

Author's Note

PLACE NAMES

Author's note – The *Notitia Dignitatum* indicates that by the beginning of the fifth century when this book is set, the names of a number of forts on Hadrian's Wall had altered slightly, at least in official documents: for example, Segeduno, Cilurno, Borcovicio. In the interests of clarity and continuity I have chosen to stay with the more traditional spellings, Segedunum, Cilurnum and Borcovicium.

*indicates a major fort on Hadrian's Wall

Aesica* – Great Chesters Roman fort

Ail Dun – Selgovae fortress, Eildon Hills, Melrose (see Trimontium)

Alona – fictional township, south of Slaggyford, Cumbria

Arbeia – Roman fort and port, South Shields

Augusta Treverorum – Trier, Germany

Banna* – Birdoswald Roman fort

Barcum – fictional settlement on the high ground between Great Chesters and Haltwhistle

Bodotria – the Firth of Forth

Borcovicium* – Housesteads Roman fort

Braboniacum – Roman fort, Kirkby Thore, Cumbria, home to the Numerus Defensorum

Bremenium – abandoned Roman outpost fort north of the Wall on Dere Street, High Rochester, Northumberland

Brocolitia* – Carrawburgh Roman fort, also location of the Carrawburgh Mithras and Coventina's Well

Caer Eidinn – tribal capital of the northern Votadini, Edinburgh Castle rock

Camboglana* – Castlesteads Roman fort

Castra Exploratum – abandoned Roman fort, Netherby, Cumbria

Cataractonium – Roman fort, Catterick, North Yorkshire

Cilurnum* – Chesters Roman fort, home to Second Asturum cavalry wing

Condercum* – Benwell Roman fort

Constantinopolis – Istanbul, Turkey

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Corstopitum – Corbridge Roman fort and township

Din Gefrin – tribal capital of the southern Votadini, Yeavering Bell, Northumberland

Eboracum – Roman York; its fortress is home to the Sixth Legion Victrix

Epiacum – Roman fort in the Pennine Hills south of the Wall, near Alston, Cumbria

Fanum – abandoned Roman outpost fort north of the Wall, Bewcastle, Cumbria

Grabant – fictional royal estate of the Brigantes, East Yorkshire

Habitancum – abandoned Roman outpost fort north of the Wall on Dere Street, Risingham, Northumberland

Hibernia – Ireland

Hunnum* – Roman fort, home of the Ala Sabiniana cavalry wing, Halton Chesters

Isurium Brigantum – Roman fort and tribal capital, Aldborough, Yorkshire

Lavatris – Roman fort, Bowes, Co. Durham

Londinium – London, capital of the Roman province of Britannia

Longovicium – Roman fort, on Dere Street, Lanchester, Co. Durham

Luguvalium* – Carlisle Roman fort

Lutetia Parisiorum – Paris, France

Mamucium – a Roman fort situated in what is now the Castlefields area of Manchester.

Mediolanum – Milan, Italy

Morbium – Roman fort on Dere Street, Piercebridge, Co. Durham

Petriana* (aka **Uxelodunum**) – Roman fort, Stanwix, Carlisle

Pons Aelius* – Newcastle Roman fort and first Tyne crossing point

Saxonia – land of the Saxons, now coastal north Germany

Segedunum* – Wallsend Roman fort

Tinan River – the River Tyne

Tivyet River – River Teviot

Trimontium – Roman fort (abandoned), Newstead, Melrose

Verteris – Roman fort, Church Brough, Cumbria

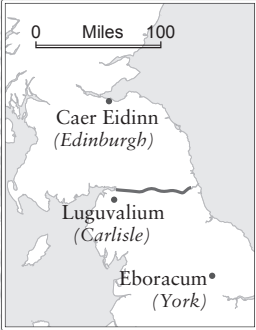
Vindobala* – Rudchester Roman fort

Vindolanda – Roman fort a mile south of Hadrian's Wall, near Borcovicium (Housesteads)

Vindomora – Roman fort on Dere Street, Ebchester, Co. Durham

Vinovium – Roman fort on Dere Street, north of Bishop Auckland, Co. Durham

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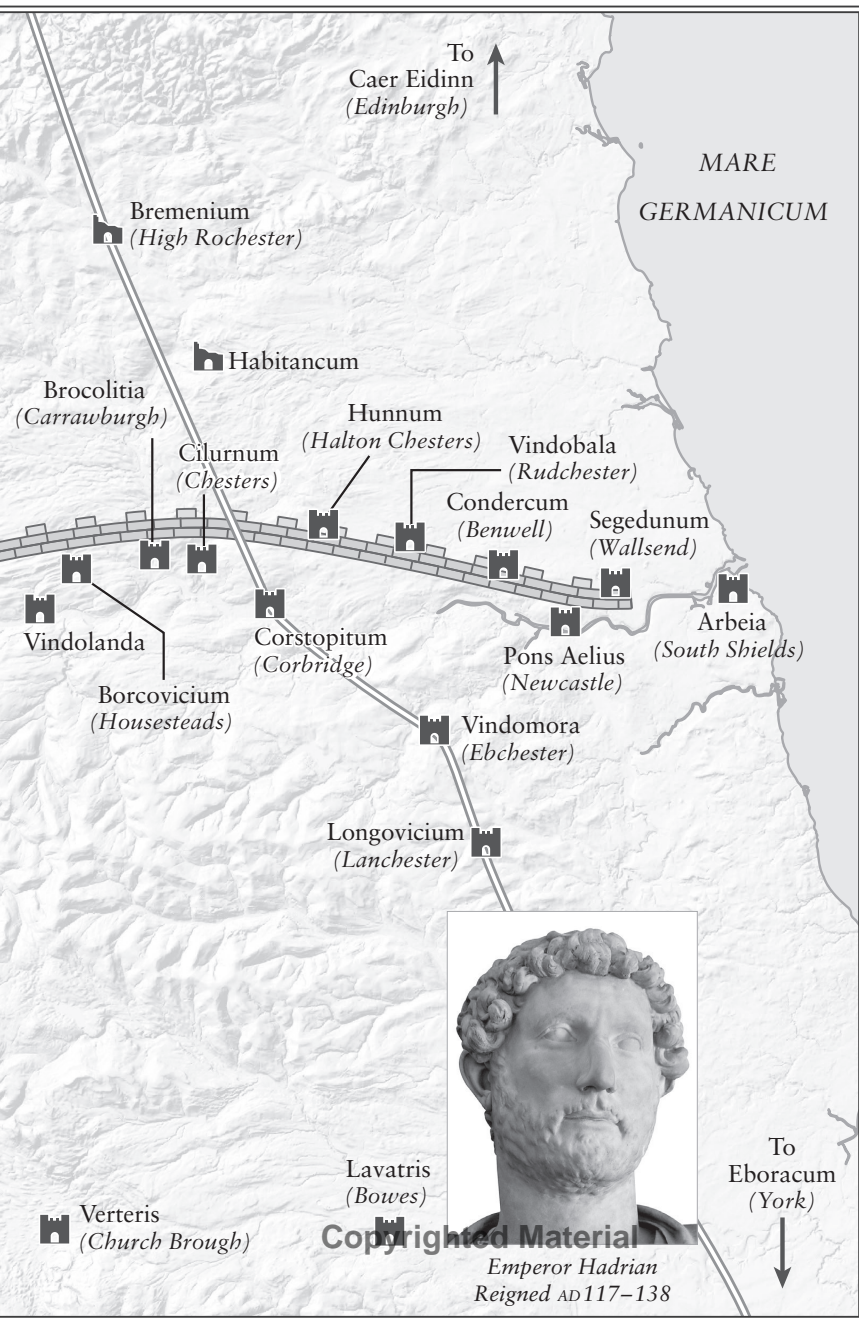
HADRIAN'S WALL

circa AD400



	The Wall
	Fort
	Ruined fort
	Roman Road

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To
Caer Eidinn
(Edinburgh) ↑

MARE
GERMANICUM

Bremeniun
(High Rochester)

Habitancum

Brocolitia
(Carraburgh)

Hunnum
(Halton Chesters)

Vindobala
(Rudchester)

Cilurnum
(Chesters)

Condercum
(Benwell)

Segedunum
(Wallsend)

Vindolanda

Corstopitum
(Corbridge)

Pons Aelius
(Newcastle)

Arbeia
(South Shields)

Borcovicium
(Housesteads)

Vindomora
(Echester)

Longovicium
(Lanchester)

Lavarris
(Bowes)

Verteris
(Church Brough)

To
Eboracum
(York) ↓

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Emperor Hadrian
Reigned AD 117-138

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Dramatis Personae

- Marcus Flavius Victor** – prefect commanding First Pannonian Wing of Sabinus, the Ala Sabiniana
- Caradoc** – decurion, squadron commander Ala Sabiniana
- Luko** – *draconarius* (bearer of the *draco* standard) Ala Sabiniana
- Janus** – a Pict, captured as a young boy, now serving as a trooper, Ala Sabiniana
- Julius** – his twin brother
- Velanos** – *curator* of Alona
- Zeno** – a Greek, former *medicus* to the Emperor of the East, now serving with the Ala Sabiniana
- Melcho** – a young Pictish warrior
- Keother** – Pictish tribal chieftain
- Gofanon** – the Ala Sabiniana’s armourer
- Demetrius** – Marcus’s deputy commander
- Liberalis** – head of Hunnum’s civilian authority
- Senecio** – a Numidian cavalryman and expert archer
- Valeria** – squadron commander Ala Sabiniana and Marcus’s half-sister
- Brenus** – Marcus’s father, a prince of the Brigantes and Roman cavalry commander
- Bren** – Marcus’s eight-year-old son, abducted and carried off into slavery by a Saxon war band

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Leof – Valeria’s Saxon prisoner
Rufus Arrius – commander of Vindobala Roman fort
Septimus Iuuentius – commander at Condercum
Julius Postumus Dulcitus – *dux Britanniarum*, commander of all Roman military forces in the north of Britannia
Cassius – commander of the fort at Segedunum
Pompeius Canalius – commander at Cilurnum
Justus – commander at Corstopitum
Sempronius – commander of Second Asturum
Tullius Nepos – tribune, commander of First Batavians, Brocolitia
Calista – keeper of Coventina’s Well
Clarian Apollo – commander at Borcovicium
Ramios – leader of German mercenaries
Claudius Dexter – commander at Aesica, First Asturians
Hostilius Geta – junior officer of the Sixth Legion Victrix
Magnus Maximus – Roman general and usurper serving in Britannia who declared himself Emperor in AD 383
Count Theodosius – saviour of Britannia during the Great Barbarian Conspiracy of AD 367, later Emperor Theodosius I
Flavius Stilicho – Rome’s pre-eminent general and adviser to the young Emperor Honorius
Honorius – Emperor of the West
Arcadius – Emperor of the East
King Coel – ruler of the southern Votadini
King Luddoc – ruler of the northern Votadini
King Corvus – ruler of the Selgovae
Queen Briga – ruler of the northern Picts
Nechtán – Briga’s cousin, commander
Lucti – Briga’s predecessor as king of the northern Picts
Ciniath – elder of Keother’s people
Drosten – Ciniath’s younger son
Duna – Drosten’s wife
Breth – Ciniath’s elder son
Niall of the Nine Hostages – Hibernian raider and pirate whose kingdom takes in Anglesey and part of Wales
Ninian – slave and former priest, later trooper of the Ala Sabiniana

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Gordianus – master builder and the young Marcus’s mentor
Antonius Felix – fort commander at Vindolanda
Blaid – keeper of Queen Briga’s wolves
Antonius Vitalis – tribune commanding the Roman fort at Vindomora
Terentius Cantaber – legate of the Sixth Legion Victrix
Arelius Verinus – tribune, commander at Banna, First Dacians
Julius Pastor – commander First Herculaea
Emeritus – *centurio regionarius*, Luguvalium
Rufius Clemens – commander at Verteris
Senilis – Rufius’s cavalry commander
Rhuin, Alpin – Pictish scouts
Aurelius Quirinus – commander at Longovicium
Burrius – commander Numerus Defensorum
Publius – commander of Fourth Gauls squadrons with Marcus

Military units

First Pannonian Wing of Sabinus, Ala Sabiniana, cavalry wing (Hunnum)
Sixth Legion Victrix (Eboracum)
Fourth Lingonum, part-mounted cohort (Segedunum)
First Frisians, auxiliary infantry (Vindobala)
Second Asturum (Cilurnum)
First Tungrians (Borcovicium)
First Asturians (Aesica)
First Batavians (Brocolitia)
First Dacians (Banna)
Fourth Gauls, part-mounted (Vindolanda)
First Herculaea (Epiacum)
Numerus Defensorum (Braboniacum)
Numerus Exploratorum (Lavatris)
Numerus Directorum (Verteris)

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There was no respite from the barbed spears flung by their naked opponents, which tore our wretched countrymen from the walls and dashed them to the ground.

Gildas the Wise, *De Excidio Britanniae*
(On the Ruin of Britain) c. AD 500

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Prologue

The northern frontier, AD 400

The screams of the raped and the dying carried through the night like the distant cries of squabbling gulls on a windswept shore.

Somewhere close by in the trees a man cursed and the commander of the Ala Sabiniana hissed a demand for silence. He understood their frustration. The victims of the Pictish murder raid were neither nameless nor faceless. Many of the riders around him on this Saint Jude's Eve had sat in the little forum of the settlement not a fortnight past, drinking companionably with the men, teasing the children and flirting with the women; greeted as protectors.

Yet for all the ear-grating suffering of innocents it suited Marcus Flavius Victor that the people of Alona should be reminded what could happen if that protection did not exist. Velanos, the village's *curator*, had been somewhat reluctant of late to part with the supplies due the frontier garrisons as a portion of his village's tax obligations. Next time he would be less so. If he lived.

His mount tossed its head and Marcus patted the animal's neck in an automatic gesture of reassurance. Other horses sensed the animal's tension and he heard the soft jingle of horse brass as their riders

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gentled them. On another night that sound might have been enough to get them all killed, but they were far enough away from the village for it not to matter. Besides, the Picts and their victims were making enough noise to conceal a cavalry charge.

At least four houses were already burning, identifiable as individual glowing pyres through the trees. Now they were joined by a fifth. A spectacular eruption of flame sent a shower of sparks high into the night sky and spoke of some highly combustible substance stored for the winter. An unearthly shrieking accompanied the flames, evidence the unfortunate occupants remained trapped inside.

‘Prefect?’ The word emerged from between an unseen trooper’s gritted teeth.

‘I told you to be silent,’ Marcus snarled. ‘The next man to speak will have the skin off his back by sundown tomorrow. We wait until Caradoc is in position.’

Someone laughed, but he chose not to hear it. They knew Caradoc and his four squadrons had been in position these many minutes past. Alona was a settlement of two hundred souls that lay ten miles south of *linea valli* – the line of the Wall – and an hour’s march from the fort at Epiacum. Marcus had tracked the Picts for two days after they’d slipped into the province through an unguarded gap between two watchtowers. The raiders were the menfolk of newly arrived settlers from the High Lands who’d set up home in a remote valley north-east of *Castra Exploratum*, a long-abandoned outpost fort beyond the Wall. The moment they set foot south of the Wall they’d broken the truce Marcus had brokered. But that was the way of it. The war against the Picts never ended. You could defeat them a hundred times and still they’d keep coming.

Marcus unhooked his polished iron helmet from the pommel of his saddle and settled it over his head. The blackened leather padding that lined the interior instantly deadened the screams, the bitter-sweet scent of old sweat comfortingly familiar. His mind focused on the disposition of his forces, the layout of the settlement and any potential weaknesses in his plan. He felt no fear – a leader couldn’t afford such

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distractions – only that familiar, almost breathless sense of anticipation that preceded battle.

‘Stay close to me,’ he growled into the darkness. ‘And remember, I want prisoners.’

He nudged his mount forward and sensed movement all around him as his squadrons followed suit. A rough and poorly maintained wooden palisade encircled Alona, with entrances to the north and south. By now Caradoc and his hundred cavalry veterans would be converging on the northern gate. Marcus would lead two hundred more up the Epiacum road.

No trumpet calls or glorious charge. Instead, the riders advanced in an almost leisurely arcing trot that brought the column to the road out of sight of the village. Luko, Marcus’s *draconarius*, bearer of the dragon standard, rode a pace and a half behind his left flank, and Marcus curbed Storm, his midnight-black Andalusian stallion, to allow the standard-bearer to close. He felt a shudder of expectation run through the horse as he drew his long sword from its scabbard with its familiar metallic hiss.

Storm responded by increasing his pace and Marcus let him have his head. The sound of hundreds of hooves echoed from the hard-packed road surface, but the Picts inside these walls would hear nothing but the crackle of flames and the screams of their victims.

The gates hung open, the bodies of those who’d been cut down while fleeing mere patches of deeper darkness on the roadway. He quickened the pace to a canter. This was the time of greatest danger. If his scouts had missed a single guard the horsemen would be met by a wall of spears.

As he swept through the gate a pair of shadowy figures rose from where they’d been stripping a body. The closest picked something up from the road and Marcus saw the glint of an iron spear point in the light from a burning building. Too late. Storm was already inside the point and Marcus brought his heavy cavalry sword round in a smooth, practised swing. The leather grip cushioned the jarring impact, but his fingers sensed the edge bite into flesh and the point grate across bone.

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His victim went down with a howl of agony and dark liquid spurted high from the falling body. He angled Storm towards the second shadow as it darted towards a house to the left. Before he could strike a whooping figure passed him and skewered the man in the spine with the point of his long ash spear.

‘Janus, you crazy bastard,’ he rasped. ‘Get back in position.’

The column had split into three as it entered the settlement. A pair of squadrons broke right and left across the patchwork of rutted fields and vegetable patches inside the palisade, to envelop the houses like the horns of a charging bull. Marcus took his remaining hundred men straight up the main street towards the glimmer of the flames.

The Picts had herded the inhabitants of Alona into the forum, where they could be butchered at their leisure, but not before they’d been tortured into revealing the location of any hidden valuables. A dozen bodies already lay scattered around a fire where reaping knives and a blacksmith’s tongs glowed a fearsome red.

Every face turned at the clatter of hooves as Marcus’s horsemen rode into the open space: he registered expressions of fear, astonishment, defiance and relief. The Roman cavalry outnumbered the raiders by five to one, but that didn’t make the Picts any less dangerous. A few fled northwards only to be met by a new wall of bright iron as Caradoc entered the Magna gate with his squadrons. The others abandoned their captives and clustered in a defensive huddle that bristled with thrusting spears as the cavalrymen moved to surround them.

‘I want them alive,’ Marcus reminded his officers. ‘Every last one.’

A single Pict, a seasoned warrior draped in wolfskins, remained by the fire. He held a young woman in a white shift with her back against his chest and the blade of his long, curved knife touching the pale white skin of her throat. Stark terror contorted a face that might normally have shone with extraordinary beauty. Before them, a man who must be her husband knelt with his hands bound behind his back.

Marcus walked his horse from the encircling riders and approached the Picts.

‘Throw down your spears and I will spare your lives.’ He used the

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Pictish tongue which every frontier soldier learned before he was allowed on his first patrol.

The big man met his gaze and spat. Without taking his eyes from Marcus he drew the knife across the pale flesh of the girl's slim neck. For a moment it seemed nothing had happened before a terrible gurgling cry rent the air and a dark stain sheeted the front of the white dress.

Marcus sighed and turned Storm away. 'Take them.'

It was daylight by the time the last of the Picts had been subdued and they sat in a sullen, battered huddle under the spears of their captors, each man's hands securely bound at the wrist. Fifty-six, if he'd counted correctly. Most were young men, their wispy beards more ambition than reality, but a scattering had the look of experienced warriors. They wore their hair in a curious style, an intricate topknot Marcus hadn't previously encountered. Stinking, matted furs or filthy, off-patched plaid tunics offered scant protection against the chill air. Cloth *braccae* encased their legs to the calf and some of the older men had boots of felt or leather, but most went barefoot. It had required six men to subdue the big warrior with the knife and Caradoc had suffered a fearsome slash across the ribs in following his commander's order to take the man alive.

'How is he?' Marcus asked Zeno, the unit's *medicus*, as he worked on the injured decurion's wounds.

'He'll live.' The doctor cheerfully ignored Caradoc's groans as he stitched the gash. 'If it doesn't mortify he'll be back in the saddle before the turn of the year.'

Seven Picts had died in the fighting, which Marcus counted an acceptable price. A number of the others had suffered broken bones and other injuries, but they were mostly whole. A pile of confiscated weapons lay nearby and Marcus picked up a broad-bladed Pictish sword. It was an unwieldy weapon, rust-pitted and notched, but it would do.

'Bring them to the big oak,' he ordered Luko. 'And tell those vultures,' he pointed towards the hovering band of villagers who'd armed

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themselves with whatever edged or blunt weapon came most easily to hand, 'the first man to harm any of my prisoners will take his place. And Luko?'

'Yes, lord?'

Marcus nodded towards the prisoners. 'Choose five of the most dangerous-looking bastards and keep them apart with that big savage.'

He regretted what must be done, but his orders from Eboracum were clear. The Pictish raids had become too frequent and their warriors' confidence a sign of growing threat. A message must be sent. One that could not be ignored.

The oak, gnarled and twisted, towered over the other trees at the forest's edge, topped by a vast canopy of skeletal branches and with a trunk the circumference of a roundhouse. It had been the settlement's gathering place long before the Romans arrived to give Alona a semblance of civilization and a name. Ragged strips of cloth fluttered in the lower branches and little copper coins glittered within cracks in the bark, evidence the tree still inspired a certain awe in the superstitious and the gullible.

Dismounted cavalymen escorted the prisoners from the gate as the villagers hissed and cursed. Some of the wrathful men, including Velanos, the settlement's leader, waved knives and reaping hooks, but none dared risk Marcus's wrath. The Picts remained untouched.

A large fire had been set close by the stump of a mature tree felled years earlier. The tethered prisoners eyed the flames uneasily as they were herded into a group close by.

'Strip them,' Marcus ordered. The cavalymen went to work cutting away the Picts' clothing with knives to the hoots of the villagers, which quickly turned to jeers and taunting as the prisoners' nether parts reacted to the touch of the chill morning air. Picts. The Painted Ones, as the frontier soldiers had called them since the time of Marcus's father's father's father. His men used the name for any warrior north of the Wall, but Marcus knew that among themselves many of those considered southern Picts retained their old tribal identities: Novantae, Selgovae, Votadini and Damnonii.

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The origin of the title became obvious when the men were naked. Most of them wore facial tattoos, intricate patterns of dotted lines and unreadable symbols. But the story of their lives and the accomplishments that gave them status and fame among their people was written upon their chests, backs and arms. All of the younger men sported the mask of a stylized fox above their left breast, indicating their clan. More dotted patterns decorated them according to rank, courage, raids completed and enemies killed or outwitted, different designs and other animals: the hare, the wolf, the horse, the boar, the hawk and the eagle. The veteran fighters wore a veritable menagerie, but it was the warrior who had cut the girl's throat who drew his attention. Scarcely an inch of his heavily muscled flesh was left bare of symbol or pattern. Fine warriors, fearless and merciless, but today they would be taught that Rome still had teeth.

As the prisoners were stripped, five of Marcus's men threw plaited ropes across a sturdy branch perhaps ten feet above the ground. A great moan went up as the younger Picts noticed the nooses that adorned the ropes' ends. The big warrior snarled at his comrades to be silent, to show courage, and as the cavalymen hustled the five veterans towards the branch he turned to Marcus with loathing written across his swarthy features.

'We are not afraid to die, Roman,' he spat. 'And be sure that your death will be a hundred times more painful and prolonged.'

Marcus watched as the nooses were placed around the necks of the doomed men and the ropes slowly tightened, raising them on to their toes as they began to struggle for breath.

'We will see how brave you are in a moment.' He turned to address the main group of prisoners. 'This is the fate you all deserve.' He raised a hand and the cavalymen on the ends of the ropes hauled so that the Picts were lifted a few inches off the ground, the rough hemp nooses cutting into their necks, constricting their throats and forcing their tongues from their mouths. The dying men wriggled and twisted like hooked fish, faces livid and contorted. Desperate cawing sounds accompanied their agony, encouraging a growl of approval from the

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watching villagers. 'But I am minded to be merciful,' Marcus continued impassively. 'One man brought you here. One man blinded you with lies of treasure and plunder. One man encouraged you to kill.' He nodded to Luko. 'Secure him to the tree.'

They'd discovered that under a grown man's weight ordinary nails quickly tore through the flesh of his wrists and ankles, which made it an untidy business. Marcus's armourer had solved the dilemma by forging nails with flat two-inch heads. The Pict didn't make a sound as the nails were hammered through his flesh into the oak, piercing skin and shattering bones, though he bit his lip so hard blood ran down his chin.

'This is the Pict who led the attack on your village,' Marcus called to Velanos. 'He is responsible for the destruction of your property and the death of your loved ones. Do with him as you will.'

'Murderer!' The husband of the butchered girl dashed forward with a howl of rage and anguish and a reaping knife in his hand. He reached for the big warrior's groin. Marcus turned away as an agonized shriek tore the still air and a dozen other villagers rushed past him to take their revenge.

Who would it be? He studied the prisoners as they watched their leader die. A face drew his attention. He might be kin to Janus. 'You,' he pointed to a young man of about twenty who stood shaking with fear and cold, his bound hands covering his groin. 'Come here.'

Terror had drained all the strength from the Pict's legs and one of Marcus's troopers had to support him across the glade.

'Who is your lord?' Marcus spoke quietly, using the tip of the Pictish sword to raise the man's chin so he could look into his pale, bewildered features.

'Lord?' The wide eyes darted from side to side in search of an unlikely avenue of escape.

'Who rules your tribe?' Marcus persisted.

'Our chief is called Keother.'

'And to whom does this Keother pay tribute?'

'I do not know, lord,' the young man whispered.

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Marcus nodded slowly. ‘Then I wish you to carry a message to Keother.’

‘A message?’

‘Yes. Take him across there,’ Marcus pointed to a spot on the edge of the clearing and the cavalryman dragged the young man aside. Marcus strode purposefully to the tree stump. ‘Bring the first one forward,’ he ordered.

Two troopers chose a prisoner from the huddled group and man-handled him towards the stump. A low growl went up from the remaining captives, only to be stifled instantly as the ring of spear points surrounding them tightened. When the troopers reached the stump one held the prisoner’s shoulders while the other dragged the bound man’s arms onto the flat surface.

The terrified Pict looked up into Marcus’s eyes and Marcus felt a momentary pang of regret before he steeled himself to do what no leader could avoid.

‘This is Rome’s mercy.’ He raised the sword and brought the edge down on the outstretched arms just above the wrist. The prisoner shrieked in agony and disbelief and a great howl erupted from his penned tribesfolk.

The cavalryman tossed the severed hands aside and dragged the uncomprehending Pict to the fire, where his screams reached a new pitch as Luko stemmed the spurting blood with a glowing iron. The stink of burning flesh and loosened bowels filled the air. Another prisoner was dragged to the stump. Sickened by what had been forced upon him, Marcus threw the sword to the nearest of his troopers and stepped away. ‘Let every man play his part,’ he said.

An hour later he stood amid a sea of severed hands, his breath misting the morning air and the metallic stench of the slaughterhouse filling his nostrils. A groaning line of hunched, shivering men, bound to each other by the neck, waited nearby, each consumed by his own personal agony and the certainty of a future without hope. Only one Pict remained unharmed. Marcus called the waiting prisoner to him. His face was as white as a December snowfield.

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‘What is your name?’

‘I am Melcho,’ the prisoner replied with a fearful glance at his mutilated comrades.

‘You understand the message you are to carry to Keother, Melcho?’

‘I . . . I think so, lord.’

‘You will lead these men back to your village – I will give you an escort as far as the Wall – and you will inform Keother this is what happens when he breaks his king’s oath. If there is a next time his warriors will return without their eyes and tongues.’

The man swallowed, barely able to nod his agreement.

‘And Melcho?’

‘Lord?’

‘Never venture south of the Wall again.’

‘No, lord.’ The young Pict was about to turn away, but he hesitated, lip trembling. ‘Who shall I say sent the message?’

Marcus gazed across the gore-spattered clearing to the dangling bodies of the Pictish warriors and the bloody mess that was all that remained of their leader.

‘My name is Marcus Flavius Victor and men fear me. I am Lord of the Wall.’

EARTH

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I

Hunnum (Halton Chesters)

An empire does not just die: first it fades, then it crumbles. Who had said that? Was it his father or his blood-father? Marcus couldn't remember which, but there was no denying the truth of it.

Yes, the truth of it was abundantly clear in the decaying barrack rooms of the fort, the missing paving slabs in the courtyard and the roofs where thatch had long ago replaced the terracotta tiles of two or three generations earlier. He'd used the broken slabs and fallen tiles to fill in gaps where the original stone had fallen from the outer walls. With a pang of conscience, he'd replaced some of the slabs with the last of the pagan altars his predecessors had set up to the gods they worshipped. Minerva, Mars and Jupiter had served them well. Now Marcus liked to believe they were content to fulfil a different role keeping his men's feet from the mud. A soldier could live comfortably enough beside his horse in a barrack block, however draughty, but he needed good solid walls to fight behind, and Marcus couldn't afford to properly repair both.

Hunnum, his home and his refuge for the last ten years. Base of the First Pannonian Wing of Sabinus since the time of Septimius Severus,

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though none of the present Ala Sabiniana had ever trod the earth of Pannonia, and they neither knew, nor cared, who Sabinus had been. The fort lay on the crest of a hill, straddling the Wall and surrounded by the many hundreds of *iugera* of good grazing land that was the prime requirement of a cavalry *ala*. To north and south the country undulated into the distance in a gently flowing succession of peaks and troughs. Hunnum had always been a curiosity on the frontier. It was built, if the dedication stones were to be believed, by the Sixth legion at the same time Hadrianus Augustus ordered the construction of the Wall. But what made it unique was the extension added by some long-dead commander to create more space for horses and men, and which gave it the shape of a cavalry trooper's boot lying on its side.

Marcus took a moment to savour the sights and sounds and scents, revelling in the familiarity of it. Smoke from the bread ovens still hung in the air of the chill morning, competing with the permanent reek of horse dung that marked any cavalry fort. Gofanon, the unit's armourer, sat hunched over his anvil in his workshop trying to salvage a batch of faulty blades foisted on them by Eboracum, and the rhythmic clang of his hammer echoed from the walls. On the far side of the courtyard, beyond the pig pens, two boys, the sons of Marcus's troopers, flailed at each other with wooden practice swords in preparation for the day they would join their fathers in the saddle.

'Do you think they'll repair?' Marcus called as he walked past the armourer.

'I'd have a better idea if me and my lads hadn't spent every spare moment knocking out your toys for the last week.' Gofanon didn't look up or pause in his work. 'But I reckon the blades will be ready by the time you get back.'

Hunnum had been sited to provide protection for Porta Aquilonis, the gate which carried the Great North Road through the Wall. Turn south and that road would take a man over rolling uplands, across countless rivers and streams, through valley and pasture and rich forest all the way to Londinium. To the north it had once bustled with carts and pack animals conveying supplies to the outlying frontier forts, and

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couriers destined for the long-abandoned outer turf wall a hundred miles further on. Now it was used only by Marcus's cavalry patrols and the engineering gangs who kept it in decent repair as far as the ruins of Habitancum, an old scouting base a day's march away. Good hunting country even now, by God's favour, because Marcus ensured his officers took only what they needed for the table and left the deer alone during the calving season. The rivers teemed with trout and grayling, and great, slab-sided salmon provided a generous bounty in spring and autumn, along with the geese and thrushes the huntsmen netted in their thousands.

Luko sat patiently in the saddle with the *draco* resting on his right shoulder. Beside him, Claudius, Marcus's stable boy, was clinging on to Storm. The horse skittered restlessly with suppressed energy and the boy's lean, ten-year-old features were set in a frown of concentration.

'Don't worry, Claudius.' Marcus took the reins from the boy's hands with a smile. 'I'll bring him back to you soon enough.'

As he mounted, a young officer approached from the *principia*, the fort's headquarters building. 'Demetrius,' Marcus greeted his deputy commander. 'You know your orders. Keep the barbarians from the gate at all costs.'

'That would be easier if you'd left me enough people to man the watchtowers, never mind the walls.' Demetrius accompanied the words with a wry look. 'But I'll use every man, including the clerks and the kitchen slaves. The boys from the settlement can earn their place for a change by taking their turn on the ramparts.'

'Good,' Marcus nodded, 'and Demetrius?' He leaned from the saddle. 'At need you may call on a century from the garrison at Corstopitum.' Demetrius gave a little whistle. Corstopitum was the main supply base for the central Wall garrisons, a substantial township in the valley two miles south of Hunnum. The soldiers who defended it were legionaries from the Sixth Victrix at Eboracum. 'I've told the tribune that, at least for now, the integrity of the frontier takes precedence over his precious stores. He may be reluctant, but . . .'

'He knows better than to cross you,' Demetrius laughed. 'I won't ask

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unless they're lining up in front of the gate.' He took a step back and saluted. 'I'll do my best, prefect.'

'I know you will, Demetrius. I wouldn't have left you with so few men if I didn't trust you to cope. If it's any consolation I don't think you have to worry.' He glanced at the dark, lowering clouds with their promise of snow. 'Only a fool would be out and about in this weather.'

Demetrius pursed his lips. 'And yet you'll be gone for a month, lord?'

'My inspection tour is long overdue.' Marcus ignored the veiled rebuke and smiled. 'And I'm called to a meeting with the *dux Britanniarum* at Segedunum. A good hunter never misses a chance to take out two ducks with one cast.'

'Then I wish you Fortun—' Demetrius grinned at his mistake. 'I mean may God watch over you, lord.'

Marcus shook his head. 'One day you're going to say that to the wrong person, boy. Fare well.'

'And you, lord.'

Marcus nudged Storm towards the south gate past the granaries and the hospital. Outside the gate houses, shops, workshops and taverns lined the road, along with a *mansio* guest house built to host visiting dignitaries, but which now housed Hunnum's brothel. Like the fort, the stone houses had seen better days and some had been replaced entirely by wooden structures. Marcus heard an excited female voice calling his name from the brothel.

The bulk of the regiment had preceded them and little clumps of the village's residents lined the main street to watch apprehensively as the fort's prefect rode to join his men on the heath to the east of the village. These soldiers were their protectors, the only thing that stood between them and a Pictish war axe. Most of the older men were former auxiliaries who'd served with the troopers of the Ala Sabiniana before settling in the village to eke out their retirement with their families. The others were the wives and children of serving soldiers, and their slaves. Young or old, most of the faces wore the pinched look that went with acute hunger, and many of them didn't hide their resentment about their empty bellies.

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Marcus grimaced as he recognized a bearded face among the crowd and he reined in Storm as the man stepped out to meet him. ‘Liberalis,’ Marcus nodded. ‘I hope I see you well?’

‘They tell me you’re going to be away for a while? Weeks even?’ Liberalis spoke with the authority of the head of the village’s administrative council. He farmed a tract of land among the low hills to the south, but the tanning works that gave his clothing its all-pervading, pungent aroma of stale urine provided his main income. To Marcus’s certain knowledge he also had a lucrative sideline selling off the mounds of horse shit the fort’s hundreds of mounts and remounts produced to local farmers. Nominally he was subject to the prefect’s authority, but he’d served with Marcus’s father and it suited Marcus to treat him, for the most part, as an equal.

‘Then I hope the Picts don’t have as efficient an intelligence department as you do, *curator*,’ Marcus answered cheerfully. ‘Otherwise they might be paying you a visit.’

‘You’re stripping the fort bare?’ For all his status Liberalis didn’t dare venture a direct criticism, but his meaning was clear enough.

‘Demetrius is a steady man.’ Marcus ignored the puffed-out cheeks and shake of the head. ‘And Justus down at Corstopitum has a standing order to supply him with a century of legionaries at the first sign of trouble.’

‘Even if he obeys – and he’ll find a reason not to – Justus will spend an hour making up his mind what to do. By the time they get here we’ll all be dead.’

Marcus studied the men grouped behind the elder. ‘Then perhaps you and the other veterans should scrape the rust off your swords, give them a proper edge and put in some practice,’ he said. ‘I hear training sessions aren’t too well attended?’

He saw a nerve twitch in the other man’s cheek. The frontier veterans’ discharge diploma contained an agreement that they maintain their skills at arms and fitness ready for a return to the ranks in the event of an emergency. It was Liberalis’s responsibility to ensure they kept to their part of the bargain, but Marcus knew barely one man in

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three did so. He made to turn Storm away, but Liberalis decided he wasn't finished.

'Your men haven't received their *stipendium* for months. We can't be expected to extend credit to their families indefinitely.'

'I'm aware of that.' Marcus's words were measured and restrained, but Liberalis detected a dangerous glint in the dark eyes that made him hesitate.

'I . . .'

'I'll see you receive your money, Liberalis. As you always have in the past. Today you will organize a donative of food and clothing in my name and you will double their credit until I return.' The other man opened his mouth to protest, but Marcus continued relentlessly. 'Because if you do not, I will begin an investigation into certain tax irregularities involving food being sold to the quartermaster at Corstopitum instead of being handed directly to the garrison as it should be by law. Is that understood?'

Liberalis nodded mutely and turned quickly away.

'That stopped the cheeky bastard's gob,' Luko chuckled as they rode away. 'Has he really been flogging off our rations?'

'I have no idea,' Marcus admitted. 'But wouldn't you if you were in his position?'

Their route took them past neglected mausolea that lined both sides of the road, one or two of them impressive monuments which contained the remains of the fort's previous commanders and their families. Beyond them lay the carefully tended graves of the settlement's Christian cemetery, each burial marked by a whitewashed boulder brought from the stream that fed Hunnum's water supply.

The three hundred men of Ala Sabiniana waited in parade formation for their commander's inspection on a flat, bare plateau to the east of the road. Even the birds seemed to have paused for breath in an abnormal silence that deepened as Marcus and his standard-bearer approached. They took up position beside the regiment's senior decurion and the prefect's trumpeter.

Marcus choked back an oath when he recognized the officer. 'I

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thought I told you to stay in barracks, you old fool.' He glared at Caradoc. 'You still have a hole in you I could ride this horse through.'

'Begging the prefect's pardon,' the decurion grimaced. 'But the *medicus* said I was fit to ride.'

'Did he say how far?'

'We'll just have to see, won't we, sir.'

'All right,' Marcus allowed his tone to soften. 'Return to your squadron, decurion.' In truth he'd been pleased to see the grizzled old soldier back in the saddle. Caradoc was the most experienced trooper in the regiment and he would need every veteran who could wield a sword before this expedition ran its course. Caradoc saluted and turned away with a wink. Marcus stifled a laugh. He waited until the decurion had taken his place in front of the rightmost squadron before allowing his gaze to slide across the ten compact squares of riders, each nominally thirty men strong.

Clouds of steam rose in the chill air above the animals, the only sound the chink of horse brass, the thump of hooves pawing the frozen earth, and the snorting of beasts energized by their riders' palpable sense of anticipation. Every trooper wore a woollen cloak that had once been green, but was now so faded, patched and mended it resembled muddy plaid. Beneath the cloak, over a padded leather tunic, a vest of linked iron rings or scales covered his body from neck and upper arms to knees. Like their cloaks the mail had been mended so often it was akin to the farmer's mattock which he boasted had 'lasted a lifetime', he'd only changed the shaft three times and the head once. Heavy winter breeches of different patterns clad their legs and each had been issued with a new pair of stout boots made by the unit's cobbler from leather unwillingly supplied at a discount by Liberalis. Pot helmets of various designs encased their skulls, many of the metal helms on their fourth or fifth owner and with the dents and scars to show for it.

But Marcus didn't need them to look pretty. He needed them to be able to fight. For all its hard wear, their battered armour showed not a speck of rust. They had two other things in common. One was the

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round shield every man carried, freshly embossed with the unit's emblem of a red eagle, wings outstretched and gaping beak screaming its defiance. The other was the glitter of the iron points that topped their nine-foot ash spears, polished at great effort to a mirrored sheen. They carried three days' rations in a leather bag on one side of the saddle and three days' fodder for their horse on the other. Horse soldiers, an elite and immensely proud of that fact, Marcus had trained them so they were equally at home on foot, either in attack or defence.

Only the elaborate decoration of the iron helmet he wore differentiated Marcus from his soldiers. Sheathed with silver and studded with garnets, it had a long nose guard, hinged cheekpieces that strapped together beneath his chin, and a broad neck protector. Bands of iron ran from brow to nape and ear to ear to reinforce the dome, and leather and wool padded the interior for greater comfort. For all its beauty Marcus disliked the helmet. In battle it marked him out as a target for any ambitious Pict seeking plunder and fame. But his blood-father had taught him that a commander had to be more than a leader. He must also be a symbol: the visible manifestation of calm, order and authority among the chaos. The helmet was an expression of power.

He edged Storm a little closer to the still formations.

'You look well, Pannonians.' His strong voice carried across the parade ground. He knew the opening would amuse them. Apart from one or two exotic exceptions every man had been born on the island of Britannia and counted himself a Briton. Half of them were the descendants of auxiliaries who'd manned the Wall over the centuries. Pannonians, yes, but also Tungrians, Batavians, Asturians and Thracians. He had two Picts, the brothers Janus and Julius, twins, though instantly identifiable by their contrasting characters, taken captive as children and as happy to slit the throats of their brethren as any other. One African, Senecio, who was shy about his origins, but seemed to have been born in the saddle. He could put an arrow through a mouse's eyeball at sixty paces from a horse at full gallop, which was all Marcus cared about. Zeno, the *medicus*, was Greek, with a history that was much more interesting than he cared to admit.

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Marcus also had five or six deserters from the Sixth Legion Victrix, who'd enlisted under assumed names. Their past didn't concern him, only that they would sooner fight than preen, and preferred the more relaxed discipline of the *limitanei* frontier troops to the iron hand and wooden rod of the regulars, the *comitatenses*. The rest were Marcus's Brigantian tribesfolk, raised to service in the Roman cavalry for countless generations.

'I am glad you have looked out your ceremonial finery for our meeting with the *dux Britanniarum* at Segedunum,' he continued, to a ripple of laughter. 'But our jaunt has a more serious purpose. You will have heard that we will be in the saddle for some weeks as I embark on my long-delayed inspection tour of the Wall garrisons. What, you ask, in the dead of winter, with sparse grazing and ice soon thick on the ponds? Well there is a reason for our haste. Perhaps it is a whisper on the wind, or just a stirring in the air, but I have a feeling we will be busy come the spring.' A growl of appreciation. They all understood the resurgent power in the north. 'Regiment will prepare to advance,' he called.

He waited until the decurions had turned their squadrons towards the *via militaris* before he urged Storm into motion.

'Ride, brothers,' he ordered. 'Ride for Segedunum.'

II

A blanket of dense, low cloud the colour of piss-stained wool hung above the Ala Sabiniana as the long column of horsemen rode east on the supply road that ran parallel to the Wall. From the thick haze an almost imperceptible drizzle drifted down that clung to everything it touched and made Marcus glad of his thick, lanolin-coated cloak. As he rode, part of his mind was on his surroundings and the incredible structure for which Rome held him responsible. Between the road and the Wall lay a system of what had once been impressive banks and ditches. When it was first dug it would have been an immense physical scar of raw earth and Marcus had long pondered why the labour of so many thousands of men had been expended to create a barrier that appeared, to a soldier's eye at least, to be of little practical value. It could never have been manned and even with the usual ingenious additions of palisade, sharpened stakes and thorn bushes wouldn't have delayed a determined enemy for long. The banks remained, steep grass-covered mounds, but the ditch had been filled in long, long ago, and in most places it was now little more than a shallow depression in the landscape.

'This is a fine country,' Zeno, riding at his side, broke Marcus's reverie. He looked southwards over a patchwork of grey, green, gold and

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brown that swelled and undulated like the waves of a gently rolling sea. 'It shouldn't be at war. You should be on your estate, lord, growing crops and breeding sons.'

Marcus turned in the saddle to follow his gaze and winced at a sudden pain in his chest. 'We've always been at war. Besides,' he said, 'I have a son. Not much of a son,' he added almost to himself. He and Bren shared the same blood, but little else: a sickly child whose birth had cost Marcus the only woman he'd ever truly loved. If the rumour he'd heard was true perhaps they no longer even shared as much. 'But there is still plenty of time for more sons.'

The *medicus* noticed the reaction to the old wound. 'You should let me look at that.'

'Don't fuss over me,' Marcus growled. Zeno was dressed and armed in the same fashion as his comrades and could fight as well as the best of them. His helmet hung from the pommel of his saddle and he rode with the butt of his long ash spear in the leg of his boot. He was tall and thin, with curly raven hair, a small, expressive mouth and skin that seemed to glow with health whatever his circumstances.

'It's your funeral, lord,' the *medicus* agreed. 'But, as I was saying, a man should have children early. Not as early as a woman, of course, women should bear children early and often, if they survive.' He smiled as a thought came to him. 'God should have said that. Sow thy seed early and often lest thy seed run dry. What age are you now, lord? Forty?'

'Thirty-seven. It's just land,' Marcus steered the conversation back to less provocative territory. 'Field and forest, pasture, moor, mountain and bog. Some of it is good. Some of it isn't. Didn't they have land like this in Greece?'

'In Greece the earth only seems to produce stones,' Zeno frowned at some troubling memory. 'And vines, of course, and sometimes olive trees. But I often wonder whether the Persians salted the land wherever they touched it. Asia was different, at least the parts I saw outside Constantinopolis. But it was a different type of green, especially in the north. More verdant, but less comforting, you might say.'

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Marcus smiled. Zeno liked to tell anyone who would listen that God had come to him in a dream and told him his healing powers would be of more value to the brave heroes stemming the barbarian tide in the north than in the fleshpots of the Empire's eastern capital. The truth was a little different.

They continued at a leisurely walk and after an hour in the saddle the familiar outline of the fort at Vindobala appeared on the ridge line to their left. As always, Marcus felt a stirring in his blood at the sight of the tall corner towers and the grey ramparts once lime-washed to give the stronghold its name – White Walls. This was where he had made the painful, frustrated transition from boy to youth and he knew every worn step and paving slab of those ramparts. A hundred and seventy paces north to south, and a hundred and twenty east to west, the fort straddled the Wall and its gateways had once formed a major crossing point for trade between the frontier tribes in time of peace. A horn blared in the distance, sounding high and tinny, and armed men appeared to line the walls.

‘Arrius’s people are alert enough.’

‘For once,’ Luko grunted.

Marcus called Senecio from the ranks. ‘Ride to the fort and tell them there will be no inspection today, but that we will be back within the week.’

‘No inspection today, lord.’ Senecio’s skin was so dark it had a purple tinge and the deep brown eyes never betrayed emotion, but he could outride any man in the unit. He spun his horse and urged the animal diagonally across the slope at a flashy gallop over humps and hollows that marked a long-abandoned settlement. When he was half-way, a hare broke from under his mount’s hooves. Before it covered twenty jinking paces, Senecio had unslung the bow from his back, notched an arrow and loosed it to pin the fleeing animal through the body. Still at full gallop and with the bow in his left hand, he stooped from the saddle to pick up the carcass by the arrow that impaled it.

‘One of these days he’ll break his neck doing that.’ Zeno shook his head.

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‘What was Constantinopolis like?’

Zeno frowned at the unexpected return to the conversation of an hour earlier. ‘You have seen Rome, lord?’ he said eventually.

‘No, but I’ve visited Londinium.’ Marcus’s nose wrinkled at the memory of the sewer stink that had hung in the air thick enough to chew. ‘There were too many people and I didn’t much like their habits.’

‘Well Constantinopolis is like neither,’ Zeno assured him. ‘It makes Londinium look like a squalid country hamlet and is to Rome what the Empress Maria is to some ancient, toothless crone. Arcadius’s Great Palace is clad in gold and precious stones and is not one palace, but four, aye and barracks and baths and beautiful gardens by the dozen, each as broad as your parade ground. The entirety of it would swallow up the Palatine, the Capitoline, and everything in between.’ Marcus had little notion of the exact dimensions Zeno was describing, but he had heard enough of the Palatine and Capitoline to appreciate the scale. And Zeno was only getting into his stride. ‘The great palace is only one of many: every aristocrat has a mansion worthy of the name. Magnificent churches by the score. Shaded courtyards where any may partake of cool water fed from underground cisterns. The Mese, that is to say the main thoroughfare through the city, is four miles in length and wide enough to carry five wagons in line abreast, flanked by columned basilicas, and passes through no less than five forums, each of which rivals the Forum Romanum, before it reaches the Golden Gate . . .’

‘This Golden Gate must be set into great walls,’ Marcus interrupted. ‘How do the walls of Constantinopolis compare with this?’ He pointed to his left where the outline of a turret rose above the leaden-grey line of the Wall on the horizon. Three times the height of a man and three paces in width at the base, every stone of the Wall had been quarried and set in place centuries earlier by the men of three Roman legions. It stretched to east and west as far as the eye could reach and was the greatest feat of construction in the western Empire.

Zeno frowned. The question gave him pause for good reason. This would call for diplomacy.

‘As I understand it our Wall runs for more than seventy miles and

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stretches from sea to sea, a feat which is surely unmatched in all the world.' The Greek accompanied the words with a smile of transparent insincerity. At barely twice the height of the spear he carried, Marcus's vaunted Wall was little higher than the pens Zeno's forebears constructed in Boeotia to keep the wolves from their cattle. For Zeno, the Wall was less of a barrier than a dividing line between civilization and barbarism. The Picts could cross at will in any one of a hundred places. The only thing that kept them from doing so was Marcus's combination of diplomacy, bribery and the kind of bloody example he had set at Alona. Yet the events at Alona were the exception rather than the norm. Along most of the Wall, north and south, families lived and farmed peacefully, sometimes within sight of the rampart. 'The walls of Constantinopolis encompass a mere ten miles,' the Greek confessed, 'though much of their length is also protected by the sea.'

'And yet they must be taller, surely?' Marcus accompanied his question with a hint of wry amusement that told Zeno his stratagem had been in vain.

'In truth, lord,' Zeno laughed, 'the walls of Constantinopolis do not rise, they soar, to twenty times and more the height of this battered little rampart of yours. So high that they seem to touch the clouds and it is a miracle they are not topped by snow in winter like the Taurus mountains. Too high by far for any siege ladder. Nova Roma is impregnable to siege, yet before I left the city Emperor Arcadius, may God protect him, had ordered his engineers to draw up plans for an even greater fortification.'

'And all the while,' Marcus growled, 'we must defend the north with the wind whistling through the cracks in our barrack walls and the arse torn out of our breeches.'

'The world has ever been ill divided, lord,' the *medicus* acknowledged. 'In my enthusiasm I may have painted an overly complimentary picture of Constantinopolis. True, it is a physical paradise, but the people are prone to arrogance and vanity, particularly the women, who flaunt their charms in a most un-Christian manner. Corruption, conspiracy and betrayal are woven into their souls like strands of silken thread. Arcadius's

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palace is a festering political cesspit where the weak are devoured and the strong grow fat on their flesh. Arcadius was led by his nether parts by his wife Eudoxia, whose poisonous influence pervaded all Nova Roma. She alienated the common folk and Rome by raising one of her eunuchs to the position of consul, and both she and the Emperor are held in thrall by the power of the Goths and the Ostrogoths who inhabit the fringes of the eastern Empire. Arcadius likes to call them his watchdogs, but in truth they are the wolves waiting in the bushes outside a sheepfold. That is the reality of Constantinopolis, lord.'

'I have plenty of experience of wolves outside the sheepfold.' Marcus stared northwards.

'And the province has much to thank for your success in dealing with them.'

Marcus turned in the saddle and pinned him with his dark eyes. 'Do not think your oily flattery deceives me, Greek.' He tempered the threat with a laugh. 'If only the festering political cesspit was as easy to deal with as a few thousand Picts.'

They rode on in silence for a long time. The river in the valley below grew broader and eventually Marcus caught the familiar tang of salt on the breeze. Quite soon the fort at Pons Aelius came into view, and the wide, stone bridge that gave it its name.

'What happened to the wife?'

'She died,' Zeno said, keeping his eyes on the horizon ahead.

She slipped between the huts like a wraith until she reached the centre of the compound where the largest building stood. Two guards flanked the doorway, but they acknowledged neither her presence nor her existence. She might have been invisible, but for the fact that she could sense the fear that clung to them like a fog. She passed between them and pushed the door, which was unbarred as she had ordered, slipping into the darkened interior. Here too the scent of fear hung thick in the air. Around her, still as death, a dozen guards feigned sleep. Any one of them could have killed her, but the power of her reputation and the hostages she held from their families kept them

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frozen in position. Untroubled by the stygian gloom she strode confidently towards the room at the rear and drew the curtain aside. The remains of a fire glowed in the hearth to provide just enough light to see the bed and the mound of furs, but she would have located it even in the pitch dark by the animal snoring. She reached beneath her dress and withdrew a wooden tube with a stopper at one end and a mouthpiece at the other. The furs moved and she stepped forward to be confronted by a naked girl-child who smiled at the sight of her and rolled clear of the bed. A twitch of the head sent the child away. She approached closer, and now she could see him. A face that might have been carved with an axe, all harsh lines and flat planes. Rumpled silver hair and a pointed beard of the same colour. He had his head thrown back and his mouth open. She carefully removed the stopper and put the mouthpiece to her lips. She waited for the right moment and blew a cloud of dust directly into his mouth just as he drew in a breath. He choked and his eyes flew open. She saw the moment when, in his mind, his hand went to the sword he always kept beside the bed, and the realization that it could never be. The dust was a compound of dried mushroom that brought instant temporary paralysis, though he still retained the ability to cry out.

‘You,’ he hissed. ‘Guards, to me. Guards!’

She stood back and watched until he understood how helpless he was and the cries faded. But he was not completely cowed.

‘I am Lucti, High King of the Caledonian Picts, and I swear by the spear of Beli Mawr that I will have my revenge. Begone, witch.’

She smiled. ‘You are an old man and your time is past.’ She pulled a narrow, pointed dagger from a scabbard at her waist and Lucti gasped. ‘But you have one more service you can do for your people.’

She placed a hand on his chin and made three deft strokes with the knife, rejoicing in his howls of terror and pain. When she was done, she showed him the dagger with his left eye gleaming like an obscene jewel on the point.

‘This is only the beginning.’

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