looked like he was about to throttle him, but instead he turned on his heel and marched out without another word as Henno's mocking laugh followed. Mithras, but he'd always wanted to do that!

When they were alone, Fergus' face said he was torn between anger and relief.

"He saved your life! Why did you insult him?" Apparently, he was leaning more toward anger at the moment.

Henno felt under the bandage. His grin shifted a bit to a grimace as he probed the thick, congealed blood there.

"I'm not an idiot." He replied. "He didn't save my life by choice, you didn't allow him any other option. Right?"

Henno didn't bother waiting for Fergus' confirmation.

"Gratitude, Optio. I was in a bad way. If I know the old man, he was all for taking me apart one layer at a time. It wasn't

easy to change his mind." Henno nodded to his young friend.

"You earned your salt today." Henno wondered why that phrase sounded so familiar to him. "Gratitude." He repeated.

"Actually, it wasn't difficult." Fergus looked guilty now. "I only had to promise we could get Galla free of Marcus so the General could begin his attack."

"Is that all? You had me worried there." Henno shifted his pillow a bit and settled back. It felt good to be in a Roman bed again.

"All? You're not worried?" Fergus was pacing around the small tent now.

"No, we were going to do that anyway." Henno realized something far more important. "Hey, how's about some grub? I bet there's a chicken roasting somewhere. I'd go, but my head is still a bit sore..."

"Marcus has an army of well-trained Auxiliaries, who want nothing more than to kill Romans, all camped around his villa. We've got to get inside, get Galla out and whatever documents we can save from his library. If we succeed, there's an excellent chance Stilicho will kill us for your insults. If we don't succeed, we'll be killed by Marcus." Fergus stopped pacing and stared at Henno. "And you want chicken?"

"Not too much pepper." Henno nodded. "I don't care for pepper."

Fergus shook his head as he headed toward the tent entrance.

He stopped, "I almost forgot." He added. "I suppose this means you're not worried about the Minotaur that guards Marcus' estate either, right?"

Henno's stomach forgot about chicken and went cold. Did he hear that right? "Did you say Minotaur? A real Minotaur?"

"Yes. A real Minotaur. Or at least something that looks exactly like the Minotaur." Fergus said brightly. "The surgeon told me about it when he was fixing what's left of your head. He said a small patrol tried to sneak into Marcus' villa night before last. Of the six men, only one made it out alive. Well, he didn't exactly make it out on his own, he was thrown over the wall. That is, most of him was thrown over the wall. He lived long enough to describe a huge, armored man with the head of a beast that attacked them. He called it a Minotaur. Screamed it repeatedly, in fact. The surgeon said it was amazing he lived at all considering his arms and legs had been ripped off. That is a testament to the strength and courage of the average Roman Legionnaire, isn't it? I'm sure a seasoned veteran, a former Centurion such as yourself will have no problem with such a monster." He gave Henno a big smile. "So, you're right, nothing to worry about. I'll go get you some chicken with no pepper on it, right?"

He ducked out the tent leaving Henno to consider this latest news.

A Minotaur? Nonsense. The soldier was off his nut obviously. Britain was much too cold for Minotaurs.

#

Fergus stamped through the mud in search of some food.

"Nothing to worry about." He muttered under his breath in a mocking approximation of Henno's voice. "We were going to do that anyway."

Fergus cursed himself for a fool as soon as he heard the gruff voice behind him.

"That's him."

Before he could finish cursing himself, two hands like iron clamped around his arms from behind and raised him off his feet. Before he could try to escape, he felt a steel blade against his throat.

He was surrounded by four Legionnaires in full armor.

"What are you doing?" He tried to sound tough, but could tell he was failing. "I'm under the protection of General..." The blade pressed in, just a hint of a threat, but the razor sharp edge carried the message effectively. Fergus stopped talking. One of Stilicho's officers stepped into the light in front of him. The eldest of the ones meeting with Stilicho, but also no less dangerous looking. Fergus looked him over quickly. His hair was pure white, close cropped except on the left side where a wide, red scar could be seen.

"I am Tribune Rufius. I am going to ask you three questions."

He said quietly. "You will answer them truthfully, without hesitation to my complete satisfaction or you will die here. Is that understood?"

"Yes." Fergus replied. "What are the next two questions?"

He felt the knife at his throat shift slightly, but Rufius saved his life with a slight shake of his head. Fergus knew an even slighter nod would be the end of him.

No more false bravado.

"I understand." Fergus said evenly. He was surprised at how calm he sounded. His heart was beating in his chest so loudly he was sure it would wake the rest of the camp.

"What is your true mission?" His eyes were boring into Fergus' soul like twin rays of sunlight.

Fergus swallowed hard. "We are to retrieve whatever literary or scientific documents from Marcus' library which we deem too important to be lost."

Tribune Rufius silenced the subtle chuckling of the soldiers with a glance.

"And who has sent you on this mission?" Rufius asked.

Fergus raised his chin, offering it to the knife defiantly.

"God sent us."

The soldiers didn't dare laugh now. They held completely still while the officer's eyes searched Fergus for a whisper of a lie.

He apparently didn't see one, so he asked his third question.

"Did Henno know he was stealing Stilicho's horse?"

Fergus couldn't help his reaction. Again with the horse?

He let out an exasperated sigh. "No. He would no more steal from him than he would chew off his own arm. Whatever he did,

whoever he killed, it's on Stilicho's head. He has been wronged and forced to kill those he once called brother. If Stilicho is the man he believes him to be, the man the world believes him to be, he will beg our forgiveness and let us serve God and the Empire as you do."

He wanted to believe he wasn't closing his eyes out of fear, that he was just blinking longer than usual, but when he felt his feet touch the ground and the knife slip away, he realized he was going to live.

"Bring her back." Rufius said. It was a request, not a command and that was when Fergus understood how deeply the man was in love.

Fergus could only nod his agreement. He would bring her back.

How many men has Galla twisted around her fingers?

"Fetch him food and drink." The Tribune barked to one of the soldiers.

Before the soldier could salute, Fergus barked in a reasonably good imitation of Stilicho, "Chicken, no pepper. Wine, watered, but don't drown it. And be quick about it!"

The soldier saluted automatically. "I hear and obey...? Sir!"

The soldiers ran off, Rufius turned and walked away.

Fergus' thoughts turned to Galla. Was she still safe? He had an unwanted image in his head of her imprisoned in a filthy, dark cell with nothing to eat or to drink.

It was almost more than he could bear.

"More chicken, my sweet?" General Marcus asked.

Galla smiled and batted her eyes in a way that made Marcus' breath burn in his throat.

"I shouldn't, my dear Marcus." Then added with a smile which had a hint of wickedness behind it which Marcus found promising. "But I'm forever doing things I shouldn't." She waited as the slaves placed another plate of steaming chicken on the table in front of her.

Marcus wanted nothing more in the world than to watch her. She reclined on the couch across from him like a cat in the sun. Her hair was still damp from her bath, her skin glowed and he could swear he caught the scent of her delicate perfume over the table heaped with exotic delicacies from all corners of the empire.

This was why he wanted to be Emperor. She was why he wanted to be Emperor. She embodied all that he lusted for, all that he deserved. She was glory. She was beauty. She was Rome. Right there, just beyond his reach but within his power. He watched as her perfect pearls of teeth bite ravenously into the glistening chicken wing, tearing the meat from the bone like a hungry lioness. How he wanted her! How he wanted Rome!

And he would have her.

He knew he was not an unattractive man. He'd had many women, many of them welcomed his advances. Even his slaves, who he had with some frequency, couldn't hide their appreciation. He was virile and powerful. He adorned himself with fancies from

his collection. Gold was his favorite, but he had a fondness for the art made by the Egyptians. They understood how to dress a ruler.

Even now, although he'd chosen to dress simply, he couldn't stop himself from a bit of a show to impress the young Galla. He wore his red robe fashioned in the far east of a shimmering light material which was glorious. Silk, it was called. The merchant claimed it was spun by magic insects or some such nonsense.

He only wore a few bracelets, gold, of course and a necklace with an emerald ruby the size of an egg.

He didn't want to give Galla the impression he was showing off for her, so he reluctantly chose not to wear the crown he'd had custom-made at great expense. She'd be more impressed that way, he thought.

He poured more wine for her. "Do you like the wine?" He knew she would. It was priceless, very old and very rare. He thought she'd be touched by his pouring it himself. He was, after all, a man of the people.

"It is as intoxicating," She murmured boldly, "as the company."

By the gods, she was in his power!

He shifted slightly on the couch to let his robe ride up just enough to show off his calf muscles. He would tease her with a small preview of more to come. He thought his calves were extraordinary. It's probably driving her mad with passion but

she was containing her volcanic lust as much as she could. All part of her noble upbringing, no doubt.

"Tell me, my General." She blushed. "Apologies, my Emperor..."

He waved off her mistake as though it were nothing, but it thrilled him to hear her say it. "How many troops are in your command now? Your army must be vast. Is it difficult to control such wild barbarian troops as these?"

He smiled then set his face in the pose he was using for his statue. "Upwards of 30,000 soldiers call me the true Emperor of the East. First Britain..." He let his voice trail off to better allow her imagination to see him as the conqueror of the Eastern Empire.

"Your victory over Stilicho is assured then." She looked away. Was that a disappointment he detected?

"Does that not please you, my sweet?" He didn't try to keep the edge from his voice. "I give you my solemn oath, your brother will not be harmed." As a woman, of course she would not be able to detect his lie. Women are such simple creatures, he thought. So easily seduced.

Her eyes flashed with a pleasing amount of fear. "Of course! I want nothing more than to see you in your rightful place! No, I...it is nothing. I am still fatigued from my travels and am but a young woman who has silly romantic notions. Please, ignore my childish ignorance." She sipped her wine again, hiding her face behind the goblet as if embarrassed.

"Speak your mind." Marcus said grandly. He would display how magnanimous a ruler he was and how magnanimous a husband he would be. Within reason, of course.

"It just that..." She began hesitantly, then it burst out of her, "To defeat Stilicho will cement your place in history. It will be a great victory over the famous general, but to defeat an enemy with an overwhelming number of troops is one thing." She shyly met his eye. "To defeat him with overwhelming skill is another. You are a better tactician, a much finer soldier in every respect..."

Marcus nodded solemnly, this girl was wise beyond her years.

"Then give the empire a new hero." She continued brightly.

"Defeat Stilicho with your superior tactics not your superior numbers." She snapped her mouth closed as if afraid she'd said too much. She bit her lip as she watched his reaction.

It was a delightful thing to see. Marcus thought he'd go mad if he didn't jump across the table and have her right there, but he took a deep calming breath, pretending to contemplate her suggestion. He decided he would cover her with Carthaginian oil and cinnamon. It would be expensive, but he wanted their first time together to be special.

"Yes, of course." He replied shaking off the image he'd created in his mind, "That was always my intention. I have no need of merely defeating his army. I must best the man. Alas, if he would only accept my challenge to a duel..."

The idea seemed to excite Galla, her eyes flashed, but before she could speak, he continued quickly.

"But, being a coward and weakling, he has declined my many challenges." He gulped his wine. He'd not sent any challenges, of course, because he knew Stilicho was too noble to accept. And his troops deserved a victory. Otherwise, why should they expect payment? He couldn't deprive them of that, could he?

"So, it will be my legion against his. The news of my victory will sweep throughout the Empire. I have already commissioned a fine song to commemorate it. Would you like to hear it?" He clapped his hands for his musicians' attention before she replied. "You! Sing The Hero of Britain!"

Galla was obviously impressed. She looked as though she would swoon any moment.

#

Galla felt as though she might retch at any moment.

She sipped the mediocre wine and swallowed hard, forcing herself to imagine something more calming than the nauseating image Marcus was trying so hard to make real.

Men! She fumed silently. Outwardly, she continued to smile, laugh and flirt as her captor, now dinner host, rambled on, firmly convinced of his future place on the throne and in her bed.

No wonder the Empire is in such a state. Men are like horses; impulsive, aggressive and ruled by their selfish desires. She

couldn't decide if she was giving men or horses more credit than they deserved.

In any case, both are easily led.

So far, everything was moving in the right direction. Despite the numerous unexpected problems, she was right where she needed to be. Success depended on her manipulating Marcus and, so far, he was proving to be much less of a challenge than expected.

She picked up another over-cooked, under-spiced bird wing and pretended to eat with relish as Marcus hummed along to his newly-commissioned song of premature victory.

A stray thought drifted in. She hoped Fergus and Henno were safe. They have been useful, indispensable in fact. Once all this nonsense was over, she would make every effort to find them.

Two such resourceful and loyal subjects would be a valuable asset. And he has such pretty eyes...

She hoped they both were safe and enjoying their supper more than she was.

#

Fergus watched Henno as they ate.

The nearly demolished chicken carcass was between them. It had been taken down in record time in soldierly fashion. Fergus was able to buy an entire chicken from a section of soldiers for the same paltry sum that would've gotten him a fine team

of racing stallions anywhere else in the Empire. It was worth every sliver if it helped with what would come next.

They sat facing each other in the tent where Henno had been recovering. The leather sides creaked and shuddered in the wind. Fergus could feel gusts of cold slipping in under the sides, the small brazier of coals was providing little heat. Henno wiped his face with one of the unused bandages. Fergus noticed he was using his left hand to eat. His right hand was clenched like a fist.

"So, here's the bad idea I came up with..." Henno grinned lopsidedly.

Fergus nodded as he interrupted. "How's the chicken?"

Henno gave him a look. "The best medicine I know is a full belly." He spit out a bone on the floor. "I've had worse. You want that?" He was reaching for the last wing.

Fergus snatched it off the plate.

"Steady, lad." Henno eyed him with growing concern. "There's no need..."

Fergus held the wing out to him. "You're right. I'm sorry. Here."

He dropped the chicken back on the platter.

Henno's eyes narrowed at him with growing anger. "You trying to be funny?"

As he reached out, again with his left, Fergus moved. In a flash, he had grabbed Henno's left wrist, pinning it to the table while he pressed a knife against his throat.

Henno froze; not from fear or surprise, but as a trained fighter assessing the situation.

"Fergus." He began quietly through clenched teeth.

"What...are...you...doing?"

"Time for a bit of sword practice." Fergus replied; his hand steady, his eyes cold.

"Take that damned knife from my throat." He growled in reply.

"I'm not playing this game."

"Is that what you'll say to Marcus' Minotaur?" Fergus growled back, then added in a mocking tone, "Oh please, friend, I'd prefer not to play a game just now."

Henno tried to yank his left hand free, but Fergus held tight and the knife pressed just a hair tighter.

"You want the knife moved?" Fergus asked quietly. "Use your right."

"As you say." Henno answered, as still as a stone.

His right leg shot out kicking the small table between them.

The table, chicken bones, Fergus and Fergus' blade were knocked to the floor.

Fergus had the wind knocked out of him as a knee slammed him in chest, pinning him to the floor. He felt his own blade pressed tightly to his throat.

In Henno's left hand.

"Lad, you are starting to worry me." Henno spoke calmly, but his face was a mass of sweat and confusion.

Fergus took a long breath before speaking. "The chicken was lousy with pepper, Henno."

He could see on the Centurion's face that he knew he'd been found out. He quickly tried to cover it up with bluster.

"You think I didn't notice?" He laughed sharply, without humor. "I was too hungry to care. Next time though, when I tell you I don't want any..."

Fergus wasn't letting him get away with it. "You can't hold a sword with your right hand, can you?"

Henno snorted. He stood up and held out his right to Fergus. His hand was no longer clenched in a tight fist, but felt cold to the touch as Fergus accepted his help to get to his feet.

Henno grinned at him. "I'm just as deadly with my left as..." Fergus was shaking his head. Henno's face shifted to anger as quickly as if a mask had been dropped into place.

"You want to have a go?" He barked. "Is that it? You learn a few steps and think you're ready for the arena?"

He tossed the knife, it stuck into the ground at Fergus' feet.

"Blade, club or bone?" He kicked the cot over making room for them to fight.

Fergus was crushed at having to do this. He thought his mentor, his friend, was indestructible. It broke his heart to humiliate him this way to save his life, but his was a life worth saving.

No matter if it cost their friendship.

"I'm not going to fight you." Fergus said quietly.

Henno's mocking bark hurt his ears in the small tent.

"Ha! Don't blame you, lad." He moved to right the table and chairs again. "Enough of your foolishness. Now, here's my plan..."

"Because you can't fight." Fergus finished. "Catch this."

As Henno whirled on him, his face again a mask of rage, Fergus tossed his knife in the air.

Things seemed to slow, the knife flipped end over end across the tent straight at Henno's right shoulder. His hand instinctively came up to catch it, but failed to close on the knife's pommel. It slipped out of his hand and fell to the floor.

Henno stared at his useless right hand as he sat down heavily. The rage, the fight, the indignation left him in a big whoosh of breath. He couldn't meet Fergus' eye, but stared down at the bone-strewn floor.

"Fetch my sword, Optio. There's a good lad."

He spoke so quietly, Fergus wasn't sure if heard him correctly. When he lifted his red eyes, Fergus could see he'd made a decision. His eyes were filled with regret at the choice but also with determination to see it through.

"I might need your help. I'm not sure I can do it." Henno whispered either to Fergus or to some unseen Roman god.

Fergus was shocked!

"No!" He stammered. "I'm not...I'd never...you can't..."

Henno stood again. He had the old bravado back, but it was covered with an air of grim finality.

"I am Centurion Tiberius Scorpanicus Henno. Twenty-five years in service of the Empire didn't kill me. I will not end my days as some one-armed starving beggar on the street. I'll die on the sword as I deserve." He glared at Fergus. "If you can't stomach what's to come, then leave me to it."

Fergus' shout startled them both in the cramped quarters.

"Twenty-five years of fighting means nothing if you turn coward now!"

"You dare?" Henno raged "You dare call me coward?"

His left arm cocked back ready to punch an insult right back.

Fergus was not about to back down. He stepped in with his chin raised in defiance, daring Henno to strike him.

"Besting me proves nothing." Fergus growled. "You want to fight? Then fight a worthy opponent. Fight yourself."

Henno's rage was replaced by confusion.

"Did you get hit in the head too?" He asked.

Fergus shook his head with irritation.

"When a horse loses a sandal, do you throw away the horse?" He spit back at Henno. "Of course not! You fix the shoe!"

"This is a bit more of a problem than a bit of torn leather, lad." Henno was trying to flex his right hand, the fingers were moving awkwardly.

"Then we'll fix it!" Fergus shouted again. Henno couldn't hide a slight grin at his young friend's exasperation.

Fergus continued in a more reasonable voice

"I'm going to find that butcher of a healer. He got you this far, he may have a remedy. If he doesn't, I'll find somebody else. Or we'll think of something else. Right?"

Henno replied with a brisk nod. "Right!"

"Wait here. I'll be back with the healer." Fergus was strapping on his sword and dropping his knife in the sheath on his belt.

"And clean this place up! This is a Roman Marching fort, not some house of whoring!" He added copying Henno's voice.

"I hear and obey, Centurion!" Henno barked proudly.

Fergus smiled as he left.

The smile faded as he left the tent into the cold night air. He pulled his cloak around him tightly, but the chill that swept through him had nothing to do with the cold.

It was the realization that of all the options he'd considered to return Henno to full health, prayer had not been among them.

#

The beast waited.

He knew how to wait. He had dim memories of another time; a time of light and heat; a time of pain and rage. The past was all dimmed now by its lack of importance. He had been brought to this place long ago, when he was small. Small, but fierce; the beast had fought but lost.

Now he waited.

He had been starved at first. Long stretches in darkness with only oily puddles of dank water to sustain him. Then, one glorious day, it came.

Meat.

The beast had gorged himself on the familiar food. At first, it was thrown to him through the bars which separated him from his kingdom each day.

Then, it was secreted throughout his territory every night. The bars would open and he would leave his dark cage to roam the grounds. A high wall marked the boundaries of his kingdom. He may have been able to climb it, but the heavy shell he was encased in weighed him down.

He scratched at the shell on his chest. He remembered when he woke to find it strapped all around him. On his chest, his arms and upper legs. He had raged at it. He'd pulled, scratched, even tried to bite it, but nothing he did shifted it. After a time, he accepted it. Then, he realized it made him stronger. It made him a king.

He sniffed the air. Night was coming. Meat was coming.

Sometimes the meat was cold chunks lying on the ground, but his favorite was the kind of hot meat that snuck into his kingdom with shells of their own and long thorns in their hands.

First, the hot meat tried to fight. Then it tried to run. Then it tried to scream.

He drooled at the memory of the last time meat came to him. He took a long sniff at the coming night air. Not far away, he could smell more meat.

Something welled up in him. He stood banging his stony fists on his chest as he roared a challenge. His rock-like fist thundered on the shell, his roar shook the stones of his daytime place.

Sand drifted down as the echoes of his challenge faded.

He heard no reply.

With a satisfied snort, he sat back down. And waited.

Waited for the kind of meat that comes to him.

#

Stilicho stared at the huge map laid out on the table in front of him. He was alone now. He'd dismissed his staff for the evening.

Rufius had reported raised voices coming from Henno and the young priest's tent, even the sounds of a fight. Stilicho's hard face cracked with a fraction of a smile.

"Same old Henno." He muttered. "He can even bring out anger in a priest."

Some things change, but some things never will. The Empire for one; it will not fall. He will see to that. By the gods, he will not fail Honorius. No, the gods will not let Rome fall. As his eyes drifted over the map for the uncounted time, he felt his faith in the gods of Rome seep through his hands like smoke.

The latest reports were disturbing to say the least. Marcus the Usurper had somehow bought himself an army of local Roman Auxiliaries reinforced by thousands of Celt warriors hungry for generation's worth of revenge against Rome. At best estimate they were out-numbered 5 to 1, at worst it was closer to 6 to 1.

Losing soldiers in battle was the least of a commander's worry. Soldiers were lost from disease, from attrition but the worst way to lose soldiers was from rumor.

Rumor can destroy a legion as quickly as a wildfire destroys a forest. And in a similar fashion; just a spark at first, then as more fuel is added, the fire grows and grows, out of control until it's run out of fuel to burn.

Rumors were costing him a victory before the first trumpet blew. Rumors such as:

Marcus was already emperor and they were the rebels now.

Marcus was giving a fortune in gold to each man who fights for him.

The barbarian Auxiliaries had ballista and catapults large enough to throw bolts as large as trees and stones as large as war elephants.

Marcus had a Minotaur.

All of it nonsense and all of it costing him men every day. He could not continue to hold his siege for long.

Siege?

He snorted derisively at his own optimistic assessment. It was hardly a siege. His troops were arrayed as best as the terrain allowed, but he'd not been able to completely encircle the estate of Marcus. More and more barbarian troops arrived every day. Yet, they seemed content to camp in the valley beyond Marcus' massive villa. Almost as if there were a Minotaur contained in the villa's high stone walls. Nonsense! He admonished himself for such absurd weakness.

Stilicho and his 10th on one side and thirty thousand enemy soldiers on the other.

In the middle, Marcus.

And Galla.

How had she failed so miserably to do the one thing asked of her? He was quite clear in his instructions. Clear to the point of insubordination, but she was not the Emperor of the West. Honorius, Emperor Honorius, he corrected himself, was true to his word and backed Stilicho's plan completely. He'd carefully explained as much of the plan to young Emperor as he could. Just enough to allow him to agree with confidence in front of his younger sister, Galla.

Stilicho was honor-bound by oath to protect the Emperor, but it was not an easy task. The young man had always been intimidated by his younger sister. As a youth, he'd stammered horribly. With time and judicious use of a willow stick, his Greek teachers had broken him of the ridiculous broken speech.

Now the only time the stutter returned was in the presence of his sister.

Honorius was young, barely out of his 20's, but youth is a condition which improves with time. Then, time brings on a new set of problems. He flexed his knee painfully. How much time does he have in this life?

No, Honorius' youth was not the issue. It was his weakness. He lacks the boldness needed by a good leader and spends too much time thinking and worrying. The royal line has been diluted too often like weak wine in a cheap tavern. What was left was hardly palatable and incapable of ruling an empire alone.

Honorius' father Theodosius had known it. He loved his children, but his love had never blinded him to their shortcomings. Stilicho and the old Emperor talked many nights into the coming dawn about the future and what would be expected of men like Stilicho.

He longed for those days. A strong man on the throne, a clear purpose, a foreign enemy to fight. Through the curtain of time, all things seem simpler. He supposed even back then, he'd longed for the simpler life of a common soldier.

That brought his thoughts back to Henno.

How in Apollo's name had they both ended up on another battlefield together? Stilicho was still trying to decide if this was a good omen or ill. Sent by God? The boy was obviously mad or a zealot, which amounted to the same as far as he was concerned. Although, he admitted there was a

strength in the youngster he admired. Shame they'll both be dead as soon as they attempt to enter the villa. Henno deserved a better death, despite what he'd done.

He forced himself not to dwell on the condition of the bodies which were all that was left of the raiding party he'd sent in. Or the insane screaming of the one brief survivor. Damn his eyes forever! His ignorant, pain-filled shouting of Minotaurs had been the start of that particular nonsense.

That won't do, he admonished himself. It is bad luck to curse those who had served and died at his command. They were good men and deserved a better epitaph. He poured himself more wine and raised the goblet in a silent toast. To lost soldiers. And undiluted wine, he thought bitterly.

Back to the map.

Although they weren't true Roman citizens, the enemy he faced were as well-trained and equipped as his own soldiers. And in disturbingly larger numbers.

Numbers. Always numbers. Inventory, shortages, wages, bribes, soldiers ready to fight, soldiers on sick-call, soldiers who've deserted; military command seems solely about counting now. He was sick of numbers.

And rumor.

He'd issued strict orders against rumormongering. He knew it was as effective to stemming the tide of malicious rumor as it was to stemming the ocean's tide. Still, it was expected.

Six to one? He forced himself to scan the map anew. There must be a way. Something he's missed. There's always a way to victory, if one has the sight to see it and the will to carry it out.

His tired eyes drifted over the lines of the map, imagining the terrain they represented and knew what he really needed. A miracle.

#

Fergus prayed for a miracle.

The healer was once again tutting and fretting over Henno. As he examined the damaged right arm, Henno was obviously trying his best not to throttle the annoying man with his left.

"Well, sunshine?" He grumbled as the First Surgeon continued his odd examination with his pudgy fingers.

The surgeon hissed at Henno which was apparently his version of "shut your bean hole." He acted as though his patient's attachment to the limb he examined was a minor impediment. Henno glared back, but kept his bean hole shut. He obviously had little faith, but a little faith was enough to move mountains, Fergus reminded himself.

But was it?

Was this the end after they'd come so far? No, he couldn't believe that. There was always a way. His own life was a testament to the power of faith. How else had he been able to survive? Those long, endless nights alone in the wilderness, with only his fear and his faith to keep him going. Fear of

falling asleep and losing his master's sheep to wolves. Faith that one day, God would deliver him from servitude.

And it had happened.

There had been a way out then and there would be a way out now. There must be a way. He closed his eyes and clutched the small cross which still hung around his neck. His hand rested against the armor he wore. There was something disturbing about the feeling of both the cross and the armor. Both protected him, but if he had to choose, which would he choose to protect him?

So much doubt. Can faith survive with so much doubt in the heart?

There must be a way. He closed his eyes in prayer again.

"There is a way."

Fergus' eyes snapped open. For the briefest of moments, he thought he'd heard the voice of God.

Henno and the First Surgeon were staring at him.

"You sure you didn't get hit in the head?" Henno asked as the First Surgeon hushed him.

Fergus wanted to hear it again.

"You said what?" He asked the healer.

The heavy-set man arranged his robe around him and settled back on the stool next to Henno's bed. He stared upwards briefly, organizing his thoughts as if he was preparing to speak to an imbecile.

"The flow of life to the limb is obstructed. It is as water may be blocked in a stream by rocks or logs or even mud in the dry season." He spoke as though giving a lecture.

Fergus' impatience beat Henno's.

"Yes?" He fought to keep his voice under control. "How do we remove the obstruction?"

The healer held up a beefy hand as he emptied his wine goblet. After a belch, he continued.

"The obstruction is not as obvious as a stone or wood or sediment, my young friend." He explained ingratiatingly. "We have two courses of action."

He took a deep breath and continued. "We can remove the limb. Here." He made a sawing motion just below Henno's right elbow. "The limb can then be replaced with a wooden one or not at all, of course."

"Next option." Henno spoke with finality.

"It is not a difficult process." The healer counseled. He did some quick mental calculations. "I would set the chances of survival at...3 to 5."

"Next. Option." Henno's sense of finality was coming close to being fatally final for the healer.

He sighed as he looked at the array of gleaming knives laid out on the floor next to him.

"Are you positive?" He attempted. "I'm quite skilled at limb removal. I've plenty of practice and my knives are..."

Henno glare and low growl interrupted his suggestion. Fergus felt the same frustration.

"What is the other option, First Surgeon?" Fergus snapped.

The fat man sighed again as his meaty fingers once again pinched, stroked and rubbed along Henno's arm. He took a breath as if to speak, then he moved faster than either Fergus or Henno would've believed possible. So fast, in fact, Fergus wasn't sure exactly what he had done.

His hands were a blur as one seemed to twist, the other pulled, then both yanked and there was a loud popping sound followed by Henno's loud painful howl.

"Greek buggering, shit-stained...I'm going to...!"

Before he could attempt his inevitable retribution, the healer threw himself over Henno's chest, pinning him to the small cot with his massive bulk. His robe flipped up in the back as he struggled to hold on, exposing his huge white ass.

Fergus was still in shock over the popping maneuver and now stared at the quaking heap of white flesh with revulsion.

Henno was bellowing unintelligibly, but it was obviously a series of threats.

The healer looked at the gaping Fergus and shouted over Henno's roaring, "Don't just stand there! Help me hold him down!"

Fergus threw himself across Henno's thrashing legs, but it was like trying to hold on to a pair of logs as they rolled down a

hill. Henno's threats now included Fergus, as well as all Greeks and all Christians.

Fergus did his best, but Henno's efforts doubled when they heard the gasping healer announce, "Now, hold tight! The next part is extremely painful!"

#

The sun was just starting to rise. In the brief period between rainfalls, the dark blackness of the cloud-laden night sky was beginning to give way to the dark grayness of a cloud-covered day.

Pug sighed contently as he stared out the window of his luxurious room.

Reclining on the softest pillow he'd ever felt, which was on top of the softest bed he'd ever slept in, he gave the barest of nods and one of the slave-girls gently placed a grape between his teeth.

He screamed and bit down when it tried to crawl down his throat. The burst of vileness made him retch as he spit the insect out on the floor.

He cried out in sorrow and shame. He'd been dreaming again.

How had it come to this?

The weak light from the small window was illuminating his sorry state. It created a small circle of light in the center of his cell. He lay on the cold stone floor, hugging his knees tightly to his chest. He was shivering. He was sure he was dying of the cold fever.

The shaking increased as the unwanted reality sank in; daylight means the beast would return to its lair.

Pug was surrounded by heavy iron bars. The safety they provided was not for his benefit, but for his torment. Beyond the bars, nothing but darkness. He had no idea how large the room was the cell was in, but the echoing sounds made him think it was a vast underground cellar under Marcus' estate. As long as he stayed in the exact center of the cell, the beast's long hairy arms couldn't reach him.

But the dumb brute tried anyway. Relentlessly.

The first time he saw it he was sure he'd gone mad. He wailed in despair when he realized he had not.

At first, in the dark, he thought he was seeing a man approach, but as the beast came closer he saw the horrific truth. It was a nightmare version of a man. It was huge; as large as a bear and the parts not covered in thick black armor were covered in thick black fur. It had the general build of a man, but shorter legs and much longer arms. So long, when it charged his cage, it ran on all four limbs like a bull. Its face was almost man-like in its expressions of rage and frustration. He'd seen animals go mad, but this beast displayed anger like a man. Or like a madman.

It had charged the cage, slamming its massive shoulders and fists against the bars over and over. Its hunger fueled its furious attacks. An animal would tire eventually, but the brute seemed to find grave personal offense in Pug's very

existence as it roared, spit and beat on the bars as if seeking revenge. Only the night had brought any relief. At night, the beast shuffled away to whatever other innocent souls it tormented.

He whimpered as he heard shuffling and grunting echoing off the stone walls. He hugged his knees a bit tighter and fought the temptation to slink back away from the noise. He knew the beast was crafty and could rush out from any direction.

What had he done to deserve this? Just two days ago, he was enjoying the life he was meant to live with the promise of wealth and comfort for the rest of his days. After the brutal hardships he's had to endure his entire life, was he not due the simple life of the Patrician class?

He had fulfilled his duty to Ruttella, surely the horror his life had become was not her doing. Did her sex magic powers extend all this way? How could the curse find him over such a vast body of water? No, he was sure he'd not wronged his former owner.

It was so unfair! He did what those bastard Christians or soldiers or whatever they were had told him to do. He was only too eager to help. It's the kind of person he's always been! Help others in need, that's his motto, with no thought to personal advantage.

When Marcus' men had come for him in the jail at Deva, how was he to know it wasn't part of the plan? Nobody ever considered letting poor, sad Pug in on the details. No! Just yell and

threaten and shove and hit him; that's all he's good for! When they saw the oxen cart full of Marcus' gold looking for "Gratian", why shouldn't he speak up? Would the real Gratian have done less? He was doing his part in their wicked deception and this is how he's treated.

And that cow Galla! She should be showering him with gold and affection right now. Was it not because he'd brought her along that she was now in the fine villa above him enjoying delicious roasted meats, honeyed sweets and rare wine? His mouth watered at the thought of food. A part of him that he feared suggested he should eat the remains of the bug he's spit out. At least it was something! How long would it take in this horrible place before he found such a thing a welcome delicacy?

He tried not to think about it and turned his thoughts to brighter things.

Like revenge.

His kindness was his weakness. The world is full of evil men and evil women who prey on kind men like Pug. Men like that treacherous bully Henno.

The armored beast tormenting poor Pug had many similarities to Henno; they both had more strength than control, both lived only to torture Pug and they both had terrifying fangs. He was sure Henno had fangs.

His lamenting was cut off by his own scream as the hairy beast, not Henno, charged out of the darkness behind him and

hit the bars like a battering ram! How long had it been there watching him? A shower of dust fell from the ceiling giving the growing sunlight a shifting haze.

"You're a bully!" Pug raved helplessly. "I hate you, Henno! I curse you!"

His pitiful squeaking was drowned out by the monster's deep roar as it pounded on its metal-covered chest like a giant drum.

The assault stopped when a trumpet blast was heard far off in the darkness. The beast stopped in mid-roar and sniffed the air. It stared at the quaking Pug with obvious reluctance to surrender before shuffling away into the dark after the sound. Pug tentatively uncurled himself. He edged slightly toward the bars and looked intently into the darkness.

He nearly crapped himself when the beast gave one final charge at the bars! He did crap himself when the beast made a huffing sound like laughter before shuffling away again.

If he'd had any tears left, he would cry.

Just when he felt himself sinking into an exhausted heap, he heard a clanking sound from above him.

"What...? Who's there?" He called out.

A chain holding the top of the cage began to pull. The top separated and although it was still too far for any civilized man to scale, he could see a trap door being opened above him.

Torches held by several soldiers in a mix of barbarian and Roman garb illuminated the rich toga and smiling face of General Marcus Buteo.

"Vibius Claudius Gratian!" He called out as if seeing an old friend across the market. "Or should I call you by your other name?"

Pug's blood froze. Why are the gods torturing him so?

"Friend Gratian!" Marcus continued smiling broadly adding to Pug's mind-breaking confusion.

Marcus waved to one of the soldiers who tossed down a rope.

"I was wondering, my friend," Marcus called down. "Would you do me the honor of joining me for a light breakfast?"

He held a delicate cloth to his nose as he added, "Perhaps after a bath?"

Pug or Gratian was already looping the rope around his waist and jumping up and down eagerly, mewling like a kitten. The soldiers began pulling him up, out of the cursed darkness and into the light.

As much as he longed for a hot bath, food and drink, he'd trade it all to see Henno facing the horror of that beast's lair. The farther he was raised into the light, the broader his smile became at the thought.

#

Henno would happily trade places with anyone at that moment. He stood by the horse-pen watching Volucer as she strutted among the lesser horses. She'd been cleaned, fed and now that

she'd seen Henno, she ran around the ring on wings. Not a care in the world.

Unlike Henno.

His right arm alternated between terrifying numbness and mind-numbing pain. He welcomed the pain, despite it feeling like hot knives being dragged across his skin from the inside. The pain was almost crippling, but the fear that washed over him when his arm went dead was worse. The fat Greek bastard told him the pain was a good sign.

And Henno desperately needed a good sign.

The camp was buzzing with fear and anxiousness. A battle was coming. Even if Henno didn't know these soldiers were within hours of taking the field, he would've been able to tell. All the sounds, all the sights, even the smells told him men were preparing to kill and to die.

Tomorrow at dawn, they would march out against a much larger force.

Part of him longed to join them again. To go on one last march with steel on either side and behind you. To face an impossible battle with strong friends. That's how he should go out of this world to the next.

But sadly, that would never happen.

He saw it in the familiar faces that glared at him. Even soldiers he didn't know scowled and spit when they saw him. Word had spread he'd killed Titus and the others. He'd stolen General Stilicho's horse. He was an outcast among the only

world he'd ever known. A heart he'd long thought immune to such things broke when he saw the disgust in their faces. Volucer decided he needed cheering up and started a fight with another horse. She chased the unworthy opponent around the ring a few times, calling out her challenge before rearing up on her hind legs in victory. Barrel even stopped eating long enough to whinny his congratulations.

Henno smiled. He may not have earned that horse, but he was damn sure going to try.

"Scorpio! At least leave us a few nags in case we have to leave in a hurry!" A familiar and unwelcome voice shouted out. He didn't bother turning around.

"Rufius." He barked over his shoulder. "You get a promotion to shit-shoveler?" Henno grimaced as he slowly moved his right arm to rest on the gladius hanging from his belt. He felt sweat break out on his forehead as his arm burned just from the simple act. He'd be damned if he was going to let that ass-licker Rufius see it though.

He turned slowly and leaned against the wooden post. He adopted a carefree attitude, when in reality he needed the post's support. Mithras, he thought, give me strength. I'll take the pain, just don't take my arm.

Rufius had several soldiers with him. The grins they carried faded to angry snarls at Henno's retort.

One of them, the biggest one, stepped forward. "Thief! Murderer! Crucifixion is too good for the likes..."

His rant ended in a choked grunt as he saw Henno smiling at him.

"Rufius, I don't believe I've met your lady friend." Never let the enemy see your true strength or lack of it, Henno thought. He slapped his thigh and whistled. "She's a looker, that's for sure."

Before the big soldier could draw his blade, Rufius stopped him with a hand on his arm.

"Now, now." Rufius smiled. "Let's not argue like children. I was making a jest, my good friend Scorpio. By this time tomorrow, we are all likely to be crossing the river Styx in the same boat. Let's not quarrel over what was done in the past."

Good friend? Thought Henno. One of us has gone mad.

The soldiers with Rufius were dismissed and stomped off tossing mumbled threats over their shoulders.

Rufius held his arms wide. "I don't come to fight with you, Scorpio. I come in friendship. I come to speak to you of important matters. Matters more important than a nag and few dead soldiers."

"Same old Rufius." Henno snorted. "A man of the people."

"Mock me if you must, but although we've never been in agreement on many things..." Rufius' voice was taking on that annoying Senatorial quality that always made Henno want to strangle him.

"We've never been in agreement on anything, Rufius." Henno was enjoying not adhering to proper military protocol by skipping over his rank of Tribune. He could see how much it bothered Rufius, even though he was hiding it well. Henno hated actors, on stage and off.

Rufius continued playing his little game. Whatever it was. It certainly wasn't Black and White.

"I wanted to speak with you. Privately. The world is changing, Henno. May I call you 'Henno'?" His voice dripped honey.

"All my friends do." Henno replied coolly. "So, no."

Rufius laughed as though they'd just shared a joke. Henno tried to recall if he'd ever strangled a man with just his left hand.

"Well then, as I was saying," A quick glance around, "There's a wind blowing across the Empire."

Henno hid his shock behind a mask of smugness, "A wind from the East." He added. So, Rufius was part of the plot!

Stilicho's second in command? Things had gone from bad to infuriatingly bad.

Rufius practically clapped his hands in joy. "I knew it!" He hissed. "When I heard you'd arrived in camp, I knew it! I told them. I said it. He's here for a reason, I said." He looked as though he might start dancing any moment. "I always suspected you were smarter than you let on."

"Don't be so sure." Henno replied calmly, although when he said it out loud it didn't sound so clever.

"Ah, yes," Rufius gave his reply a confused look, before continuing, "We can't talk now, but I will find you when the time is right."

He was within arm's reach of Henno now. The only thing that saved his life was his reference to 'them'. He would name his co-conspirators, then he would die screaming.

Rufius took a startled step back as Volucer's massive head draped protectively over Henno's right shoulder. She snorted and glared at Rufius with obvious violent intent.

"Ah, magnificent...horse, my friend." He stammered trying to hide his intimidation. "I don't suppose you'd consider selling? You could certainly name your price."

Henno stroked her nose with his good hand, his right was cold and numb again.

He appeared to consider the offer.

"Tell you what, Rufius." He haggled, "You put an edge on that fancy dress sword, geld yourself and I'll think about it."

One of Henno's favorite jokes among the Centurions was that Rufius didn't even own a sword; just a jewel-encrusted pommel sticking out of an expensive scabbard. Nobody had ever offered eyewitness testimony to the contrary.

Rufius laughed nervously as he backed away. "Very good. Yes. A clever jest." He stared at the strutting mare with a faraway look as he muttered, "A queen. She was born to be a queen." He

glanced around again, looking every bit like the field mouse he was. "We'll talk soon."

He gave Henno a quick wink and disappeared among the tents.

One question answered, Henno thought, watching him go, I'm not mad. He is.

Henno slumped his shoulders. Is everything a lie? It made him tired all over just thinking about the layers and layers of conspiracies.

Friends have become foes; foes have become friends.

It was too confusing for a stand-up, face-to-face soldier like him to be involved in. He'd thought the mystery and double-talk at the Folcutt Monastery was confusing, like looking for shadows at night, but he found himself wishing he was back there right now.

At least the bread was always fresh.

Volucer interrupted his thoughts by gently nudging his right arm, sniffing it from shoulder to elbow with concern.

"You a healer now too, girl?" Henno spoke soothingly. "Don't worry about me. I've been in worse spots."

Volucer didn't believe him any more than he did himself. She blew out her breath with a frustrated whinny.

"Don't believe me? I'll tell you about the time I was in..."

His conversation was interrupted by another familiar and unwelcome voice.

"Talking to your horse isn't unusual," Stilicho said as he approached alone. "But when you hear a reply, stop drinking."

Henno turned, his face a hard mask. He saw Stilicho's eyes flick to Henno's right hand which was still resting on his gladius' pommel. If he could've moved his hand, he would. Anyone offering even the hint of violence to a man such as Stilicho could be killed on the spot. Then again, how many times can they crucify him?

Stilicho chose to ignore the implied insult and joined Henno at the fence. Volucer eyed him cautiously, shaking her head and pawing the ground aggressively.

Stilicho was unfazed by her threatening display. He stared at the giant white beauty with the awe and the admiration of a true horseman.

"She's remarkable." He muttered. "A perfect animal, isn't she?"

Henno shrugged. "She's alright. Gets a bit gassy when she eats too many apples, but as nags go, I suppose it's better than walking."

Stilicho gave him a sharp look until he saw the grin on Henno's face. He grunted and his stone face split with a small grin of his own.

"Some things don't change." He added wryly.

It was Henno's turn to snort derisively. "Name one thing."

Stilicho sighed with a heavy breath as he leaned on the fence next to Henno.

"You're right there, Centurion." He shook his head,

"Everything is changing."

The both watched in silence as Volucer raced around the ring bullying the other horses.

"If you knew what I'd paid for her..." Stilicho began, but stopped when Henno's voice cut him off like the crack of a whip.

"You know damn well what I paid for her!" Henno glared at his old commander who continued to watch the horse, not able to meet his eye.

"You're right." He nodded. "It was all a tragic mistake." He was facing the pen, but his eyes were focused on the past as he spoke.

"Titus loved you like a brother." Stilicho started. "When he heard what had happened, he begged...no that's not fair, he demanded to be sent after you. He would not allow anyone else to send you from this life. He said you deserved to be in the company of a friend when you passed."

Henno had a lump in his throat from the dust the horses were kicking up despite the light rain and muddy ground. Must be the dust, he thought as he swiped at his eye.

"I was in Ireland to collect...I'm sorry, you've named her I suppose?" He continued.

Henno coughed. The dust, of course. "Volucer." He croaked.

Stilicho nodded. "Flyer." He smiled as he watched she shoved her way to the water trough. "A good name."

Barrel strutted beside her with all the cockiness of someone with a much larger friend.

After a moment he went on, "She was bred by a master horseman. He said she was descended from Bucephalus himself."

Henno cocked an eyebrow skeptically.

Stilicho shrugged. "I doubted it too, a merchant's empty claim, but seeing her..." He shook his head. "I think I believe it now. The horse trader was chased by bandits. His party escaped and took refuge in that mud puddle of a town you found her in. I was on my way to finalize our deal when you...acquired her. I was furious. I thought you'd done it to spite me."

Stilicho suddenly straightened up, his back as stiff as a new recruit. "I have rescinded your death sentence. The horse is yours."

Henno knew how hard it was for a man like Stilicho to admit defeat. It was one of the few things they had in common.

"Gratitude." Henno mumbled. "For that and for saving...my...life."

Stilicho was all business. "That was due to your young friend's insistence that you two will remove the Lady Galla from Marcus' estate and take her to safety."

Henno noticed Stilicho hadn't said anything about bringing her to him. He knew his chances of survival were slim. Almost as slim as Henno and Fergus' if they go forward with this insane mission.

Stilicho fixed his hawk-like gaze on him. "How will you do it?"

Henno grinned. "Haven't a clue, sir."

Stilicho threw his head back and laughed. He held on to the fence as he brayed loudly. Henno couldn't ever remember seeing the General laugh. Everything is changing, he thought.

"Some things never change." Stilicho said as soon as he had his breath again.

As they stood silently watching the horses, Henno debated whether to tell Stilicho of Rufius' betrayal. They were obviously being watched. If he said anything now, doubtless Rufius would be watching the commander for any sign he'd been found out. Besides, Stilicho would just as likely not believe him. He's perfectly willing to allow Henno and the boy to take on a suicide mission, but could he really expect the General to take sides against his most trusted aide?

No, better to find out who else is involved before moving.

Stilicho seemed to be debating with himself as well. Finally, he turned and faced Henno.

"It is likely we'll not meet again, Centurion. I would have us part as comrades." He extended his hand.

Henno's arm was still numb. The best he was able to manage was a twitch of his shoulder which made his hand drop from his sword's pommel. Truth be told, he didn't try very hard.

"I can't do that, sir." He said stiffly. "But know that I wish you a great victory and will do my utmost to get Galla to safety."

Stilicho nodded and marched away.

Henno was left alone with his doubts. Get Galla to safety? He didn't even know how to get to her, much less how to get her out. Now he's discovered yet another snake in the woodpile; Rufius and who knows who else. If he was smart, he'd just pack up and ride away, but he knew Fergus would never agree to it. A lightning bolt of pain jolted him from his self-pity. He flexed his hand painfully and pulled his sword from its scabbard. The pain was slightly less terrible. It only made him want to throw-up.

He tried a few moves but it was all he could do not to drop the blade. It felt too heavy. He felt as awkward as a farm-boy picking up his first sword, but he pushed himself. Slowly he felt his arm loosening up, but the pain was still excruciating. After just a few minutes, he had to sheath his sword. He was gasping, sweating and trying his best not to toss up his last meal.

He noticed it had gone quiet in the horse-pen. He looked up and saw all the horses were watching him with big, curious eyes. It was as if Volucer had demanded silence. Henno chuckled despite the pain.

"Want a show, do you?" He called out to the animals through gritted teeth.

He straightened up, pulled his sword and began to practice again. He took a deep breath and rode out the agony.

He would be damned if he was going to look bad in front of his horse and her friends.

Faster and faster he pushed his agonized body, forcing it to his will. He was muttering under his breath. So focused on the simple task of sword drill, even he wasn't aware of it.

#

Fergus had been watching from a short distance away. Either he was better at following discretely or Henno was very much off his game.

He had watched as Rufius and his goons approached Henno; as Stilicho had words with him and now as Henno muttered and cursed under his breath while working through basic sword drill.

"Earn...your...salt!" Each word was punctuated by a jab with his sword into the big wooden posts surrounding the horse-pen. Despite the obvious dedicated exertion, the jabs were weak. The gladius was barely sticking into the hard wood. The years and the injuries, new and old, had taken their heavy toll. Fergus couldn't expect Henno to continue on their mission. He could barely stand.

Henno was covered in sweat, gritting his teeth as his weak, clumsy movements got weaker and clumsier. Finally, he doubled over and retched on the ground. The gladius slipped from his hand. Fergus nearly ran to help him, but he knew Henno would only find more pain in being discovered in such a vulnerable state.

Instead, with hot tears burning his eyes, he turned away.

Chapter 30 - The Villa of the Usurper Marcus

Fergus wasn't feeling in prime physical condition either. As the Marcus' villa came into view, he longed for more time to rest. His body ached, but his soul pained him more. To have brought Henno all this way only to abandon him at this, the final stage of their mission, was the hardest decision he'd ever made.

Perhaps, this was Henno's role all along; to bring Fergus to this place safely. He certainly wouldn't have survived on his own.

It wasn't fair, but he had no choice in the matter, Henno could go no further.

Leaving General Stilicho's camp had not been a problem. The looks on the faces of the soldiers was more "good riddance" than "good luck".

He walked. Part of him wished he could have taken Barrel, not just for the comfort of riding over walking on his aching feet, but Fergus desperately longed for a friend right now. Even if he was successful, he knew Henno would never forgive him. God grants us too few friends to toss them away but he'd rather lose a friend than see his friend lose his life.

He carried next to nothing with him. His plan, if he could attach such a lofty description to the half-formed bad idea he had, was to approach Marcus' villa as a humble monk offering prayers for victory. Many such men roamed the empire,

spreading the word and living off whatever coins could be wrung from the hopeful. More than likely, there would be other such priests of various religions and sects promising victory, gold, eternal life; whatever would get their feet in the door. Fergus continued shuffling along glumly as he realized he would most likely be turned away as just another "religious beggar." Or worse, he'd be recognized and killed.

He was close enough to smell the fires of the huge camp of Auxiliary soldiers which surrounded the estate. What he'd thought were low-lying rain clouds was the thick, black smoke of their cook fires. It covered the sky over the estate like an evil storm of Marcus' own making.

The faint sounds of the soldiers' battle preparations were identical to the marching camp he'd just left. Why shouldn't it sound the same? After all, both sides are trained, equipped and led in the Roman fashion of warfare.

As he topped a small hill, he could see the villa better, but more depressingly, he could see Marcus' army spread out protectively around the estate's walls. The enormity of his task was suddenly all too real. He'd never seen so many people in one place at one time. It staggered him. This wasn't a harvest gathering. It wasn't the packed city of Rome he'd heard so much about his whole life.

This was an army.

Men gathered to reap the benefits of killing other men. His stumbling footsteps slowed as if he'd lost his way. Hope flew

out of him as if he'd been punched in the gut. What had seemed so possible within the relative safety of the monastery now seemed like a monumentally impossible mission to even consider.

He couldn't take another step. He dropped his small pack and sat on a rock by the path he'd been following. He bowed his head and prayed.

"Lord, why have you brought me all this way, put so many hardships before me, cost me the friendship of a great man, only to have me fail at the very doorstep of our goal?" He asked in a whisper.

Only silence. He shook his head angrily in frustration.

He felt his face flush with anger and his hands clench into fists.

He wanted to spit! He wanted to rip the cross from his neck and stomp on it!

He leaped to his feet and shouted at the sky. "Where are you? Am I to whisper quietly like a frightened child in your presence? All I have done I have done for your glory and for the glory of your word. Why will you not give me one sign that I am not a fool? I have been humble and I hear nothing. I have sacrificed and you do not respond. I have begged and received nothing from you! Why do you continue to ignore those who profess to love you? Are so cruel? Must I insult you to hear your voice?"

Fergus whipped out his sword and waved it at the sky. He knew he was acting like a madman, but his anger well up inside him threatening to consume him totally if he didn't release it.

"Come then!" He howled. "Come face me! Wood, bone or steel, it's all the same to me!"

He waited, but no bolt of lightning, no angel with a flaming sword answering his challenge. Nothing. Just the wind, the sound of rain and the distant sounds of men preparing for war. Anything, any kind of response would be welcome at this point. He was fed-up with hope. He had exhausted himself waiting for a sign.

No more. He had no more expectations and no more illusions.

What follows now is on his head and his head alone.

Depend on none and none will disappoint. He took a gloomy satisfaction in creating an adage.

He shoved his sword back in the scabbard at his side, checking to make sure it would slide out easily again. Just like Henno had taught him, he thought sadly.

He shouldered his pack and marched like a Roman soldier down the path to what waited for him.

#

Galla waited nervously. Something had changed.

The servants which had doted on her had been replaced by two of Marcus' barbarian soldiers. They politely but firmly informed her she was to wait in her rooms until Marcus sent for her.

What had gone wrong?

When that conniving traitorous slave Pug had delivered her up like some kind of bundle of firewood to Marcus, she was convinced she was as good as dead. Instead, Marcus had flown into a rage, even struck 'Gratian' as he raged about some long-passed insult. Then, he promptly ordered Pug/Gratian tossed in his villa's prison.

Just as quickly, his rage disappeared and he greeted Galla as if she was his invited and most honored guest.

Later, she discovered Gratian, the real Gratian, had caused the financial ruin of one of Marcus' close friends in Rome. It had caused an embarrassing scandal and Galla suspected had something to do with Gratian's flight to Ireland.

Of course, none of the former-slave Pug's hysterical ranting had been considered. His claims of secret plots, killer monks, false identities and sex magic were dismissed if they'd been listened to at all.

She was startled from her worrying by the sound of the guards at her door snapping to attention with a metallic clank.

Marcus' body servant scurried in squeaking, "The rightful Emperor of Rome, the hero of Britain, the honorable, the just, the...eek!" Marcus swatted him like a bothersome fly as he breezed into the room.

"As radiant as the dawn." His smile displayed teeth as decayed as his soul, thought Galla. She pretended she was greeting Fergus, who had such perfect, healthy teeth.

"It's such a relief to see you again." She replied warmly, then shouted in surprise, "What are you doing here?"

Marcus' smile broadened as Fergus stepped in behind him, managing to look both nervous and determined at the same time. He was dressed in his monk's robes, covered in mud and soaked to the bone. It took every ounce of her royal blood to keep her mask of indifference in place and not run to him. He looked so wretched and sad!

"I hope I can always manage to surprise you, my love." Marcus beamed. "You do know each other then? We get so many beggars with such outlandish tales, but this one..." He eyed Fergus with a reptilian glance, "This one seemed genuinely concerned about you."

Fergus bowed, staring at the floor as he spoke. "Forgive me, Domina. I was lost and made my way here as quickly as I could."

Despite her shock, Galla realized the best course is to say as little as possible despite the millions of questions burning through her mind.

She gave him a tight smile, as one gives a servant who has erred, "I am glad you are well, Brother Fergus." She turned to Marcus, "May I ask that he be given food and access to a bath?"

Marcus shushed her and she wanted to stab him in the heart. He cooed as if speaking to a child, "Of course, of course. We can't have him stinking up the ceremony, can we?"

Galla's heart froze. "Ceremony?" She tried to sound casual. Marcus was smirking with delight at having surprised her again.

"Our wedding, of course! We will pledge our love at dawn in my villa's temple to Venus. I accept your Christian faith, as long as it doesn't interfere with your wifely duties or your devotion to myself, naturally. This young priest will perform the ceremony with all the trappings and pomp of your religion. Does that please you?"

He continued on, his eyes drifting above her, safe in the knowledge that her agreement was as inevitable as it was unnecessary.

"As the sun rises a new royal dynasty will be born and a great victory will be won. We shall become one. One with each other and one with a new Rome!" His eyes focused on her again with a leer.

Fergus' stared at her intently. She could practically hear him shouting in her mind, Just go along with him! Trust me!

Galla fluttered her eyes shyly and hoped the pig Marcus mistook her flushed cheeks as the blush of a nervous bride.

"I am breathless with anticipation, my emperor." She whispered breathily. How much longer would this fool buy her act?

She glanced up and seeing his moony-eyed schoolboy face mixed with animal lust, she realized she had plenty of time.

She gave him another bright smile, "Now my future husband, if you will allow me to discuss the ceremony with my priest and

send your servants to me with something appropriate to wear. We have much to do before dawn!"

Marcus practically skipped out of the room as he babbled.

"Yes! The coming battle! The envoy has been sent to the enemy. We don't have much time. You!" He slapped his cringing servant again. "Go do all those things she said!"

The servant ran out. Marcus gave Galla another leering look before sweeping out majestically.

Fergus started to speak, but Galla stopped him with a wave of her hand.

"Brother Fergus, will you hear my confession?" She knew the guards must be listening. She had no reason to trust Marcus. He may be ruled by his desires, but he's managed to keep his head on his shoulders while many more deserving men have not. It was a testament of his likeness to the rat, not the lion.

"Of course, Sar...my...Domina. Lady Galla." Fergus stammered. "Confession is part of what a..." He stopped as Galla pulled him to a couch by the far window.

They put their heads close and whispered as though performing the Rite of Confession.

He smelled of sweat, horse and fear. Galla saw how exhausted and worried he was; his eyes were sunken and red, his hands dirty and bleeding, he limped as though he'd walked far. Her heart went out to him, but she knew they had little time for mutual sympathy.

"How did you find me? Where's Henno? Does Stilicho intend to attack?" She babbled so the words ran together.

Fergus closed his eyes and for a brief instant she thought he'd fallen asleep. He opened them wearily, as if they were weighted down. "I don't know how I found you. Somehow Henno knew where..." He took a deep breath, "Henno is injured. I don't know what Stilicho intends, but we must get you away. Far away."

"Yes, of course!" She whispered fiercely. Why do men always think they need to state the obvious? "What is your plan?" She asked patiently.

His shoulders slumped with exhaustion and defeat.

"I haven't a clue." He muttered. "I honestly didn't expect to get this far."

She realized the enormous weight placed on this young man's shoulders. He was not born to this life, yet he continues to place himself in more and more danger. What drives him? Of course, she thought. It's his faith.

She gently took his hand, it felt cold. He gently squeezed her hand gently as if holding a butterfly.

"Fergus, would you like to pray with me?" She whispered.

He stiffened as if insulted, pulled his hand away and stood. The servant girls were bustling in with armloads of dresses, wigs, make-up, jewelry and perfumes.

Fergus ignored them as he spoke loudly and formally, "Domina, I leave you to prepare for your wedding. I will make myself more presentable and return at your convenience."

She started to shoo the jabbering slaves away, but Fergus bowed and marched through the throng of fawning women and eunuchs.

Something in his gait reminded her of Henno.

Henno injured? It was unthinkable. He seemed like the kind of soldier who was impervious to injury. As impervious as Fergus' faith. What had happened?

Where was Henno?

#

"Where is he?" Henno roared as he burst into Stilicho's command tent.

He was preceded by one of the exterior guards flying through the opening first and sprawling on his ass before Stilicho and the meeting of his generals.

"I'll kill you!" The young soldier shouted as he drew for his gladius.

Henno barely noticed him as he kicked his sword away. "Get in line, boy." He growled.

"Enough!" Stilicho commanded. The soldier picked up his sword and skulked by Henno back to his post.

"You!" Henno shouted as he pointed at the cowering Pug. "You back-stabbing, shit-covered little..."

Stilicho barked with a voice that stilled even Henno's,
"Silence!"

Pug was dressed in a fine tunic and wore the brass plate around his neck signifying he brought a message from an Emperor. Marcus is just as full of himself as he ever was, thought Henno as he glared at the shaking Pug.

"I take it you know Marcus' envoy, Vibius Claudius Gratian?" Stilicho said with a wary eye on Henno.

"General!" Rufius rose from his seat, his face full of credible-looking indignation, but with a twinkle of amusement Henno alone detected. "Let me deal with this lout!" His hand was on the pommel of his sword as he snarled at Henno. The other generals were calling for Henno's head.

Pug's loud squealing voice rose above theirs, "Keep him away from me! I am on official business. I have been sent by Emperor Marcus..."

"Ha!" Henno laughed.

"...by Emperor Marcus", Pug continued in a shaking voice which rose with confidence, "to discuss either the terms of battle or the terms of your surrender!"

It was not unusual for such discussions to precede a battle, but Henno wasn't going to let this farce go on any longer. It was time for him to flip a few game pieces.

"Horseshit!" he shouted.

Before anyone could stop him he'd grabbed Pug with his left, he still wasn't sure of his right, and pushed him against one

of the tent posts. He grabbed Pug's robe at the neck and lifted the little man so he was standing on his toes, his eyes wide in terror.

Henno locked eyes with him. "You're here to deliver a message to the traitor. Who is it?"

It was an old trick. One an experienced spy would never have fallen for, but Henno knew Pug's secret: He's an idiot.

He couldn't help himself. The sweating, shaking slave glanced at Rufius.

There was a shocked moment of silence before everything seemed to happen at once.

Rufius shouted as he drew his sword, "Death to tyrants! Long live the..."

Stilicho's voice cut through it all, "Seize him!"

The other generals jumped on Rufius, grabbing his arm and thumping him solidly on the head. The guards rushed in and dove on the pile of men beating Rufius senseless. Stilicho let it go for a few moments as Henno gave Pug a grin.

"You're next, sunshine." He rumbled. Pug ruined his fancy new tunic when his bladder released in fear.

"Enough." Stilicho commanded and the beating stopped. "Bind him, confine him and send the Legion Interrogator to me."

Stilicho raised an eyebrow to Henno. "Unless you'd care to give us all a lesson in questioning the enemy?"

"Gratitude, General." Henno grinned at Pug, but it was all teeth and no humor. "But I think I'll start with this morsel before moving on the main dish."

Stripped of his armor, weapons and clothing, the bleeding and barely conscious Rufius was dragged away. Stilicho picked up his expensive sword which had been knocked aside in the beating. He admired it as he quipped, "I would've bet a month's pay there was no blade in that fancy scabbard." He tossed it to one of the tribunes as the men laughed.

Stilicho grimaced at the puddle at Pug's feet. "You could've at least tried to do that outside my quarters."

He nodded his approval to Henno.

Henno went to work. It was all about setting the proper mood, he thought, much like seducing a woman. Your target must believe you are capable of all your words have promised.

"I've missed you, Pug." He snarled.

As Pug took in a breath to deny everything, Henno hit him. Hard. He'd unconsciously used his right arm, grateful it responded to his will. The blow flew into Pug's skinny belly, just above the navel with an upward hook at contact. Henno could feel the blow didn't have the force he expected, but the results were still pleasing.

Pug's eyes popped wide, his mouth gaped like a fish and he fell to his knees gasping and choking.

"He'll need a moment or two." Henno stepped back and looked around as if lecturing a room of recruits. "Questions?" One of the Generals raised his hand as Stilicho stifled a grin.

Henno stood at parade rest, feeling every bit like he did the first day he'd put on the Centurion's crest.

He jutted his chin at the general, "And you are...?"

The General almost came to attention! Henno was loving this.

"Ah, General Severus Germanicus Padius, 2nd Cavalry." He announced.

Henno nodded for him to continue.

The General continued, raising his voice over Pug's coughing, "Where's the best place to strike a man if you want to cause intense pain, but leave no mark?"

"Excellent question, sir!" Henno clapped his hands together, his right was starting to go numb again, but he was still able to move it. For now anyway. Best keep using his left for a bit.

"Best way to answer is to show you." He looked around the tent. "I'll need a volunteer." He feigned surprise as if just noticing Pug at his feet. "How about you, sunshine?"

The men in the tent were laughing and taking their seats again. Stilicho was waving his servant to pour wine and Pug was whimpering.

#

Fergus was floating.

His mind was barely conscious of his body. All he knew was water, steam and warmth. The bath had been perfumed with lavender. As he breathed in through his nose, he was filled with memories of his home. His first home. There had been the scent of lavender then or at least the scent triggered all the thoughts and emotions of his earliest childhood.

He slipped a bit deeper into the bath feeling the warm water cover his ears.

He floated.

His half-open eyes drifted with the curls of steam. A bright lance of sunlight illuminated the center of the large marble bath. The opulence of Marcus' villa was overwhelming. The bath he was soaking in was at least twice the size of his room back at the monastery. He could feel the hot water as it dribbled in from the far end, renewing the warmth of the waters with small ripples. He could feel the heat coming from the bottom. A hypocaut, his father had told him many years ago when they visited the public baths together for the first time. Heat generated by fires maintained day and night by servants and pushed through a space under the floor. Brilliant, he thought. Mother...Father...Henno...home...Galla...he pushed the unwanted memories away with practiced ease. All that time in prayerful meditation had some benefit, he thought idly.

He floated.

He marveled at the amazing innovations of Roman life. The Empire had done so much for humanity; roads, medicine,

literature, security, a hot bath! Something so simple was such a gift to all who experienced it. How could such things be lost? How could anyone conceive such a powerful force as the Roman Empire could fall? It was ridiculous. No, it was more than just mere nonsensical thinking and mistaken conclusions. It was criminal to expect him to risk his life for such a mad idea. And not just risk his life, but the life of Henno. And for what? To steal from others? To commit what they have always told him was a sin? He's killed other men on this mad quest. Did Canus and the others think the owners of these precious books would just give them up?

He pushed it all away again and floated.

He jumped at what sounded like a man shouting in anger from far away. He sat up suddenly, looking around the room.

Nothing. He was alone. Where had the sound come from?

He ducked back under the water. He heard it again. A long howl of rage mixed with the sound of someone pounding a drum. He pressed his ear to the marble bottom of the bath. It echoed as if beneath the bath was a long hallway or stone room.

Now all the unwanted thoughts rushed back. Rushed back like a charging Minotaur. There was no mistaking the sound of a monster. As much as he wanted to believe it wasn't true, he knew in his heart what he'd just heard.

As he sat up sputtering water he was shocked to see a small servant scurrying into the room.

"The rightful...eek!" Was as far as the mousy little man got before Marcus smacked him in the head sending him scurrying away.

He stood smiling down at Fergus, but it was the smile a serpent gives its prey. Fergus knew he would have to choose his words carefully. This serpent didn't need to know it was dealing with a wolf just yet.

"Brother Fergus," He began, then acted as though he'd made a mistake. "But apologies, is that the correct title for one so young? I thought the Christian training was more extensive. Am I in error? Galla referred to you as 'Brother'. Was she in error perhaps?"

Fergus stepped out of the bath and began flicking off the water with his hands.

"I would not presume to correct either yourself or the Lady Galla, Dominus." Fergus began, making sure his voice and manner were that of a servant. "I am a priest in training, my proper title was 'novitiate', but I have left my order at the request of the Domina to serve as priest in her house's chapel. I had hoped to continue my training in Ravenna." The best lie, he thought, was one covered in truth. It saddened him that he'd developed the skill so easily.

Fergus was dressing in a simple brown tunic similar to his monk's robes. Marcus edged his way around the bath toward him with such exaggerated casualness it was almost comical. They'd taken his sword and small pack when he'd arrived. Fergus

considered how easy it would be to drown Marcus in the pool. It may end the coming battle, but not the civil war. The gold was the key. Without it, there was no army, no rebellion. But who cares about gold and rebellions anyway? How could he get to Marcus' library? And how could he get Galla to safety? His head swam with the problems he faced as his host droned on. "Ah, that explains everything." Marcus soothed, although it was obvious it did not. "Are you quite sure you're authorized to perform our wedding ceremony? I want no confusion in anyone's mind as to the validity of our union, either in her faith or mine."

Fergus saw an opportunity. Just a small crack in the rock hovering over his head, but with the right push, maybe...

"In the Christian Ceremony of Marriage, the priest is more of a witness. Professing your love and following the simple ceremony is all that is required. I would like to make one small request, Dominus."

"Of course." The snake eyes narrowed at him. "Ask."

"I lost my books containing the details of the ceremony."

Fergus dropped his eyes to the floor, as if ashamed. "May I ask if you have a library which might contain any documents to aide me?"

Marcus' laugh echoed around the bath. It grated on Fergus' ears.

"Oh, I may have a few scrolls lying around in a trunk somewhere." He chuckled. "Worm!" He shouted.

The little servant came scurrying back in immediately dropping to his knees before Marcus so quickly it made Fergus' knees hurt just to see it.

"Escort our...Novitiate Fergus to the library." He never took his eyes off Fergus. "Will there be anything else?"

Fergus bowed. "You are more generous than I deserve, Dominus. I only ask to be allowed to pray for your inevitable victory." The only way Fergus could say those words with sincerity was to pretend he was speaking to General Stilicho.

Marcus gobbled up praise like a pig. "I will strive to be a generous Emperor." He nodded as if he'd arrived at a decision. "Yes. You will do. I can see why she chose you. You recognize true power when you see it, as well as your place in the world." The last was said as he left the room. Fergus wasn't sure who he was referring to, not that he cared.

Fergus cleared his throat. Despite the bath, he felt dirty again.

"Your name can't be Worm." He asked the servant, still huddled in a ball on the floor.

The little man raised his head cautiously, like a mouse expecting an owl to swoop down on him. He nodded quickly as he rose. At first Fergus had guessed him to be in his late 30's or older even, but as he looked closely, he saw the slave was much younger. Maybe even only a few years older than Fergus. A hard life was etched across his nervous features.

"The Dominus calls us all 'Worm'." He shrugged. "It's easier." He gestured toward the door and Fergus followed with a grin. The servant returned Fergus' smile hesitantly and his heart went out to him. A slave sees few smiles, he thought. "I don't want to call you that. What is your true name?"

The slave stopped. "Drest?" He asked.

Fergus laughed. "Drest, it is then." He followed him out into the hallway.

Drest turned suddenly, "Please don't call me that when anyone can hear." He whispered fearfully.

Fergus' face must've betrayed a flash of anger toward Marcus and cruel men everywhere. Drest involuntarily crouched, expecting a blow for his insolence.

Fergus calmed him with another smile. "Friend Drest, you have nothing to fear from me."

Drest didn't seem fully convinced, a life of servitude didn't instill a sense of trust in others, but he managed another small grin of gratitude before scurrying ahead down the wide hallway.

If fear is the foundation, then perhaps it's time for the empire to fall, Fergus thought. No one should live as a slave.

#

Marcus walked the hallway with a slow, measured gait. Only the lower-classes had to hurry. Those of breeding, those who are in control of their emotions and their days planned ahead

dedicated the correct amount of time and effort into each aspect of their lives.

He barely heard Worm's pathetic mewling. "What did you say, Worm?" He glanced at the skinny slave-girl. Had he had this one yet? Probably.

The girl was shaking. It was a common reaction for a low-born when in the presence of greatness.

"Your generals await your pleasure, Dominus." She repeated a bit too loudly.

"What!" Marcus shouted as he gave her a cuff on the side of the head knocking her to the floor. "Why was I not told?" He gave her a kick for hurting his hand.

"I'm surrounded by incompetence!" His voice echoed up and down the hallway as he ran toward his day quarters. "Worm! My purple robe! My crown! The new necklace, the gold one! Not the silver one! Worm!"

Several slaves appeared from wherever they cower when not in sight. They scurried frantically at his bellowing.

Why was he not informed sooner? He nearly fell as one of his slippers flew from his foot. Was there time for him to bathe? Food. He should provide them food. So many things to keep in mind.

None knew how difficult it was to be a ruler. He was alone in all things.

He slapped another slave as he rushed into his quarters tearing off his clothes to don the proper trappings of an Emperor.

#

Fergus heard Marcus' voice echoing from far away, but a charging elephant's trumpet would've had a better chance of registering.

He felt like he was floating again.

Marcus' library was a monument to the written word. No, it was a temple to knowledge; a holy shrine dedicated to history, art and science.

From the mosaic-covered floors to the high-domed ceiling were books, scrolls and writing on nearly any flat surface he could've imagined. Blocks of wax, wooden tablets, stone tablets, thinly-shaved strips of wood, parchment of all kinds; it was staggering to imagine how much precious knowledge was contained in this room.

The intricate designs on the floor depicted oceans, maps and lands both real and imagined. The ceiling was covered with star-patterns and smiling faces of either gods or men, he couldn't tell.

Drest stood by the door as if afraid to enter. He glanced nervously over his shoulder, the sound of Marcus' shouting had faded, but he obviously felt compelled to follow the echoes.

"Young master," He squeaked nervously, "is there..."

Fergus interrupted him. "I am no man's master." It sounded harsher than he intended in the large room. He added with a smile. "You can call me Fergus."

Drest nodded but still looked conflicted as whether to stay or go.

Fergus couldn't stop looking at the collection. "A small trunk, he said."

Drest took a small, shuffling step inside the doorway. "The Dominus pays you a compliment by sharing his humor with you." Fergus laughed as he saw the grin on Drest's face.

"How long have you been a member of this house?" Fergus asked.

Drest shrugged. "I was born a slave, mas...Fergus."

The question obviously troubled the man. He glanced again at the hallway as he retreated a step back to the doorway.

Fergus switched to more pressing matters. "Where did all this come from?"

Drest looked around the shelves with an unmistakable gleam.

"From many places. The Dominus has many friends who have been sending writings to him for several years now. When the villa was first built, I never imagined all these shelves would be filled one day. Now, there's barely room enough."

Fergus recognized the look of admiration in his eyes as he stared at the massive collection. "You can read, can't you?" Fergus asked quietly.

The gleam was immediately replaced by the fearful look of a slave who'd been caught stealing. He babbled, on the verge of

running away. "No, master! It is forbidden for a slave to know letters. I would never betray..."

Fergus quieted him. "Of course not and I would never betray you to Marcus. I only ask if you can help me sort through all of these documents so I can find what I need for his wedding ceremony. A catalog perhaps? Are the documents grouped by topic?"

Drest glanced up and down the hallway before stepping in again. He locked eyes with Fergus and whatever he was searching for, he found it. He swallowed nervously and nodded slowly.

Fergus whispered, "Drest, if there was a fire and only you and I were here to save what we could of this collection, could you help me determine what is the most important?"

The gleam returned with a shy smile. "Oh yes." He said quietly. "It would be my honor."

#

Marcus paused to collect his thoughts. He stood before the large wooden doors to the larger dining room. The fountain was nicer there and the entrance was on a slightly raised platform with marble steps leading down to the circle of couches where his guests would be now reclining as they finished the exquisitely prepared refreshments he'd ordered provided for them.

Six Auxiliary Generals of six Roman-trained, battle-hardened barbarian legions. These six men were the fingers of the fist

he planned on using to smash his way to the throne of the West. Their first battle would humiliate the pompous Stilicho. The man who stole his glory at the Battle of Frigidus. Marcus cursed and spit. Marcus was the one who turned the tide by tactically maneuvering his troops to the other side. The payment was his due, but it was not for gold that he fought, but for glory. The gold he'd been given had been put to good use, but the glory had been stolen from him by Stilicho. Now he would have his revenge and much, much more. He would defeat Stilicho using the same tactic; a trusted confederate making the choice to join the winning side. General Rufius would be the thumb of the fist that would smash Stilicho. He smiled at the thought of men on the other side of the door. Six good men, leaders who spoke the language of both Rome and of their barbarian troops. They'd been drawn from the mud of their homelands and taught the art of war by Rome. The old Rome had abandoned them. All the promises of citizenship, of land and power had vanished when Honorius, the boy emperor, had pulled his troops out of Britain. Now, they would serve Emperor Marcus and the new Rome. His Rome. They were his Pantheon of Victory.

"Worm, light the torches." He muttered and the two attendants raced to light the large torches they carried behind him. It would be a marvelous sight from where his generals would be waiting. He would be lit by the soft glow of golden light; Mars himself made real. What an inspiration! No doubt he would

interrupt conversations of tactics, of battle experiences, each man secretly hoping to be the one who rises above his fellows to perform some heroic deed and catch the eye of their blessed Emperor Marcus.

He pushed the doors open with a grunt. He must remember to beat Worm for not oiling them properly.

A wave of noise and confusion washed over him.

The room was a complete shambles. A herd of horses couldn't have made a bigger mess or a worse smell. Of his six generals, three were fighting in the fountain, two were sleeping and one was puking loudly over the balcony into the garden below.

He closed his eyes and imagined he was already on the throne in Ravenna.

"Announce me, Worm!" He called over his shoulder snapping his fingers impatiently. His generals had not noticed his entrance.

"The rightful..." His slave shouted as he rushed down the marble steps.

"Bring us women, you goat!" General Flavius interrupted from the balcony as he threw a clay pot at the cringing slave.

"And more wine! Before we castrate you again!" General Sextus roared, which for some reason made them all laugh hysterically.

Flavius, who was the nominal leader of the others, noticed Marcus first. "Marcus! It's about time!" He used the priceless curtains to wipe his beard ineffectively of the expensive

regurgitated refreshments. "Where's our gold? My boys want paying."

The others stopped their various barbaric activities and grumbled with agreement.

Marcus kept reminding himself that by this time tomorrow, he would be the ruler of all Britain. The force which would put him and keep him on that throne stood before him.

He spread his arms wide, a generous showing of his acceptance.

"My generals. You are welcome to my home! We are about to embark..." A loud belch and the sound of a plate breaking broke his concentration.

Flavius dropped heavily onto one of the couches and kicked a very expensive glass goblet over with his foot.

"If I wanted to hear wind blowing, I'd feed onions to Blandis!" Flavius shouted. The other men roared with laughter as General Blandis leaned to one side and emitted a loud blast of noxious wind.

Marcus continued smiling, focusing on his upcoming wedding night as he made his way down the steps.

When dealing with simple men, use simple words.

"I am happy to provide you with any proof, a token payment perhaps?" He knew offering would be more than enough. His word as their emperor would be enough to satisfy them, of course.

"Now you're talking!" Flavius shouted as they all stood.

"We'll take a load back to show our men so they don't think we marched all this way for nothing."

Marcus tried to hold his temper. An Emperor must know when to fight and when to placate.

"Excellent." He said through gritted teeth. "Worm!"

His slaves did that stupid thing where they act like they don't know which of them he's calling. After an insufferable moment, all three dropped to their knees before him.

"Bring my generals women and wine and a trunk of gold." The generals roared their approval, not hearing Marcus add quietly, "Ugly women, cheap wine and a small trunk. Go."

The slaves ran away as he graciously accepted the cheers of his generals who were so impressed by his magnificence and generosity they averted their eyes while smashing his priceless furniture in some barbaric rite of loyalty.

#

Henno rubbed his eyes while he tried to find the words.

"Shit me out of...how could standards have fallen so low so quickly." He stared at the Legion Interrogator in total amazement at the man's incompetence.

The interrogator, whose name was Tarquinius, started to answer, but Henno stopped him. "I wasn't talking to you." He looked at Stilicho.

The general was staring at the lump of babbling, naked, bleeding flesh that was once his second-in-command, Rufius. Rufius gurgled something through his bleeding, toothless mouth. It sounded like "King's Queen, all gold" and maybe

"Monsters." He'd been screaming so much his voice now sounded like a rusty wagon wheel.

He'd been driven mad by the pain of torture.

Tarquinius glared at Henno. He was rail-thin, covered in scars. He shaved his head bald for some reason or maybe he just liked it that way. His bloody instruments were all over the tent; whips, blades, pliers, assorted metal prods and fire. A coal-filled brazier had various instruments jammed in it as the smoke filled the tent with a choking stench that nearly covered up the stench of bowel and blood.

Henno ignored Tarquinius' angry glare. "He's useless to us. Whatever information he may have had about the opposition or other traitors is lost to us. He's gone."

Tarquinius took a step toward Henno, a hot poker still in his hand. Henno was as threatened by the gesture as he would be by a summer breeze.

"Do you question my loyalty?" Tarquinius growled.

Henno didn't budge. "Not yet. I'm questioning your ability right now, sunshine."

The interrogator flinched, but realizing he had little support in the tent he jutted his chin out defiantly. "He held out too long. I applied what pain I thought reasonable. You can see for yourself how much pain he endured." He waved his gnarled hand at Rufius as if there was some evidence to support his feeble excuse.

Stilicho shook his head sadly. "Finish him cleanly. A Roman officer, even a traitor, deserves better than this." Without a glance back, he left the tent.

Henno locked eyes with Tarquinius. "Who was it?" He nodded at the man's gnarled hands.

It took him a moment to understand the question. "Sasanians." He muttered finally. "They held me for 3 days."

"Picts." Henno replied. "I don't remember how long."

Tarquinius nodded. "I didn't break." Henno could tell by the way he said it that he had.

Henno shrugged. "Doesn't matter. You still see his face, don't you? The one in charge of your questioning."

"Yes." Tarquinius snarled. "His name was..."

Henno shrugged again. "Doesn't matter." He added. "No matter how much you hurt others, you'll never beat him. You'll never even find him. He won."

Tarquinius' expression went from angry suspicion to angry confusion.

Henno continued. "It's an important job you have. An army wins or loses based on information. Yes, it's also unbroken supply lines, sharp edges and strong hearts, but without the right information, the battle is lost before it starts."

"I know that." Tarquinius snapped. "You think I don't..."

Henno went on quietly, he knew what the man had gone through.

"What you don't know is that your job isn't about giving pain, it's about giving hope."

Tarquinius shook his head in confusion. "Hope? What are you talking about?"

Henno sighed. "Any brute can hurt someone. You have to give them hope. Hope that if they tell you everything, they'll live. Hope that they'll be granted a swift death. Or hope that if they do what you ask, the pain will stop. It's not pain that makes a man talk, it's hope." He pointed at the insensate Rufius. "You took too much from him. He had no hope left."

He wasn't sure if he'd convinced him, but the interrogator at least seemed to appreciate the advice. "Gratitude." He replied with sincerity.

Tarquinius took a deep breath as he shoved the poker back into the brazier of coals. He picked up a large knife and stepped toward the post Rufius was hanging from.

Henno stopped him.

"I'll do it." He pulled his gladius and ended Rufius' pain.

#

"Strap up, ...Oh, it's you." Henno burst into the small hospital tent he and Fergus had shared to find the healer packing up his tools and belongings.

The Greek nodded in reply and returned to stuffing his trunks full of assorted items, many of which don't look like they were his own. The Greek was behaving more sullenly than usual. The purple swelling around his eye where Henno had thanked him for his medical treatment hadn't improved much. Let him fix

himself, thought Henno sourly as he tried to make a fist with his right hand.

Henno looked around, Fergus' armor was still stacked near his cot. "Where's the lad?"

The Greek turned and stared for a moment through his one still-open eye. "Why is it you Romans insist on asking questions with obvious answers?"

"Why is it you Greeks never answer any questions?" Henno grunted impatiently as he started gathering up his belongings. The Greek seemed to be pondering that as if it was a real question, so Henno repeated, "Where's the lad?" loudly enough to make the healer flinch.

The big man shrugged, sending his flabby flesh bouncing which disgusted Henno. He hated laziness and this man was a living monument to eating too much and moving too little.

"He's not here. That's all I know." He finally admitted.

Henno nodded at the packed bags, "Going somewhere?"

The Greek smiled, "As you may have guessed, I am not a soldier."

Henno was already getting bored with this word play, "It wasn't a guess, sunshine."

The Greek healer continued, "In my trade, the dead have no need for a healer and the losers have no coin to pay. I suspect the other side will have more survivors and thus, more opportunity."

Henno's face turned grim. "You're deserting to the enemy?"

The Greek looked surprised. "No. I'm going to hide in the mountains with the other civilians and wait to see who wins." He ignored the disgusted look on Henno's face. "Before I go, have you changed your mind about...?" He nodded at Henno's arm.

Henno flexed it, grimacing at the pain. "All better. Pack up your knives, butcher."

The Greek sighed and continued packing up his knives. "It will be some time before you regain its full use. If ever. I still advise..."

Henno's bark stopped him. "I've got enough use of it to blacken your other eye! On your way."

The Greek shrugged again, as if he was somehow immune to Henno's threats. "As you wish." With that he continued to pack as Henno surveyed Fergus' belongings.

Several items were missing. Could the lad have...? No, even a love-struck boy wouldn't be so stupid.

Or...?

Never underestimate the stupidity of the young.

Pug didn't hold back any information. Quite the opposite, he was so filled with hope Henno had to punch him in the gut again to get him to stop babbling. Marcus was convinced Pug was the real Gratian and promised to allow him to go free once he'd won his victory. Rufius had been promised a cushy job as adviser to Marcus. An especially cushy job since Marcus wasn't likely to take advice from anyone there'd be little to do.

And of course, gold. Marcus had the gold. He'd promised a fortune to the six barbarian generals who led the rebellious Auxiliary legions.

But now he was worried Fergus had done something completely stupid. Like going after Galla himself. Henno ground his teeth in frustration. The more he thought about it, the more it was obvious. The lad thought he could save the girl and complete their task all alone. He must've thought Henno was incapable. He flexed his right hand. It was painfully stiff, but working. He knew he had to go after him. This was all down to him. It was his bad idea that put them on this path together. He'd given his word to protect the lad. But how could he get in the villa? He considered donning his monk's robes but it was one thing to fool some country plebes, but even then he had Fergus to back him up. On his own, Henno had little faith he could pull off the deception.

He punched one of the tent posts in frustration, biting back the howl of pain that welled up inside him.

The healer glanced at him, but didn't speak as he shouldered his pack and began lumbering toward the tent's opening.

"Hold on there, butcher." Henno called out. "I don't even know your name."

The fat man paused at the entrance without looking back. "If you live, I do not relish the idea of you finding me. If you die, what does my name matter?" With that bit of wisdom he waddled out of the tent.

Henno's mind had already latched onto something. His name? Of course!

He stormed out of the tent with half a bad idea already forming in his head. It was already starting to get dark. The activity in the camp had increased. Word must've spread that the enemy had been sighted.

He was angry, but he was also scared. Not an uncommon feeling for someone who's lived the life of a soldier, but the anxious fear of not knowing the fate of a friend is much worse to him than the fear that comes from being in a losing battle.

He was scared for Fergus. Most likely the lad was dead already.

The idiot, if he's not, I'm going to kill him! He fumed, regretting the gallows joke as soon as it formed in his head. He liked the young man. He trusted him and there was damned few people he could say that about.

He stomped through the mud, shoving anyone who got in his way. Titus had died at his hand. He was determined Fergus wouldn't die for a lack of it.

He was muttering quietly. "He's young, he's stupid, but he has a destiny. He deserves a better champion, but I'm all he's got. I'm all that you've given him. Give me the strength to help him on his path."

If someone pressed a sword to his gut and demanded, Henno couldn't have told them who he was talking to. He just hoped someone was listening.

#

Fergus' head was swimming, his eyes were burning and his back ached, but he couldn't stop reading. His mind was trying to keep up with his eyes as they darted over the words as if they might disappear any moment.

It was amazing! This collection was beyond his wildest dreams! Seeing the piles and piles of books in the huge room had overwhelmed him, but as he began to realize the fortune of information he was surrounded by, he realized the importance of his mission.

Whether or not the Empire was truly falling, this collection must be saved. The villa was between two armies which would soon clash like the tide against the beach. Even if Marcus was an honorable man who would use this wealth of knowledge to help others and not fill his bottomless greed, it was too dangerous to leave it all here. He must save it.

No. Call it what it is. He must steal it. He felt the weight of the task settle upon him, erasing the euphoria he felt only moments ago. Steal all of this? How? And what of Galla? How was he to get her to safety? Was there anywhere safe? Did she even want to be saved?

Guilt and despair washed over him. He wished Henno was here. He'd know what to do.

Drest interrupted his dark mood with a gleeful laugh as he ran to the table where Fergus was sitting. He dumped an armload of

scrolls and books on the already full surface and practically danced as he picked up one after another.

"Here!" He his words ran together with excitement. "This one is an amazing history written by a man named Titus Livius! It's all about Rome's early founding. You'll love it! And here!" He snatched up another. "This one we must save. It's a recipe book!"

Fergus couldn't help but find his mood brighter at the man's infectious enthusiasm. "A recipe book?"

"I think so!" Drest opened the scroll. It was elaborately decorated with detailed drawings of creatures Fergus couldn't identify. "See? It's filled with animals from another land. The pets of the gods maybe? I can't read the language, but the sketches are...wait! Here! This is a lexicon for the language of a people called Sumerians. It's got Latin next to their words! Can you believe it?"

Fergus couldn't believe it. Everything in this library was precious.

Drest was still babbling, "That reminds me! They, those Sumerian folk, wrote so much! There's a whole section dedicated to their gods! They fought all the time! Just like ours! Do you think...? Wait here! I'll go get them!" He ran off, first down one row before sheepishly ducking back out and down another.

Fergus had tried to prioritize what he was finding but it was near impossible. The pile of 'must save' continued to grow

while the pile of 'leave behind' was yet to find a single candidate.

No. He couldn't decide. Even if he had time, he couldn't bear the thought of losing any of the treasures he's found so far. Even if he had the time, he reminded himself.

He put his head down on the table. The smell of ink and parchment filled him. He'd have wept if he wasn't so afraid his tears would wash away a single precious word on the papers under his face.

It was impossible.

#

"Impossible." Stilicho said with all the authority of an experienced commander.

Henno stood before him wearing the armor of General Rufius. It was his best bad idea.

"Pug said Marcus has never met Rufius. He'll present me as he was ordered. What can go wrong?" He scratched his ass absentmindedly. Rufius put some kind of salt or something in his trousers to give them a completely unnecessary crease. It itched like mad.

Stilicho shook his head. "For all your qualities, Centurion, you are not officer material."

Henno was tired of people telling him what he was or was not.

"I'm all ears if you've got a better idea!" He took a breath and continued with more control. "Some would say I'm not

priest material either, but I've managed to pass myself off as one."

Stilicho raised a skeptical eyebrow.

Henno waved off the unspoken question. "It's a long story. I can do this. Marcus is expecting Pug to return with Rufius."

"And you trust this slave won't betray you?" Stilicho asked.

"I trust Pug to fear my anger above all else." Henno replied confidently. He knew it was dangerous and the first opportunity he had, Pug would most likely betray him. He just needed to get inside. After that, it was all a roll of the dice any way you slice it.

Stilicho gave up. He also knew to pick his battles. "You should be carrying Rufius' spatha." He held out the dead man's fancy sword. "A general doesn't carry a gladius."

Henno shook his head. "I need a sword I can rely on. Not some fancy-boy's toy." He nodded at Stilicho's weapons of choice, adding with a grin. "I see you favor a soldier's blade."

Stilicho regarded his gladius. "True enough." He waved his hand dismissively. "You are not under orders of the Roman Legions any more. I gift you the armor for revealing the traitor. However," His voice became cold, "if you are caught wearing that by any of my men, you will be killed as an impostor."

"Understood." Henno added with the same chill in his voice.

What a bastard, he thought. Some things never change.

"Fortuna smile on you then." Stilicho returned to his map.

Henno saluted smartly, "The fickle bitch never had much use for me."

He wheeled smartly and marched out of the tent before Stilicho could reply.

It's nice to get the last word every now and then Henno thought.

He wrapped the red cloak around him tightly, jamming the helmet low on his head, but the two guards snapped to attention seeing only his uniform. He would have to move quickly. It was still dark, the camp was being struck and preparations for the coming battle would hopefully distract anyone from eyeing him too closely.

He made his way quickly toward the horse-pen, head down, returning salutes and ignoring any confused remarks muttered in his wake.

"This is the worst bad idea I've ever had." He mumbled.

#

Galla paced nervously. The servants kept trying to compliment her or hold up mirrors for her so she could admire the fantastically expensive wedding dress and jewelry. Galla tried ignoring them, but the tightly bunched pack of yammering women and eunuchs kept moving to keep into her field of view.

"Enough!" She finally snapped. "Your charge is competed. I'm wrapped like a gift on Saturnalia! Leave me!"

The servants froze in terror. One flabby eunuch was elbowed forward. He spoke in the voice of a small child, which sent a

chill through Galla. "Apologies, Domina. The Dominus told us we must stay...so...in order to..." His voice trailed off into a helpless whisper.

"Very well." Galla tried to soften her tone, but found the group of frightened servants only served to increase her anxiety. "But stop following me everywhere. Go stand over there." She waved at the far corner.

After exchanging worried glances, the group moved as one to the corner and stood in a tight bunch.

Galla sighed. Where was Fergus?

As if in answer to her question. Fergus was ushered into the large room by one of the guards. He looked cleaner, but there was still a haunted look about him. Surely, he and Henno had a plan of some kind?

"Domina." He said formally with a quick confused glance at the servants standing together in the corner.

Galla shrugged helplessly. "That's the best I could get them to do." She waved him toward the seat by the window overlooking the garden. The herd of nervous servants started to follow, but she stopped them with a commanding voice, "Stay!"

Fergus joined her on the seat. They spoke in hushed tones.

"It will be dawn in a few hours." He said. "We must get you to safety. By dawn, the battle will be joined just beyond these walls. Marcus will have a perfect seat from which to watch a bloody spectacle beyond anything imagined in the arena."

Galla was still unsure of how much she could tell him, despite wanting with all her heart to reveal all. Logic and reason were her best weapons. They had served her well so far, there's no need to blunt them with emotion now.

"The gold is the key." She whispered. "Pug betrayed us. He brought both the gold and myself to Marcus. He continues to play the part of Gratian."

Fergus' tired eyes burned with fury. "He is the one who...you didn't come here on your own then?"

She matched his fury with her own. "How could you think that?"

She snapped, still trying to maintain a low voice. "I was tied up and carted here in the same wagon which carried my brother's gold to Marcus!"

Fergus blinked in surprise. "Then you know it is Emperor Arcadius who plots against Honorius?"

Men, she thought. So determined to think themselves intellectually superior. "Yes. Of course I know. And so does Honorius. Why else do you think I'm here?"

"You said you were brought here against your will, but..."

Fergus was struggling to keep up.

Galla sighed. "Pug...Gratian thought he would present me as a gift. He didn't know I was on my way here anyway. Marcus tossed him in a cell as a reward."

"But..." Fergus was trying to unravel the details of the conspiracy. Given time, he would most likely do so, but Galla couldn't allow that just yet.

"None of that matters now, Fergus." She snapped. "We must secure the gold. Without the gold, Marcus has no army. Do you understand?"

"Yes." He sat up straighter, the determined look back in his eye. "And the library. It's coming with us."

"The library?" She shook her head. "Impossible."

The look on his face thrilled her and chilled her at the same time.

"Nothing is impossible." He growled sounding very much like Henno.

She found herself nodding in agreement. His eyes made her believe him. She didn't know how, but she believed with his help it would all work out. Somehow.

#

Pug burped loudly. "I think I'm sick."

Henno didn't bother looking at the whining man, still dressed in his fine clothes. "You probably are. You're most likely dying. Talking will just make it worse."

"Why do you say that? I'm trying to help you." Pug whimpered.

"All I do is help others and this is the thanks I get."

Henno gave Volucer a kick and rode ahead. The man's voice was giving him a headache.

Pug tried to get Barrel to speed up, but he was as proficient at riding as he was at anything else. Barrel snorted defiantly and continued to keep pace behind Volucer.

The villa was just coming into sight, it loomed in the night sky on top of a rise backed by a clear moon-bright sky. Henno was both discouraged and impressed by what he could see. The designers of this villa knew their business. It was on top of a natural hill and surrounded by trenches, no doubt filled with all manner of sharp objects. The walls were high with covered guard posts.

This was no country estate, it was a fortress. No wonder Stilicho had decided not to storm it. A single legion would have as much hope of taking it as a flock of sparrows. The valley it was situated in meant any attack would be channeled into a narrow line passing directly below the eastern walls of the fortress.

When the rebel Auxiliary army was in place, Stilicho would have to fight with his flank exposed to whatever missiles Marcus' men had available.

Out-numbered six to one and vulnerable to a rain of arrows. It was impossible.

And the glow in the sky beyond Marcus' fortress estate told Henno the barbarians were at the door.

His growing sense of helplessness was interrupted by Pug's whimpering.

"Please, master. Don't make me go back there." He had finally convinced Barrel to join Volucer. He rode next to Henno, bouncing in the saddle while he started to blubber like a child. "Why won't you believe there's a muh...muh...?"

Henno whirled on him, his glare silencing the cringing slave. "Don't say it! I swear to Mithras if you say 'monster' one more time I'll bash you so hard every slave in Rome will feel it!"

Pug's mouth continued working until he blurted out, "Muh...Minotaur!"

"Right!" Henno punched him so hard he fell off Barrel and tumbled down the slight incline by the road.

He rose to his knees, now covered in mud, wailing, "I didn't say it!"

Henno glared at him, "Close enough! You knew what I meant!"

Pug stood, still shaking from the cold and rage as he shrieked, "You're a bully! You're a terrible...muh...MONSTER!" He cringed expecting more punishment, but instead Henno turned Volucer and smiled down at him. "You'd better hope I'm monster enough."

Volucer turned back to the road with a condescending flick of her tail and Barrel following as Pug scrambled up the slope.

"What a load of bollocks." Henno muttered. Volucer's ears twitched and she shook her head nervously. Henno had learned to recognize when his horse sensed something she didn't like, but he continued to tell himself, "Monsters. Ridiculous. Impossible."

Unwanted arguments floated up into his thoughts: Pug swore he'd seen it. Something had torn those soldiers apart. Rufius' odd remark about monsters stuck in his memory like a splinter.

"Stop behaving like a child." He was speaking to Volucer as a way of not admitting he was speaking to his own fears.

"Monsters? Impossible."

The final unwanted argument filled man and horse with a spike of fear. From the estate, the sound floated up into the night sky: A rage-filled howl at the moon in a voice no man possessed.

If there's one thing Henno had found in this world that none could dispute, it was that nothing is impossible.

He turned to stare at Pug who had covered his ears. He glared until the slave realized he had no choice and he reluctantly struggled back onto Barrel.

Henno kept Barrel's reins in his fist and after the briefest hesitation, Volucer responded to his command and began trotting down the road toward the dark shadow of the estate at the end of the road.

He shook his right arm trying to get some feeling back into it.

Nothing is impossible, he kept reminding himself.

#

Nothing is impossible, Fergus kept reminding himself, hoping at some point a solution would come to him.

Galla was striding in full regal glory as if on her way to an imperial function. As was proper, she was 3 paces ahead of Fergus. Marcus' personal guard escorted them down the long hallway. Two in front and two behind. It was obvious Marcus

trusted no one. Not even his future bride. The very thought of having to perform a wedding ceremony, even if it was a sham, disgusted him. Galla made it clear she was only going along with Marcus in order to buy them time, but how much time was left?

Dawn would be breaking soon. First, the wedding, then the battle which would wipe out Stilicho's army. He knew he should be more concerned with the library and Galla's safety, but he couldn't help but feel as though he should try do stop the slaughter of thousands of men for an impossible cause.

Impossible. Again he was stymied by that word. Might as well try to save an entire legion from annihilation to the list. He had as much chance of succeeding at that task as he did at the others. Maybe he could try to turn the sun blue while he was at it.

Thinking about changing the sun brought an involuntary smile to his face. There are hundreds of Irish warriors under Loiguire's command who will swear to their dying day he'd covered the sun with Christian 'magic'.

And he knows a group of monks who were so peaceful they felt guilty for beating bread dough had defended their home against a much larger force of highly-skilled warriors. If someone had told him that, he'd declared it impossible.

There must be a way. He just had to find it.

The guards led them over a small bridge which spanned part of the villa's eastern grounds. Fergus' heart sank as he glanced

down. There were two massive catapults being prepared. Teams of men were checking ropes, pounding down the stakes to hold the contraptions steady and going over the wooden supports one inch at a time.

Stilicho's army would be passing by this side of the villa under a rain of stones the size of a man's head. The impossible just got a bit less possible.

Just before they passed under the archway back into the villa, they all heard a loud howl; like a hungry demon. The armored escorts all started with fright, despite knowing what it was. Galla covered her mouth with her hand and Fergus barely stopped himself from rushing to comfort her.

"What...what was that?" Galla asked quickly resuming as much of her royal manner as possible.

The guards were looking down at the grounds nervously. Fergus noticed the catapult teams glancing back toward the villa with terrified looks until an angry Centurion put them back to their tasks with a few hard smacks from his cane.

The senior guard cleared his throat and tried unsuccessfully to sound unafraid, "Domina, that is the Emperor's Minotaur. It's usually set free at night to guard the grounds."

She waved her hand to continue the escort, giving Fergus a quick worried glance over her shoulder as they stepped a bit faster than before. He gave her a slight nod with the barest of winks as if it was all part of his plan.

The Minotaur is real? Success may not be impossible, but it all just got less possible.

#

Henno was feeling pretty good about things far. Even Pug, he reminded himself to call him Gratian, seemed to be falling into character. A good thumping has always proven to be the best way to improve concentration.

The metal nails on the soles of his boots clicked smartly as they were led down the long marble hallway to meet with Marcus. Emperor Marcus, he reminded himself. The ball-less man-child who'd greeted them was very clear on using the proper title.

He had his helmet tucked under his left arm, his right swinging freely as they marched in step with the two guards. Even his arm was feeling better. Just a bit better but was good enough for now. Pug...Gratian, that is, was doing his best to stay in step and Henno had to admit, the slave deserved a bit of swagger. He had been true to his word. He'd gotten Henno this far.

The rest was up to him.

Two guards snapped to attention at their approach. Henno suppressed a grin by turning it into a snarl.

One of the guards leading them turned to say, "Wait here while I announce you." and got as far as "Wait here..." before Henno shoved him aside.

"I'm a bleeding General, boy. I don't wait!" Before any of the guards could react, he was through the big black doors with Gratian striding confidently behind. He liked playing the role of a general.

Then he regretted his impulsiveness immediately.

"Ah, General Rufius" Marcus cooed softly from his new throne, "How marvelous to finally meet you."

"Shit me out of a donkey's...Right." Henno tried not to stare, but knew it was too late. "It's me...I'm..."

Gratian had dropped to one knee, his head bowed in total subjection. He coughed and tapped the floor nervously. Henno got the subtle message. He would've liked to give the quaking little messenger a kick, but decided not only should he play the role of hopeful supplicant to this trumped-up, phony Emperor, but it would give him a moment to take in the sight before him.

Marcus was completely nude. Not completely, he apparently had on a thick coating of oil and some kind of reddish powder or spice. Cinnamon, maybe? Henno tried not to think about it too much.

But an even more bizarre sight was his new throne.

Naked, glistening Marcus was reclining at the top of a huge mound of gold coins looking obscenely comfortable. More obscene than comfortable, Henno thought, but he couldn't help but wonder what it must feel like to be sitting on all that

wealth. Cold and not very comfortable he thought, but still worth trying.

"General Rufius, at your command, my Emperor." Henno remembered not to bark like a proud Centurion, but did his best to emulate the quiet, cultured authority he'd always found irritating among the upper-class officers.

He heard coins clinking as Marcus shifted on the big pile of gold.

"Rise, my dutiful servants." Marcus said dreamily. Was he drunk?

Henno stood, trying not to display the mixture of disgust and anger he was feeling. He had a picture in his mind of shoving the pompous, naked fool under all that gold until the life left him.

He was snapped out of his daydream by the look on Marcus' face. He couldn't remember Henno from all those years ago as the one who delivered the gold at the Battle of Frigidus, could he? It was dark. Henno was merely the messenger. Marcus had barely acknowledged him and had eyes only for the satchel of gold he was delivering then.

Not now. He stared at Henno so hard he could feel the man's gaze on his skin. He fell back on his lifetime of soldierly experience. Back straight, shoulders set and eyes focused on some distant unseen point. Be stone, show nothing.

"I have many qualities which has made me the right man to rule." He said never taking his eyes off Henno's face.

Coins clattered and fell from the large pile like water from an overfilled tub. Some were still stuck to him as he walked slowly across the floor toward them. They slid off his body as he walked, clinking to the ground. The sound was disturbingly loud on the marble floor.

"One is my memory." He was so close to Henno now his nose confirmed that it was indeed a mixture of olive oil and cinnamon. He knew they were being watched. No doubt a score of archers were ready to plug him from a dozen different directions at the first twitch.

He was stone. Give up nothing.

"I can say with absolute certainty, we have met before."

Marcus smiled.

Gratian started shaking. He glanced around as if to make a run for it. Henno allowed his gaze to rest on Marcus. He'd gambled enough to know a bluff when he saw one.

"It's a small empire, Emperor. Getting smaller all the time."

Henno grinned. Want to see if you can make me sweat, little man? He wasn't about to fold now.

Marcus laughed. "Yes! Now I'm sure of it!" He clapped his hand sending more coins clattering to the floor. Gratian bit his lip as if trying to stop himself from diving after them like a puppy chasing a ball. "We were brothers in a former life. We stood side-by-side to build Rome, you and I. Romulus to my Remus! It is the work of the gods to bring us together again!"

Henno nodded. "I was thinking the exact thing." He added quickly, "My Emperor."

Finally his eyes left Henno. Despite himself, he wanted to sigh with relief. Marcus turned to Gratian who twitched at being noticed.

"Gratian. My loyal servant. My trusted friend." Marcus scooped two handfuls of coins which had been stuck to his backside and held them out to Gratian. The little man didn't hesitate. Gold is gold, no matter who's ass it was stuck to. "A token of my thanks."

Gratian bowed deeply, clutching the gold like a squirrel.

"Gratitude, Dominus...Emperor. I only ask to serve."

Marcus was already on to the next subject. "General. Are you quite ready?"

Ready for what? Henno thought, but said, "A good soldier is always ready." He bowed to cover the confusion on his face.

Marcus was walking to the window. Henno glanced at Gratian who turned away from eyeballing his gold to give Henno a confused shrug. Great, he doesn't know either. Is this something Rufius should know?

Marcus whipped around suddenly, his eyes full of anger. "You act as though you know my surprise, but that's not possible. Unless..." He took a step toward Gratian who slunk back in fear. "Unless you told him, but how could you know? Do you know?" He roared loudly. Henno could see it in his eyes. It

was a mistake to think him a fool, this man is dangerously insane.

Gratian fell to his knees again, still clutching his gold.

"Please, master! I don't know anything! I never know anything!" He wailed. "Nobody ever tells me anything!"

And as quickly as it appeared, the wild anger vanished. "Of course not, friend Gratian." Marcus soothed. "I merely wished to be the bearer of good news to my General." His snake-like eyes shifted to Henno. "My brother. You will have the honor of commanding my palace guards during the attack."

Henno bowed deeply as his mind raced over the possibilities. This could be useful. "I will do my...upper most to honor the...um...honor you have given unto myself." Talking like a spoiled fancy boy isn't all that tough, but he still didn't like it.

Marcus was waving at several slaves who rushed to his side.

"Gratian, be so kind as to introduce him to Centurion Arminius. He's yelling at the catapult crews, I would imagine."

"Leave off!" Henno hissed when he noticed Gratian tugging his sleeve. His arm had gone numb again. Did he say catapults?

"Hmm?" Marcus half turned as slaves carefully scrapped the oil and gold from his body. "Oh and don't dawdle. The ceremony will be starting shortly. I'll send Worm for you."

Henno bowed and followed Gratian.

"Ceremony?" He asked when they were out in the hallway again.

"The wedding ceremony. Hurry. This way." The little man was practically running now.

"Who's getting married?" Henno asked, but Gratian kept scurrying away.

#

Stilicho was still running over his battle plan looking for weaknesses as Podius strapped on his armor. The servant grunted dramatically as he pulled the straps of the gleaming breastplate tight. Stilicho shot him a look which the older man ignored.

Stilicho grinned at his own vanity. He was getting old; no need to chastise others for noticing it. Thinner on top and thicker in the middle, his father used to say.

Everything is changing.

He waved Podius away. The older man grunted, "Fine. Do it yourself then." He was as loyal as he was cranky. "Don't forget this." He nodded at Stilicho's sword belt hanging on the post as he began fussing with something else.

"Soup." Stilicho was hungry and the man's muttering was getting tiresome. "Hot soup."

Podius grumbled, "Hot soup will just loosen your bowels. How would that look? The great General Stilicho stopping in the middle of a battle to take a crap. You'll get bread and cheese and there's little enough time for that." He was still muttering about crap and generals as he left the tent.

Stilicho strapped on his sword belt and checked his blade. It slid easily out of the scabbard, but he applied another light coating of oil anyway. It was more out of superstition than need. His rough hands ran over the old gladius remembering every nick and scratch. It was a fine blade and had served him well.

A soldier's blade Henno had called it. So it was.

The blade was strong, sharp and dependable. Not unlike Centurion Henno himself.

He had no doubt that Henno had gotten inside Marcus' villa. His forward spies had confirmed it, but he knew it without their telling him so. When his former First Centurion had that look in his eye, whatever he decided was a done thing. He knew Marcus had no intention of only fielding a single legion against him. The man was a usurper, a traitor with no trust or trustworthiness in him. It would be six to one across ground owned by the enemy.

No. His plan was bold at best, but it gave them their best advantage. It bought them time. It would confuse the enemy. He felt Henno and the boy Fergus would play some part in this. At best he hoped the odd pair would confuse his enemy as much as they'd confused him.

#

"I'm confused." Henno snarled. "Was I given command of the guard by Emperor Marcus or were you?"

Centurion Arminius grinned with the few teeth he had left. Holding up his hands in a placating gesture that only further angered Henno, his voice dripped with condescension, "Don't mistake me, General sir. You're the officer in charge, I'm just an old soldier. I wouldn't know how to give an order if you ordered me to, sir." He laughed at his own joke. Alone. Henno started to speak, but stopped as Arminius motioned for him to step away so the catapult crews wouldn't overhear.

Henno knew this man. He knew him better than he wanted to know him. He was a Centurion much like Henno had been. He knew all the tricks, knew how to get the most out of his men and how to deal with officers. Henno was seeing himself through the old soldier's eyes and he didn't much like it.

"Here's the nub of it, General." Arminius was smiling as if doing Henno a huge favor. "I've been working with some of these boys for years before we got ourselves in Marcus' Guard. You just got here. We're all used to each other, you get me?" He mistook Henno's unchanging face for agreement. "Sure you do. You're a smart fellow. Knew it right away, I did.

Switching over to the winning side, that's smart. Same as most of us, truth be told."

"You're deserters then?" Henno tried not to let his anger show, but made the question simply a request for information.

"Well now, sir," Arminius didn't even have enough virtue left to be insulted. "I'd say you're only a deserter if your side loses, wouldn't you agree, sir?"

Henno swallowed down the anger rising up in him and managed a conspiratorial grin.

"Tell you what." The Centurion continued, "You just sit back, let old Arminius call the dance and we'll have ourselves one sweet payday when it's all over. How's that sound?"

Henno knew what he looked like to the grinning, greedy bastard. Expensive, highly-polished armor without a hint of a dent or a nick or even the slightest sign of repair. He was expecting General Rufius; a pampered member of the Patrician class of officers who were just passing through the military on their way to some cushy government post.

Henno didn't like it, but he knew the best card to play right now was the one face up.

He forced himself to sigh with relief. "That sounds just fine by me, Centurion." He saw Arminius' face brighten with a satisfied smirk. "How many men in the guard detachment?" He added casually.

Arminius glanced around briefly. "Half a cohort." He shrugged, "Give or take a few dozen, if you catch my meaning, sir."

Henno did. The weasel was skimming extra pay rations by adding fake soldier names to the roster. It was an old trick and suddenly Henno felt guilty about having done it himself.

He nodded at the smiling Centurion, the whole conversation was making him feel decidedly slimy. He spoke up in a louder voice, "Very well then, Centurion. Carry on. I've got a wedding to attend."

Arminius snapped to attention and saluted. "I hear and obey, sir!" He barked in a loud parade ground voice adding a slight wink.

That wink sealed his fate. Henno turned on his heel and marched quickly back to the villa.

#

Fergus was lost. He'd left the library at the last minute, despite the constant desperate pleas from a variety of Marcus' servants. Finally even Drest had started pleading with him to leave before Marcus sent one of his guards. Fergus relented and instructed Drest to continue to pack up the books as best he could.

But if the slave is discovered, Fergus had to believe he'd reveal Fergus' involvement. Even if he wasn't found in the library, how was he going to get all those books out? And Galla? Right now, this place is safer than any of the surrounding countryside, but after the battle? Could he really just sit by and allow a great man like Stilicho and an entire legion be destroyed?

Once again he regretted his impulsive decision to leave Henno behind. If he was here...

His self-pitying was interrupted by a hard and strangely familiar punch to his stomach.

He fell to the floor gasping for air and with surprise at the sight of Henno standing over him looking like an angry Mars in bright gleaming armor.

"There you are!" Henno roared. "Get up, you little snot-ball, so I can knock you on your skinny ass again!"

Fergus had no interest in getting up under those terms and began scooting backwards. Henno reached down, grabbed his tunic in both hands and lifted him to his feet. Instead of knocking him down again he wrapped his big arms around him and hugged him briefly. Fergus was about to hug him back when Henno gave him a shove and an embarrassed look.

"Right. Enough of that." Henno grumbled. "Just glad I didn't find your head on a spike somewhere." He waved a fist under Fergus' nose. "In the Legions, you'd be flogged as a deserter! From now on, we stand, we fight and we die as one. Right?"

Fergus snapped to attention. "I hear and obey, Centurion!"

Henno shushed him. "It's General, lad. General Rufius until I tell you different."

Fergus nodded. "And I'm Father Fergus, for now."

"He's marrying Galla?" Henno asked. Fergus nodded.

"We're expected." Fergus saw several worried slaves bustling toward them, no doubt frantic to get them to the temple before Marcus is kept waiting.

Fergus wasn't surprised to find Henno had no patience for nervous eunuchs.

"GET LOST!" Henno roared causing them to shriek like banshees and run the other direction. "STOP!" He roared again and they froze. "Which way is the temple?" They pointed with shaking

hands. "GET LOST!" He shouted again and they resumed their terrified retreat.

Fergus couldn't help but laugh. Henno's presence gave him hope. At least he know how to handle a flock of annoying eunuchs.

He fell into step with his friend and they marched together down the long stone hallway.

#

"What did you say?" Marcus spoke as if afraid to wake a sleeping child. Arminius found it more terrifying than when the man raged like an animal.

He kept himself locked rigidly at attention and prayed to his ancestors that Marcus wouldn't toss him to the beast in the cellar below. "The enemy has not yet taken the field, Emperor, sir."

"I heard you. Do you think me an imbecile?" Marcus moved closer to him. By the gods, this man scared the crap out of him, thought Arminius, and there's damn few men living he could say that about.

He bowed his head quickly. "Of course not, Emperor. Forgive me."

He could hear Marcus breathing slowly as the moment stretched out until Arminius was sure he would soon start shaking like a new recruit. Gods, but he hated this man. How much gold was his pride worth? How much gold was there?

"I anticipated this, of course, my friend." Marcus clapped him on the shoulder. His hand felt like a vulture's talon.

Arminius knew he was not considered a friend any more than Stilicho's confusing tactic had been anticipated. This fool is as much a general as he is an emperor. With gold, you can pay others to do your bidding. You can buy troops, he thought, but once the gold runs out, so do we.

"Send word to my generals at once." Marcus posed as if giving a speech to a crowd. Arminius couldn't help but glance around to make sure they were alone. "Tell them to attack. Surround the weakling Stilicho. Slaughter each and every one of his traitorous soldiers and bring the coward Stilicho to me. Alive." Marcus giggled like a child. "My sweet pet is hungry and he deserves nothing less than the famous Stilicho himself!"

Arminius saluted. "I hear and obey, Emperor!"

He tried not to rush out, but he definitely didn't waste any time either. The man was getting worse the closer he got to his goal.

As he stepped into the hallway, he saw that weaselly little shit Gratian hovering nearby.

"Centurion?" Gratian whispered with a furtive glance in every direction. "Can I speak with you?"

Arminius couldn't figure this one out. He dressed like an upper-class snob, but he acted like a latrine attendant.

Still, he didn't achieve the rank of Centurion by questioning anyone's authority. He put on his best subservient smile.

"Of course, sir." He nodded his head in a brief bow. "I'm at your service, sir."

Gratian grinned nervously. Arminius recognized the look of greed and conspiracy. This one was up to something. Crazy he couldn't work with. Greed, oh yes, that he could understand.

Chapter 31 - The Battle of Monsters

Henno tried not to rub his arm. It was hurting as if on fire, but he didn't want Galla or Fergus or any of the guards lining the sides of the temple to know.

Galla was building herself into a rage as she paced back and forth. "Where is he?" She asked of nobody in particular. "How long does he expect me to wait? It's outrageous."

Fergus stared at her while she ranted about Marcus' tardiness to his own wedding. Finally, he couldn't hold it back. "Do you want to marry him?" He muttered, trying not to be heard by anyone but the three of them as they waited by the alter.

Galla whirled on him, hissing through angry clenched teeth, "Of course not! Don't be ridiculous. It's just...he shouldn't...he said he would be here. Making me wait...it's..." She let out an exasperated sigh. "It's just insulting."

Fergus looked at Henno for support. "Let it go, lad." Henno mumbled. "Just let it go."

They waited.

One of the slaves scurried in with a nervous smile and fluttering hands. "All is well." He twittered to Galla. "The Emperor is on his way. I'm sure of it, my lady." He added unconvincingly.

"I will not be made to wait like some merchant on the doorstep!" Galla fumed.

Fergus started to speak again, but Henno held up his hand signaling he should keep his mouth shut.

"I'm just hoping he takes the time to put some trousers on." Henno muttered.

"What does that mean?" Galla demanded.

Henno shrugged it off with a slight shudder. "Nothing. Just talking to myself. I don't want to go into it."

Galla's angry reply was interrupted as a soldier ran in and spoke in a hushed voice to the ranking soldier attending the ceremony.

"You there!" Galla called out. "What's the reason for the delay?" Her anger was bumped up to fury as the soldiers ignored her.

Henno knew this meant trouble. "Soldier!" He shouted. "You will address your message to me, your commanding..."

His anger was also bumped up as the soldier in charge of the ceremonial guard barked out a command.

"Guards!" The soldier commanded. "Column of twos. On me. March."

The two dozen formed up and marched out of the temple without even a backward glance.

Galla, Fergus and Henno were left alone.

Henno broke out of the shock first. "This isn't good." Then he added. "Or maybe it is. I don't think we should wait around to find out who it's good or bad for."

"Agreed." Fergus was already heading toward the exit. "I'm going to the library."

"No! The gold!" Galla shouted at him. "We must secure the gold!" She was heading to join him.

"Stop!" Henno barked.

The young have no patience, he thought. "Here's what we're going to do..."

#

Marcus knew he was expected at the temple, but after he decided on the proper outfit he found it difficult to stop admiring his reflection in the large copper mirror. He was born to wear purple. The color of power. It suited him so well. The heavy, full-length and extremely expensive mirror slipped slightly as the two slaves struggled to hold it properly.

"Hold it still, Worm!" Marcus shouted. The early morning light coming from the balcony was perfect. He envied his future bride.

He heard footsteps approaching.

"Worm, send word to the Lady Galla..." He stopped when he saw Arminius and several soldiers reflected in the mirror behind him. "Oh, it's you. Have you sent the message to my Generals?" He could hear the smirking grin in Arminius' voice. "Not yet, sir, but we're about to."

His blood froze at the sound of several swords slipping from their scabbards.

#

Blandis shifted in his saddle. "How long we going to wait?" He added a belch which made Sextus laugh as always.

Flavius kept his eyes on the villa walls. "Once his royal ass decides to give us the signal, we attack."

"Attack who?" Sextus grumbled. "I don't feel like riding all day looking for someone to kill."

"They're still in their marching fort." Flavius explained for the 8th time. "And we're getting paid to..."

From Marcus' villa came a distant shriek of terror that grew louder after the obvious whump of a catapult launch. A figure flew over the wall, arm and legs flailing, screaming with a mixture of fright and outrage.

The body hit the ground a few dozen yards ahead of the barbarian generals and rolled to a bloody mix of purple and red. The bored troops laughed and cheered at the sight. Even from where they sat, the generals could see the shocked expression frozen on Marcus' bloody face.

Blandis took a big bite of onion, farted loudly and asked.

"Paid by who?"

#

Fergus found Drest in the library. He'd done his best to cram as many books and scrolls into the six large leather sacks bulging on the large marble table. Fergus despaired as he looked around the shelves at all the remaining works. His disappointment was reflected in Drest's eyes.

"I'm sorry, Fergus." Drest looked on the verge of tears. "I did my best. There's just so many..." His voice trailed away as he gestured at the rows of shelves.

Fergus nodded. "I know. And thank you, Drest. You've done a great service. More than you know." He held out a small pouch of coins. Drest shrank back as if it were a serpent.

"It's not allowed..." He stammered.

"You're a free man now, Drest." Fergus explained. "Your master is...not your master any longer."

Drest was confused, but he hesitantly took the pouch of coins.

Fergus continued, "It's not much, but it should be..." He stopped when Drest bolted for the door. "Right then."

Fergus turned to packed leather pouches on the table steeling himself for the long haul when Drest appeared back in the doorway. "Thank you, Fergus!" And he was gone again.

Fergus smiled until he felt the weight of the first sack. He suddenly appreciated all the long hours of painful exercise Henno had put him through.

#

"General!" The messenger rode up hard to where Stilicho and his remaining aides waited. "The enemy..." He started breathlessly.

"We can see them, soldier." Stilicho was watching, along with his entire legion which manned the ramparts with growing optimism, as the enemy slowly wheeled to the right. The entire army was on the march toward Marcus' fortress villa.

"If we move now, General, we can hit their left as they..." One of his younger tribunes was far too eager.

"We hold." Stilicho said, ending the discussion of tactics before it'd begun.

He wasn't a religious man. Too much of his life depended on what he could see and do to allow him the luxury of believing in magic. Still, he found himself hoping that "fickle bitch" Fortuna would smile on Henno, Fergus and Galla.

"Another victory then, I suppose." Podius mumbled. "Ain't we grand?" He was ignored by the officers, as usual.

Stilicho took off his helmet and tossed it over his shoulder knowing Podius would catch it. "Anyone feel like some hot soup?"

#

"You bastard!" Galla screamed. "You lying, cheating, traitorous, filthy bastard!" She was in the process of

revealing an even deeper understanding of curses when Arminius' mocking laugh interrupted.

"Now, now there, little kitten." He smirked from the seat in the packed wagon next to Gratian. "That's no way to talk to our new Emperor."

If it hadn't been for the wall of sharp spears wielded by several centuries' worth of guards, Henno would've gladly removed him from that seat and from this world.

Henno and Galla had arrived at the courtyard entrance to the lower levels just in time to see the guards marching in escort around the oxen-led wagon which had brought Arcadius' gold to Marcus. It had been hurriedly packed once again with all the gold they could find.

Arminius and Gratian sat side-by-side grinning like foxes.

Henno roared, "Emperor now, is it?" He pointed at Gratian, who despite the armed protection flinched with fright. "He's nothing but a slave! A fake!"

"Really?" Arminius spit. "Like a beat-down, old ranker pretending to be a General? That kind of fake? We are what we are and what we are is an army in search of an emperor." He dropped Marcus' heavy crown on Gratian's head. The little man's winced as if struck, but still managed a lopsided grin. "I like this one better than the old one. He's more agreeable."

Henno glared as the soldiers added their derisive laughter and insults.

Galla's voice cut through the mocking cat-calls. "You are thieves. You insult the name of Rome." Her angry speech was drowned out by loud suggestions from the celebrating soldiers. Henno put a hand on her arm and stepped protectively in front of her.

"Run then." He shouted. "You've got your gold, you've got your emperor. Run away before I get angry."

Arminius bowed in his seat and snapped the reins. The four oxen stirred reluctantly and began pulling the large, treasure-filled wagon through the mud toward the gate. "Good advice, fellow Centurion!" He shouted. "With that damned Minotaur loose in the villa, I'd recommend you all do the same!" The wheels of the cart creaked loudly as it rolled away.

"You did what?" Galla shrieked at him, now more in fear than fury. She grabbed Henno's arm frantically. "Fergus! We have to help him!"

"Right with you." Henno scooped up a dropped spear as the retreating troops were heading out with the wagon. He knew he only had one throw so he picked the target he wanted dead the most.

Arminius.

He took three quick steps and loosed. His right arm screamed in white-hot agony as he let the spear fly. It fell short, barely touching the retreating wagon's rear panel before clattering to the ground. Several soldiers started as if to

throw their spears in return, but just laughed at Henno's weak throw. A spear in his chest would've been less painful than the embarrassment he felt. They didn't even think him worth killing!

Arminius and Gratian were still laughing at him as the wagon rolled through the gates.

Galla pulled him again. "We've got to find Fergus!"

Henno handed her a long dagger. "Get the horses. Anybody gets within arm's reach of you, cut them deep. Understand?"

She shook her head stubbornly. "I won't..."

Henno's angry look stopped her. "You will do as I order!" He added, "I'll get Fergus and join you. I swear on my honor, Domina."

"On your word then, Centurion." She nodded grandly and headed toward the stables.

Henno shook his head in amazement. She'd somehow managed to make him feel as though he'd been given her permission.

"Royals", he snorted. "Always trying to get me killed."

He scooped up another spear and raced into the villa. Fear washed over him like a plunge in an icy river. He didn't know where Fergus was. He didn't even know where the library was. His arm felt like it was about to fall off and he was racing into the arms of a monster from a nightmare.

As promised, his life had a purpose.

#

Fergus froze at the sound. His mind refusing to accept what his ears were telling him. He heard heavy footsteps, snorted breath like a bull and the clanking of armor.

Before he could convince himself he'd imagined it, death shambled around the corner at the far end of the hallway. A massive man-like beast covered in black fur and black iron. It bared its yellow fangs at Fergus in a completely unnecessary show of aggression.

It was a Great Ape. Fergus had seen another the one and only time his father had taken him to the local arena. During the animal combat part of the show, an ape half the size of the one Fergus faced dispatched two huge lions with grim ease. This one is not only twice the size, but some twisted soul decided to encase it in its own armor. He could see why the rumors of a minotaur spread so easily. The shaggy beast's head sticking out of the black iron armor certainly fit the ancient description neatly.

Fergus met the monster's eyes and found himself reaching for the cross which hung around his neck. He didn't want to pray for strength or life, he only wanted a quick death. This was no minotaur, but it was going to be the last thing he'd see in this life. His thoughts touched on his friends. He hoped Henno and Galla would have time to get to safety. He found he couldn't bring himself to ask for anything. He could only stand there clutching the small bit of wood around his neck, wishing he had a sword instead and watch as the monster began

moving toward him. It knew it didn't need to hurry, but its hunger forced speed. Fergus could see the drooling horrible mouth, the hate-filled eyes and he never felt more alone. He closed his eyes and wished just once he'd heard the voice of God.

A loud roar filled the hallway. Fergus's body clenched in anticipation of the killing strike. Then, he realized the monster had slid to a stop only a few dozen paces away. The roar had come from the other end of the hallway.

Where Henno stood. The dawn poured in through the window behind him, reflecting off his borrowed golden armor and covering him with a brilliant glow. For a brief mad instant, Fergus thought he was looking at the angel Michael.

The monster turned at the sound, ignoring the morsel; preferring meat which offered a challenge.

Henno held a spear in his left hand, his right was dangling useless. Fergus instantly knew what his friend planned. "No!" he shouted. "Run!"

The beast whipped its massive head back around at Fergus' shout.

Henno rapped the spear butt on the stone floor as he roared again, "Come on, you hairy bastard. You want a fight? Wood, blade or bone; it's all the same to me!"

The beast roared in response. Fergus' ears rang painfully at the sound. It launched itself on all fours racing at Henno.

Over the thunderous sound of its attacking run, Fergus could just make out Henno's muttered, "Oh shit."

#

"Oh shit." Henno muttered. From a distance, the beast was fearsome. Black, hairy, angry pain right out of a bad dream, but as it got closer it got even more terrifying. Hands like feet and feet like hands, it seemed to grip the ground as it raced straight at him.

This thing would stand up to a legion. At best, he'd give Fergus time to run away. The beast was blocking his view, but he hoped the lad had enough sense to understand Henno's sacrifice.

Henno was prepared to die, but not without raising the price of his death. He tucked the heavy spear under his left arm and braced himself. He'd only get one good thrust and he was going to make sure it hurt.

"Run, boy!" He shouted. His hand was steady as the floor shook with the beast's thunderous approach. One thrust, go for the neck.

Then he heard it. A high-pitched whistle that cut through all the other sounds. The beast slid to a stop and barked in anger, grabbing its ears in pain. The whistling got louder and faster. The beast crouched on the floor and slammed its massive fists on the stones in frustration, swatting at the air as if it could knock the sound away.

Henno could see Fergus now. The stupid lad was spinning that singing stone in his sling. Faster and faster he twirled it over his head, his whole body swaying with the effort, but by Mithras, the lad looked strong. Henno was proud of him, but still wanted to box his ears for taking such a risk. Did he think he couldn't kill the beast on his own?

The monster shrieked in agony as the whistling rose again, higher and higher until Henno couldn't hear anything. The beast rolled on its back, snapping its massive jaws and pounding the walls in complete madness.

Henno called out. "You're an idiot!" He laughed. "But gratitude."

Fergus grinned and began moving closer. Henno could see the strain of keeping the sling spinning at the perfect speed was wearing on him. "What...are you waiting for? An...invitation?" Henno dropped the spear and pulled his gladius. Before he could take a step, the beast jumped to its feet and charged at Fergus! Howling in pain, it raced at the shocked boy desperate to attack the sound which had caused it so much pain. Henno roared another challenge in fear and frustration but the rampaging creature ignored him.

Henno could only watch as the beast was bringing certain death to his friend.

#

Fergus saw death coming straight at him. Again. His arm was burning as he spun the sling and with a desperate cry, he

fired the stone. The stone took the monster's eye with a loud popping sound and no other effect at all. It didn't even slow down.

He was about to die. He would be crushed and eaten by this beast. His blood would stain the precious works he'd traveled so far to save.

"Father, guide my hand!" He heard Henno shout.

The beast stopped again. It stared at Fergus, its maddened expression changing to one of questioning. Fergus and the beast both stared at the metal spear point which protruded from the center of the dark breastplate strapped to its furry chest. It lifted its huge hands and tried to pull the spear, but only a spurt of crimson blood poured from the rent in the metal. The beast looked again at Fergus, then its features went slack. Its body followed and it fell to the floor with a loud crash.

Henno was marching proudly down the hallway to join him. "Now, that is how you throw a spear, lad. See that? Damn near went right through."

Fergus was still shocked they were both alive. "How...?" Was the best he could manage?

Henno winked, "By being a bigger monster, of course."

"But your arm." Fergus was getting closer to using complete sentences.

Henno looked surprised. "I told you, I'm as good with my left as my right." He shook his right arm and flexed his fingers.

"It's feeling better now. Much better, but it's not ready for a fight like this. Not yet anyway." He grinned and Fergus knew his friend's arm was as unkillable as Henno was.

Henno nudged the sacks of papers at his feet. "Strap up, Optio. We've got an army on its way."

"Right." Fergus hefted three of the sacks, leaving three for Henno. They trudged as quickly as they could under the heavy weight.

Fergus was soon panting with the effort but had to ask, "Henno. I heard you call on the Father for help just before you threw."

Henno gave him a sideways look. "Huh? I asked the spirit of my father to guide my hand. He's the one who taught me to throw a spear. Who else would I call on?" He was trying not to meet Fergus' eye. "Earned my salt today, father." He added quietly. Fergus didn't reply and did his best to hide the small grin Henno was trying to ignore.

#

They were just within sight of Stilicho's camp. Sentries were calling out to them, but they were still too far away to be heard. Fergus could hear horns blowing in alarm. Soon, Stilicho would send men out to escort them safely inside the camp.

Behind them, the barbarian army was ransacking Marcus' villa. The looting and burning had already started at the far end of the estate as the three had ridden away. Fergus couldn't bear

the thought of the loss of so many precious documents, but he consoled himself by patting the large sacks strapped to Barrel. Volucer had a load as well. It wasn't everything but it was better than nothing.

When you go fishing, Henno had said, you can't catch them all.

Henno stopped and put a hand on Fergus' arm.

Galla rode ahead for a few paces before realizing her companions had stopped.

"Well?" She asked. "Why do you wait?"

Henno jerked his thumb away from the road. "We're following a different path. You'll be safe now. Stilicho will see you returned home. Gratitude, Domina!" He called as he urged Volucer off the road. "It's been an honor to serve the Empire once again!" He gave Fergus a nod. "Don't be all day. We've a long ride before we make camp." With that, he trotted off giving Fergus and Galla a few moments alone.

"Fergus." Galla began. Fergus had no idea what to say, so he welcomed her hesitant beginning. "I'm sorry. I've not been able to tell you everything."

"I understand." He didn't, but he thought it made him sound worldly somehow.

"No, you don't understand anything." Galla said angrily.

So much for worldly, he thought.

She looked at the marching fort and the soldiers just now moving quickly toward them with Stilicho on horseback in the lead. "We don't have much time. There's so much...we're trying

to save Rome. There are many like me who know it's time for a new Rome. Not one ruled by an Emperor, but an Empress."

Fergus thought he'd been surprised at the sight of a giant ape in armor, but that was nothing compared to the realization of what Galla was telling him. She was part of a conspiracy to overthrow her own brothers and rule Rome herself? The Roman Empire ruled by a woman? His head was spinning.

Galla smiled at the obvious confusion. She reached across the vast distance that separated them and ran a cool hand down his cheek so lightly he thought he might have imagined it.

"Will you join me?" She whispered. "Will you?"

He felt himself slipping. One more step and he would be lost forever in those eyes. Part of him was already weeping for not taking that step.

She saw the answer on his face and for an instant Fergus saw anger flicker across hers, like winter lightning, to be replaced by the sad smile he'd fallen in love with.

"Then, I hope we will not meet again in opposition." She said it with such regal authority that Fergus believed one day she would be the queen of the empire. She gave her horse a kick and rode to meet the soldiers.

Fergus gave Barrel a nudge and the horse eagerly trotted after Volucer. He watched as Henno unbuckled the gleaming gold breastplate which belonged to a dead traitor. He dropped it to the ground next to the gold helmet. He pulled his gladius and saluted Stilicho as Volucer reared back on his hind legs while

trumpeting victoriously. In the distance, Stilicho pulled his sword and saluted smartly.

It was the least he could do.

Fergus joined him and they wasted no time leaving the valley.

"Not a bad start, eh lad?" Henno was laughing.

Fergus could only laugh as they raced away. Not a bad start at all, he thought.

Chapter 32 - A Good Start

Several days later, Henno waited outside of the Abbey of Chester's chapel while another group of monks chanted and sang and prayed. Some things never change. He'd hung out in the back listening to the singing for a bit, but soon got bored and wandered outside. He ran a sharpening stone along the edge of his blade while he waited. He'd used the time to work his right arm by jabbing repeatedly at a wooden hitching post and the thick chunks of wood which covered the ground were evidence of his full recovery.

Volucer was posing in the sunlight to the appreciative whispers of any onlookers while Barrel munched oats from a bucket.

Finally, Brio and Fergus joined him.

"About time." Henno grumbled. "Everybody all done chanting and begging for miracles?"

Brio gave him a scowl which Henno enjoyed immensely.

The older priest spoke to Fergus. "I'll stay on for a bit to ensure the copying is being done correctly. We'll be transporting the...items back home in due course. In the meantime, I've been asked by Brother Canus to convey my congratulations and ask you both to return to Folcutt so Fergus can continue his religious education."

Henno snorted. "What if we don't want to go back to Ireland?"

Brio regarded him with a very tight smile. "Feel free to follow what path you will, Friend Henno, but Novitiate Fergus has responsibilities which..."

"He's right." Fergus interjected, causing Brio to smile even wider at Henno until Fergus added, "We're not going back. After a bit of kip, we're going to use Gratian's list to find more...items." He stopped Brio's argument with hand on his shoulder. "I will return to continue my studies and, one day, God willing, to take my vows. But not today. We have work to do."

Brio laughed, much to their confusion. "Brother Canus suspected as much. I was asked to give you this." He handed Henno a pouch of coins, a fairly weighty one. "And this." He dropped two game pieces in Henno's hand. White on one side and black on the other. "He said you'd understand."

Henno and Fergus laughed while Brio stared uncomprehendingly. Henno slapped him on the shoulder. "Your Canus is downright sorcerous."

Brio crossed himself. "There's no need for..." He blustered and stammered, finally composing himself enough to say goodbye before going back inside the chapel.

#

Later that morning, Fergus and Henno rode sedately down a long stretch of road. An old Roman road, still neatly covered in crushed stone, but not as well maintained as it was in years passed. Grass was growing on it, but it marked the way and it

was a welcome luxury. By dark, they'd be at a traveler's inn and could rest for a bit while planning where to go next.

They were both dressed in their monk's robes again. Their light but sturdy armor underneath with both sword and shield strapped tightly to their backs, hidden by their capes. Monk on the outside, soldier on the inside, Fergus thought.

Like two Black and White game pieces.

Henno was chewing on a bit of dried fish. He offered some to Fergus, but he wasn't hungry.

"Let me ask you," Henno's voice seemed loud in the quiet, sun-filled afternoon. "Why didn't you want to go back to Folcutt? I thought you were all fired up to be a priest."

Fergus stared up at the sky for a few moments. He wasn't exactly sure himself. "I'm having doubts. For as long as I can remember, I've wanted to hear the voice of God. I've prayed, I've begged, I've even cursed him and nothing." He shook his head sadly. "I just don't know if I have the faith anymore."

Fergus ducked as Henno threw the remainder of his fish at his head. "Children! Always expecting the world to bend in your direction. Has it ever occurred to you that Mithras, Jupiter or Jesus has better things to do than grant our every wish or sing us to sleep every night? You think your God has nothing better to do than to join you for a stroll along the road?"

Henno paused briefly, as if that had reminded him of something.

Fergus tried to interrupt, "But..."

"Shut your bean hole. I'm talking here." Henno continued. "You think when Barrel or Volucer asks Epona for speed, strength or a quiet, dry place to sleep at night they expect it to just magically happen with a blast of trumpets? No, Epona gave them to you and me so they'd be cared for. Just like the sun comes up every morning and sets every night. Just like the rain comes, like men and women live, have children and die. Just like when you needed your right arm, I was there. You see? You're waiting for your God to speak to you, but you aren't listening." He bit off a big chunk of dried fish, tossing the rest to Fergus.

They rode and chewed for a bit.

"That was very profound, Henno." Fergus grinned.

Henno gave him a suspicious look. "Yeah?"

Fergus continued seriously. "You sound just like a priest."

Henno laughed loudly. "And you sound like someone who wants a punch in the beak."

"I'm serious, tell me more of this Christianity, Brother Henno."

"More sword drill, that's what you need." Henno replied.

"You look like a priest, too." Fergus taunted.

"And you might look like a soldier on occasion, but that's a far difference from being a soldier, lad." Henno growled.

While Fergus was contemplating Henno's views on religion, he switched topics again. "I just thought of something. If you

take the step to become a priest, you'll be 'Father Fergus'? That sounds a bit awkward."

Fergus smiled. "No. I'd take a new name. I had planned on using the Irish version of the name my parents gave me so I'd be..."

Henno's barking laugh cut him off. "Don't care!" He spurred ahead. "You'll always be Fergus to me, lad! Even when they make you one of those holy saints your lot is always singing about!" Voucher pranced and snorted, echoing his rider's impatience with long conversations when the open road beckoned.

"Let's run 'em for a bit, lad!" He let out a loud howl and raced away.

Fergus watched them gallop down the road while he and Barrel followed at a much more sensible pace. His eyes wandered up to the glowing sun as the tips of the clouds drifting slowly into the orange rays of morning.

Me? A saint? Nothing is impossible, he thought with a grin.

Saint Patrick. It does have a nice ring to it. Wouldn't his parents be proud?

He allowed himself a few moments of dreaming about silly things, then kicked Barrel to a gallop after his friend Henno. They had work to do.

Soldier's work.

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