



# LORD OF SILVER

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The cover shows a detail of the late Alan Sorrell's impression of how the Lullingstone Roman villa might have looked in the mid-fourth century. The image is the property of Historic England, which holds the copyright.

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## CHAPTER ONE

When Austalis finally came within sight of Hadrian's Wall he was surprised to see that the gates of this northern barrier of civilisation were open. To either side of him, the small doorways of the milecastles made two points of light in the dark line of the Wall itself, but directly ahead, in line with the rough road that he had followed south from Gododdin, the great gateway of the fort of Vercovicium could be made out even at this distance, a small rectangular window giving Austalis his first glimpse of the Roman part of Britain. There was little to see from so far away, except for that alien, compelling slice of light itself.

The spring wind blew from the east, still carrying a trace of the sharp smell of the winter that had passed. Austalis had heard that in the western and southern parts of Britain the wind blew mainly from the west, and was damp rather than dry.

As he came closer to the Wall he began to feel conspicuous, alone on the empty moorland and the deserted road. He could make out heads moving along the top of the Wall. The heads moved together into groups of two or three, and coalesced into a phalanx of silhouetted helmets over the main gateway. They were watching him. They had to be; no other creature was there to be watched, north of the Wall.

Now he could read the inscription mounted in huge gold letters along the Wall itself, a standing challenge to the northern peoples: AVE ROMA DOMINA MUNDI. Austalis mentally translated it into British and Germanic, and found that the Germanic version was more impressive: Hail to Rome Mistress of the World. He wondered why the letters had not been pulled down during the Great Raid, six years earlier. Even if the illiterate warriors could not be provoked by words they could not read, he would have expected them to be greedy for the gold of which the letters were made. Perhaps this part of the Wall had not been attacked. That might also explain why the gates of the fort were left open.

The road dipped as it was carried on an embankment over a steep-sided ditch, and then rose again as it led over a sunken belt of mud and into the gateway.

Two Roman soldiers were waiting to meet him. They wore trousers and smocks, not the grand armoured splendour of a Roman soldier as Austalis had always pictured him. They barred his way. Behind them, Austalis could see buildings, paths, and the road continuing towards a second gate and wall, but the soldiers gave him no time to contemplate the scene and organise his impressions.

"State your name and business."

"Austalis, son of Notfried," he replied in British, the language in which the soldier had challenged him. "I want to visit the Empire."

"Search him," the first soldier told the other one. Austalis did not resist, and the soldiers showed no interest in any of his personal belongings until they found a small bronze tablet carefully inscribed in Latin letters.

"So you're a thief!" the first soldier exclaimed. "And you have the nerve to carry this into a Roman fort."

"Perhaps he doesn't know what it is," the second soldier suggested.

"I know very well what it is," Austalis told them. "It's a diploma. My father received it when he left the army after 25 years. See? There's his name, Hnaudifridus. That's how the Romans spelt it. He was in the auxiliaries, and he commanded a troop of Frisian cavalry. In fact, he served in this fort."

"That may be true," the first soldier replied, "but how do we know he was your father?"

“How does any man know who his father was?” the second soldier joked, but he stopped laughing abruptly when he realised that he was the only one who was amused.

“Look at me,” Austalis answered. “Do I have the appearance of a Briton, or would you say that I was a German?”

The two soldiers examined him carefully, and Austalis was somehow conscious that other eyes were judging his claim, behind and above him, looking down from the rampart of the Wall. He was confident that his blue eyes and curly blond hair would convince them that, son of Notfried or not, he was not the son of a Briton.

The first soldier glanced upwards, and seemed to nod slightly in response to a signal from someone up on the Wall.

“Come along, Austalis, son of Notfried or somebody else.”

He kept the bronze diploma, and Austalis followed him into the interior of the fort. Austalis was disappointed at what he saw: within its rectangle of stone wall, the fort seemed nearly empty. Only a few structures sat in the blank flatness. Two main roads crossed it, the first being the continuation of the road from the north, which led to a gateway in the southern wall, and another road running from the east wall to the west. Where they would have crossed each other, a large stone building sat in the middle of the fort, as if ready to pounce in any direction upon an enemy of Rome.

Austalis followed the soldier up the steps of the building. He had never been in a stone building before, and could not help being awed and apprehensive, but he was determined not to play the simple gaping barbarian tribesman in front of the soldiers.

“Wait here,” the soldier told him. Austalis obediently stayed under the porch. This stone building was cold. He wondered if he should have let the precious diploma out of his sight. It had aroused curiosity and suspicion. While nobody had harmed him yet, still he had not been granted free passage through the southern gateway, and he knew that the Romans normally allowed nearly anyone to pass through the Wall in either direction without hindrance.

“You! Come here,” the soldier’s voice called. He went in, and discovered why the fort looked empty. The building was full of men, walking about in gloomy passages lit by candles, or standing in groups, or sitting at tables in rooms that Austalis was hustled past.

The soldier halted him before a hanging curtain.

“Bring him in,” a deep voice called from within, in Latin. The soldier drew aside the curtain, and Austalis stepped through a doorway into a room furnished with a high table at which a man sat, with a flat piece of wood covered with writing lying in front of him, and more slabs of wood stacked on shelves lining the walls. The room was filled with a strange unnatural warmth. Austalis could not see any fire or brazier, and could not make out the source of the heat, which was evenly distributed throughout the room.

He waited for the Roman to speak, but the man said nothing. Austalis looked past him, and he was startled to see that the window was covered with pieces of glass set in a lead frame. The view of the yard outside was fascinatingly broken up and distorted by the bulges and concavities of the thick slices of glass. So simple an idea, to cover a window with glass without opening it to the wind and cold.

The Roman suddenly spoke, in British.

“You claim that this diploma belonged to your father.”

Austalis’ attention shifted back to the Roman. “That is so. He was Notfried, or Hnaudifridus, and when he left the service he was praepositus of a numerus of Frisian cavalry, stationed in this fort.”

The Roman took the bronze tablet out from under the table where he had been concealing it, and held it away from his eyes to study the lettering in the unstable light from the window.

"It is certainly a genuine diploma," he said, changing from British into Latin. "What did your father do when he left the army?"

"He settled in the land of Gododdin, which is north of this wall, but south of the ancient turf wall."

That was a mistake, Austalis realised: he should not have mentioned the fact that the Romans had been forced to abandon the northern turf wall, long before. The Roman ignored that.

"I know perfectly well where Gododdin is," he said, surprising Austalis. "I am more interested in the irony of the situation. As soon as your father received Roman citizenship by this diploma, he left the Empire. Why?"

"He knew the country beyond the Wall very well. The Frisian cavalry used to patrol far to the north, checking on the loyalty of the treaty tribes. My father had been a barbarian among the Frisians and a soldier among the Romans. He wanted to make a third life for himself among the Picts."

"The northern people don't call themselves Picts."

"It is because we are speaking in Latin that I use the term."

"How did you learn Latin?"

"My father taught it to me, along with Germanic."

"Take back your father's diploma," the Roman said, handing it to Austalis across the table. "Now I want to know why you want to pass through the Wall."

"I want to visit the Roman Empire of which I've heard so much. My father was not born a Roman, but he came to respect and love the Empire. He found a place for himself. Among the Germans, there is no way for a foreigner to become a Saxon or a Frisian. You must be born into those peoples. The same is true of the British peoples north of the Wall, the Picts. He told me that there was room for everyone in the Empire, that any man who obeyed the law could enter Roman society and take up all kinds of opportunities that he would otherwise never have."

"What opportunity do you expect to find?"

"I don't know. I'm looking for variety, for an education, and for a religion."

"The law gives you no choice. Christianity has been the official religion of the Empire for more than fifty years. We recently had an Emperor who tried to overthrow Christianity, but he failed."

"Is it compulsory to be a Christian?"

"Oh, not at all, but in the cities it is becoming uncomfortable to be anything else."

Silence fell for a few moments, as though the Roman, like Austalis, could think of nothing to say. Somewhere outside, a man began shouting, and figures of men passed by the window, compressed, twisted, elongated, like demons.

The Roman clapped his hands together, and the soldier stepped smartly into the room.

"This man is to be kept within the fort until I give my decision on what is to be done with him," he ordered, and then spoke directly to Austalis. "You will not be allowed to pass through either the southern or the northern gate." He switched his remarks back to the soldier. "Digernus can look after him. You may leave."

The soldier turned, and pulled the curtain aside. Austalis obediently went through, leaving the Roman to the problems made of wood that filled the shelves.

The soldier led Austalis briskly to the entrance of the building.

“Digernus works at the bath-house. It’s over there.”

They had to walk around groups of men exercising with short swords and throwing-spears. None of them were wearing what Austalis thought of as the uniforms and accoutrements of a Roman soldier. They were dressed as men dressed in Gododdin, and although their orders were shouted at them in Latin, Austalis was sure that their own language was British, even if they might only speak it among themselves when their officers were out of hearing. The soldiers glanced curiously as Austalis was led past them, daring to move only their eyes.

He was stopped at a rectangular building built close to the east wall of the fort, but not so close that attackers could have jumped from the wall onto its roof.

The soldier ducked into the doorway.

“Digern! Are you there? Are you awake and earning your pay?” Such questions could apparently be put in British.

“All right, I’m coming,” a hoarse voice replied from within. and an old man emerged, wiping his hands on a rag. “You can’t have a bath for hours yet. Don’t you ever learn how long it takes to heat up a bath of water? There won’t even be steam for an hour.”

“Look, stop telling me all about baths,” the soldier answered. “I didn’t come here for a bath, and this barbarian has never heard of a bath, never mind having one. You’re to keep him here at the bath-house until someone comes for him.” He gave a warning to Austalis. “Of course, old Digern can’t keep you here by force, but if you try to pass through the gates, it will look much worse for you.”

With that, the soldier walked away, back to the north gate. Austalis was left uncomfortably exchanging stares with Digern, and decided to break the dangerous silence.

“Since we’ve got to stay together, we might as well be friendly. I’m Austalis, son of Notfried, and I come from Gododdin.”

“I’m Digern, son of a mother, father unknown. Come in. Have you eaten yet?”

“Thank you, but I’m not hungry.”

“Come in anyway.”

Digern led Austalis into the bath-house. The air inside was cold; the morning sun of early spring would warm the stone structure only slowly, if at all, but when they entered one of the interior rooms the air was warm. It did not fit with the cold of the floor and walls, like two flavours clashing with each other in the same dish of food.

Digern sat down on one of the stone benches built into the wall, next to a mysterious dark slot over which he held out his hand as though waiting for a coin to be dropped into it.

“Ah! The heat’s coming stronger now.”

“Where is it coming from?” Austalis asked, sitting down beside him.

Digern looked at him sympathetically.

“You’re a real barbarian, aren’t you? I suppose you wash yourself with ash soap instead of oil. The heat comes up from below, where the fires are. Soon the floor will begin to get warm.”

“I did come through the Wall to learn new ways,” Austalis said. “This is the first time I’ve come across anything that was completely different from our own homes in Gododdin. I’ve seen glass windows. That was my first new experience.”

Their voices echoed around the hard stone room. Austalis could make out cressets mounted on the walls, waiting to be lit, but the gloom in the unlit bath-house added to the strangeness. He had never heard echoes inside a building before. The effect was like being in a cave, and this primitive image was difficult to reconcile with the sophistication of a Roman bath-house. Warm and cold, primitive and civilised, an old man speaking British like his own, but acting as the spokesman for Roman civilisation. Austalis was already beginning to suspect that the Roman world was more complex than he had believed, and he had still not really entered it; he had not yet even passed out of the fort.

Digern coughed noisily into his rag towel.

"If Rome weren't different, you might as well have stayed at home. Why are you here, anyway?"

"I wanted to see the Empire my father told me so much about."

"Who is this father you keep brandishing in front of my face? I've never met a man who was so keen to tell perfect strangers about his father. Are you the illegitimate son of an emperor?"

"I told you, my father was called Notfried. He was the commander of a troop of Frisian cavalry, right in this fort. He came to the Empire of his own free will, as a young man, and I want to do the same."

"Very inspiring," Digern snorted. "Well, now I know what happened to Notfried."

"You mean you knew my father?"

"How could I not know him? I've worked here for more than forty years. Let me show you something."

He rose from the bench, in a series of alarming clicks from all the joints of his body, and shuffled into another room.

"This is one of the storerooms. Not a fit place for such a relic to be kept, but it's safe."

He brushed away a cloud of dust from a stone slab propped up against the wall.

"Look at this. It's a dedication to the four Alaisiagae."

"The Frisian goddesses!" Austalis exclaimed.

"Right, and look who set it up: Numerus Hnaudifridi, Notfried's troop. It's an altar. There's an old shrine in the fort, a hundred or two hundred years old, (dedicated) to the four goddesses. The Frisians were here for a long time."

Austalis had never been taught the forms of worship of the four goddesses, but he wished he knew how to make appropriate reverence to the altar. The dust showed that nobody else had worshipped before it for a long time.

"Why is it kept here?"

"Ah. I brought it in, because so nobody will come across it. For a small and isolated place, this fort has many religions. The Mithraists would simply ignore it, but the Christians might get nasty."

"Why should they care?"

"Well, the Christians don't want anybody to practise any other religion. I think they hope to stamp out all the religions of the Empire. They're even worse than the Jews. At least the Jews don't try to convert you."

"Don't the Frisians worship the Alaisiagae any more?"

"I couldn't tell you. There haven't been any Frisians stationed in this fort since the attacks six years ago. They all rode out one morning and were never heard of again. So much for loyalty to the Empire."

Austalis noticed that the floor was definitely becoming warm, and he took off his cloak.

“Hot, eh?” Digern enquired. “Well, you’ll be hotter yet if we stay in this room. I’m an old man. I need warmth more now than I did when I was young. By the gods, whoever they are, I hate the winters. Excuse me. I’ve got to get back to my work.”

“I’ll help you,” Austalis offered. “It’ll pass the time for me.”

“You don’t know what the work is, but I’ll take you up on your offer before you change your mind. I don’t often get any companionship down in the stoking-room.”

He lifted a trapdoor in the floor, revealing a flight of rough stone steps leading down into a vague dimness which threw up a blast of hot air. A dull light flickered from the glow of unseen fires.

“And you thought Hades was cold, didn’t you! Come on down.”

Austalis followed Digern down the steps. He found himself in a kind of man-constructed cavern. Piles of firewood were neatly stacked everywhere in the shadows, and iron shovels stood near a pair of doors opening into a vertical shaft.

Digern pulled the doors open. A fire was burning inside.

“Pass me some wood, Austalis,” Digern commanded.

Austalis took a handful of chopped sticks over to the fire, and Digern carefully threw them in, one at a time.

“Not too many,” Digern remarked. “Slow heat, for a long time, that’s what’s needed.”

Austalis stripped to what he judged to be the Roman standard of decency, and set to work. The heat and exertion soon made him thirsty. He could do without food for many days if necessary, but he would need water before long. He had reached the point of wondering whether he would have to drink the water in the bath when Digern called a halt.

“That’ll do for a bathful,” he announced. “We only use the small bath nowadays. When I first worked here, we had to heat up the large bath, too, but that was when we had a much larger number of men stationed in this fort. Let’s take a break for lunch.”

“I didn’t bring any with me,” Austalis admitted. “How can I buy something? I’m not allowed out of the building.”

“I keep a stock of bread and sausages to sell to the soldiers when they come for their bath. My wife has just made a fresh batch. I’ve got some wine, too, and that’s fresh as well. It’s last year’s. The supply convoy from Eburacum came in two days ago, and I bought up most of the cheaper stock.”

“You seem to be operating quite a large enterprise out of this bath-house.”

“I also run gambling here too, but you won’t tell the Duke of the Northern Marches about that, will you?”

“I wouldn’t know him if I met him, which I never would, anyway. What’s his name?”

“Fullofaudes is the present commander in the northern provinces, and a good man, too, even if he is a Visigoth.”

Digern brought out baskets and clay jars, and Austalis sat down with him to eat the sharp, spicy sausages and cool, thick bread. The wine was the same as Austalis had known at home in Gododdin, which was a disappointment to him, but he assumed that the lands nearer to the heart of the Empire would serve a more luxurious product.

“How much do I owe you for this?” he asked Digern, fishing out a few Roman coins.

“It’s on me. Glad of your company. Oof, put that one away! A coin of the anti-Christian Emperor Julian!”

“It’s the newest-looking one I’ve got.”

“Don’t give that to a Christian, or he’ll throw it straight back at you, even if he’s starving. I’d take it, but for the fact that I’d have trouble passing it on myself. As I said, you’re my guest for lunch.”

When they had finished eating, the furnace needed more wood and more strenuous stoking, which Austalis supplied. As he banged the furnace doors shut, he thought he heard a voice call above. Both he and Digern paused.

“Digern! Bring up your barbarian, if you’ve still got him!”

“Come along,” Digern said, starting up the stairs. “Better put your tunic on in case you have to go somewhere.”

Austalis managed to slip the tunic on over his head while climbing the stairs without involving himself in an accidental tumble, and found himself confronting the soldier who had been escorting him from one place to another ever since they had met under the gateway through the Wall.

“The commander has made a decision about you,” the soldier informed him. Austalis had realised that the Roman who had interviewed him must be a person of rank, but he had not imagined that it was the commander of the fort in person.

The soldier was obviously enjoying stretching out the suspense.

“You’ve been passed. You can go through the southern gate and travel wherever you like within the Empire. I don’t know what story you told the commander, but it must have been a good one. There is one condition. You have to leave this fort at once.”

Digern interrupted at this point.

“How far away does he have to go?”

“What’s that got to do with you?”

“I want to invite him to stay with me tonight.”

“Well, since you live outside the fort, it must be all right,” the soldier decided, “but I’ll hold you responsible for seeing that he’s out of the fort before mid-afternoon tomorrow”.

“He can go now. Austalis, you can take this empty basket to my wife. Tell her you’re staying with us until tomorrow.”

“That’s very kind of you, but I can start my journey now.”

“No, no, I’ll try to get you a ride with the supply convoy. It’s going back empty to Eburacum tomorrow. Here’s how to get to my house.”

After Austalis had memorised the directions that Digern gave him, he let the soldier lead him to the southern gateway. It was a close copy of the northern one, in case the fort should be invested from all sides.

“Goodbye,” the soldier said. “I hope you find whatever you’re looking for in the Empire. I’ve never been more than half a day’s march south of here myself, and I’ve never been north at all.”

“This is the first time I’ve been away from home,” Austalis replied. “Perhaps I’ll see you again if I come back through here.”

“Barbarians never come back from the Empire,” the soldier answered, and he walked away without any further farewells.

Austalis, carrying Digern’s empty basket, went through the gateway, nearly tripping in a series of grooves that ran under it in an intricate parallel pattern. Standing in the shadow of the gateway, with the dank stone over his head like a threatening storm, Austalis puzzled over the grooves, until he realised that they had been made by the wheels of a cart. How many

carts, in how many hundreds of years, must have passed that way in order wear grooves in the actual stone itself?

On the other side of the sombre gateway, Austalis nearly laughed at the contrast. About 50 houses were built close to the Wall, as though they were huddling around the gateway, clamouring to get in. Women and children wandered about, and dogs sniffed in the rubbish, which Austalis guessed would never have been allowed to litter the fort itself. Patches of brown earth would become gardens later in the year.

In the distance, beyond a shallow defensive ditch, a Roman road ran across the horizon. Austalis' father had told him about it, the Military Road, built so that soldiers could move quickly from one part of the Wall to the other.

He strode into the civil settlement, picking out Digern's house from the description. It might have been a village in Gododdin, except for the fact that some of the houses were rectangular rather than round. How these Romans went for straight lines and sharp corners!

A group of children fled from him, and one of them ducked into a house. He heard the child's voice softly giving some urgent news, and then an old woman emerged and waved a stick, twisted and thin like herself, towards Austalis.

"Keep to the road, barbarian! You're not allowed in here."

Speaking in Latin, Austalis replied "I'm invited to the house of Digern and Brigid".

"Uh," the old woman said, retreating a pace, and Austalis had been correct in guessing that she did not understand Latin. "I'm no barbarian," he told her, as he walked by and continued to Digern's house.

He knocked at the door, and another old woman, but warm-eyed and smiling, came out. He held the empty basket out to her.

"Digern told me to give this to you. He told me to stay here."

The woman took the basket, and looked Austalis up and down, making him remember that he had failed to introduce himself. Still standing outside the door in the cold spring wind, he explained who he was and where he was bound.

"That's something new," the woman answered. "A citizen of Rome who's never seen the Empire! I've seen little enough of it myself. Come in. I'm Brigid."

Austalis sat down on a section of log in the house. The earth floor had been newly beaten down, and covered with last year's straw, which would do until there were rushes or fresh grass to be spread.

"Digern won't be long," she said. "The soldiers will be having their bath now, and then he has only to clean up afterwards."

She plied him with questions about Gododdin, admitting that she had never been north of the Wall. Austalis noticed that she used a large number of Latin words in her speech, even for the most common items of the household. When he told her the native British words that were used in the north, she had never heard of them, so long had Roman influence weighed down on everyday life in the Imperial provinces.

While Brigid set to work on cooking the food to sell to the soldiers the next day, Austalis went to the door and surveyed the civil settlement again. It would have been safer to build the houses within the fort, but obviously the Romans would not permit a swarm of untidy houses to spoil the clean emptiness of their fort. The Wall stretched away to east and west. There was no golden inscription on its southern face, unlike the challenge to the unconquered peoples on the northern side.

When the afternoon ended, Digern came home, carelessly tramping through other people's vegetable gardens and ignoring the loud curses this behaviour elicited. Austalis suspected this was a daily ritual for him.

"I've set everything up for you, Austalis," he puffed. "You've got a ride down to Eburacum with the supply convoy that leaves tomorrow morning. You can't go back into the fort, but you can join the convoy when it comes through the gate."

"How was business this afternoon?" Austalis asked him.

"Quite good. The bread and sausages all sold, and I made a good profit on the gambling."

Austalis enjoyed sharing supper with Digern and Brigid, and confessed to them his shyness in the face of his first venture into the Empire.

"It's a whole world that I don't understand. I'm not even sure where I ought to go."

Digern had a brisk suggestion.

"Go straight to the heart."

"To Rome?"

"No, not that far, not yet! Go to Londinium. If you have a fortune to find in the Empire, you'd best start in the capital of the British provinces. From here to Eburacum is a good start."

Brigid insisted on making a meal for Austalis to take with him, and Austalis insisted on paying for it with a bulbous copper coin that Digern identified as coming from the Greek lands in the east of the Empire. Austalis was heartened; if a little coin could travel from Constantinopolis to Hadrian's Wall, he should be able to survive a journey to Eburacum.

# CHAPTER TWO

Next morning, after being given a bundle of sausages and a generous supply of advice, Austalis took his place by the gateway. Before Digern left for his work at the bath-house, Digern had assured him that he would be recognised.

“How many unknown blond barbarians do we see standing by the road?” he asked. “They’ll know you when they see you.”

Austalis waited patiently. The southern gate had been kept shut during the night, and he had no doubt that the northern one would have been closed and barred as well. He wondered whether it was a real fear of raiders that was the reason for closing the gates, or simply a disciplinary tradition.

The curious women and children watched him suspiciously from their houses and gardens. He hoped that Digern and Brigid would not receive any hostility because of having made him their guest for a night.

At last he heard the thump of the great bolts being drawn back, and the gates slowly opened. Because they opened inwards, the gangs of men pulling on each gate were hidden from view, and so the heavy gates seemed to open by themselves.

Two horsemen with spears rode out, and halted right in front of Austalis.

“Are you Austalis, the barbarian?”

“Yes, I’m Austalis.”

“Wait for the last waggon, and jump into it when it passes. It won’t stop for you.”

The horses moved on, and the first ox-cart followed. The carts moved jerkily, because they were travelling empty on the southward journey. Austalis did not move. It would be no problem to board any of the passing carts, because the oxen were pulling them along so slowly.

He counted ten carts, and then saw the eleventh, which was covered with an awning, and that was followed only by another pair of horsemen. This must be the last one. He stepped over and began walking alongside it, as it groaned and lurched whenever its wheels bumped in and out of the grooves worn into the stone roadway.

“I’m Austalis,” he called, hoping that someone was inside the cart. A corner lifted at the edge of the awning, and a dark face peered out from under it.

“You fit the description,” the man said. “Climb in before the rain starts.”

Austalis clambered over the side of the cart, drawing a snort of protest from one of the oxen as his extra weight made itself felt, and ducked under the awning.

He had expected the cart to be lightly loaded, but it was nearly empty, apart from a few large jars with narrow necks.

The other man shifted into a corner.

“Make a space for yourself. Just clear the amphoras out of the way. They’re tough. They won’t break.”

Austalis pushed away the jars. They rolled easily, being empty.

“We make people give back the empty ones,” the man remarked. “Of course, everybody wants to keep them for storage.”

“I’ve never seen any where I come from,” Austalis replied, “but I’d heard about amphoras”.

“Yes, you’re a barbarian, aren’t you? Well, I’m Demetrius. It should be Dimitrios, but these Romans always insist on torturing foreign names to agree with their own grammar.”

“Are you a Greek, then?”

“You know a lot for a man who comes from the other side of the Wall. I’m born and bred in Britain, but my father came from Citium, in the province of Cyprus. That’s an island at the eastern end of the Middle Sea.”

Austalis tried to imagine the distant island, so far away, that still belonged to the same Rome of which he was a citizen. It was as true, and as hard to believe, that the sun that shone upon him was the same sun that shone upon every other man on earth.

“Where are we going?” he asked Demetrius.

“We’ll stop at a little fort tonight. It’s several days’ journey to Eburacum, when you’re travelling at the speed of an ox.”

As promised, the rain began to fall. The awning kept most of it out, but the harsh wind blew a constant stream of drops through the sides.

Demetrius seemed to be in no mood for conversation, and soon fell asleep in the opposite corner of the cart. Austalis sat back, and enjoyed the comfort of being transported instead of having to walk. The view inside the dark awning, made dimmer still by the heavy clouds pouring down the rain, quickly grew boring. Every so often, Austalis lifted up a corner of the awning to see what was outside, but all he saw was the familiar landscape of hills and grass in which he had been brought up. He should have expected that the hills on one side of the Wall would look the same as on the other. The only novelty was the straight stone road itself, and the rear ends of the oxen drawing the cart, and he had hoped for a more elegant sight of Roman power.

The journey went on, through the long morning. The only interruptions came when the road was forced to go up or down a hill. The inclines were really too steep for wheeled traffic, and the empty amphoras rolled thunderously across the floor of the cart as it tipped dramatically.

Around noon, Austalis heard voices ahead crying for a halt. At once, the awning was thrown back by one of the ox-drivers.

“We’re stopping for a meal. Gives us a chance to get out of the rain at last! It’s all right for you two, travelling like women in a litter.”

Austalis was embarrassed, because it did seem like a mode of travel unworthy of a blooded warrior like himself.

Demetrius clapped him on the shoulder.

“Never mind him. Let’s eat. Did you bring some food? Oh, you did. Where are we, anyway? They must have been desperate for a halt to have stopped here!”

Climbing out of the cart, Austalis saw a wooden tower built right next to the road. It was obviously new, and not to be compared to the stone towers built as advance posts north of the Wall.

“What is this place?” he asked Demetrius.

“A warning tower. Fullofaudes ordered them built after the raids six years ago. The soldiers keep a watch from the top, and they light beacons if they see anything suspicious. There’s a chain of them. When the beacons are lit, the warning can be passed south to Eburacum and north to the Wall in less than half an hour.”

“That could easily be prevented,” Austalis pointed out. “This tower could be burnt down, by even one man.”

“You barbarians don’t think things through, do you?” Demetrius replied. “The burning of the tower would bring the soldiers even faster than a signal beacon.”

The other men sheltering in the tower grinned, sending Austalis into a fit of anger.

“I’m not a barbarian. I am a Roman citizen!”

“All right, all right,” Demetrius said. “Come and eat.”

They sat down on the earthen floor, which was cold, and damper than it should have been. Austalis guessed that it had not been properly drained. In fact, the whole rickety wooden structure had the appearance of being a temporary construction, thrown together as an emergency measure. He had seen the abandoned forts and signal stations that stretched in a line due north of the Wall, and they were built of stone. He wondered why this tower had not been built of stone, too, but he did not dare to ask in case they decided that he really was a barbarian spy and an enemy of Rome.

The men of the supply convoy seemed friendly enough, and did not exclude him from their conversation.

“What’s your profession in life?” one of the drivers asked him.

“I don’t have one. That is, I suppose I’m really a warrior. It’s all I’ve been trained for. We have men who do particular trades, but I don’t belong to that class. My father wasn’t a native, so I took the class of my uncles on my mother’s side.”

“Who are your gods?” another man asked.

“The same as yours. Many of us are Christians, and others worship British gods and goddesses like Maponus and Epona.”

This time it was Demetrius who questioned him, in a more urgent tone than any of the others had used.

“Which god do you worship, Austalis?”

Before Austalis could say anything in reply, one of the soldiers intervened.

“Come on, Demetrius, you don’t put questions like that in public, and to a stranger at that. You could get him into trouble without meaning to.”

“Why could I get into trouble?” Austalis asked. “Are there gods whose worship is banned in the Empire?”

“No, but there are the Christians, and they don’t like anyone to practise any religion except their own.”

“I was told that by the commander of the fort when he interviewed me,” Austalis said, and immediately regretted mentioning the commander, whom he had now perhaps endangered by blurting that out. Once again, he felt that he really was a clumsy, ignorant barbarian, but then what was this society where a man was not free to speak his mind? This was the other hand of Rome, not the hand that gave the blessings of peace and security and civilisation, but the hand holding the sword that had conquered the Empire.

There was silence inside the dark wooden tower, and outside only the hiss of the rain and the groans of the oxen who had been left out in it. Theirs was a life of pain, suffering and service.

Austalis said. “I have no god yet. Like most men of mixed descent, I sometimes have difficulty in knowing to what way of life I belong. My father’s goddesses were the four Alaisiagae of Frisia, my mother favours Maponus, and one of my aunts likes to think she’s a Christian. How can I know who my god is?”

“You have mistaken a blessing for a problem,” Demetrius said. “I’m of mixed descent, too, a man with a Cypriot Greek for a father, a British mother, and the citizenship of Rome. People like us have a strange freedom, Austalis. We can choose our gods.”

“Who have you chosen?” Austalis asked.

“I’m a worshipper of Mithras.”

“The soldiers’ god! My father spoke of him sometimes.”

“Was your father an initiate?”

“No, no, but of course, many of the men that he served with were.”

“Times are changing. Few soldiers want to be initiated now. Mithras is too strong a god for them.”

“A strong god?” Austalis asked, beginning to feel more interest. This might be of meaning for him. A stern, powerful god, whose worship was favoured by the best soldiers of Rome, could be his guide to the true spirit of Rome.

One of the other soldiers spoke from a corner.

“The Christians are hot against Mithras.”

“That’s because he stands for everything in opposition to them,” Demetrius said. “Strength instead of weakness, nobility instead of vulgarity. They envy us. That’s why they’ve blasphemously copied the ritual feast and the birthday of the god on the day when the sun comes back after the winter solstice.”

“You can’t argue with one fact,” the other soldier said. “There are more and more Christians in the army, and fewer and fewer followers of Mithras.”

“We live in an age of softness and decline,” Demetrius replied. “Take Christianity itself. What is it but a soft alternative to the rigours of Judaism?”

Austalis intruded himself back into the conversation. “I already know a lot about Christianity, something about Judaism, a little about the traditional Roman gods, but nothing about Mithraism. I want to know more.”

“I wish I’d met you before we left the fort,” Demetrius replied. “It has a Mithraeum. That’s the special temple we use for our worship. I tell you what. There’s a Mithraeum in the garrison fort at Eburacum. When we arrive there, I’ll present you and perhaps you’ll eventually choose to be initiated.”

“Tell him about initiation,” someone suggested. “That will dampen his interest.”

“I don’t speak about it,” Demetrius answered. “I’ll tell Austalis about initiation when he has to make his choice. All I can say is that the ceremony involves ordeals. You don’t come to Mithras by mumbling a prayer or being splashed in water. He demands more, much more.”

Nobody spoke for a while, and Austalis received the impression that everyone was uncomfortable at the intense discussion of religion during what should be a friendly meal break on the road. He changed the topic.

“How long will it take till we get to Eburacum?”

“Three or four days,” one of the ox-drivers replied. “If the sun were out you’d have noticed that we’re travelling from west to east. Tomorrow we’ll reach the main road south, and that will take us right to the north gate of Eburacum.”

That seemed to be a signal, because everyone got up and prepared to resume the journey.

As they plodded on eastwards, Demetrius explained to Austalis that the road upon which they were travelling had once marked the northern frontier, until the emperor Hadrian had hit upon the idea of building an actual physical wall to replace it.

“I have heard,” Demetrius said, “that the emperor wanted to duplicate another great wall. In Cyprus, my father tells me, he used to meet traders from the empire of China. They come with the camel caravans that cross the great desert at the centre of the world. In China there is a wall that runs all the way along the western frontier of the empire, to guard against a warlike people called the Turks.”

Austalis encouraged Demetrius to tell stories of strange lands within the sphere of Rome and outside. He repaid the favour as well as he could, by telling how his father had crossed into the Empire to become an auxiliary soldier, and of the rough life of a warrior in the parts of Germany that Rome had never conquered.

“Of course, the Germans can come and go, just as we ‘Picts’ do here in Britain, but the Roman influence isn’t as strong beyond the German frontier. There, so my father told me, it’s a firm and definite line, not as in Britain, where there’s a gradual shading from what is definitely Roman territory to what is definitely not.”

The first night on the road was spent in an abandoned small fort on the southern road. It reminded Austalis of the decaying forts north of the Wall that the Roman army had withdrawn from. This fort was in better condition. Demetrius told him that it had been brought back into service purely as a fortified halt along the road, after the widespread raids six years earlier had made it seem unwise for the men of the supply convoys to sleep out in the open. Austalis found it eerie to lie awake in a barracks building that had once been full of soldiers. It was as if Rome had gone and they were camped among the ruins.

On the next day, they bypassed another empty fort of the same type, and spent the night in yet another one.

When they started out on the third morning, Austalis soon saw that the countryside was more cultivated and more thickly inhabited. Most of it was still moor and marsh and forest, but there were more fields, and travellers coming the opposite way. Many of them turned out to be free Britons, going back to their homes north of the Wall. Austalis had expected the local people to have a noticeably different form of speech to his own, but instead he found that the variations were no wider than among the different regions outside the Roman territory. The easy passage through the Wall had prevented any real divergence in speech.

Eventually, Austalis noticed that the number of houses they passed was increasing, along with the number of travellers on the road. Demetrius and his companions became more cheerful.

“We’re getting closer to civilisation,” Demetrius announced, using a Latin word that Austalis associated with living in a city. He became more excited at the prospect of seeing a real city for the first time.

He became aware of the presence of the city while they were still a few hours away from it. The city made its power felt at a long remove, like the warm rays of the hot and distant sun. The landscape changed. The forests thinned out, and then fell away behind, like a dark curtain across the northern horizon. The silver-grey line of the road struck out from the forest like a spear protruding from a wounded body.

Austalis had never before seen an entire countryside worked upon and changed by man. All around him were cultivated fields and vegetable gardens, houses, farms, and great stone buildings with tiled or thatched roofs from which smoke curled up gently like calm, contented breathing. He gazed at all the sights, not caring who laughed at him for being an ignorant barbarian. He kept Demetrius busy answering questions.

“Why aren’t there any marshes?”

“They’ve been drained. That’s common in the provinces of the Middle Sea. In the more southern parts of Britain, you see drained marshland in many districts. The dykes have to be kept in good condition, or the land becomes waterlogged again.”

“But how is the work done? By slaves?”

“Who can afford to keep that many slaves these days? No, it’s part of the obligations of the peasants. They used to pay rent in money, but here in the north, now, they pay for the use of the land by sharing part of their crop and doing labour for their landlord. After all, it’s in everyone’s interest to keep the land drained. In Italy, they do it on a much larger scale.”

Austalis marvelled at the power of Rome, which could organise men to drain marshes, roll back the forest like a memory of the savage past, and build walls from one coast of Britain to the other. What were the little square fields and the timber-and-thatch halls of Gododdin compared to this?

He noticed that the sad oxen were plodding a little faster without being goaded by the drovers who walked beside them. Walk, yes! He climbed out of the cart, and jumped down onto the hard road. Demetrius did not follow him, but then this was not his first arrival at a Roman city.

At once, a ray of sunshine broke out of the clouds and flashed off the puddles by the roadside. The road itself was already nearly dry, being cambered to let the water run off so that no unsightly puddles should mar it. One day, the Emperor might come that way;. Emperors had come that way; and the Emperor’s horse or litter must not have to splash through chilly British puddles!

Austalis quickened his stride and caught up to the first cart. He did not dare to go ahead of the two soldiers who led the supply convoy, because that might seem too much of a liberty to take on his own initiative. Nobody took any notice of him, so he was free to survey the sights.

Soon, following the line of the road with his eyes, he could make out what looked like a section cut out of the great Wall. Obviously that was the wall that enclosed the city of Eburacum, keeping it apart from the suburbs that lay “below the city”, to translate the Latin word. As they came closer, Austalis was astonished at what he saw outside the dark wall.

None other than the familiar little square fields, and the timber-and-thatch houses that he had travelled so far to leave behind him. They clustered around the wall as though they had been expelled from the city in disgrace.

Austalis fell back to the cart in which Demetrius was still riding, at his ease among the amphoras.

“Who lives in those houses, and works those fields?” Austalis called in under the awning. “They’re British, not Roman.”

“Oh, they belong to people who came here in the last few years because of the barbarian raids. They grow vegetables and corn to sell in the city. Some of the houses belong to the families of the German soldiers.”

“Germans? Here?”

“Wasn’t your father a Frisian? That’s a kind of German. Why are you surprised that Germans should be in Eburacum as well as on the Wall? They’re only a few, among so many. All kinds of men live within the Empire.”

With that, Demetrius climbed out of the cart, and walked beside Austalis on the last stretch of the road.

“I’ll find you a place to stay in Eburacum. Do you still want to go on to Londinium?”

“Yes, but I’m in no hurry. I can wait until I find someone who’s going south.”

“People leave here every day. Most travel by road now. There used to be a lot of sea traffic, because it’s faster, but the German pirates have stopped most of that. Stay a day or two in Eburacum. It’s only a little place compared to Londinium, of course, but you’ll have a chance to get used to a Roman city.”

The double towers of the gateway swallowed the road ahead. A crowd of people and animals was backed up, waiting to be examined by the guards before entering. Austalis expected a long wait, but the two soldiers at the head of the supply convoy quickly forced a way through, but not without getting cursed by those who would now have to wait even longer. Austalis was slightly shocked to hear citizens disputing with a soldier of Rome.

The oxen drew the carts through the dark tunnel under the gateway, and emerged into a fresh burst of sunshine. Austalis found himself in a great square formed by the walls, like an enlarged version of the fort on the Wall, but without the wide empty spaces. Buildings were crammed close to each other, leaving narrow gaps that were filled with human and animal bodies.

The supply convoy, which had made unopposed progress all the way down from the Wall now had to struggle to make its way ahead.

Demetrius helped Austalis and the others to clear a passage.

“Not far now,” he said. “We’ll report to the headquarters of the Duke of the Northern Marches, and if they approve we’ll be free for the rest of the day.”

At last, the procession of oxen and carts halted at the gate of the military compound and was allowed to pass through, but without Austalis, who was not known to the guards.

“Go and sit down in that cook-shop there,” Demetrius told him. “I’ll come and meet you as soon as I can.”

Austalis took the advice and went into the dark shop. He took a stool at the cool stone counter and bought a pie and a jug of wine. Having nothing to do, he listened to the conversation going on around him. Some was in Latin, some was in British, and more than one of the speakers would change from one language to the other, a habit which Austalis found annoying even though he had no trouble following both. Some of the people who came in and out spoke Latin with odd accents, and Austalis wondered if they were Gauls or perhaps even real Romans from Italy.

One tall man with red hair, whom Austalis had taken for a Briton from beyond the Wall, startled Austalis by sitting down beside him.

“Godan daga!” the big man said.

“Dever ach,” Austalis replied politely, surprised that the man should have recognised him at once as a German by blood. Austalis called for another jug of wine, and shared it with the German, who explained that he came from outside the Empire, from Angeln, or Engaland, in the north of Germany. There were about fifty English auxiliaries stationed in Eburacum. Austalis told him how his father had followed the same path.

“I have to go,” the man said. “I’m on at sunset.”

As he left, Demetrius came in.

“Why is everybody staring at you?” Demetrius asked.

“They heard me talking in British, and then in Germanic, and now in Latin. They must be wondering what kind of beast I am.”

“That happens to me, too,” Demetrius replied. “Even I don’t know what I am, Greek, British or what, except that I’m a Roman.”

“That man who went out just as you came in took me for a German at once.”

“Oh, Childeric? I know him. He lives in the next barrack-block to mine, and he’s a follower of Mithras, too.”

There was a mumble of Latin prayers from a man sitting at the back of the cookshop.

“Were you talking to me?” Demetrius called to him.

“I was talking to God. I was praying for him to save your heathen soul. You are lost if you don’t turn away from Satan.”

“Who says I worship Satan? I am a devotee of Mithras.”

The censorious customer mumbled again, and returned to his wine.

Demetrius took a jug for himself, and called for some clean water, which he poured into the wine to make an equal mixture.

“My father does this,” he explained. “He says that nobody in the Greek lands takes his wine unmixed with water.”

The owner of the cook-shop began to light little oil lamps and place them on tables and shelves around the room. This struck Austalis as being highly luxurious. In Gododdin, oil lamps were used only in king’s halls, and sparingly at that. Ordinary people had to make do with smoky, smelly rushlights.

By the time Demetrius finished his wine, Austalis had been sitting in bored silence for a long time and wondering where he was going to spend the night.

“Are you ready to be introduced?” Demetrius asked.

“Introduced to what, or to whom?”

“To the worship of Mithras! Don’t worry, you don’t commit yourself. You don’t even go into the service, because the postulants stay outside. You’re risking nothing. You can stay overnight, because I paid my centurion a little bribe.”

“I thought only legions had centurions,” Austalis said.

“That’s right. I’m a legionary soldier, Legio VI Victrix. I hope you didn’t think I was an auxiliary.”

“I was impressed because I’d never met a legionary,” Austalis quickly answered, because he had indeed thought that Demetrius was an auxiliary. The casual clothing and demeanour of the soldiers on the supply convoy did not match the mental picture that Austalis had always held of the splendid and disciplined legionary in his armoured cuirass and plumed helmet. Once again, he felt himself to be a clumsy barbarian, but then he consoled himself by reflecting that Demetrius would be just as baffled by the life and customs of Gododdin.

They left the cookshop in the early evening. Demetrius explained that the gates of the military compound would be closed soon.

The guards recognised Demetrius, and after some whispered conversation with him, accompanied by what sounded to Austalis like the clink of coins being passed, they admitted Austalis as well.

For a moment, they stood together in the darkness. Austalis could smell stone and water. Men’s voices came distinctly to him, with the sounds of doors closing. Somewhere a horse whinnied and boots stamped along the ground, accompanied by the bouncing point of light of a flaring torch. It was so unlike the murmur and soft noises of a stronghold in Gododdin. There were no women or children, no dogs, no geese. The fortress of the Sixth Legion, the Victorious, was a place for men only.

Austalis had a strange sensation, which he expressed to Demetrius. “I feel as though I belong here, and yet I’ve never been to such a place before.”

“There’s a place for every man in Rome. Once you had to come from the city of Rome itself to be a citizen, and then you only had to be an Italian, and now every free man in the Empire is a citizen. If you had been born here, you would be a soldier. The Emperor Diocletian made a law that all men have to follow their fathers’ trades.”

He walked a few paces away and opened a door from which the light of a lantern shone out. He was handed a torch, which revealed a vision of stone walls and flat earth.

“Come this way.”

Austalis walked behind, turning left and right. Other men carrying torches passed by. He thought he imagined a faint row of pale lights suspended in the sky, and Demetrius halted at the door of a stone building.

“This is the house of Mithras,” Demetrius said. “We have to go in quietly, because worship is in progress.”

He opened the door and dropped the torch into an iron rack. An oil lamp lay at the top of a flight of stone steps leading down below the level of the earth. Murmuring rose from the depths, like the voices of the unhappy spirits of the dead.

Demetrius led the way down the short staircase. His eyes were unnaturally wide, and his face shone with joy, although he had adopted a rigid, implacable expression. At last, he looked to Austalis like a real Roman legionary.

“This is as far as you can go,” Demetrius whispered, opening a door. Austalis followed, and found himself in a narrow box-like chamber.

“Wait here,” Demetrius instructed him, before passing through another door. Austalis caught a glimpse of a strange tableau: two files of growling men, facing a raised platform on which stood a man wearing some kind of animal pelt as a cape. A candle was burning on a small table, and faint light came from above through windows set on the sides of a raised centre section of the roof. Demetrius closed the door.

Austalis was left alone in the dark confined chamber, listening to the murmuring voices. A long time seemed to pass, until there was a shout:

“Ave Mithras! Sol invictus es!”

A moment of silence followed, and then the door opened. Austalis stepped aside, and the men filed out without speaking, climbing the stairs and striding out into the night. Enough light came from the oil lamp above to show him that every man wore that same expression of joy, discipline, and nobility that Demetrius had adopted. Austalis was fascinated. What religion was this that could give the faces of gods to common men?

Demetrius was the second to last man to emerge. Behind him, folding up his animal fur cape, was the man who had led the worshippers.

The antechamber was a small place for three men.

“This is Austalis, whom I told you about,” Demetrius said.

“Ah, the citizen come home!” the man replied, in Latin that carried a vaguely familiar accent. “Consider yourself a postulant of Mithras.” The priest turned, and the candle inside the temple went out instantly. “If you want, and you are willing to be tested, I can give you an introduction to the Mithraeum in Londinium. I warn you, this is a stern religion.”

“I want to be accepted,” Austalis answered. He saw now that this was what he had been seeking, to be accepted into this disciplined brotherhood of Rome.

## CHAPTER THREE

Twenty days later, Austalis stood in the streets of Londinium, feeling that his life had come into its spring bloom in parallel with the year. A benevolent sun shone down upon him, making his hair feel hot whenever he ran his hand over it. The sun made its heat felt even in the shadows of the narrow streets, and even though its rays had to pass through the awnings over the shops and the drying laundry stuck out on poles like banners waiting for an Emperor to pass in triumph.

The streets were easy to pass through, in spite of their narrowness, because wheeled vehicles and pack animals were not allowed during the day, in imitation of the ancient law of the city of Rome. It made for noisy nights, but free streets in the daytime.

Here, at least, nobody stared at him as a curiosity. In a city that often saw soldiers from Africa, merchant captains from India, and occasionally ambassadors from the unimaginably distant land of China, a mere Pict was not worth looking at.

If the Roman citizens saw nothing interesting in Austalis, he found their provinces endlessly fascinating. On the journey down from Eburacum, he had marvelled at the way the countryside, still recognisably his own Priten, had been changed. The great fields surrounding the villas, and the vineyards that had been pointed out to him, were sights that had never been seen north of the Wall.

Austalis shifted into a doorway as a grunting porter with an enormous box on his back hobbled along the street. Everybody had to give way to him, because it would have been impossible for him to step aside with the inertia of the weight he was carrying driving him on more implacably than any whip or goad.

Because Austalis had been forced to move, he decided to keep on walking for a little while, because his initiation ceremony at the Mithraeum was not due to take place until late in the morning. By now he was quite familiar with the general layout of Londinium, although he could still become lost among the narrow alleyways of the poorer districts. When he looked north, he could see the city wall through the gaps between the houses, and beyond that lay the forested hills overlooking Londinium. The trees were green with new leaves, and a reminder that Rome had not changed everything, even here.

Two dark men passed by, chattering in a language that Austalis did not recognise. One of the differences that Austalis had noticed between Londinium and the other cities he had seen, such as Eburacum and Ratae, was that Britons were in a definite minority in Londinium. Most of the inhabitants were from other parts of the Empire, or from outside the Empire altogether. He would have expected the local Britons to be resentful of this, but all of those to whom he spoke about it were proud of the cosmopolitan character of their city. They were happy to live in a part of Rome sitting on the river Tamesis instead of in a purely British city such as Ratae.

Austalis found himself beside the little river that flowed through the middle of Londinium to join the Tamesis. Small boats plied up and down it, carrying goods from ships tied up at the wharves. There was no law against water traffic in the city during the daytime. Beyond the river, Austalis could see the western wall with its great double gateway. Past that wall lay another river, and then untouched woodland. The southern bank of the Tamesis was equally rural, and the northern wall of the city looked down upon marshland. Austalis could not understand why the Romans, who had made so many alterations in remote parts of the

island, should have left the capital of their British provinces to stand in the middle of wild country, such as one might see in Gododdin.

The little river flowed into the Tamesis beside the Governor's palace, which stood directly on the water, with its back turned to the city, and to Britain in general. The Governor looked towards the river where a ship could carry him to Gaul, the first part of the journey to the Imperial City. The Governor looked towards Rome.

Austalis turned back, and walked slowly towards the Mithraeum. He passed the upstanding stone from which all distances in the Roman parts of Britain were measured, and the row of coloured marble statues that stood in a line guarding the landward entrance to the Governor's palace. The colouring of the statues was patchy in places. The bright wax had become dry and flaked off, showing gaps of bare white marble like a disease. If somebody did not repair the damage, then eventually all the wax would disappear, leaving only a pale white ghost of the original.

Austalis wandered over to examine the inscriptions on the heavy base of each statue. Most were of gods and Emperors, but on two of them the identifications had been roughly chiselled away. These must be usurping pseudo-Emperors who had set themselves up in Britain and then been overthrown. Now they stared anonymously into the city. Their faces were remembered but their names had been forgotten. No doubt new names would one day be carved upon the bases, to save the expense of commissioning a new statue for some notable.

Austalis wandered back to the neighbourhood of the Mithraeum. The building might easily be missed by someone who was not looking for it, set in what seemed to be a private garden between two large administrative buildings in a busy commercial street. Austalis was still early, and he bought a small bag of wine to drink while he waited. He sat on the steps of the building opposite, breathing in the smell of the river out of sight behind him, the odour on the wind like that of a hot, dirty animal.

Before long he saw a soldier in armour and plumed helmet approach the Mithraeum. The soldier produced a long, heavy key, unlocked the door, and closed it behind him. Austalis decided to wait until his sponsor arrived. He saw more soldiers arrive, a few men in neat robes who might be merchants or government officials, and even one man in a toga, who seemed at ease wearing it.

"Austalis! Are you ready?"

Austalis had been so absorbed in the sight of the man in a toga that he had not noticed the approach of the young legionary officer who was to sponsor him for initiation into the noble brotherhood of Mithras.

"I'm ready, Magnus."

Austalis had not admitted that he was amused by the young man's full name of Magnus Maximus, given to him by his father in the faraway province of Hispania. Austalis had given Magnus a note of introduction from the keeper of the Mithraeum in Eboracum, and Magnus, in spite of the difference in position between a Roman officer and a Pictish barbarian, had shown Austalis a friendly attitude at once. He had advised Austalis to beware of thieves in the inn where he was staying, but Austalis assured him that the other lodgers had stopped showing interest in his personal possessions after he had dropped a few hints about being a trained Druid with paranormal powers. Actually, he knew very little about Druids, but then neither did the Romans. He did know that the Druids had ceased to exist in the Roman provinces hundreds of years earlier, and that they had never existed in northern areas such as Gododdin at all, but he saw no reason to educate his roommates in these matters.

Magnus stood up straight, checking that his bearing was correct. Austalis was amused at the way that Magnus seemed always to be trying to live up to the portentous name that his father had chosen for him, but he respected the young officer's serious resolve at the same time.

"Let's go in," Magnus said, and Austalis followed him across the street and into the temple.

"You're the only postulant to be initiated today," Magnus told him, 'so the preparations won't take long. This is the last time that you'll have to wait in the antechamber."

"What do I have to do?" Austalis asked.

"I could say that you have to give yourself to Mithras. I could tell you that you have to make a journey to death and come back. Both of these statements are true, but let me make it easier. You don't need to prepare any responses to the questions that you'll be asked. We're not testing your memory for pat phrases, the way the Christians do. Christ is an amiable god. He takes anybody who comes forward. Mithras is a stern god. He only accepts men, never women, and then only after ordeals."

"How many ordeals are there?" Austalis asked.

"Only this one, to enter the first grade. The tests become more rigorous as you work your way up through the grades, if you want to. The choice is yours to make on how far you want to progress."

Magnus put his helmet under his arm. "Wait here until you're summoned. From then on, you will be guided at every step." He entered the sanctuary, and closed the door behind him.

Austalis was left to wait alone in the antechamber to try to guess at what was in store for him by listening to the sounds that came through the heavy wooden door. He wondered whether he should put his ear to the door to hear better, like a child, but then realised how silly he would look if the door were to be opened suddenly, catching him in that position.

He could make no meaning out of the voices that he heard, except that the tone was that of ordinary informal conversation. Whatever the ceremony was, it had not started yet. In fact, the noises could be those of a family household. He thought he detected the sound of dishes upon stone, of sticks of firewood softly clicking together, and, once, the squawk of a disgruntled chicken that was immediately silenced. It all sounded more like the preparations for cooking a meal than the solemn marshalling of men and instruments for a religious rite.

Eventually there was quiet, and Austalis became aware of a high-pitched humming, that seemed to originate in his own ears. He heard a man approach the door with slow measured steps like those of a legionary on night sentry duty.

Austalis held himself erect, as a warrior of Gododdin should.

The door opened slowly, and a voice boomed out of the sanctuary.

"Come in and stand before the god!"

Austalis entered the sanctuary. The narrow aisle was lined with men wearing strange leather caps with a bulge that lay forward on the crown of the head. There were no windows, so the sanctuary was lit from by a row of lamps. The sanctuary was plain, mainly bare stone with not even plaster on the walls for decoration. Perhaps this was to help emphasise the centrepiece of the sanctuary.

Directly in front of Austalis, on the wall above the altar, the face of the god blazed at him in golden fury. Lit by a flaming brazier mounted on a tripod, a golden disc bore the face of Mithras with outspread wings. The god wore the same cap as his worshippers, and his

eyes, even though they were only empty puckered hollows beaten into the shining gold, seemed to be fixed upon Austalis.

Austalis faced the god. Nobody spoke or moved. Everything was still in the sanctuary, watching the confrontation between the terrible god and the postulant seeking acceptance.

Mithras, silent, seemed to communicate to Austalis, who felt the presence of a god come upon him. Mithras took hold of his soul.

*"This is why you were put in this world," Mithras said. "I claimed you long before you had ever heard of me. It was I who set you walking south from Gododdin, who drew you into the provinces of Rome."*

The flames flickered in a draught from nowhere, and the god's empty eyes seemed to move with the fire that was his element. Mithras reflected the flames towards Austalis. *"I, too, am from beyond the frontiers of Rome,"* he said. *"Do not allow these Romans to tell you that they are the only ones in the world who have a civilisation and know truth."*

A hand fell upon Austalis' left shoulder. He turned to face the Keeper of the Mithraeum, the chief priest of Mithras in Londinium.

"Are you ready to pass through death?" the Keeper asked.

"Yes, I am," Austalis replied, given new strength by his moment of personal contact with the god.

"Do you have perfect faith in the power of Mithras to raise you from the dead, not once only, in this place, but again when you die out in the world?"

"Yes, I do. The god will raise me."

The Keeper raised a flat white object in front of Austalis' eyes.

"Are you willing to eat the god?"

The Keeper held the flat object on edge. Austalis saw that it was a round disc of unleavened bread, stamped with the same face as the golden image on the wall. In spite of the cruder picture, the same eyes seized upon Austalis, claiming him.

"I will eat the god and make his substance part of myself," Austalis replied, more loudly than he had intended to. His own voice reverberated in the little chapel, too small for its walls to throw a clear echo. He heard his own voice coming at him from all directions, as if from the heavens, booming an incomprehensible command of biting urgency.

He put out his hands, in the manner of a beggar, but with dignity. The Keeper put the wafer of bread into them and Austalis placed it in his mouth. His tongue could feel the face of Mithras imprinted in the rough crust. He crushed the wafer in his teeth and swallowed the fragments.

He felt a new power now that the god was within him, to become a part of his own body.

He stood waiting for whatever the next stage in the initiation ceremony might be. One of the other worshippers present slipped away. In spite of the light of the lamps, Austalis was overwhelmed by a sense of being in darkness and night. The fire on the brazier dazzled his eyes, so that the interior of the Mithraeum seemed to be in shadow.

The man who had moved away came back from the corner, carrying a live, but unnaturally still and silent chicken. Austalis recognised it as the sacrifice. Mithras was not a cruel god. One of the few things that Austalis knew about the old religion of the Druids was that the sacrifice had been one or more live human beings, put into great wickerwork cages that were then set on fire.

The Keeper took the bird and put its neck into Austalis' left hand. He gripped it, feeling the pulse in its flesh and the rise and fall of air in its throat. He felt the handle of a knife being pressed into his right hand.

The Keeper went forward to the altar and Austalis followed him. Standing close to the golden face of Mithras, Austalis could feel on his own face the heat of the fire reflected from the metal surface.

He heard the other worshippers move from their places to cluster behind him. They were inhuman shapes. He wished he could tell which one was Magnus Maximus. It would be a comfort to know there was a real person nearby.

"You must make the sacrifice yourself," the Keeper told Austalis. "Kill the bird and open it."

Austalis took the knife, killed the inert bird, and cut it open. An arm holding a tray appeared in front of his eyes, and he dropped the entrails into it. The tray was withdrawn, but the animal smell remained. Once more there was stillness apart from the flickering of the flames and the changing fall of light upon the golden face of Mithras.

Suddenly, Austalis' arms were roughly seized and hauled behind his back. The knife was snatched from his right hand and a blow between his shoulders made him drop to his knees. He was facing a dead stone floor instead of a live golden god, and he became aware of a sweet smoky smell building up in the air.

Strong hands took hold of his wrists, and they were bound together with a slippery form of twine that Austalis could not identify. He wondered why the slippery binding was hot, and then he realised that it was the guts of the chicken that he had just killed. What kind of barbaric rite had he volunteered himself for? This was not what he had expected from noble, sophisticated Rome. This was more like the primitive ceremonies of the Atacotti, far to the northwest of Gododdin.

His legs were bound together, but with cord this time. The mysterious smell was beginning to make him dizzy, and he could feel a headache starting to build. He was being overwhelmed by the power of the god, and he could hardly believe that this eerie gloom and strange ritual was taking place only a few feet away from a bright ordinary street where common people passed by.

The voice of the Keeper came to Austalis. The intoxicating smoke made the Keeper seem to be addressing Austalis from within his own soul, where he felt already the watching presence of Mithras.

"You are now to pass through death and the next world," the Keeper boomed.

Austalis was rolled onto his back, and he saw the assembled worshippers standing around him. They looked like giants, and then suddenly like dwarves, as his own body seemed to grow to monstrous size and then shrink. It was the effect of the fumes, which he could feel filling up his lungs with a delicate chill that spread through his slumping body.

Voices came to him in a muddle of meaningless noise, and then the sound of stone grinding upon stone.

Austalis tried to move his body, but his limbs were heavy and hardly responded at all to his frantic efforts. Above him, the lamps of the Mithraeum seemed to be continually changing colour. Between them, a dark figure held a flaming brand. Again, fire! All of this fire and sharp blades of light, and nothing else but frightening dimness saturated with smells.

The contrast between light and dark was echoed by the combination of the sweet odour

of the vapour that was paralysing him and the ugly animal stink coming from the carcass of the slaughtered chicken.

Suddenly all of the impressions overwhelming his senses were overlaid by an awareness, more than merely a smell, of blood.

The man holding the firebrand spoke to him in the voice of Magnus Maximus.

“The god Mithras wrestled and overcame a bull. You must conquer it as well, alone in the emptiness of death, to be received into communion with the god.”

A great dark shape appeared above, and tipped down. Austalis tried to writhe away, but now he was as frozen as a Roman statue. His face was drenched by an outpouring of blood, the blood of the chicken symbolising the sacrificed bull, the symbol of the victory of Mithras.

“Blood and fire and death,” Magnus Maximus recited, while Austalis gasped for breath and involuntarily swallowed a gush of salty blood.

The heavy blood made his clothes into a sticky cocoon stiffening around his body. He felt himself being lifted up from the floor, and then lowered again, below the floor, into a deep rectangular pit lined with stone that was slippery with streaks and pools of blood.

The men laid him upon his back in the narrow pit. A patch of blood, already cold, soaked through to his skin.

He heard again the grinding of stone upon stone, as a heavy lid was drawn across the pit. The last sight he saw was the backlit figure of Magnus Maximus, bending down with the flaming brand.

The lid slid shut, and Austalis lay in total darkness. A vague booming noise came from above; the sound of voices distorted by passage through the stone. He could hear his own heart, pounding rapidly even though he could not move. A slow breeze of air began to flow over his body from his head downwards, obviously coming through hidden light-trapped vents. The air that they fed in was heavy with the drugged fumes that had taken control of him, and he had no choice but to breathe them in.

There was a series of thumps on the lid of the pit, which sounded like blocks of wood being laid upon it. A few moments later, a faint smell of smoke began to infuse the air. Magnus Maximus had spoken to blood and fire and death. The blood had already come. Now there would have to be fire.

The smell of smoke grew stronger, and Austalis seemed to feel his entire body melting into a new form, something liquid and unbearably cold. Was he to be a human sacrifice, baked alive in this stone tomb like the victims that the Druids had burnt in their great wickerwork cages? There was no hope of escape; the only people who knew where he was were the worshippers of Mithras. Far away in Gododdin, nobody would ever know what had become of him. He tried to call out, but all he heard was a dull low sound, like an echo of the bellowing bull of Mithras.

He became aware of warmth radiating onto his face from the stone slab above. It was true: they had lit a fire on it. The dizzying effect of the fumes spread through his whole body, and the beating of his heart became so loud that he was certain it would be heard by the malignant worshippers in the temple above. His heart would be heard in the streets of Londinium, on the lonely turrets of the Wall, in the forests of Gododdin.

Blood and fire. Now there was only death to come. Only death.

At once there was silence, so complete that it was like a physical shroud wrapped around him. There was no sound of voices, no crackling of the unseen fire above him, and he could no longer hear the beating of his heart or the breathing of his lungs. The frightening

smells were gone. He could no longer feel the rough stone under his body or the stiff sticky coating of drying blood upon his skin. It was as if all his senses had been cut off, and yet he could still feel his own body, motionless and icy with fear.

He had been promised a passage through death, and this was death. Now he would have to confront the god in his own realm, the world of spirits and divinity where a mortal man had no protection.

Somewhere inside himself Austalis still felt the presence of Mithras, as he had begun to when he had swallowed the wafer bearing the god's portrait. He waited for Mithras to speak, but the god said nothing, only watched from within the dark hidden places of his postulant's soul.

Austalis began to dream, although he was still conscious of being imprisoned in his stone tomb under the floor of the temple.

The golden face of Mithras appeared before him again, and once more Austalis faced the unbearable gaze of those empty eyes. The face suddenly watched him more intently, and then Austalis saw that it had been transformed into his own face, portrayed in beaten gold. Instantly he found himself looking at a bloodied prostrate man, lit in ghostly paleness by a light that came from nowhere. The man had the face of Mithras.

The vision vanished, and Austalis was returned to his own body. His fear turned into a new sensation, one that he had never known before: an awareness of the immediate presence of evil, around him, within him, and that it would always accompany him. Mithras had accepted Austalis into his brotherhood of worshippers, and there was no escape.

More dreams came. Mithras fought with a bull, and killed it. The blood streamed out as liquid smoking gold. The gold fell in glowing drops upon a field of grass in heaven. An army of warriors in the leather caps of the worshippers of Mithras rose from the grass, and Austalis found himself searching to see if he was one of them. Before he could tell, the vision disappeared and he became aware of other impressions growing stronger in his consciousness.

Hard cold stone pressed against his back, and his clothes clung to him. They were stiff, and stank of blood. His arms and shoulders ached, and his hands were numb, tied together by tight stringy cords. His head ached and his brain pounded and throbbed within his skull.

Above him there was darkness and muffled voices.

Austalis realised that the air flowing through the tomb no longer carried the smell of the fumes that had drugged him and transported him to the world beyond death. They had gone. The slow breeze of air was clean and fresh. He wanted release, to be free, out of his bonds and this stone grave for living men.

He heard a quick clattering, like objects being cleared away from the lid of the tomb that imprisoned him. Once more he heard the grinding of stone upon stone.

The light fell in upon him, forcing him to close his eyes, but he could not protect his ears from the sound that followed.

"Ave Mithras!", the worshippers shouted in unison, driving bolts of pain into his aching brain.

He felt himself being seized, and the touch of so many hands upon his body was terrifying and obscene, as if he had been caught by a tentacled monster. He tried to writhe away, and found that he did have at least that much control over his body again, but because he was still bound he could not resist being lifted up.

He had expected them to lie him upon the floor of the temple, but instead they lifted

him upright. His hands were unbound, and immediately began to burn with pain as life flowed into them once more. His arms were put around the shoulders of two men, and he finally dared to open his eyes.

The light within the temple sickened him by its brightness, even though it was only a small leak of illumination from the lamps. By force of will he compelled his eyes to remain open and look at the men who had brought him to this new knowledge of fear and evil.

Magnus Maximus reached out and took Austalis' hand.

"Ave Mithras! And Ave Austalis, too! You're a brother in the fellowship of the Mithras with us."

The Keeper of the Mithraeum added his own congratulations.

"Now you can rise from this beginning, through the several levels of initiation. You have passed through death and returned. You are now strong enough to face the harder tests to advance through the higher levels."

The lamps lit up the men's faces, which had become human again even though they were still wearing the god's distinctive cap. They no longer had masklike expressions. They were an ordinary group of men who wished him well and wanted to offer him their friendship.

Austalis still needed the support of their arms, but he could feel strength and control rapidly returning to his body. A faint trace of the drug passed across his face, and that small odour was enough to fling his soul back into the heavy darkness of fear that he had known in the grave.

He wrenched his arms away from Magnus Maximus, and stumbled forward, suddenly remembering the way to the door.

"Austalis!" Magnus Maximus exclaimed. "Wait, the ritual isn't over yet!"

Austalis lurched on. He found the door, and opened it by falling against it with his entire weight. Out there were air and light and things that were clean. He nearly collapsed, but he forced himself out of the antechamber.

Bloody, wild, and raving in terror, he burst out into the sunlit street.

He stood breathing in fresh air, coloured by the pleasant smell of stone and of the mud of the river Tamesis. He would have roared out his happiness at having escaped from the temple, but a golden face flashed before his eyes and a voice spoke from within his soul: *I am with you always*.

With a cry, he fell onto the pavement, and began to drift into unconsciousness again.

There were other voices, above his head. First, there was a woman, in pure clear Latin.

"That poor man! He came out of that terrible place!"

A man with the accent of a lower-class native Briton answered her.

"Best to leave him where he's lying, my lady."

"What kind of charity is that? Put him in the litter. I'll get out and walk."

Austalis, his eyes still shut and his mind swimming, felt himself being lifted by the same kind of rough hands that had handled him in the Mithraeum, but this time he was set down upon soft cushions.

There was a lurch as whatever he was lying on was lifted up, and then carried forward. The regular jolting motion drove away the last flickers of his consciousness, and as he let his face sink into the cushion, he heard the man speak again.

"I tell you, my lady, it would have been better to have left him. This man will bring trouble on us all."

# CHAPTER FOUR

Austalis woke up in a strange room. He was lying on a bed under a woollen blanket, looking at an open sunlit window.

Something marvellously cool and wet was laid upon his brow, and he found that his head was aching. The voice of the unknown woman spoke to him in her beautiful Latin.

“So you’re awake now! You slept all through the night, and now it’s nearly noon.”

The woman came and sat beside him on a little stool. She was young, with a strong face, clear pale blue eyes and a white hood over her hair.

“I’m Marcella,” she told him. “Who are you?”

“I’m Austalis,” he replied. Feeling better, he told her where he came from and why he had entered the Empire.

“What were you doing in that beastly Mithraeum?” she asked.

“I thought it was a way into the brotherhood of Roman men. Instead, it turned out to be something foul and evil. I don’t think I’ll ever be rid of it.”

As he spoke, he saw for an instant, somewhere inside his soul, a golden face twitch in an arrogant smile.

“You’re safe now,” Marcella assured him. “That demon can’t keep you in his power.”

Austalis made no reply to that. He wanted to know where his fate had brought him now.

“Can I ask who you are?”

“I told you, I’m Marcella! All right. I have an estate about a day’s journey from here, not far from the road to Durobrivae.”

“Which direction is that?”

“East, or south-east, I suppose. My parents left it to me. This was their town house in Londinium, but I don’t often visit it. I prefer the villa at Venodala.”

Austalis managed to sit up in the bed, and the view from the window showed him a panorama of the roofs and gateways of Londinium.

“I must thank you,” he said. “I think I’ve recovered now. I ought to leave.”

Marcella laughed, a surprising childlike laugh to come from that wise adult face.

“I’m the one who ought to leave! I hate to think what Augurius would say if he knew I was alone in a man’s room.”

“Augurius is your husband?”

“I haven’t got a husband. Augurius is the bishop of Londinium. That’s why I’m visiting the city. I came here to discuss my religious life with him.”

“Are you a Christian? You’re the first real Roman Christian I’ve talked to.”

“No I’m not! Most of the people you see in the streets are Christians. In the countryside, well, that’s different, but we’re making progress there. Would you like to hear about becoming a Christian?”

Austalis let himself fall back onto the pillow.

“Easy, now. Only yesterday afternoon I went through the initiation ritual of Mithras. Now you want to start telling me about Christianity. I need time.”

“You haven’t got time. You may be struck dead today, or Christ may return to Earth before sunset.”

“Then again he may not. Look, I appreciate your kindness, but I’m not ready to have yet another religion pumped into me. I would need to learn about Christianity first.”

“I’ll help you. Would you like to eat something?”

“Yes, please. I’m beginning to feel hungry again.”

“Can you get up?”

Austalis swung himself up from the bed, and noticed that he had been dressed in a fine white robe. Marcella held out a pair of light crimson slippers for him, although he felt embarrassed as a warrior to be so delicately dressed, he put them on and followed her into a room furnished with a low table and a pair of couches.

Austalis sat down, and Marcella briefly went out, obviously to give her orders to the kitchen.

She returned, and took the other couch.

“What are the dining customs where you come from?” she asked.

“We all sit on logs at a high table, and the highest-ranking man present divides up the food according to the status of each person.”

“Oh, we have our own formalities too, but this is only a simple meal.”

An elderly female servant entered with a tray, carrying two bowls of porridge, a flat loaf of bread, and four little cakes. As she set them down on the table, a middle-aged man with dark thinning hair brought in a jug and two exquisite glass beakers. The jug proved to contain wine and as the man poured it into the glasses, he gave Austalis a glance that Marcella could not see.

For a brief moment, he locked eyes with Austalis in a look of hate and contempt. It was enough to convey to Austalis that this man regarded him as a disgusting stray animal that his soft-hearted mistress had insisted on bringing in from the street. Austalis immediately guessed that this was the man whose voice he had heard, trying to dissuade Marcella from having Austalis picked up from the paving-stones.

Austalis gave him the defiant stare of the warrior, even though a mere domestic servant did not deserve to have such notice taken of him.

Marcella looked up and noticed.

“Osgirn,” she said, “you can go now. I’ll call if we require anything else.”

“Very good, my lady,” Osgirn replied, and the sound of his voice confirmed Austalis’ suspicions. He decided that Osgirn’s opinions were of no consequence; it was up to Marcella to decide who entered her house.

Osgirn and the old woman both left the room. Austalis and Marcella faced each other across the table.

Marcella held up her hands in the air, and bowed her head.

Austalis noticed that her hands were sturdy and strong. Marcella might be a cultured Roman lady, but somewhere in her ancestry there was a peasant family, or perhaps a warrior family.

She murmured a quiet prayer, so softly that Austalis could not make out all the words, although he did hear her thank her God for the food and ask for help in guiding Austalis to the kingdom of heaven. Well, he knew from the traditions of Gododdin where that was: on the far western shore of the ocean. Politely, he refrained from starting to eat until she had finished her prayer.

She threw back the hood that covered her head, revealing long straight brown hair. Austalis was convinced that she was British by race, however Romanised her family might

be.

The food was good, and Marcella plied Austalis with questions about life in Gododdin, and about his reasons for following his father's lead and seeking his fortune within the Empire.

"You're certainly adventurous," Marcella said. "You're the first person from beyond the Wall that I've ever met. We imagine it as being such a wild place. I always think of the Pictish chieftains that our historian Tacitus wrote about, so fierce and full of long flamboyant speeches."

"That sounds accurate enough," Austalis agreed.

"Where are you going now?" Marcella asked.

"I was advised to go to Londinium, because it was the best place in Britain for me to get an understanding of the Empire. So here I am. I'm impressed by the city, but after that ceremony in the Mithraeum I think I know more about the mind of the Empire than I wanted to."

"You've seen so little. You should see more. Perhaps I could give you some advice if you would tell me where you intend to go next."

"I don't know. My objective was Londinium, and I'm already there."

"Did you mean what you said, about being willing to study Christianity?"

"Yes, but I'm willing to look at other religions, too."

"Let me show you Christianity, with the help of my friends," Marcella said, leaning forward. The pale blue eyes caught the noon light from the window. Austalis was afraid that he would see the glow of fanaticism in them, but there was no more than enthusiasm and happiness.

Marcella sat back.

"Come home with us to Venodala tomorrow and stay for a little while as my guest. You can see what Christian life is like."

Austalis considered her offer. He had nowhere else to go, and a visit to a Roman country house would probably be interesting. Why not?

"I would be honoured to accept your invitation," he replied. "I'll have to collect my belongings from the inn where I'm staying. I don't own anything valuable except the diploma that shows I'm a citizen of Rome. I can't afford to lose that."

"You certainly can't," Marcella agreed. "You can keep the guest room here for tonight. Augurius will be visiting for supper, and tomorrow we'll leave first thing in the morning for Venodala. I can't wait to get away from the noise and smells of this huge city."

After the meal, Austalis excused himself to go and collect his possessions from the inn. Marcella found him a man's tunic and a pair of heavy boots. He stepped out of the door of Marcella's house, ignoring another hostile glance from Osgirn, and stood on the pavement for a few moments trying to work out in which direction the inn lay.

A quick gust of wind brought the smell of mud and water to him like a gift. He began to walk towards it, guided as well by the wooden bridge whose northern tower frowned over the rooftops to his left. He had already found it easy to lose himself in the streets of Londinium, even though the city formed a neat rectangle bounded by its wall on three sides and by the Tamesis on the other.

He made sure to look behind occasionally so that he would know the way back to Marcella's house. Very soon, he found himself in an area he knew, and he took a long

unnecessary diversion so as not to have to pass the Mithraeum. He realised that Marcella's servants must have carried him a long way the day before.

Eventually he walked up the street where the inn was situated, and paused under the letters picked out in tiny seashells above the door that proclaimed its name: HOSPITE CAMELI. Unfortunately, the anonymous craftsman who had spelt out the name had not produced a further demonstration of his skill by attempting a seashell representation of a camel. Perhaps the reason was the lack of a model. Austalis doubted that anyone had ever brought a camel to Britain.

Surveying the street, he thought that a camel, whatever they might look like in reality, might not be out of place if one were to saunter around the corner. There was something persistently foreign and un-British about this narrow street, about the raised stone pavements, and even about the dark little shops where bent men worked hunched over tiny anvils. The Romans had founded this city about three hundred years before, but it still seemed foreign. Nobody would know now whether there had been Britons living there before, where all these busy little rivers emptied themselves into the Tamesis beside the ford formed by a convenient gravel bed. Probably there had always been fishermen living on the little marshy island to the west.

Austalis walked into the hallway of the inn, where he almost collided in the blind shadows with Magnus Maximus.

"Austalis! We were really worried about you. Are you all right?"

"I was as soon as I got out of that filthy temple of yours!" Austalis shouted, regretting the harshness of his words while he was still saying them. "I'm sorry. I didn't mean to insult you personally, but your god is not for me."

Somewhere in his mind, a golden face smiled.

"Well, perhaps we shouldn't have rushed your initiation," Magnus Maximus replied. "We've been too eager for converts these past few years, and you're not the first good man that we've lost. I came here to put your belongings in a safe place before someone stole them. Here they are."

He put a bundle into Austalis' arms. There was a reassuring clank from within, which meant that both halves of the bronze diploma were inside.

"I paid your bill, too," Magnus Maximus said, "and don't let me hear anything from you about paying me back."

Austalis stood in thought, trying to compose a proper reply, as should come from a warrior of Gododdin who had been trained in the due appreciation of words.

"You're an honourable man, but I cannot help associating you with the cult of Mithras. I think we would both be more comfortable if we didn't meet again for a while. Thank you again for your kindness in thinking of me."

Austalis turned, and walked out. He had not even seen Magnus Maximus properly in the gloomy hallway, and although he did not like the words he had spoken he did not regret them. He would rather keep away from the devotees of Mithras until the ritual had become a past memory rather than a living pain.

He walked slowly to Marcella's house, carrying the bundle unopened under his arm. He wished he had checked it. It was unlikely that his vague hints of Druidical magical powers would deter habitual thieves, especially if he had been thought to have disappeared. Some of the Romans probably believed he was a primitive barbarian who had been frightened by being

exposed to a civilised religion. They had probably pictured him running in terror up the great road to the north, back to the Wall and the comforting savage emptiness beyond.

As he returned to Marcella's house, and boldly walked through the doorway as though he had always lived there, he could tell that it was not one of the grander houses of Londinium, although it was well-kept and clean. After all, he reflected, it was not Marcella's principal residence. He began to feel impatient to see her estate at Venodala.

He found his way to the guest room while he checked his possessions. He found that nothing of his had been stolen at the inn. He was tidying his clothes when he heard a light knock at the door.

He opened it to find Marcella holding a jug and towel.

"I thought you might like to wash. Oh, you did find all your things at the inn. Is that all you travelled with?"

"It's all I own in the world. We don't have many personal possessions in Gododdin, and anyway, I didn't want to leave anything behind that might call my spirit back there."

"What a poetic phrase," Marcella said. "Do you always throw little snatches of music like that into ordinary conversation?"

Austalis was baffled; the phrase was quite natural to him.

"Perhaps it sounds odd to someone brought up in Roman ways, or perhaps it sounds strange in Latin. In Gododdin, we aren't embarrassed to talk about our spirits."

"Nor am I!" Marcella exclaimed, and Austalis took the jug and towel out of her hands, wondering why she had not sent a servant to do the menial job of carrying water and washcloth. "The spirit is what we're going to talk about this evening at dinner. You will join us, won't you?"

"I'm a guest in your house, but even if I had a choice I would come. I'm afraid I'm no expert in Roman dining manners, but you must have already noticed that at midday."

"Oh, this is no classical feast. I don't know all the rules myself. This is just a meeting of friends. Come and join me in the courtyard when you're ready."

She disappeared behind the closing door. Austalis pushed the shutters over the window. Since it looked out over the streets, the courtyard must lie on the other side of the house.

He undressed, and gave himself a thorough wash. He would have liked to change into his own clothes, but they had been taken away while he was unconscious. He hoped Marcella's servants would be able to clean the blood and dirt out of them. He combed his hair into the particular warrior style that he favoured, and carefully pinned it into place. He gave his cheeks and chin a harsh shave with his glass-edged razor, and finally judged himself fit to enter Marcella's presence again.

Coming out of the room, he saw an open door admitting a spray of dusty sunbeams from the rear of the house. He guessed that this was the exit to the courtyard.

Marcella sat on a folding wooden chair, holding a glass of wine. There was an empty chair next to her, to which she beckoned Austalis. He sat down uneasily, not being accustomed to the light Roman chairs that seemed alarmingly rickety and unstable to him. He was used to sitting on stout logs, or, much more often, on the fixed bare earth.

The little courtyard was paved with square stones, and bounded by the four interior walls of the house. Every so often someone would pass by a window, or there would be a short muttering of discontented voices, of which Marcella apparently took no notice. Austalis followed her example. The murmurings of servants meant nothing.

Marcella reached down to a little table beside her, and poured Austalis a glass of wine.

He held it up to the fresh afternoon sunlight, charmed by the play of colours in the clear liquid.

“Your house is full of beautiful things,” he said.

“Wait until you see my real house at Venodala,” she replied.

Austalis was puzzled by a stone plinth that stood in the middle of the courtyard, with a strange triangular ornament set in a wide shallow bowl. He got up to examine it.

“What is this thing, Marcella?” he asked, examining a pattern of lines carved in the stone at the base of the triangle.

“It’s two things. First of all, it’s a sundial. When the sun is shining, the position of the shadow shows you what time it is.”

Looking more closely, Austalis saw that the shadow cast by the upstanding triangle lay upon a line marked III.

“What’s the second function of this plinth?” he asked. At once, there was a deep hiss and gurgle from within the stone, as though the object were drawing breath to tell him the answer itself.

His face was drenched by a rush of cold water. He jumped backwards, and saw that the plinth had thrown up a plume of water that clawed up towards the sky and then fell in drops that ran away in the bottom of the shallow bowl.

Austalis had been too surprised to have had any other reaction, but when he heard Marcella laughing, rocking in her chair with her hands clapped together like a little child. Her laughter harmonised perfectly with the splashing of the drops of water in the fountain, and infuriated Austalis. A warrior of Gododdin did not allow himself to be laughed at by anyone, and certainly not by a woman.

Marcella saw him glaring at her, and she smiled at him.

“Come and sit down, Austalis, and don’t be angry. You only got a little water on your face, and your fancy hairstyle is firmly in place. Have some more wine, and enjoy the fountain.”

Remembering the obligations of a guest receiving hospitality, Austalis sat down heavily, nearly overturning his ridiculously flimsy chair, and accepted another glass of wine.

“How does it work?” he asked, trying to be polite.

“My father built it. He was a builder of aqueducts and water systems, and he travelled all over the western part of the Empire. I don’t know the details, but the water comes from a pipe that’s connected to a main one that runs down from the hills to the north, outside the city walls. When the pressure of water builds up, it opens a door somewhere and the water forces its way out.”

The fountain fell away, leaving some last struggling drops to flow down the bowl and a fresh smell of water in the air as though Marcella’s courtyard had enjoyed its own little shower of rain.

“When will it come back?” Austalis asked.

“It depends. Last night we had rain, so there’s a lot of water running down underground from the hills. In a summer drought, the fountain can be quiet for weeks, until we start to wonder if it’s become blocked up.”

Just as Marcella finished speaking, the fountain came back to life and lifted its banner of fresh water in the air.

Austalis began to relax. He decided that his bad mood was an effect carried over from his experience at the Mithraeum the day before. As the horror of it turned into a memory,

Austalis felt his soul brightening, cleaned by the sunlight and leaping water.

He drank his wine and reflected how lucky he was to be sitting in a courtyard in comfort with Marcella as his hostess. Why should she not have laughed at him when the fountain had given him a faceful of cold water?

He laughed at it himself, now, and Marcella looked at him with pleasure.

‘so the noble warrior can laugh, too! I was waiting for you to recover yourself completely. Tell me more about Gododdin.’

“I’ve told you many things already. Tell me about the places your father took you in the Empire.”

“He never took me with him. I was always left at home with my nurses. I never knew my mother. My father used to go away for months at a time, and once he was away for over a year. I’ve never been out of Britain.”

“I’m still hoping to meet someone who’s actually been to the city of Rome,” Austalis said. “I know you’ll tell me that it’s probably only a bigger Londinium, but I like to think that it’s magnificent and greater than I can imagine.”

“You can ask Augurius at dinner. He went on a journey to Italy fifteen years ago. He can tell you about Rome, I’m sure.”

Austalis and Marcella sat in the sunlit courtyard for the rest of the afternoon, as the shadow of the sundial crept onward to IV and V and VI. The walls of the house hid the sight of Londinium. Austalis thought that if he had woken up here there was no sign to tell him that he was in Britain. He might be anywhere in the vast Roman Empire. All he could see of the outside world was a rectangle of blue sky crossed by jolly spring clouds. Perhaps the sky looked different in other lands, but he had no experience to give him an answer on that.

At the end of the afternoon, when the wine had long run out and even the fountain was coming to life less and less often, Marcella rose from her chair.

“It’s time I took a hand in preparing for dinner,” she announced. “Would you like me to have Osgirn come in and help you wash? I still have some of my father’s scents left if you’d like to try some of them.”

“No, thank you,” Austalis replied. “Plain cold water will be good enough for me.”

He went to the guest room, and found his own clothes neatly folded on the bed. Marcella’s servants must have spent a long time washing them. He guessed that if he had looked up when he had returned to the house he would have seen his clothes set out on a pole or two to dry.

He decided to change back into them. He might as well appear at Marcella’s dinner party as the exotic “Pictish” barbarian from the other side of the Wall. He washed himself first, and when he dressed himself he was forced to admit that whoever did the laundry in this household probably really did have Druidical powers even if he did not.

He put his boots on, and stuck his dagger into the right one. That should impress those Romans!

Marcella knocked at the door.

“Austalis, are you ready? Come and be my first guest.”

Austalis let her lead him into the room that had been made ready for the meal, resigning himself to a boring evening. He could think of ways to make it an amusing one, but he could not misbehave in this house as he could even at a lord’s feast in Gododdin.

Three couches were set out around the table, with a chair on the remaining side.

“That’s for me,” Marcella explained. “I’m the only woman present, and women don’t dine reclining on a couch.”

“You mean I have to recline?”

“No, sit if you want to.”

Being a simple barbarian was a good excuse to get out of all kinds of tiresome social obligations, Austalis reflected.

Osgirn entered with two candles, that he lit with a slow-match, which he then applied to cressets mounted on the wall.

Marcella watched with approval. The light of the flames, mingled with the last glow of the day, emphasised the beautiful regularity of her face.

“How bare these walls are,” she remarked to Austalis. “I miss all the decorations in the villa at Venodala.”

There was a distant knocking at the front door, and a quick exchange of words between men’s voices.

Osgirn returned to the dining-room.

“Bishop Augurius has arrived, my lady,” he announced.

“Well, show him in, then.”

This turned out to be unnecessary. A heavy bearded man in a coarse brown robe and worn black sandals walked in. He opened his mouth to greet Marcella, gave a startled glance at the wild barbarian warrior, and then composed himself sufficiently to return his attention to his hostess.

“Good evening, Marcella.”

“And good evening to you, too, Augurius.”

Marcella hurriedly presented Austalis to the bishop of Londinium, and while they were exchanging formal Latin greetings, Osgirn came in to announce the arrival of the final guest, whose name was Fabius.

“Fabius is the deputy tax-collector for this province, Maxima Caesariensis,” Marcella explained.

Fabius came in, dressed in a white formal toga. He paid his respects to Marcella and Augurius, while Austalis looked at him in astonishment, because this was the toga-clad man who had been in the Mithraeum during the initiation ceremony the day before.

He came over to Austalis with his right hand outstretched.

“We have met before, I believe,” he said, and his grip seemed stronger than was warranted. It was a signal. Austalis decided to play the game. It was no business of his if a man chose to adhere to two politically powerful religions at the same time. If Augurius and Marcella did not know, it was not up to Austalis to tell them.

He introduced himself to Fabius as though they had never met, and then Marcella called them all to take their places for dinner.

Austalis sat upright on his couch, and Marcella sat in her chair. Fabius and Augurius remained standing until Augurius had finished a brief prayer. Fabius looked perfectly at ease when he reclined on the couch in his elegant toga. Augurius was ungainly in his old brown robe.

Once the meal had started, Marcella asked Augurius to describe Rome for the benefit of Austalis.

“I never went there,” he replied. “Five years ago I went to a great conference of four

hundred bishops from all over the Empire, which was held in Ariminium. That's as close as I got to Rome."

"Couldn't you have found time for a visit?" Austalis asked.

"I very much wanted to, but if I had gone to Rome it would have been too late in the year to get back across the Alps." He laughed at some memory. "I was one of the minority whose expenses were paid for by the Emperor, and then I was one of the minority who voted against the resolution that he sponsored!"

"What was the dispute about?" Austalis inquired, but Marcella intervened before Augurius could answer.

"It was a theological issue," she explained. "It would be too confusing. It's better for you to hear the principles that Christians agree on before you hear the points that they argue about."

"You Christians seem to disagree among yourselves a great deal," Austalis commented. "You have a reputation for it."

"I admit that," Augurius replied. "The truth is so important to us, because we believe there is only one god. A religion of many gods can be more elastic."

"Mithraism holds that there is only one god," Austalis said, shooting a glance at Fabius, "and they don't quarrel".

Fabius accepted the challenge.

"Mithraism doesn't require absolute allegiance," he explained. "You can remain in another religion at the same time."

"But Christianity does require absolute allegiance," Augurius said.

Austalis looked at Fabius again, who looked back at him fearlessly. Austalis dropped the issue. Perhaps Fabius, too, carried that implacable golden face within his soul.

The conversation drifted into discussions about people whom Austalis did not know, and into explanations of technical points of Christian beliefs. Austalis became drowsy, but he knew he could not simply walk out as he could have done at a feast in Gododdin.

The evening ended more quickly than he had expected. Augurius swung himself off the couch, and held up his arms. Fabius and Marcella followed his example.

Augurius led a prayer for the Emperor, for all Christians, and for Austalis, asking that the Christian god might help his servants to bring Austalis to the light of the truth.

After that, Augurius and Fabius left, once their servants had been called from wherever they had spent the evening with Marcella's servants. No man wanted to walk home through the streets of Londinium without an armed escort.

Marcella closed the door behind them, and Osgirn turned the key in the lock, before sliding a wooden bolt across.

"We retire early," she told Austalis, "and tomorrow we're off to Venodala".

Austalis slept well in the guest room, although from time to time his sleeping mind felt the sound of the fountain in the dark empty courtyard playing in his dreams.

# CHAPTER FIVE

Austalis was delighted by Venodala, which lay in a long shallow river valley. Venodala was a small village, centred around a villa in the same way that a village in Gododdin was centred around the local king's hall.

The morning after they arrived, climbing to the top of the hill that stood behind the villa, Austalis looked out across the green landscape.

Beyond the red-tiled roof of the villa, a cluster of thatched barns and houses led down to the river. It was slow and shallow, but it was good enough to float barges down to the Tamesis, and Marcella had told him that most of the estate's surplus produce left for market that way. There were few boats to be seen that morning: only cattle being herded across in the shallow water, and small children floating leaves and flowers downstream like offerings to the spirit that ruled the river.

Austalis scrambled down the hill, and walked down to the riverbank. He shouted a greeting to the children, but they did not reply, and their mothers looked at him warily from the doorways of the houses. He gave them unwanted greetings, too, and continued to explore the village.

It was not too much unlike a village in Gododdin, except that the houses were square or rectangular instead of round. The people looked the same; in fact, they looked more like Britons than Austalis himself did, with the blond hair that, along with Roman citizenship, had been his inheritance from his German father. Their dialect was perfectly comprehensible to him, and, although he heard them using a large amount of Latin words, any peasant from Gododdin would have had no trouble keeping up a conversation.

The boundary of the estate was marked by scrub and thick bushes that had once no doubt been the natural vegetation of the valley. It would probably be cleared as well, one day. These Romans always changed the face of the country, wherever they could.

Austalis walked along the edge of the water, keeping his right arm held up to brush away the twigs and branches. He had been told that there were other estates and villas further down, and that whenever the thick bushes cleared away he would see another island of Roman civilisation cut out of the wild land of Britain.

He looked up at the continuing line of hills, and saw instead a sign that this was still Britain.

High up on the hillside on the other side of the valley, a human figure had been cut out in white outline by removing the turf that covered the chalk below. He could not tell what god or hero the figure was meant to represent; perhaps the attributes or symbols that would have identified him had not been kept up or had been forgotten. Austalis was surprised that the Romans should have allowed such a symbol of British culture to be preserved. He knew that such chalk figures needed to be scoured clean every few years at least, or else they would disappear as the slow but inexorable flow of hill-wash would encroach upon them and eventually obliterate them without trace.

Austalis stood for a while facing the giant figure, who gazed back at him across the valley. They were both out of place in this tame and orderly Roman countryside. The wind blew down the valley, rustling the thick bushes and the young trees, and when he directed his eyes to a point where there were no Roman buildings in view, Austalis could have believed himself back on the lonely moors of Gododdin.

Well, he had not travelled so far only to see views that he could have had at home. He

turned back towards the villa, to further his education in Roman life.

The villa was almost a small settlement in itself. A large number of household servants lived in it, and the agricultural workers of the village were always going in and out, although they did not enter the private rooms of the house. Austalis had been startled, and then amused, when he had heard Marcella speaking in British for the first time. It was obvious that she had learnt the language as a small child from her family's servants in the kitchen. Although she was as perfectly bilingual as Austalis was himself, her British was that of a common peasant. Although Austalis was too polite to tell Marcella, the contrast between her elegant classical Latin and her rough milkmaid's British was very funny.

He saw Marcella standing on the front terrace of the villa as she approached. A wooden gate and an enclosure of horizontal poles prevented animals from wandering into the house.

"I thought you'd got yourself lost," Marcella said.

"I was exploring the village. Who made that chalk man on the hill?"

"It's very old. I've forbidden my own peasants to look after it, but I can't be here all the time. In fact, I saw it this morning, too, and I think they've been working on it while I was away in Londinium."

"What have you got against it?"

"It's a pagan image. It offends me every time I see it. I don't know what god it's supposed to be, but it's not the true one that I worship. I can't force the peasants to become Christians, but I do try to discourage them from pagan worship."

"I doubt that even they could tell you who it is," Austalis replied. "They haven't been taking care of it too well, anyway. All his identifying attributes have already gone. He has no spear, no horns, nothing that would show who he is. If he were being worshipped, you can be sure that those signs would have been preserved. Why can't you see it just as a historical relic?"

"It's a symbol of an evil, primitive religion."

"Come on, Marcella, whether we're Roman citizens or not, neither of us is an Italian. You're as British as I am, in fact probably more so. Do you want all signs of our original way of life to disappear?"

"Yes. I think of myself as a Roman, and that's what I want to be, because the Roman way of life is far superior. That's why I keep trying to convert the peasants to Christianity, and why I encourage them to speak Latin."

Austalis, who had always considered it an advantage to have been brought up in three languages and under the influence of three cultures: British, Roman and German, could not understand Marcella's determination to crush out British culture, language, and ways of life, even in herself.

"So you want to be a pure Roman, speaking only Latin, being a Christian, and living in a Roman house. Why don't you move to Italy?"

"Because I don't need to. Let me show you how Roman this house really is. I like to think that I fit into it very well."

The wind that washed down the valley blew across the verandah. It was quite cold, even on this bright morning in the time of year when spring was beginning to turn into summer. The cold wind at his back ushered Austalis into the house, and he wondered if the unexpected breeze was not a gesture from some god who wanted to make sure that he followed Marcella.

The villa had a hall for receiving visitors of equal social status to the family. (Everybody else entered by a door at the back, next to the kitchen.) The walls were plain, but

anyone entering was coldly scrutinised by two portrait busts of noble Romans, each set on its own fluted pedestal.

The stone faces glowered at Austalis.

"Who are they, Marcella?" he asked. "I don't think they like me."

"I've no idea. The villa was abandoned on at least one occasion, about a hundred years ago, if not more. My grandfather took over the estate, which was quite dilapidated and overgrown by then." She actually patted one of the stone Romans on the head, as though it were a dog or a small child. The outraged bust looked at Austalis for sympathy. "These busts were found in the house, thrown down and damaged. I suppose they represented the family who once lived here, or they might be Emperors, or poets, or classical heroes. They can't tell us who they are."

Austalis felt sure that the portraits were not of poets.

Marcella turned to the left, into a suite of plain rooms.

"These are the baths," she told Austalis, unnecessarily.

"Under here," Marcella continued, "is the stoking-room. It serves the baths, and also the central heating system in the rest of the house."

She led Austalis into the rear part of the house.

"This is the main room, a little too pagan for my taste."

Austalis thought that he had stepped into a room in another level of existence.

Everything was in colours. The walls were painted with hunting scenes set between panels of running geometric patterns. Three green couches stood on a mosaic floor, with faces representing the four seasons at its corners. In the centre, a jaunty bull pranced among the tiny stones, captioned by a line of Latin: HAD JUNO SEEN THE BULL SWIMMING THUS SHE MIGHT WITH GREATER JUSTICE HAVE GONE TO THE HALLS OF AEOLUS.

"What does the line refer to?" Austalis asked.

"It's out of the *Aeneid*, by Virgil. That's all I know, because I've never been able to find a copy of it."

"Was this mosaic, and all the painting originally in the house when your grandfather took it over?"

"The mosaic was, and the paintings in this room were. The colours wear very well; they're painted in, not on. They're painted on the plaster while it's still wet, so that the colours sink in, and don't get chipped away. These pictures will probably last as long as the walls do."

Austalis looked over the paintings as though they could be snatched away at any moment. On the back wall, half a dozen hunters battled a fat grey animal like a giant pig in the waters of a swamp. The hunters had spears and a net; the beast's mouth was open in an enormous soundless roar of defiance that would go on and on for ever, so long as this wall stood. The hunt took place in a hot landscape where strange trees with long branchless trunks held up sprays of giant leaves at their tops.

"Does this scene mean anything?" Austalis asked.

"As far as I can tell, it means only what it shows. I think the country may be Egypt. I suppose the owner of the house had it painted because he was homesick for some warm southern country."

The panel on the next wall showed another scene of strife, but purely among humans. A group of Roman soldiers, with grand stone buildings in the background, seemed to be about to seize or kill a man in a white toga who had his hand raised in a dramatic pose.

“It’s a scene from Roman history,” Marcella explained, “but I don’t know who the man is.”

The third wall, broken by a window that gave a view of the village, carried a representation of exotic wild animals cavorting in a dry land that seemed to have no grass; only sharp pale sand. The strange beasts, capering in their desert, provided an odd frame for the placid British roofs and river valley seen through the window.

The last wall, when Austalis turned to examine it, drew a short breathy sigh of disapproval from Marcella. She had no need to explain why. The fat half-draped figures lolling on plump white clouds, and passing cups of drink and bunches of grapes, were obviously Roman gods and goddesses. None of them was bothering to look at the viewer, who would be only a mere mortal. They turned their eyes to each other.

“No doubt you don’t approve of this picture, either,” Austalis remarked to Marcella. “You’re going to say that you intend to have it plastered over.”

“If there was some way to remove it from the wall, which there isn’t, because it’s part of the wall, I’d give it to you. No, I won’t cover it up. I have my own answer to it elsewhere in the house, as you’ll see in a moment.”

Austalis wanted to spend more time in the main room of the villa, with its brilliant colours. The paintings on the wall, and the mosaic on the floor, threw out life and movement. He had never seen so much concentrated beauty and colour in his life, not in any man-made work, not even in nature.

“Can’t you see the beauty of it?” he challenged Marcella.

“Of course I can see the beauty, but beauty isn’t virtuous in itself. It can be wicked if it leads to evil thoughts.”

“Beauty can be evil?”

“Anything can be evil, according to its influences. We’ve seen enough here.”

Marcella spun herself round like a soldier, and Austalis reluctantly followed her down more corridors.

“There are two floors at the front, and one at the back,” she explained. “It must have been easier to build the house that way on the slope of the hill.”

“Why didn’t they build it on the flat ground lower down?”

“In case the river overflowed, although that’s never been known to happen in living memory.”

“They say the weather was colder and wetter when the Romans first came to Britain,” Austalis remarked.

“Perhaps they brought some of the sunshine and warmth of the Middle Sea with them,” Marcella replied.

Austalis noticed that she referred to the Romans as “they” and not “we”; a little chink of light had escaped from the British consciousness that Marcella kept disguised inside her.

“These are the rooms that I think of as being mine,” Marcella said, lifting the latch of a heavy door. “This is the part of the house where I can be myself the most.”

Austalis followed her into an antechamber decorated with two rows of geometrical frieze patterns on the wall, enclosing a painted symbol that he could not interpret.

A circular wreath, tied at the bottom by a ribbon upon which two small birds with white breasts and golden wings pecked at the seeds of grain, surrounded a monogram which looked to Austalis like a P with a long stem imposed upon an X.

“What does this mean?” he asked. “P and X?”

“It’s not P and X. It’s not even in Latin letters at all. These are the Greek letters Chi and Rho: the first two letters of the name of Christ. This is the modern symbol of Christianity. In the days of persecution, the symbol was a fish.”

“Is this your temple?”

“No. This is where the postulants stand to hear the services. They aren’t admitted into the chapel until they’ve been fully accepted into the fellowship of believers.”

Austalis could have told her that he had seen exactly the same rule applied in the temples of Mithras, but he was not in the mood to bait Marcella at that moment. He was almost prepared to believe that the Chi-Rho monogram on the wall did have some magical power, because Marcella had become transformed in its presence. Her face shone with joy, and her child’s smile passed across it again and again like a beam of sunlight. He did not want to spoil his own enjoyment of that beauty by causing a shadow of anger to come over her.

“Let me show you the chapel,” she said, leading him into the next room. The first thing that Austalis saw was another Chi-Rho monogram on the wall opposite, but smaller than the one in the antechamber.

“Here’s the altar,” Marcella said, raising her hand towards a simple wooden table at the far end of the room, but Austalis was far more interested in a painting that stretched from one side of the room to the other on the wall nearest the door.

The lower half of the wall was decorated with a pattern of flowers in aggressive regularity like Roman soldiers, but above it was a row of six human figures set among crimson pillars. The people in the painting were dressed in rich brown and blue clothes, and their arms were outstretched at their sides as if to prevent the crimson pillars from falling inwards. Austalis turned to ask Marcella what the position represented, and he saw that she was facing the altar with her arms outstretched in the same way. Her fists were clenched as though she were suffering pain, but her face shone with rapture.

She brought her arms down, and looked at Austalis.

“You’ve seen it before. That’s the attitude of prayer. It imitates the crucifixion of Christ.”

“I was looking at the people in these paintings,” Austalis replied. “Do you have any idea who they are?”

Marcella broke into her childish laugh. It echoed round the solemn room, and then seemed to fly away out through the narrow windows like a joyous little bird.

“I ought to, because I’m one of them. Look at the child. She’s me. The boy is my older brother. He died of an illness. The man and woman are my mother and father, and the old people are my grandparents.”

“So this is your grandfather, who reconstructed the house? He must be a powerful spirit, haunting it.”

“His spirit is away in the hands of Jesus. I had these pictures painted so that the memory of my family will last as long as this house does.”

“You should have had the people’s names inscribed, or future generations won’t have any way of knowing who they were.”

“I may have that done one day.”

The paintings were colourful but crude. Marcella must have employed some local talent to produce them, because they fell far below the high elegance of the wall-paintings in the other rooms.

"You don't all have red hair," Austalis commented.

"It wasn't passed on to me. I know you're going to say that it's another proof of our British ancestry. Do I ever deny it? Until you understand that anybody can be a Roman who wants to be, you'll never understand the beauty of the Empire."

Austalis had nothing to say. Marcella's conviction had carried their conversation out of this small room, to cover the provinces of Britain, widening to spread over the whole Empire.

Marcella opened her arms to the altar again, and Austalis followed her out of the room.

"Why do our steps echo like that?" he asked.

"There's a kind of cellar underneath. We call it the deep room. I keep it sealed up. Did you notice the two portrait busts in the hallway? They were kept down there. People used to make ritual offerings to the spirits that the busts represented. I stopped that, of course; it was still going on secretly, even in my parents' time. That's when I had the busts carried upstairs. Now they're simply harmless works of art instead of pagan idols."

"Can I see the room?"

"Nobody's going to see it for a long time. If there are any spirits down there, they're going to wither away from lack of worship and from my refusal to believe in their existence."

"Just because you don't believe in them doesn't mean that they don't exist."

"No, I can't accept that, but anyway their existence doesn't matter if they're locked away in a dark room."

Marcella took him on a tour of the outside of the house, which had much less of the alien and disturbing about it. She pointed out the yellow tiles that made a step-pattern relieving the expanse of red tiles covering the roof. Austalis asked her if that, too, was her grandfather's work, but she replied that the roof was older.

They sat for a while on a stone bench placed under a tree at the front of the house. A screen of trees framed the wooden landing-stage on the river. A small boat was moored to it, bobbing in the easy flow of the sun-speckled water, waiting for some important person. The workers of the estate walked by on their business with a polite greeting to Marcella, and sometimes one to Austalis, too, usually in Latin.

"Osgirn has kept the villa estate really well organised these last few years," Marcella remarked. "He was trained by my father, but to be honest, he does a better job. My father was too kind-hearted to keep the peasants working hard."

Austalis realised that he had misjudged Osgirn's status, as perhaps Osgirn had misjudged him. In the house at Londinium, Austalis had thought that Osgirn was merely an ordinary domestic servant, but he was obviously some kind of subordinate master of the estate, running it for Marcella.

Perhaps that was the best a man could do in a society without war. Austalis tried to look more respectfully upon Osgirn's position, telling himself that he might well be doing the same kind of work if he had been born in the Roman provinces and not in free Gododdin where there was still fighting to be done.

It was no wonder that the people south of the Wall had been so shocked and helpless in the face of the Great Raid. After three hundred years of undisputed Roman rule, they could not defend themselves. If the army was too overstretched to be in every trouble-spot at once, the citizens had neither the weapons nor the training to fight off raiding parties.

As Austalis sat beside Marcella on the bench, he tried to force himself into a definite attitude of approval or disapproval, one way or the other, towards the comfortable peace of Venodala.

There was no palisade around the estate, nor even a fence, and there were no guards posted to protect the fieldworkers and livestock. The children ran wherever they wanted. When was such light-hearted security ever known in Gododdin, where spears and swords had to be always at hand, to be ready for a raid, and where kings were expected to make war upon some neighbouring people at least once a year? Real war had not been seen in this flat serene valley since the original Roman conquest, and there were no tribal kings.

"Marcella?" he asked. "What do men do here? I mean, what's their particular way of life? What's the difference between their way of life and that of the women?"

"What a strange question. The men do more of the harder tasks, such as constructing buildings, and maintaining the seeding machines and tools. The women do more of the cooking and domestic work, but everybody takes a hand in all types of work."

"Well, what's the point in being a man, then?"

"What do you mean?"

"Don't the men ever get to do any fighting, or at least, any training in how to fight?"

"Only those who leave to join the army. Most of the men here have never handled a weapon more dangerous than a kitchen knife."

"Well, how are you going to defend yourselves if Venodala is ever attacked?"

"We don't need to defend ourselves. Nobody can kill us."

"Come on, Marcella, listen to the first real live barbarian warrior you've ever met in your life! You were lucky that the Great Raid didn't come this way. I know what the warband of one village, just one village, of Gododdin, would do to Venodala."

Marcella turned her face towards him, and the pale blue eyes looked into his with the calm intensity of the eyes painted on the praying figures in the chapel.

"Our bodies can be destroyed, and our homes can be burnt, but our souls will live for ever with God."

Austalis met her eyes with the same steadiness. He was a warrior and had faced enemies, but this was the first time that he had encountered the power flowing out of someone possessing absolute faith.

"Do you care only for your soul?" he asked.

"Yes. I might show weakness if a crisis came, but I know God sees that I believe."

"You can say that for yourself, but what about all the other people in Venodala? You're responsible for them. Would you stand by and see them all slaughtered, just to show your god how strong your faith was?"

"All I can do, is to help them build their own faith. I'm not a soldier, am I?"

"If this were Gododdin, you would be the queen of this village."

"A queen! Do you really have kings and queens north of the Wall? I thought kings and queens had gone out of the world."

"Of course we have queens. We Britons have had great queens. Didn't you ever hear of Boudicca, or Cartimandua?"

"Cartimandua means nothing to me."

"Ah, these Romans and their Wall! They've made a barrier between you subject Britons and your own history."

"I don't consider myself a subject because Rome rules me, any more than I consider myself a subject because God rules me."

Marcella looked away, over the little river, and the tidy village, as peaceful as if there had never been violence in the world. It struck Austalis that these folk must be the

descendants of the fierce warriors of Boudicca and Caradog - what did the Romans call him? Caratacus. Rome had tamed the savage Britons. They still took up swords to fight, but only in the service of Rome. The villagers of Venodala would be shocked if the chariots of Boudicca were to storm into the valley.

Austalis shook his head.

"Who would think that a plain stone wall could prevent a man and woman from talking to each other?"

Marcella laughed, and Austalis saw an elderly woman walking among the houses smile in response, pleased at her mistress' laughter.

"Oh, my pagan barbarian, let's stick to rough common things we can understand. Let me show you the granary."

Austalis wondered why Marcella was so proud of something so ordinary, until he saw that she was leading him to a long stone building set with one end close to the river. A lane that would be a disgusting churn of mud in the autumn ran around it, and for some reason the granary was a rallying-place for the noisy dogs of the village. They barked at Austalis, but did not dare to approach him. Looking at their angry but fearful eyes, he would have liked to have asked them whether they were descendants of the ferocious hunting dogs that were still bred in Gododdin.

Inside the wide door, the granary was built like a temple to a god. The roof was supported on mortared pillars, and a wooden staircase led up to an attic. The interior reminded Austalis uncomfortably of a Mithraeum.

"What do you think of it?" Marcella asked. "My grandfather built it. You should see it in the harvest season. Look at those arches at each end. They conduct air under the floor to help dry the corn. We sell most of it. Londinium needs plenty of feeding."

"It's eerie as it is now, so big and empty."

"At the end of summer you'll see it full of people. It's the centre of life in Venodala then."

Austalis had to admire the confidence of Marcella's grandfather, who had gone to the unimaginable expense of building in flint and mortar, calmly secure in the belief that the stone shield of the Wall protected Venodala from enemies. Who in Gododdin would risk such an investment of wealth and skill?

"You're uncomfortable," Marcella said, shaming Austalis that she had noticed it. "Let's go out into the sunshine."

In the open air Austalis had the feeling of being in Britain again. Even the functional granary hummed with the mystery of the lands of the Middle Sea and beyond. He looked out over the valley and saw the chalk man, reassuringly primitive and crude, the work of Britons who had not been Romanised.

Marcella interrupted his thoughts.

"You must think me scandalous," she said. "Would you ever take me to Gododdin? I suppose all your women are quiet and domestic, or perhaps they're big sword-women like Boudicca."

"They certainly aren't like you," he admitted, and at that moment he realised that he had not considered her as being a woman. She was old not to be married. Her father had failed in his duty to find a suitable husband for her, but it would be easy enough even now, since she could offer the splendid estate of Venodala and the house in Londinium as her dowry.

Austalis looked down at her, and felt even more foolish to realise that he had noticed

only now that he was a head taller than she was. Did she see him as a man, a towering blond barbarian?

“You don’t know what to say,” Marcella whispered.

“I don’t know my social obligations in this Roman world. I don’t know what a guest should do.”

“Nothing. It’s an honour to us to have you stay here.”

For the first time Austalis studied Marcella as a woman. Some men might think her tough-looking; probably she would make a good sword-woman! Then there were the kind eyes, and the childish laugh.

“You want my soul!” he exclaimed.

“Of course I do,” Marcella replied. “Do you want me to show you how you can become immortal, with me? You said you came through the Wall to understand the Empire. Begin by understanding Venodala. Begin that by understanding me.”

## CHAPTER SIX

It was the first Lord's Day of Austalis' stay in Venodala, and Marcella invited him to come and witness the religious service. She was shocked when he told her that he had never seen Christians at worship, not even his aunt; there were few Christians living north of the Wall, and since he had come south, the only religion whose rites he had participated in was Mithraism.

"From which," Marcella reminded him, "I rescued you when you were lying near to death in the street".

"I haven't forgotten what I owe you."

"You owe me nothing. You should be thanking God, not me."

Austalis stood with Marcella on the front verandah of the villa and watched Osgirn walk up and down among the houses of the peasants, ringing a hand-bell that sent the birds leaping up to the sky in alarm.

In response to the bell, the people came out of their houses, and walked to the villa, entering by the side door that led directly to the Christian chapel. The men and women filed in respectfully; even the children were quiet and orderly.

"Do they have to come?" Austalis asked.

"No. It's voluntary. It has to be, or the service would mean nothing."

Austalis suspected that the villagers would not dare to fail to attend, no matter how gentle their mistress might be.

Marcella kept looking along the river.

"Are you expecting someone else?" Austalis asked.

"I certainly am! I'm waiting for the priest. He must have been delayed at Sebenium. That's another villa, upstream from here."

Just then, Austalis heard the regular splash of a paddle and a boat drew into sight, with a high curved prow and a similar stern at the rear. If one were to attach strings of gut, it occurred to Austalis, the boat could be transformed into a giant floating musical instrument.

The boat was being propelled by a man in a peasant's smock, evidently the servant of the eager-faced young man in a shining white robe who rode in the bow.

"There he is," Marcella commented. "That's Varrus, the priest."

The young man waved to Marcella, and then stripped off his splendid robe. Kicking off his shoes, he said something to his servant, who put up his paddle and stowed it away. Varrus then seized the painter of the boat, and leapt over the side into the shallow water. Flinging the painter over his shoulder, he splashed through the river, drawing the boat along behind him, while his boatman sat embarrassed at the stern.

"Well, I'm glad the villagers are already in the church!" Marcella exclaimed. "I don't know what they would have thought of this. Dear Varrus needs to develop a sense of dignity."

She hurried down to the little wooden quay as the boat drew up to it. Austalis heard Varrus finishing a song as he bent the painter to the mooring-post.

"Varrus, put your robe and shoes on!" Marcella scolded him, but her face was full of the smile that always delighted Austalis. "You look like something in a pagan mosaic."

Austalis reached out his arm to pull Varrus out of the water, but the young priest skipped deftly up onto the quay without help.

"Who are you to talk, Marcella?" he replied, quickly dressing himself. "Here you are in the company of a barbarian god."

“My name is Austalis,” Austalis replied, in as frosty and formal a tone as he could manage, “and I come from the kingdom of Gododdin, north of the Wall”.

“I’m Varrus, and I come from Londinium. Your Latin is very good, if I may say so.”

“I am a Roman citizen.”

“How interesting! I look forward to hearing you tell me about your country.”

Austalis, watching the young man gaily shower drops of water off his legs, saw him as a friendly, lively dog.

“Austalis will tell you whatever you like, but after the service of divine worship,” Marcella interrupted. “The congregation are already in the chapel, waiting for you.”

“I’m sorry I’m late. I was trapped in a theological discussion with the young son of the house at Sebenium. That little boy Pelagius is certainly precocious, and he already says he wants to be a priest.”

“I hope he makes a more serious one than you do,” Marcella answered, but she was on the point of breaking into laughter herself. “Come into the house and do your duty.”

Marcella took the party in through the front of the house, and led them down the steps to the vestibule of the chapel, where she stopped and turned to Austalis.

“I’m sorry, but you’ll have to wait in the vestibule with Artus, because you aren’t a baptised Christian.”

“That’s all right,” Austalis said. “We had the same rule in the temples of Mithras,” he added, and regretted it when Marcella shot him an angry glance that reminded him that she had little sense of humour where her religion was concerned. She went into the chapel with Varrus following, and Austalis heard a sudden shuffling sound as the villagers formed themselves into orderly ranks.

He was left outside with the boatman, who avoided his eyes. Austalis recognised another case of someone being unsure of the social status of the blond stranger, and he guessed that the man might not have been able to understand the exchange of Latin conversation with Marcella and Varrus.

“My name is Austalis,” he said, in the British language. “I’m a warrior from the other side of the Wall. I come from the country of Gododdin.”

The man’s eyes widened, and he moved closer.

“So do I!” he whispered, in the accent of the northern part of Gododdin. He raised his voice as the congregation began to exchange prayers with Varrus. “My name is Artus. I was captured in the Great Raid, six years ago. The Romans sold me as a slave to the owner of the villa at Sebenium.”

“Surely the Great Raid didn’t come this far!” Austalis replied, more loudly than he had intended, so that a few disapproving eyes rebuked him from the dimness of the chapel.

“No, I was captured away on the east coast. I’ve been a household slave ever since. Where were you taken?”

“I wasn’t. I came here freely, to visit the Empire.”

The voices in the chapel rose to a roaring incantation. There was a moment of silence, and then Varrus led the congregation in a sung prayer that struck Austalis as being familiar. At once he identified it as a hymn to Jupiter that his father had taught him. Only the words had been changed, and not entirely.

Artus smiled as he listened.

“Most of them don’t know what the words mean. They can’t even pronounce them properly.”

“Do you know what they mean?” Austalis asked him.

“No, I hardly understand Latin. I don’t want to learn. I won’t become a Christian, either.”

Austalis became interested in the latest stage of the ritual being conducted in the chapel. The worshippers, except for the children, came up one by one to receive a fragment of bread and a sip of wine from Varrus, who gave each of them a quiet blessing.

Artus watched with a sardonic smile.

“Do you know what they do? They believe that the bread and wine are magically transformed into the body and blood of their god, and then they eat his flesh and drink his blood.”

The words, in that flat bored voice, threw Austalis back into the sick perfumed shadows of the Mithraeum. He had been made to eat an image in bread of the god, and now as he thought about it he was attacked by the fear that the evil golden face would rise up in his soul again.

He concentrated his attention on the soft voices in the chapel and fixed his eyes upon the Chi-Rho monogram painted on the vestibule wall. Mithras remained hidden. Austalis dared the eastern god to show himself. Mithras failed to appear. Austalis kept his vision filled with the Christian symbol, and searched in all the corners of his soul for Mithras. There was no sign of him.

Austalis turned away from the monogram, and rejoined Artus in watching the ceremony. He could not share the disgust that Artus felt.

“Christianity is a strong religion, Artus,” he commented.

“It’s imposed by the Roman Emperor’s sword.”

Austalis knew that was true, but he could see in Christianity no sign of the sinister mystery that he had been shown in the Mithraeum. In the calm chapel, cool in the basement of the villa away from the hot sun, Austalis felt an atmosphere of peace and open-hearted goodwill. Certainly most of the peasants were probably participating in the service against their inclination, but nobody smeared them with blood, choked them with drugs, or put them through death in a stone coffin.

Artus had his thoughts on other subjects.

“I could have found myself in far worse circumstances as a slave. My master is kind, and I spend a lot of time serving Varrus, who’s a good fellow. I might have been sold to work in the mines.”

“I know a soldier called Demetrius. He told me about the slave miners in his father’s country, who live and die underground. That’s in the province of Cyprus.”

“Where’s that?”

“It’s an island in the eastern part of the Middle Sea, at the other end of the Empire.”

“I’m glad they didn’t sell me that far away. Sebenium is distant enough already.”

The singing in the chapel ended. Varrus gave a final blessing, and the congregation began to break up. Austalis heard them beginning to leave by the side door that led directly out of the house, and he questioned Artus more hurriedly, fearing that their conversation would be interrupted.

“Why don’t you leave, then? Run off one day. Look, you could have done it now, while Varrus was in the chapel. You could have taken the boat, and gone downstream to the Tamesis. They would never have caught you.”

Artus looked down at the polished stone floor.

“Because I’m comfortable. Because I’ve forgotten how to be a warrior. I don’t want to leave the easy life I have here, for the fighting and poverty of Gododdin.” He turned up his face. “When did you ever see an idle servant north of the Wall? The Romans keep me here with luxury more securely than if they kept me in chains.”

His expression showed that he expected only contempt from Austalis; he stood passively waiting for it as though for a physical blow, but Austalis saw him, not as one fallen man, but as one face of Roman Britain. All the Roman provinces in the island were peopled with men who enjoyed the security of Rome, called themselves citizens, and forgot that their ancestors had fought with Caradog and Boudicca.

“You forged your chains yourself,” he told Artus.

The solemnity of the religious service was over. Varrus and Marcella came out of the chapel, laughing and smiling. Austalis was angered that Marcella did not even seem to notice him waiting for her, and then stopped in surprise at his own feelings. He was angry at Marcella for giving her attention to Varrus instead of to him; and in that moment, Austalis faced the truth that he wanted Marcella himself.

That was only part of the truth, as he recognised himself. Watching Marcella chatting with Varrus, he knew that she was not for a barbarian with no land and no place in the Roman world. Yet, he remembered, he was a Roman citizen, as much as Marcella was. What she shared with Varrus was Christianity and Austalis could see that Artus was accentuating his own loneliness by defiantly refusing to accept it. Not all Romans were Christians, apparently not even a majority; but Rome herself was Christian.

Marcella, seeing nothing of this turmoil of thoughts within Austalis, greeted him happily as though their separation had been a long one.

“Did you like the service? I hope you’ll be able to join in yourself soon.”

“I would be honoured,” Austalis replied, “if you could teach me about your faith”.

“That’s a job for Varrus. Will you instruct Austalis?”

“Of course, Austalis. My time is yours.”

Austalis saw Artus pass him a look of the kind that was exchanged between warriors unsure of each other’s loyalty. He returned a glare of command, and saw Artus shrink away.

Marcella laughed with delight.

“I’m sure you two will be good friends. There, Austalis, you see? The hand of God brought you to me, and now it brings Varrus to you.”

“I’m only an instrument,” Varrus modestly exclaimed.

“Today is the Lord’s day, though, and Varrus is busy. Varrus, would you like to come again tomorrow?”

“I’ll be here.”

The next day, Varrus rode up to Venodala in a cart hitched to a little horse, and began a course of lessons in Christianity with Austalis.

As Marcella had proclaimed, they became friends at once. Varrus was charmingly curious, always wanting to know more about Austalis and Gododdin. He did not seem to know that Artus came from there too, and Austalis did not consider it his place to spread the news.

For his own part, Austalis had questions as well. He found out that Varrus was the son of a villa owner, and would one day inherit the house. Austalis was surprised at the way in which Christian priests lived as ordinary members of their society, and not as a special class set apart by clothing and style of life. Varrus had every intention of carrying on as a farming landowner and priest at the same time.

"That's what I want to be, Austalis. I'm lucky to have exactly the kind of life that suits me. And what do you want to become?"

"I don't know. Perhaps my father felt like that when he left Germany to enter the Empire. I grew up to be a warrior in Gododdin, to fight. We have peasants to work for us, and priests. I like Gododdin, but having a foreign father made me more aware than most of my friends that there might be some value in other ways of life."

"Do you know what you're looking for?"

"My father found something in the Empire. Even though he left it to live beyond the Wall, he was at peace with himself and with Rome."

"Is that what made you try the cult of Mithras?"

"Yes, but it turned out to be cruel and evil."

"Christianity is kind and good. I wish I could give you a copy of the Gospels to read, but I only have them in the original Greek."

"They're not written in Latin?"

"No, in the eastern lands of the Empire, Greek is the common language. There isn't really a good Latin translation."

Varrus sighed, and looked down at the couplet of verse from Virgil on the mosaic floor, spelt out in little dark stones to last for ever, like the Empire.

"I wish I were clever enough to do it. All I can do is teach you a little of God's message. Augurius can help you with any points that you really find difficult."

After a few days, Varrus invited Austalis to lunch at Sebenium. Artus brought the boat up to Venodala, although Austalis had protested that he could walk.

Artus had to work to make the boat travel upstream, and did not seem inclined to talk to Austalis.

The riverbanks slipped by. Austalis sat comfortably in the warm sunshine, enjoying the motion of the boat and the sound of the cool water. As Venodala fell behind, the boat passed three children playing in the shallows, while a dog splashed excitedly in circle around them. In Gododdin, children always kept part of their attention on the hillsides, watching for a raid. Here, nobody knew such fear.

Austalis found himself smiling, and turning his face to catch the generous sun. Friendly trees hung out over the water, and green fields spread out on both banks. The peasants were busy at work, with not so much as one spear-man standing guard to protect them. Austalis could feel the hostility of Artus, grimly paddling behind him, but it was more pleasant to face the sun.

The river curved in a gentle bend between two little hillocks, and wound on in long curves until Austalis saw a cluster of houses in the distance. The red tiles and pale mortared walls stood out strongly against the green trees and fields.

"Sebenium," Artus grunted. He obviously had a speech stored up for when Austalis replied, so Austalis did not answer.

There was a click of movement among the trees, which Austalis soon saw to be Varrus, bounding towards the water's edge. He waved, and Austalis waved back.

Artus brought the boat crunching onto the gravel of the riverbank, because Selenium's landing stage was out of service, half-tottering into the water.

"Welcome, Austalis!" Varrus boomed. Austalis waited a long time hoping for an echo to come back from the hills on the other side of the valley. He was disappointed, and, giving up, jumped out onto the land.

"How are you, Varrus?"

"Very well. I'm sorry about the landing stage. We'll have to get it repaired this summer, and certainly before the harvest. I don't want to have to send our produce to Londinium by road. Come along. I'm afraid Sebenium isn't as grand as Venodala."

The main villa was certainly smaller, as was the whole estate, but Austalis thought that Sebenium compensated for its lesser size by its more attractive look. It did not sit on the land as a great bulky conqueror, in the way that the villa at Venodala did.

An older man with pure white hair and beard came out of the house to greet them.

"That's the owner," Varrus explained. "His name is Elafius."

Austalis tried to guess what British personal name had been Romanised into this form. At Venodala, even the peasants called the island by the Latin name "Britannia" instead of the British "Priten".

Elafius waited in the porch for Varrus to introduce his guest.

"Elafius, this is Austalis, from Gododdin. Austalis, this is Elafius."

"I'm interested to meet a man of your quality from the northern lands," Elafius said. "All we ever see of people from your side of the Wall are pedlars and fruit-pickers."

"They're the only kind who regularly travel this far south. Our kings and priests don't want to see the Roman provinces."

As Elafius ushered them into the house, he surprised Austalis by the breadth of his knowledge of the northern lands.

"Isn't it true, though, that Gododdin was once part of the Roman provinces, and that there's another wall that used to be the northern frontier?"

"That's so, but the northern wall has been abandoned for a long time, probably hundreds of years, and it's very decayed. It was built of earth, not stone, so it looks almost like a natural feature of the landscape."

"What about the forts and towers? There were no small forts as there are on the southern wall?"

By now Austalis suspected that Elafius had either visited Gododdin as a Roman spy, or else that he had been questioning Artus. Was this the reason that Artus would not return to Gododdin: the fear that he would be killed for giving too many answers to Roman questions?

"The forts are in fairly good condition. In the time of my grandfather on my mother's side, a king of Gododdin tried to re-occupy the northern wall, but found that he couldn't keep a large enough number of men on it at any time."

"Ah, yes. These walls were meant to be gates, not barriers."

Elafius paused, as if deliberately to redirect the conversation.

"Varrus tells me he's instructing you in Christianity."

"I'm interested in becoming a Christian. It's a way for me to enter civilisation. It was a Christian who saved me from the Mithraeum."

"Our dear Marcella. Well, nobody can question her faith. Nobody can accuse her of being a Christian out of opportunism. With her estate at Venodala, and her house in Londinium, she already has all she could ever possess in life."

"Doesn't she have any close relatives?"

"No. The family has always been unlucky in times of plague."

"In Gododdin, such a woman would have been married long ago."

"She has had many offers. I tried to persuade Varrus to be a suitor, and I believe she might well have accepted him." Varrus reddened, and seemed to be trying to suppress an urge to make an interruption. "The problem is that Varrus has adopted a strange idea about never marrying. It has something to do with his being a priest."

"I thought Christian priests were free to marry," Austalis remarked.

"We are," Varrus burst out loudly, as though he had been holding in his breath for a long time, "but there's a movement for a celibate priesthood. Our Lord Jesus never married, and we could serve the congregation better without family responsibilities."

"If you do that," Elafius objected, "you'll become a separate class. You'll drift apart from the common people, like the priests of the eastern Greek religions."

"You won't be able to pass your property to your sons, or daughters," Austalis said, remembering that Varrus was the heir to the estate.

"We shouldn't have our own earthly property, either."

"In that case," Elafius commented, "perhaps I should make a will to leave Sebenium to someone other than my son Pelagius, because he looks likely to become a priest, too. Why do so many sons want to be priests?"

"There, Austalis, I can't even convert Elafius!" Varrus cried. "He's an unreformed pagan, sacrificing to the Roman gods."

Austalis knew enough to stay out of this argument, which probably recurred at least daily.

"I know very little about the Roman gods; only what my German father taught me, but I like what I know about Christianity."

Elafius nodded.

"It's the religion of the future. The Emperors are serious about imposing it on all their citizens. The old Roman gods are worshipped only by a few relics from the past like myself. The cult of Mithras is too narrow: it accepts only men. The nasty Greek mystical religions are too dark and decadent for them ever to claim a large number of adherents."

"What you don't understand," Varrus interrupted, "is that Christianity is expanding because it's the one true religion. You saw what happened when the Emperor Julian tried to restore the worship of the old gods."

"He didn't offer the old religion properly," Elafius replied. "His basic problem was that he didn't believe in the old religion himself, and so he couldn't communicate any sense of conviction to his followers."

Austalis had begun to be interested in the discussion.

"I'm amazed by the force of religion in the Roman provinces. It seems that in every house, on every street-corner in the cities, someone is proclaiming a god."

"In the last generation, there's been a great revival of religion within the Empire," Elafius explained. "Before, people in official positions went through the forms, but nobody believed in religion, and it seemed something old-fashioned left over from an earlier state of society. The Christians have done so well for two reasons: first, they're willing to accept anybody; and second, they're the only major group in society that has faith, and confidence."

Austalis did not know enough about the Empire to make a judgement upon the analysis that Elafius had offered, so he stated his own reasons for moving towards the official religion of the Empire.

“What attracts me to Christianity is the way in which it can claim the loyalty of people of the quality of Varrus and Marcella. I didn’t feel that way about Mithraism. While I saw noble and upright men who worshipped Mithras, they didn’t have that sense of goodness flowing out of them.”

Austalis was amused to see the honest, open-hearted Varrus blushing with embarrassment at this praise, but Elafius only sighed.

“A good man may follow an evil or a false god. Let’s set these high matters aside and take our lunch out on the verandah. We’ll sit on the benches and dine like peasants.”

Austalis enjoyed the meal. The food was good, and it was pleasant to be out in the brightness of late spring. When the young female servant filled his cup, the wine shone and sparkled in the sun like an enchanted river descending from heaven.

Afterwards, Elafius called for a small table, and added, mysteriously: “I need the Romans and Sabines, too,” as if armies were secretly encamped behind the house.

The table was brought out, with a polished wooden box and a square chequered hinged wooden board. Elafius opened the box and shook out a shower of glass discs.

“Did your father teach you any Roman games?” he asked.

“Not this one,” Austalis replied in mystification.

Elafius sorted the glass counters, half of them white and half of them brown, into their colours. He carefully laid the pieces down on the squares of the chequered board.

“This game represents a battle between the Romans and their ancient neighbours, the Sabines. Varrus is very good at it, so he can explain the rules to you.”

Varrus quickly ran through the rules for advancing, retreating, capturing the opponent’s pieces, and the conditions for victory. Varrus played a short game against Elafius, to show Austalis how it all worked.

Austalis was fascinated by this Roman symbolic fight. There were sports in Gododdin, but they were rough and physical. Only the Romans could think of turning rude bodily combat into this elegant shifting of glass pieces on a wooden board.

After Varrus had rapidly won a fast and crushing victory over Elafius, Austalis fought a match against Varrus himself.

“No, Austalis, you have to keep your pieces organised and working together,” Varrus chided him. “These brilliant impetuous attacks by isolated pieces and groups won’t work.”

Austalis tried to change his style. He had been brought up in the tradition of the single heroic warrior, and he found it hard to adapt to the organised unity of the disciplined Roman legion. Varrus explained to him how the different number of red spots on each piece corresponded to its role and to the moves it was permitted to make on the board.

Austalis became absorbed in the progress of the game, and waged his little war with Varrus back and forth across the board. As the afternoon progressed, Austalis could feel the glass counters becoming warmer whenever his fingers moved them to another position. Elafius stroked his white beard, and occasionally offered polite and magisterial comments. Austalis decided that Elafius looked like a king of the kind that still existed beyond the Wall; and if the Romans had never conquered the southern part of Britain, that might well be what he would have been.

Varrus became more and more excited as the game built to a conclusion. Most of the

original pieces had been removed from the board, with Elafius putting them carefully back into their wooden box. Austalis could imagine how annoying it would be if even only one of the glass counters were to be lost.

Varrus slammed his big fist down on the board, and the remaining counters leapt up in the air. Austalis could almost believe he had heard them making a little glassy squeak of fright.

"I win!" Varrus shouted with joy. A small bird flew up in panic from a nearby bush, and children playing by the river looked up in curiosity.

Austalis could no longer remember how the counters had lain on the board before Varrus had them bounced back into disorder, but he had no doubt that Varrus was telling the truth.

"I suppose I should congratulate you on your victory," he said.

"Really, Varrus!" Elafius said. "What kind of manners are you showing to your guest? Austalis gave you a very hard game."

"You certainly did, Austalis. I can see you've been well trained as a warrior."

"Not in your kind of warfare."

"Let's get up," Elafius suggested. "We've been sitting down too long."

Artus came out of the house to tidy up the fallen pieces of the game, while Austalis followed his hosts down to the riverbank.

"Thank you for the game," he told Varrus. "I found it very interesting."

"I'm sure you'll beat me the next time, and every time from then on," Varrus replied.

Elafius surveyed his estate in the clear afternoon light.

"It's a good spring. I dare to hope for a good summer, and a good harvest."

"Don't hope," Varrus suggested. "Pray."

"But if my prayers aren't answered, how will I keep my faith?"

Austalis sat down on the thick roots of a tree, and contemplated the ordered peace of this Roman world. This was what his father had sought, coming from the savage tribes of unconquered Germany, out of the dark forests into the soft light of the Empire.

Voices approached him from behind, those of Varrus and Elafius.

"Admiring the view!" Varrus asked. "I've seen it in all the seasons of the year, and I never tire of it.

"You should see the lonely moors and fells of Gododdin," Austalis told him. "Britain south of the Wall is so different."

"I'm glad we've been able to show you a part of our lives," Elafius said. "I must say that Varrus has good taste in friends."

"He's learnt from your own nobility, and I want to ask one more favour of him."

"What's that?" Varrus asked.

"I want you to make me into a Christian."

"Oh, that's just what I hoped for!" Varrus shouted, looking more than ever like a big overjoyed dog. "I'm so pleased, and God will be even more so."

Austalis looked back at the house, and saw Artus gazing at him with an expression that said that they were both now prisoners of Rome.

Austalis made another decision.

"I'll walk back to Venodala, along the valley."

## CHAPTER SEVEN

When Austalis told her the news, Marcella wept. Standing in front of him in the main room of her villa, she clasped his hands in hers while single tears fell down to the floor to join the mosaic sea in which fat brown dolphins played.

“What’s the matter?” Austalis asked. In Gododdin, a woman who wept would be whipped or even executed by her father, husband or brother for the shame that she had brought upon the family.

“It’s nothing wrong, it’s just that I’m so happy,” Marcella replied squeezing his hands in a surprisingly strong grip that reminded Austalis again what a fine sword-woman she would have made. The thought made him laugh, and he could not stop himself. For a long time he and Marcella stood together in that room decorated with gaudy pictures and brilliant colours, linked by their hands, one weeping and the other laughing.

Finally, Marcella stopped crying. She felt the big hands of Austalis with her own.

“Your hands are so rough. I could think you were a peasant or a craftsman.”

That put an immediate end to all laughter from Austalis, and he bristled with the pride of a fighter of Gododdin.

“I’ve never worked in my life. I’m a warrior. My hands became rough through fifteen years of exercises with the sword and the shield and the spear.”

This time it was Marcella who laughed, her childish free laugh that ended in a giggle.

“There, my heroic warrior, I wasn’t insulting you.”

She released her grip on one hand, and by the other she led Austalis to the window, that showed the wide view of the village houses and the valley: Marcella’s houses, her valley, her fields, and her people.

“You know,” she said, “there’s a place for you here. This estate needs a master. You want to share in the life of the Roman Empire, and the Empire needs you here.”

“I thought you only wanted me to become a Christian.”

“Becoming a Christian is everything in this world, and the next, but you also have to have an everyday place in this world, and Venodala can be that place if you want. You could go back to Gododdin for visits whenever you wanted to. The gates of the Wall will still be open.”

Austalis considered that. His father had sought his fortune in the Empire, and yet he had chosen to retire outside its frontiers, although still within its shadow.

“I came here to find my place in the Empire. My Roman citizenship was the only legacy my father left me.”

“It was a very precious gift.”

“I know. He told me something that made a great impression on me. All those German barbarians that the Empire fears so much: the Goths, the Vandals, the Suevi and all the others; do you know what they want above all? They want to settle within the Empire and be citizens.”

“They would change the Empire.”

“Perhaps, but it’s been through changes before.”

“Do you really want to go through so many changes yourself?”

“I really do. I want to grow.”

A small cloud raced across the evening sky, and the sunshine rippled across the valley. The children were driving the plodding oxen and scuttling sheep back into their pens for the

night, and a fierce argument broke out among a gaggle of geese until the small boy who was herding them separated the combatants with his stick. Austalis watched the scene, still holding Marcella's hand, and understood that he wanted to live in this society that was based on peace and trade rather than on war and robbery.

"We'll make you a Christian," Marcella promised.

The next morning, the procedure began, striking Austalis as being nearly as complicated as those for the enthroning of a new king in Gododdin. Varrus came in for more long sessions of studying Christian doctrine, and Marcella sent Osgirn to measure Austalis.

"What's this for?" Austalis asked, as Osgirn used a wooden rule to take his measurements.

"It's for the baptismal robe," Osgirn snapped. Austalis considered complaining to Marcella about the rudeness of her servants, and then realised that would be a breach of manners, too.

The date for the baptism was set for seven days ahead. Varrus told Austalis that he could choose an outdoor or an indoor ceremony.

"We can baptise you in the chapel, with water from a basin, or you can be baptised in the river. We've missed Easter, which is the usual time for baptisms. It's turning into summer now, so it ought to be warm enough for you!"

Austalis made his choice at once, remembering the sinister darkness and the sealed stone tomb in which he had been initiated into the cult of Mithras.

"I'll take the outdoor baptism in the river, even if it's cold and rainy and the wind blows the river backwards."

Marcella reserved a surprise for Austalis until two days before the ceremony was to take place. He had expected that Varrus would perform the actual baptism.

"Varrus and I will be your sponsors," Marcella told him, "but the priest who baptises you will be - can you believe it? Augurius, the bishop of Londinium".

"Augurius? You didn't even tell me he would be visiting here."

"He's making a special trip. I sent a letter to Londinium, and I mentioned in it that you had decided to become a Christian. He's taken a lot of interest in you since he met you that night at my house in the city."

"I'm very honoured," Austalis replied, and the sentiment was genuine. He had liked Augurius, and it was a major undertaking for the chief Christian of Londinium to leave his daily business, whatever that might be, to take several days for a visit to Venodala.

The following day, Augurius rode up to Venodala in a cart drawn by a fine horse that had drawn it all the way from Londinium, with a servant at its head who was so noble in appearance that he looked like a lord himself.

Marcella came out of the house to greet him, and Osgirn helped the lordly servant to take down the baggage. Varrus took the horse's looped reins in his hands.

"I'll take care of your horse," he said, leading the animal towards Marcella's stable.

Austalis accompanied him, amazed, and his astonishment increased when Varrus burst out in a loud song, with British words, that echoed from the hillsides. Austalis knew another version of the song from Gododdin, very different, but recognisably a relative of the song that Varrus was presenting to Venodala and everybody halfway to Sebenium.

"How can you do that?" Austalis asked. "Aren't you afraid of losing the power to impress the peasants? In Gododdin a lord is always aloof and stern."

Varrus finished the verse of his song before answering.

“We don’t rule by the sword. I’m the friend of the villagers, not their master. I’d like them to love me, not fear me.”

Austalis followed Varrus into the stable, and helped him to unhitch the cart and attend to the comforts of the horse. In Gododdin, he would never have done such work in the sight of peasants, who must always be awed in the belief that their lords and kings were not ordinary men.

It was pleasant, though, to enjoy the freedom of a Roman estate, to work on the care of a horse in a warm smelly stable while servants and children wandered in and out.

“There!” Varrus declared to the horse. “Now you’re settled in comfortably, we can go and see to the human beasts.”

They went back to the villa, and found Augurius and Marcella sitting on benches in the central courtyard, with two empty ones waiting, and glasses of wine already set out.

Austalis and Varrus took their places, and lifted their glasses of wine. The wine was cold, and Austalis knew that Marcella must be using up the last of her stock of pond ice from the ice house dug into the side of the hill. He looked into his glass, and a speck of ice twirled in the wine, defying summer.

Augurius and Marcella smiled upon him like loving parents.

“I came down from Londinium as soon as I got Marcella’s letter,” Augurius said. “I wanted to welcome you into the arms of Christ. As I was saying to Marcella, it’s a great encouragement to see the conversion of a noble warrior.”

Austalis remembered the bleached skulls of his opponents in battle that decorated the doorposts of his house in Gododdin, and wickedly considered telling these pleasant Roman citizens about them. Probably such trophies lay under the soil of Venodala, under the pretty mosaic floors, buried with the rest of the violent British past from before the legions came.

“It’s an honour to me that you would come here to perform this favour for me. I was born a Roman citizen, but until now I’ve never felt that I was really a part of the life of the Empire.”

“You’re one of our circle now,” Marcella replied.

In the evening, after dinner, Varrus produced a box containing the pieces for playing Romans and Sabines, like the one at Sebenium.

“I keep my own set here. The ones at Sebenium belong to Elafius.”

Marcella’s servants set out an array of lamps on the table, and the men drew up their wicker chairs on three sides of it while Marcella took the fourth.

Varrus opened the box, and as he lifted the lid, its decorations of inlaid bone caught the tiny earnest lights of the candle flames. Austalis found that his eye was compelled to look at the round bone medallion set in the centre of the lid. For the first time he noticed that it was carved in the form of a human face surrounded by snakes instead of hair.

Varrus snapped the box shut, and set it down on the floor. He spread the pieces out on the board.

“Who wants to play? Augurius, you can go first, against me. Do you want to take Romans or Sabines?”

“Which side is good, and which is bad?” Augurius asked.

“Neither, as far as I know. Traditionally, the reddish-brown pieces are the Romans and the white ones are the Sabines, but I suppose you could change them if you wanted me to.”

“Nonsense, Varrus, what would our lives be without tradition? I wasn’t serious. Here, give me the white ones. I’m the king of the Sabines.”

Augurius proved to play a devious, cunning game. Austalis saw his eyes glinting in response to the flickering of the lamps. Sometimes the flames seemed to move after his eyes did, as though he had some magical power to direct them. Austalis watched, and then dismissed the thought. Augurius was, after all, a priest.

As the game progressed, with the wise trickery of Augurius pitted against the bluff directness of Varrus, Marcella became interested in the contest, and sat with her chin in her hands, watching. Austalis remained quiet, as a spectator, but then Marcella laughed at one move, clenching her fists in her lap.

She turned her face up to Austalis, still laughing, and her eyes flashed a happy rebuke to him for not joining in the laughter as well. She looked down at the game again, but Austalis felt the whole atmosphere of the room change around him.

Varrus and Augurius played on, and Marcella was as absorbed in the fierce symbolic contest as they were. Austalis was left out of the circle, not by any action of the other three people in the room, but by the action of chance.

He did not resent his sudden isolation; it felt curiously fitting and appropriate. Austalis sat in his elegant and uncomfortable Roman chair, alone, and separated from his companions as though the Wall itself had sprung up between himself and them.

He swirled the wine around his cup. It was black in the dim light, and the noble smell of the wine blended with the sharp odour of the wax candles that Marcella's servants had brought out for this special occasion.

Austalis gazed past the cup to the mosaic floor where the jolly bull carried Europa on his back while a playful Cupid seized his tail. The tiny figures were absorbed in their own affairs, and could not converse with him. Austalis was alone with himself.

He looked over at Marcella. Her pale blue eyes took on some of the glow from the candles, and her white robe reflected a faint but clear colour of old gold.

A cold physical shock startled Austalis as two great realisations burst upon him: that he had wanted Marcella, and that Marcella wanted him. Perhaps she had done so since the moment when she had first seen him, stumbling in the street and falling onto the flat hard paving-stones of Londinium.

Austalis watched her, and somehow he could tell that she was aware of him, although she did not move. Austalis drank the last of his wine and made ready to perform a decisive act as a warrior of Gododdin should.

A thump and a roar came from the gaming table.

"I win, Augurius!" Varrus boomed.

Augurius smiled, and scooped up his pieces into a neat pile on the board.

"You usually do, Varrus. My complicated plans have failed again."

"That's because you're trying to work out what my plan is, when really I don't have one. All I do is push forward until I win."

"Well, I hope it works as well for you in life as it does on the board," Augurius replied. He stretched in his chair, and his eye caught Austalis. "Are you ready for tomorrow?"

"I am," Austalis replied. "I feel the same way as I did on the night before I was inducted as a warrior."

"Then I suggest you go to bed and dream of Christ, who is waiting to welcome you. I'll stay with Marcella and Varrus for a little while."

"You're going to say your evening prayers," Austalis guessed.

“Don’t worry,” Marcella told him, putting her hand on his arm. “This is the last time you’ll be left out.”

“Then ‘good night’, and I’ll see you in the morning.”

As Austalis took the corridor to the room, he heard the others assemble on the hard mosaic floor, and as soon as he closed the door of his room he heard Augurius begin praying in a deep harsh whisper. Marcella and Varrus responded with quick answers, as though Augurius were an interrogator demanding information.

Austalis sat down on the uncomfortable wicker chair, and watched the oil lamp on the table flicker in a draught that he could not detect. This would be his last night as a pagan; his last night ruled by the old gods, Lud, Dagda and the others.

Suddenly he felt a rush of tiredness. He undressed and lay down on the bed, leaving the lamp burning like a little benign spirit to guard him in the darkness.

He seemed to wake up immediately, but there was a bar of grey light under the door and the room was filled with a coarse metallic smell that the oil lamp had given out as it died during the night. Servants murmured in distant rooms and there were noises of spoons and bowls clashing. Austalis got up, washed his face and hands, and shaved himself with care. Marcella had told him that a Roman of his class would always have himself shaved by a servant, and had tried to persuade him to let Osgirn do it, but Austalis had refused. Shaving was a ritual, not a mere part of daily ablutions; and he did not trust Osgirn to put a glass razor to his throat.

He put on the same clothes he had worn the night before, knowing that he would have to change for the ceremony in any case. He opened the door, and then paused for a moment, struck by a sudden thought. He had been intending to go and have breakfast. Was he allowed to? Should he be fasting? Austalis imagined himself in the embarrassment of being responsible for a postponement of the baptism. He shrugged it off; since nobody had given him any instructions, he could not be blamed for breaking any rules that might exist.

He went towards the kitchen, and then turned away. He decided to wait until Marcella was up, and stepped out into the courtyard.

The air was chilly for a summer morning, and the front part of the house rose into the dark blue sky like a black battlement. Austalis walked across the cold paving stones, and re-entered the house. It was odd to have to go back indoors again in order to get outdoors.

He emerged onto the verandah. The sun was rising over the hillside opposite the house, and the top of the valley was already lit up. A golden strip of light grew slowly, coming towards him. A few figures wandered about in the village, and some of the houses had smoke rising from them.

“What woke you up?” a voice said beside him. In a reflex action Austalis grabbed at his belt for a knife that was not there, and before he could stop his arm he realised that the person who had spoken was Marcella.

“I woke up by myself. Augurius sent me to bed early last night, remember?”

Marcella laughed, and the onrushing sunlight reached the river in a shower of sparkling reflections.

“You can go to bed later tonight, I promise. You’ll be sharing in our evening prayers.”

The sunshine lit up the wooden wharf, and began climbing the riverbank towards the house.

“Marcella, when the ceremony is over and I’ve become a Christian, I’m going to stand up and say something very important. I’ll say it to everybody who’s there to hear it.”

"I'll be listening. Now you've got me intrigued. I'm going to be wondering what you've got to say. Now, let's go in and have breakfast."

That set Austalis' mind at rest. If there had been any prohibition on eating, Marcella would not only have known about it, but insisted on its rigorous observance. He could relax and accompany her to the dining-room and enjoy cold water, fresh bread, and mild cheese.

"I can't wait for the autumn," Marcella said. "We'll be able to have apples for breakfast."

"Where are Augurius and Varrus?" Austalis wondered. "I suppose they're sleeping in late."

"No, no, they're already up. They're busy getting everything ready. Augurius wanted to hold the ceremony in two hours' time. He needs to get back to Londinium to attend to his business affairs. I hope you don't mind."

"No, of course not. I'll be ready."

"Everybody's coming over. Elafius will be here from Sebenium, and I've given all the workers a half-holiday this morning so they can be witnesses."

"Even if they aren't Christians?"

"Look, if they don't want to come, they can go to work instead. I've told you before, I can't compel belief, and I'll never try."

One of Marcella's female servants entered diffidently, and spoke to Marcella quietly in what Austalis could hear was bad Latin. He saw a look of irritation on Marcella's face; obviously she was tempted to tell the girl to say it in British, but felt she must keep up the forms of Romanitas in front of Austalis.

Marcella dismissed the girl.

"Your servant has arrived to help you get ready."

"My servant? I've never had a personal servant in my life."

"He belongs to Elafius. What's his name?"

"It must be Artus."

"That's it. He'll help you dress. I'll send him to your room."

Austalis sat in the wicker chair, waiting for Artus. There was a knock, and Artus came in, wearing the look of a nervous accomplice in an imminent crime.

"All right," Austalis demanded. "What do I put on?"

"Not much," Artus replied, setting down a bundle of cloth on the bed. "In fact you'll have to take off more than you put on."

Under the guidance of Artus, Austalis dressed himself in a cloth that wound round his loins.

"What's the purpose of this?" he asked.

"All it's for is so that you don't violate public decency," Artus replied. Austalis noticed that Artus was insolently addressing him with the common verb forms used to a social equal rather than the honorific forms to which Austalis was entitled.

"There was a time," Austalis said, "when the warriors used to go into battle without clothes. The Romans confirm it in their histories. It had some kind of religious significance."

"You would shock the Romanised Britons if you did that," Artus remarked, still using the familiar verb form. Austalis thought of striking him, or just threatening to do so. He was under Roman law here in Venodala, so he decided not to raise the issue or his fist yet, and not on the morning of his baptism.

Artus gave him a pair of sandals, apparently for ceremonial purposes only, since they were too flimsy to last. Artus was draping a plain rectangle of cloth across Austalis' shoulders when Marcella called from the corridor.

"Are you ready, Austalis?"

"I'm coming," Austalis replied, and when he came out of the room he found Marcella waiting for him. He felt foolish in his scant baptismal costume, but Marcella beamed at him.

"You look splendid. Let me take your arm."

Marcella put her right arm around Austalis' left, and she led him through the house along the arcade that ran around the courtyard, and through the front rooms of the house. The warm pressure of her arm was the greatest physical contact that Austalis had yet had with her, and he concentrated secretly on enjoying it.

Marcella led him out onto the verandah, where he looked down on a scene fit for the acclamation of a king of Gododdin. The entire population of Venodala was assembled on the riverbank, and Augurius stood waiting, with Varrus and Elafius nearby.

"Varrus and I are ready to stand as your sponsors," Marcella said. "If we were baptising a woman, the sponsors would be two women. Are you ready?"

"I'm completely ready," Austalis replied.

Immediately, Marcella turned round, grasped his hands in hers, and fixed him with those impossibly pale blue eyes.

"Are you absolutely certain? Are you perfectly sincere?"

Austalis, fixed in her clasped hands, wondered what the assembled multitude were making of all this.

"How else can I answer? I'm certain, I'm sincere, I'm ready. Everybody's waiting, Marcella."

Marcella let his hands go, as cautiously as if they were clawed and dangerous little beasts. She seemed about to say something, but then Varrus called from the riverbank.

"Ave Austalis!"

Elafius and some of those standing near him politely took up the cry, and it spread as the crowd realised that this was required of them. Marcella led Austalis down the path from the house, and Augurius came forward to greet him. Austalis noticed that a pair of boards had been set down on the ground, leading into the water.

"Austalis," Augurius said, "welcome". Augurius raised his hands to silence the crowd, most of whom were still shouting Ave, Ave, in dutiful obedience to their last order.

Everybody became quiet. The singing of the birds flashed into prominence with the suppression of human noise, and the river lapped and bubbled. Austalis noticed a small fish rushing downstream, apparently carried by the current against its will, towards the Tamesis and the mysteries of the ocean.

Elafius and Varrus came forward. Elafius began to remove the cape from Austalis' shoulders, while Varrus knelt down on the grass to remove the delicate sandals. Austalis stood still.

To his surprise, Augurius took off his own shoes, and took his robe off over his head, revealing a body that was hairy and fat, but also with the large powerful muscles that bulky men often have. Although Austalis was trying to keep his mind framed on serious topics, he could not help thinking that Augurius must be prospering as a merchant to judge by the size of his belly.

Augurius stepped onto one of the boards leading into the water. making it creak and

groan. He motioned to Austalis to step onto the other one, and then reached out his hand. Austalis stretched out his own arm in response, and his hand was taken in the strong grip of Augurius, in contrast to the touch of Marcella that Austalis had felt only a few moments before.

Augurius and Austalis, linked together, walked with slow formal steps into the cool water. They sank almost up to their knees in the soft mud of the riverbed.

“Shut your eyes,” Augurius commanded, and he laid his hands on Austalis’ head.

Austalis obeyed, letting the sun warm his closed eyes while Augurius recited the formulas of baptism. The light upon his eyes filled his sight with the colour of blood. All at once the formless rush of light seemed to be trying to form itself into a smiling golden face, and it was all Austalis could do to prevent himself from opening his eyes to banish the vision. The comforting murmur of Latin prayer strengthened Austalis enough to say in his mind: *this is the future, Mithras. You are the past. Christ has beaten you.*

The face did not change its expression, but it began to fade just as the powerful hands of Augurius pressed down on Austalis’ head. Austalis allowed them to push him down into the water until his whole body was submerged.

Augurius held him under the water for a little while. The face of Mithras was banished. Austalis let the water flow across his skin, enjoying it, and taking a delight in the difference from the initiation ceremony of Mithraism: instead of darkness and imprisonment and sinister smells, this Christian baptism was all beauty, in sunlight, fresh air, and cool clean water.

Augurius released his hold, and Austalis rose up out of the water, into the sunlight, to take his first breath as a Christian. Augurius was clapping him on the shoulder and pushing him back to the riverbank. The breeze chilled Austalis’ wet skin, but Varrus was there with a cloth to dry him, and the crowd was cheering “Ave, Ave!”.

Austalis, buffeted and pushed in the middle of the crowd, spoken to by a dozen voices at once, found himself isolated in his own thoughts. He was astonished at how his consciousness of himself had changed. He was now a Christian, and for the first time he felt absolutely confident of his identity as a Roman.

Varrus finished drying him off, and drew back, as did all the others standing next to him. Austalis was left in a small arena of sunshine bounded by the shadows the spectators cast.

Varrus turned round, and was handed something by Artus.

“Austalis, in order to welcome you to the community of Christians, we have some gifts for you. All new Christians receive them, and I hope you’ll always keep them in memory of today.”

He held out a beautiful shimmering white robe. It must have been pounded with chalk to shine so brilliantly. Varrus helped Austalis to put it on, while the crowd shouted “Ave, Ave!” again. Artus was kneeling below, putting the sandals back on, and doing it so clumsily that Austalis regretted that good manners would not let him push Artus away and finish the job himself.

At last it was done, and Austalis felt that he could now safely take one or two steps if he had to.

Elafius and Marcella pushed their way through the crowd, and Elafius held out a glittering metal object.

“This is my gift to you, Austalis. It’s one of a pair, and Marcella has the other one to match it.”

Elafius handed the gift to Austalis. It was a broad silver spoon, with a long thin handle on which the name SAULOS had been carefully stamped, letter by letter. He was still turning it over his hands when Marcella gave him the other spoon, identical with the first as Elafius had promised, except that the name it carried was PAULOS.

“This is to symbolise your conversion,” Marcella explained. “It recalls how Saul became a Christian and changed his name to Paul.”

Marcella proceeded to break all the rules of decorum by embracing Austalis, wet skin, damp robe and all, while Austalis awkwardly held both the silver spoons in one hand.

She let him go, and Augurius, having dressed himself, once more raised his hands for silence. Austalis knew that he was now expected to say something.

“I must thank Marcella, Elafius, and Varrus for the fine gifts they have presented to me, but above all I must give thanks to the bishop of Londinium for the gift of baptism into the community of Christ.”

“Thank the Lord Jesus Christ, not me,” Augurius protested.

“Now that I have become a Christian, and have added that new qualification to the Roman citizenship that I have always possessed - ” that caused a stir of surprise among the people of the village, and Austalis could sense their collective opinion of him go up a little in response - “I now wish to consider myself a part of the earthly community of Venodala”.

The crowd seemed to pause to consider that, but Marcella, of all people, cried out “Ave! Ave!”, and her tenants, whatever their private views might be, had no choice but to echo her.

“I therefore wish to make a statement. I am not familiar with the rules and customs of this part of Britain, so I may as well violate them spectacularly but in honest spirit. I address myself to Bishop Augurius, the senior person present here. I ask him to convey to the appropriate quarters, in whatever the approved manner may be, my wish to marry the lady Marcella.”

Austalis looked straight at Marcella for an instant, and he saw her composure disrupted by a wave of astonishment that she immediately gained control of. He then turned to Augurius, who smiled at him.

“Marcella has no living close relatives. She has no father or brother to whom I could convey your proposal. I shall therefore take it to her myself. Meanwhile, I have been reliably informed that a meal awaits us in the villa, for everyone.”

The crowd diverted its attention to the villa, and saw that Marcella’s servants had set up trestle tables on the grass in front of the house, on either side of the ramp leading up to the verandah. They parted deferentially to allow Marcella and her guests to make their way into the house, and rushed to the tables when Marcella gestured to them that this was for them.

Austalis, wrapping his white baptismal robe around him, now understood the cause of all the activity in the kitchen in the early morning. He watched as the villagers took their helpings and sat on the riverbank to consume them. A couple of daring children even sat down on the stone bench, until their mothers whisked them away.

Austalis sat down with Marcella’s personal guests at a table that had been set out in the central courtyard of the villa. The noise of the village feast came from the other side of the wall while Osgirn supervised the serving of a meal that was more British than Roman, with heavy chunks of bread, slices of cold meat that had been chilled in the cellar overnight, and bowls of sauced fish.

Austalis was seated at the corner of the table, while Marcella sat next to him at the

head, directly opposite Augurius, who gave a toast. In return, Augurius offered a toast to Marcella.

He noticed that the wine, fresh and mild, was not one that she had served before, and he asked her about it and where it had come from.

“A little way up the valley, where there’s a slope that faces south. It’s three years old. Tomorrow, if the sun shines, I’ll take you there and show you my little vineyard.”

That made Varrus interrupt.

“Whose vineyard? Yours, his?”

“Yes, Marcella,” Augurius said. “You’ll have to give me an answer to the offer of marriage that Austalis made you.”

Everyone looked at Marcella, who blushed, something that Austalis had never seen her do before.

“Well, of course, I accept it!” she blurted out in a rush, and Varrus pounded the table, knocking over a jug of water.

Osgirn hurried over to pick it up. Austalis accepted the congratulations of everyone, but he received only a quick glance of hate from Osgirn. That was of no consequence; what mattered was that the barbarian from Gododdin now had a home, a faith, and Marcella.

## CHAPTER EIGHT

The next morning, after Augurius had returned to Londinium, Austalis joined in the mystery of the Eucharist for the first time, down in the family chapel. As he knelt at the altar, the painted figures on the wall seemed to welcome him with their outstretched arms, a posture that Austalis adopted himself when the time came to offer his own prayers.

Varrus was officiating as the priest, presiding over the service with a solemnity that he never showed outside the sphere of religion. He even moved differently, slowly and majestically, and the expression on his face was so set and noble that he could have served as a model for one of the marble busts in the reception room.

“Take this,” he told Austalis in the tone of absolute command. “It is my body.”

The little disc of bread was almost identical to the one used in the rites of Mithraism, but it bore no face stamped on its surface.

“Take this,” Varrus ordered, giving Austalis the cup of wine. It was warm, and slightly bitter, probably imported from Gaul when it had still been wine, before its transformation into the blood of Christ. Austalis pushed away the memory of the bleeding sacrificial bird in the Mithraeum.

Varrus moved on to Osgirn, who was the next worshipper. Osgirn accepted the body and blood with a skill that revealed long familiarity with the rite, but his reverence seemed genuine.

Of Marcella’s religious feeling there could be, of course, no doubt. Her face had been soft with happiness after she had communicated with her God.

Austalis had time to contemplate her while Varrus made his way through all the Christians gathered together in the dim chapel, lit by candles. Marcella had agreed eagerly to the marriage, and Elafius and Varrus had both expressed strong approval. Austalis knew there would be difficulties, but the rewards of life with Marcella would repay them many times over. Some aspects would take time to adjust to. He wanted to come as close to her as he could, but he knew he would have to break through the paradox of physical contact that he had experienced with all other women. When he finally took them into the physical embrace, they seemed to move away into some unknown distance.

He looked over at Marcella, still rapt with the joy of her communion with Christ. He could tell that she had no thought of her future husband in her mind at that moment. She was all of 22 years old, and her maidenhood was proclaimed from her being as clearly as if it had been written in flaming letters on her forehead.

Varrus served the bread and wine to the last worshipper, and after a short communal prayer, the service ended and Varrus led everyone out of the chapel. Out in the vestibule, the workers of the estate dispersed about their humble business, with a nod of respect to their mistress. Some of them acknowledged Austalis as well.

Varrus left at once, because he was required to hold a service at Sebenium the same morning. Marcella took Austalis on a more intensive tour of the estate, not merely showing him where everything was, but for the first time asking his opinion of what should be done.

“This vineyard is so small. I love having it, but do you think it’s worth keeping?”

“Yes, unless you would find it more profitable to use the land for something else.”

“Oh, we don’t sell the wine, and it would cost more to expand the agricultural production of the estate than we could make by selling the extra produce. The market seems to get smaller year by year. Everybody says that the number of people in the Empire is

actually declining. I don't know about the lands on the Continent, but it's certainly true for the British provinces."

"It isn't so on the other side of the Wall," Austalis replied. "The peasants have to make new fields on the moors and hillsides. My father told them to put fields in the heavy soil, but they didn't take his advice."

"How could they? You can't plough that type of land."

"That's my point. Where he came from in Germany, they have a special type of plough. It's big and heavy. My father even paid for the king's own blacksmith to make one as an example, but nobody adopted it. In fact, the blacksmith took back the ploughshare and other iron parts and reworked them into swords."

Marcella broke into a spasm of laughter.

"What's so funny about that?" Austalis demanded. "My father was only doing his best to try to help the people."

"I'm not laughing at that. It's just that there's a line in the scriptures about swords and ploughshares."

They climbed up a rough path to the ridge overlooking the river valley. It carried an ancient trackway, now disappearing under weeds and grass through neglect by travellers who preferred the straight hard Roman roads.

Austalis surveyed the fields below. The crops were ripening well; it had proved to be a good summer, warm and sunny as British summers nearly always were, with just the right amount of rain just at the times when it was needed. Austalis noted how the square fields butted onto each other, and realised that he had never asked Marcella how the peasants held the land. He had never got out of the habit of thinking of them as subjects and of Marcella as their queen.

Marcella explained that, as the present system stood, she was the owner of the land closest to the villa itself, while most of the peasants owned the land they farmed.

"It's been changing, though, since long before my father's time. It's not practical for a poor farmer to own a plough and a team of oxen, or specialised agricultural equipment. More and more of them have chosen to become tenants, in exchange for security and access to the villa's facilities, like the granary, and the planting machine."

"The what?"

"It's a horse-drawn apparatus on wheels that punches holes in the soil and automatically drops seeds into them. You'll see it work when we plant the autumn-sown crops."

"Do the tenants pay money rents?" Austalis asked. This was certainly not unknown in Gododdin, although payment in kind was the norm.

"Some do, but many prefer to offer labour services instead. Given the way that money keeps on losing its value, I've usually accepted the arrangement. Osgirn will give you all the terms for each tenant. He takes care of all the financial and legal matters for the estate. At present, I've got him checking on the correct way to arrange our marriage under the law."

"I thought it would be a purely religious ceremony."

"Of course it will, but the law recognises a Christian marriage between two Roman citizens. The religious ceremony is a legal one, too."

Austalis thanked a kindly God, who can foresee all things, for helping him to decide to carry the proof of his father's Roman citizenship all the way south from Gododdin. The heavy bronze diploma, which had been so awkward to pack and so inconvenient a burden, had

brought him this fulfilment. He would be the lord of Venodala, and a prosperous citizen of the Empire, honoured by his peers.

Austalis, surveying the undefended wealth of the estate, knew he would have to make some changes.

"I want this place to be fortified. The houses should have been built on the heights, not in the shadow of the hill. We need at least a wooden stockade where we could keep the people and animals in case of attack."

"Austalis, you're dreaming again. Who would attack Venodala?"

"The young warriors of Gododdin, that's who! All of the peoples north of the Wall, the 'Picts' you talk about. They've never imagined such plunder."

"Then why haven't they come before? The Wall is open."

"Yes, yes, but the warriors don't visit the Roman provinces. Only the traders come and they don't tell the warriors about this tempting field of war. The traders live by trading, and if the Roman provinces were to be devastated, there would be no more trade. If you think I'm a barbarian, you ought to see the Atacotti!"

"Who are they?"

"The name means the 'old people'. They live in the far north of Britain, and on the islands in the northwestern sea. They speak a language that nobody can understand, all throaty sounds. You can always identify them when they speak our language, because they can't pronounce 'f'; they turn it into 'p'. They say they were the original inhabitants of Britain. You're lucky that they've never heard of Venodala."

"All of our neighbours will laugh at us if we try to turn my peaceful Venodala into a Pictish fortress."

"I know. I don't care. I want to live in peace here with you, for as long as our lives allow."

Austalis strode down the hillside, and Marcella hurried after him.

"Just promise me," she panted, "that you would do all this only to defend Venodala".

"Not to defend Venodala, Marcella. Only to defend you."

Marcella halted, and glanced quickly to the left and to the right. Austalis wondered if she was already looking out for the approach of the savage Atacotti, but when Marcella had seen that nobody was about she astonished him by flinging herself into his arms.

Austalis held her gently. She squirmed a little, and it felt like the embrace of a small child rather than that of a grown woman. He noticed that her hair was softly perfumed, and her robe blew and whipped in the wind that flowed along the valley.

"I've never stood against a man like this before," Marcella said in a distant voice, with her face still buried against his chest. That explained her awkwardness. Had she been a girl from Gododdin, Austalis could have picked her up then and carried her off, or roughly flung her to the ground, but the attraction of Marcella was her delicacy. This clumsy but eager embrace was a new experience to him as well, and he found a deep poignancy in the depth of her feelings and her difficulty in expressing them.

Marcella drew away from him, and he released her. They walked down to the villa, speaking of field plans and crop rotations and harvesting schedules.

Marcella had wanted to speak to Osgirn, but it turned out that he had gone to Sebenium to borrow some legal codes of which Elafius had copies. Since he was away, she had more time to spend with Austalis, and she astonished him by asking if it would be possible for her to visit Gododdin one day.

“You could come, but it’s a long, hard journey, especially once you pass through the Wall. You would probably find it a crude and backward country, and the further north you went the stronger that impression would seem. I’m not sure I’d want you to go.”

“I just want to see the kind of life you were brought up to. After all, you’ve seen plenty of mine.”

“It’s wild up in the north, Marcella, a kind of wildness that you civilised people have never seen. You all think that the Wall is the northern frontier of the Empire. It isn’t. Even the abandoned northern Wall, right up in the middle of Gododdin, isn’t the frontier. The army has bases north of the Wall, and cavalry units that travel around, the *exploratores*. Some of our own people serve in them. The power of Rome gradually fades, and where it’s weak there’s no law. I couldn’t even guarantee your own personal safety. I can’t even ensure that here in Venodala, or I wouldn’t want to fortify it with a palisade and ditch.”

“So I’ll never see Gododdin?”

“Not unless I can assemble a strong guard to accompany us.”

“Oh, isn’t there anywhere in the world that’s safe any more? The Germans raid the east coast, and a lot of people say that the German settlers are secretly encouraging them. The Irish raid the west coast. There was a time when nobody would have dared to attack a Roman province.”

“Not according to our history. There have always been raids. The Empire doesn’t maintain one-tenth of its army in Britain for nothing.”

Marcella sighed. “Sometimes I laugh at such warnings, and sometimes I fear so much for this peaceful countryside.”

They walked through the colonnade around the sunlit courtyard. Austalis still was not accustomed to the inward-looking plan of a Roman house. He had been told that it was based upon the model of a traditional house from Italy, designed to provide shade and coolness in a hotter climate, but again he wondered if it was not also in part to provide the illusion that one was in Italy itself. Like Marcella’s townhouse in Londinium, graced with the little courtyard and the capricious fountain, there was nothing to tell you that you were in remote Britain, a misty island at the end of the civilised world. Even the clatter of an arriving horse and cart outside would, Austalis guessed, have sounded the same if he had heard it in Italy.

Austalis then had the idea of travelling further in the Empire. He had passed through the Wall with the intention of seeing only the Roman provinces in Britain, but now he asked himself why he and Marcella should not travel together to Gaul or Italy, or why not those distant provinces with the beautiful strange names: Pannonia, Moesia Inferior, Arabia Petraea, wherever they might be?

Hard masculine footsteps came hurrying through the house towards the courtyard, causing both Austalis and Marcella to look that way.

Osgirn strode out into the sunlight, still perspiring from the heat of the ride over from Sebenium. He nodded to Marcella, who pointedly directed her eyes towards Austalis. Osgirn gave a perfunctory nod to Austalis, but in the brief instant of eye contact he flashed Austalis a look of power and triumph. Austalis saw again what Osgirn might have made if his fate had been to be a warrior in Gododdin instead of a domestic servant in a Romanised household.

Osgirn was not interested in talking to Austalis.

“My lady, may I speak to you in private?”

“You are insolent, Osgirn!” Marcella snapped. “You’re in the presence of your future master. Perhaps he will decide that your position in this house is no longer necessary.”

“Forgive me, my lady, but I do not think that what I have to tell you should be discussed in an open courtyard.”

A large bluebottle fly buzzed down from the roof and settled on a damp bald patch of Osgirn’s head. Austalis considered that flies, who loved dirt and corruption, could be relied upon to recognise it when they saw it.

“Very well,” Marcella said. “Come and give me your great news in the reception room. Austalis, you come too.”

“I’ll wait here,” Austalis replied. Whatever Osgirn had on his mind, it would be nothing that Austalis wanted to hear, and Osgirn’s presence was something that he wanted as little of as possible.

“You’d better have a good reason for interrupting us,” Marcella told Osgirn as they went into the house. Osgirn brushed the fly off his head with a wave of the hand.

Austalis hoisted himself up on the framework of the colonnade and sat comfortably with his legs off the ground. A benevolent God had brought him to this new life as Roman, and he intended to enjoy it. He would have Marcella and Venodala, and the whole of the vast Empire to travel in if he wished. This was not Heaven, nor even Paradise, but it was a very good life for this poor Earth.

He was content. Had he not stumbled out of the Mithraeum at the moment he had, he would never have met Marcella. A little time later, and she would have passed by into another street and never known about him. In that case, he would now be in some other place, under different circumstances; but Austalis did not believe that this could ever have happened in reality. He was convinced that every man had a single fate fixed for him, and that he could only travel along it on a straight Roman road.

A sharp cry tore through the soft air. It was Marcella’s voice.

Austalis leapt down to the ground and rushed into the house, drawing out his dagger. He was baffled for an instant by the sudden change from brilliant sunlight to interior gloom, but Marcella cried out again, and he ran towards the noise, pushing aside curtains and fringes of hanging beads. He knocked some ornament off a table, and it smashed on the floor behind him.

Abruptly he collided with Osgirn, lumbering the other way. He seized Osgirn, pushed him against the wall, and struck him in the face, feeling soft cheeks flow like waves under the impact of his fists. As his eyes became used to the dim light, Austalis saw Osgirn’s face, damp and red, the eyes wide with fear.

Austalis drew his dagger under the fat chin, bringing a satisfying squeal of terror from Osgirn.

Marcella seized Austalis’ shoulders.

“No, no, don’t kill him”! she begged, and the sound of weeping still flowed in her voice.

Austalis reluctantly lowered the dagger, but the man who had somehow caused Marcella to cry would be punished. Still in the tight grip of Marcella’s hands on his shoulders, Austalis pulled Osgirn away from the wall and threw him onto the floor. Marcella buried her face against Austalis’ back, and clasped her arms around his waist while she wept so loudly that her grief filled all the rooms and corridors of the villa.

Austalis threw the dagger away, so that he would be unarmed and fairly matched with his opponent, even though Osgirn showed no readiness to fight.

Austalis snatched away Marcella's clutching hands and flung himself upon Osgirn. He hit him, again and again, and pounded his head upon the floor. Osgirn seemed not even to know how to fight, and he waved his arms uselessly in the air, trying ineffectually to protect himself from the blows.

"Lady Marcella!" he squealed. "Get this barbarian off me!"

For that, Austalis hit him harder, enjoying the release of the evil side of his own nature. He knew it was wrong for a warrior to batter a weak and defenceless man, but he gave himself over to the fierce pleasure of it.

Finally Austalis tired. He got up, leaving Osgirn as a whimpering heap of fat and torn clothing on the floor. Marcella stood softly weeping, and Austalis led her into the deserted reception room. He sat her on the heavy sofa.

"Now, what did he do to you?"

"Nothing! He didn't touch me. But -" Marcella pointed to a set of papyrus scrolls lying on the little table. Austalis snatched them up, saw that the title hanging from them read LEGES SENATI ROMAE and threw them down again.

"So they're laws. What about them?"

Marcella broke down in a long wailing cry, the escape of a depth of feeling that Austalis had not known she was capable of.

"I can't marry you!" she sobbed, and Austalis embraced her, as much for his own comfort as for hers.

"What do you mean?" he demanded, in shock.

"It's the law," Marcella answered. The tears were falling on her delicate robe. "You're not a citizen."

"Of course I'm a citizen!" Austalis raged. "How many times have I showed you my father's bronze diploma? He received the citizenship when he was discharged from the army. All the auxiliary soldiers receive it when they complete their term of service, and they can pass it on to their children."

"That's what I thought," Marcella said, "but it's not quite that easy. The children have to be born of a legitimate marriage."

"The diploma legitimises any marriage, any children -"

"That's just it, Austalis. Your father married your mother after his citizenship was granted. A marriage between a citizen and a non-citizen isn't recognised under Imperial law. Your father was a citizen, but you aren't."

Austalis jumped up and paced backwards and forwards on the mosaic of Bellerophon killing the chimaera, with its four corners guarded by figures symbolising the seasons of the year. He marched angrily from spring to autumn, from autumn to summer, and from summer to winter. He halted, and faced Marcella, who sat on the edge of the sofa with her hands clutched tightly in her lap.

"So I'm not a citizen. What difference does that make for us? We can still be married. My father married a non-citizen. Why can't you do the same?"

"Because the law of the Empire doesn't allow it. Your father was married under the laws of Gododdin."

"Then we'll go to Gododdin, just as you asked me, out there in the courtyard. We'll be married in Gododdin, in the king's hall at Din Eidyn."

"No, Austalis, a marriage contracted under foreign law wouldn't be valid here in the Empire."

Austalis snatched up the scrolls and flung them down on the floor with such violence that several pieces of coloured stone were chipped out of the face of summer.

“All right, so the Empire won’t allow us to be married! We’ll make a marriage north of the Wall, and come back here and live together anyway.”

Marcella lifted her face suddenly, into a sunbeam pouring through the window. They caught the tears in her eyes.

“I could never do that, not with any man. It’s forbidden to Christians.”

“Does your religion mean more to you than I do?” Austalis raged.

The pale blue eyes suddenly emptied of their last tears, and Marcella gazed squarely at him.

“But of course it does. It means more to me than any man, than my dear mother and father, than any human being.”

Austalis grabbed the little table, and threw it down with a crash.

“And I thought I was going to be the centre of your life. Now you’re rejecting me, and the Empire is rejecting me, too. Listen to me. You can be the ears of Rome. I’ve lived outside the Empire all my life and I can do it again. I’ve lived without you all my life, and I can continue to do that as well.”

Marcella buried her face in her hands, and Austalis walked out of the room.

In the corridor he found two strong fieldworkers preparing to carry the whimpering Osgirn out. They shrank away.

“Go on, pick him up,” Austalis told them. “I have no more anger towards him. He raised a torch and showed me the reality of my life here.”

He knew they did not understand what he was talking about, but he was a lord and they were peasants. They could listen now and understand later.

He went to his room and changed into the clothes that he had been wearing when he had come through the Wall. He rapidly bundled up all his other possessions, and quickly glanced around the room to see if he had forgotten anything.

The bronze diploma, the certificate of his father’s Roman citizenship, lay on the table. Austalis stood for a little while in indecision.

The diploma had proved to be of little use to him, and would be of even less value to his dead father. He turned his back on it as abruptly as he had turned his back on Marcella.

She was waiting for him outside the room.

“Austalis - ”

“I have nothing to say to you, except that I’m leaving you, leaving Venodala, and leaving the Empire, and I’ll only come back with a ravaging army of Gododdin, so you had better hope never to see me again.”

Marcella followed him through the courtyard.

“But I don’t reject you, I - ”

Austalis stopped, and took her arms so that she was forced to face him. For the first time, he noticed that the pale blue eyes were shallow, and that he could not see into the soul behind them.

“Will you agree to accept and marry me, yes or no?”

Marcella turned her eyes down, to the perfect square paving stones.

“I can’t, Austalis.”

“You can! What you mean is, you won’t!”

“But I can’t. The law - ”

“Never mind your Roman law. We can go to Gododdin to be married under the native British law. I am going to Gododdin, and I am leaving now. Are you coming with me, yes or no?”

“Austalis, I don’t want you to go, but I can’t - ”

“Ah, stay here under Rome and grow even older!”

Austalis pushed her away, and made his way out of the house, scattering frightened servants who hurried out of his path. He made the wooden ramp from the verandah roar like thunder as he pounded on it.

He stopped, and turned, deliberately, knowing that this would be the last time he would ever see Venodala. Marcella stood on the ramp, with her hands clasped together. Austalis felt a rush of sadness, an urgent desire to run back up to the house and embrace her, and stay on as a servant, a peasant, anything to be with Marcella for the rest of their lives.

He fought back a feeling of pity and desire for the weeping young woman who looked at him. He was a warrior of Gododdin; two seasons of contact with Roman ways must already have begun to soften him.

“I’m going to Gododdin!” he shouted at her, and he turned his face away, forcing himself to look at the river. He strode off towards Sebenium.

All the way he had to fight the impulse to turn back. He had to move his legs by a deliberate effort, fighting the weakness within himself.

He came to the villa at Sebenium, and went right up to the entrance.

“Elafius! Varrus! Are you there?”

Varrus came out of the interior of the house, puzzled.

“Austalis! What do you want?”

“I want your slave, Artus. I claim him as my vassal. I am leaving the Roman provinces, and I’m starting my journey now. I am going to take him back to where he belongs.”

Elafius appeared out of the shadows at Varrus’ shoulder, and he gestured to some unseen servant.

Austalis took it upon himself to bellow orders to the servant.

“Go and fetch Artus, and tell him to pack up all he owns. Your master will give him money for his journey.”

“But, Austalis- ” Varrus protested.

“No, Varrus,” Elafius said, “this is how it must be”. He glared at Austalis over Varrus’ shoulder, and looked at him like a fellow conspirator. Austalis became finally convinced that Elafius, the wise man who knew so much about the north of Britain but who would not reveal just how much he knew, had visited Gododdin. Elafius wanted him out of the valley, and Artus too. Let them both be thrust through some gate in the Wall as soon as possible.

Artus arrived, apprehensive and baffled. Austalis gave him an answer before Artus had time to frame the question.

“We are both returning to Gododdin. You are leaving at once with me.”

Varrus could not accept the shock.

“But Austalis, the wedding - ”

“ - has been cancelled by Marcella, because it turns out that I am not a Roman citizen after all, only a vulgar barbarian that no Christian lady of quality could accept as a husband.”

“But you don’t have to leave - ” Varrus persisted.

"I have already spoken to Marcella. The Empire has rejected me, and is spitting me out as an indigestible primitive from the other side of the Wall. I accept that. Instead of trying to be a Roman, I am going to be what I really am, a high-born warrior of Gododdin."

"All right, then, if you insist, go!" Varrus shouted, and his voice echoed back from the hillside. "Why does Artus have to go with you?"

"I don't want to go back to Gododdin," Artus protested.

"I did not ask you that," Austalis told him. "I am your chieftain until we return to Gododdin, when you can go and rejoin your own warband. Elafius?"

"Go, Artus. You will never fit into this Roman life."

Artus looked appealingly at Varrus, who shook his head. All the energy seemed to have gone out of him with his one roar of anger.

"Your master Elafius has given his decision, Artus. May God go with you, and with you, too, Austalis."

"I am abandoning your Christian god. He has betrayed me as badly as Mithras betrayed me, perhaps more, because he showed me a kindly face and soft words, while Mithras made it plain that he was a god of pain and blood and darkness."

Varrus turned away, and stumbled into the back of the house. Austalis beckoned to Artus, who reluctantly came forward. Austalis faced the shrewd eyes of Elafius.

"You knew it would come to this, didn't you?"

Elafius gave him no reply except the tiniest beginnings of a smile. Austalis knew that was the only answer he would ever get.

"Goodbye. May the true god or gods look after you all."

Artus followed him down to the river.

"We'll cross the river here, and then go across country northwest until we reach the road to Londinium," Austalis told him.

"Why not take the easy way, and follow the river valley?" Artus protested.

"Because I don't want to pass by Venodala again," Austalis explained.

They splashed through the water of the river with a decisive finality, like Julius Caesar crossing the Rubicon.

## CHAPTER NINE

It turned out that Artus had never seen Londinium, or any other city. He gaped in awe at the stone buildings and paved streets, and kept tripping in the parallel ruts that prevented the carts from getting in each other's way. He was astonished when Austalis told him that all the wheeled vehicles in the Empire were built to a standard width of axle so that their wheels would fit in the ruts. A cart from Londinium could be transported to Rome or Constantinople and trundle through the streets as easily as if it were still at home.

Austalis was glad that Artus found Londinium frightening, because that would make it easier for him to accept the idea of being returned to Gododdin. Artus was afraid of the people as well: he tried to look the other way whenever some eastern merchant in a strange robe passed by, and he cringed in dread each time a black face came near him. He even asked Austalis if the black people were human or spirits.

Austalis had his own personal demons to fight. He had come to Londinium only because it was unavoidable, being the junction of all the great roads that made travel fast, but as soon as he entered the city, dragging Artus across the great wooden bridge over the Tamesis, he thought of two essential things to do.

The first was to come back to the Mithraeum. He stood in the street, facing down the Persian god. As he looked, a pair of birds whistled down from the sky and popped into a hole in the upper wall that he had not noticed. He took that as a sign. He did not see what the meaning of it was, but it was enough to know that some unknown god was watching him.

Austalis realised that he was standing opposite the spot where Marcella had seen him sprawl on the stones. That had to be faced, too. He walked across the street, and, to make the renunciation more perfect, he lay down on his face, in exactly the way that he had done on that day in the spring. While Artus held back the curious crowd that gathered, some wanting to help the blond barbarian, some wanting to carry him off under arrest to the Procurator, and some trying to laugh, Austalis closed his eyes.

He imagined that it was the same day, and that Marcella was being carried past in her litter. He allowed enough time for her to pass by, and go out of sight. That was how it should have happened. Austalis opened his eyes, and picked himself up off the ground, satisfied that he had done his best to wipe away the time that he had spent in happiness and illusion at Venodala.

Some of the crowd still stared at him, but when he walked away with Artus, they lost interest quickly, as Roman crowds always did.

"Where are we going now?" Artus asked.

"I have one more obligation to fulfil before we leave Londinium," Austalis replied, "and that's to say goodbye to the only friend I have in this city".

The street narrowed into a bridge over a small river that flowed down into the Tamesis, and on the other side the outer walls of an enormous building kept the entire street shaded from the sun.

"That's the governor's palace," Austalis explained. "The man who lives there rules over all the Roman provinces in the island."

Two soldiers stood on guard at the entrance, and they both snapped into alertness as two men obviously recognisable as barbarians from beyond the Empire, climbed up the wide steps towards them.

They seemed startled by the perfect Latin in which Austalis spoke, marked by the old-

soldier accent that he had unconsciously picked up from his father.

"I would like to speak with the tribune Magnus Maximus, of the Twentieth Legion, Valeria Victrix, from Deva. He is on detached service as an aide to the governor. My name is Austalis. He knows me."

The older of the two soldiers, apparently also the senior in rank, considered for a moment, and then shouted into the hall. A young boy, obviously a messenger, was told to take in the message, while Austalis and Artus were kept waiting on the steps.

"Where's Deva?" Artus asked.

"A fortress on the west coast, where the river Dee goes into its estuary," Austalis replied. "It's the base of the Twentieth Victorious Valeria legion."

Austalis had expected the boy to return, but instead it was Magnus Maximus himself who came out. The soldiers saluted in a clatter of metal and squeak of leather.

Magnus Maximus saluted them back, and looked Austalis over.

"You've interrupted my routine," he said, "and I'm glad of it, but do you have any idea of the panic that you're causing in there? A barbarian from Gododdin, two of them if I include your friend, knocking at the door of the governor's palace!"

"I'm sorry if we're causing you trouble - " Austalis began.

"Oh, it's no trouble to me, but they're ready to send despatches out to all three legions. They think you're the advance guard of another Great Raid."

The vision of the golden face of Mithras flashed across Austalis' vision for the first time since the day of his baptism, but he had no time to try to understand what it meant.

"We're not invaders," he told Magnus Maximus. "We're doing exactly the opposite. We're leaving the Empire. Is there somewhere I could meet you?"

"Come in now. I'm enjoying the stir you're making. What's your companion's name?"

Austalis presented Artus, explaining that Artus had no knowledge of Latin. That was not entirely true, but it discouraged Magnus Maximus from trying to draw Artus into the conversation.

Magnus Maximus led them through the governor's palace, past staring clerks and stony-faced soldiers. They came out into a garden with twin fountains at the side of a shallow pool. Two dignified bronze statues stood guard over the doors leading into the palace. Trees grew in exactly the right places, and the rich red tiles of the roof set off pleasantly the bright blue of the sky.

"Sit down," Magnus Maximus said, and they all sat down on the edge of one of the fountains. Austalis realised that he was thirsty, and he wished he could drink the water. The problem was solved when Magnus Maximus gestured to one of the curious spectators gathering under the colonnade, and a servant brought out cups of wine on a silver tray. Austalis was surprised at the graceful way that Artus handled his cup.

Magnus Maximus looked at Austalis through the spray of the fountain.

"Do you really want to leave this beautiful garden, this magnificent Empire?"

"The truth is that I wanted to settle here permanently, and to marry a Roman lady. It's not that I didn't want the Empire. The Empire doesn't want me."

He told Magnus Maximus about Osgirn's revelation that he was not a Roman citizen.

"I wasn't sure of your exact circumstances," Magnus Maximus said, "but now you've laid it out for me, I have to tell you that the slimy servant was right. The law wouldn't recognise you as a Roman citizen. That doesn't mean that you have to leave the Empire. After all, it used to be that only a tiny minority of the population of the Empire were citizens."

“No,” Austalis replied, as quickly and automatically as a leg jerks when the knee is struck. “If I can’t belong to the Empire, I don’t want to live in it.”

“Well, it’s your decision. I hope you’ll visit Londinium or Deva so I can see you again. According to your file in the records of the Duke of the Northern Marches you belong to a prominent family in Gododdin.”

“You never told me you knew that.”

“I didn’t, until after you left us. Eburacum has to send a copy of everything to the governor’s office here in Londinium. The file is out of date.”

“It would be. Your intelligence services north of the Wall aren’t as good as they were. You should tell the Duke of the Northern Marches to purge the *exploratores*. You’re paying them for nothing.”

“These things will be done.”

Austalis turned round at the sound of voices, to see that a group of men in military and civilian clothing of high rank had gathered between the two statues. At the centre was a bald man in a perfectly draped toga, who returned Austalis’ gaze, and using his eyes to tell Austalis that he was the governor.

Austalis nodded to him. He nodded back with a hard small smile. He gathered his officials and soldiers and went back into the palace.

“You have a way of attracting attention,” Magnus Maximus remarked. “From now on you’ll be watched by the *agentes*.”

“If they had been doing their job, the *agentes* would have been keeping a watch on me before I even approached the Wall.”

Magnus Maximus shook his head, and put his hand into the gushing water of the fountain, passing the streams of water between his strong fingers.

“Austalis, Rome is not your enemy.”

“Rome is not my friend. I wanted to be a Roman, and I wasn’t accepted.”

“You’ll get over this. You’ll come back one day.”

“I’m sure I will,” Austalis replied. His cup was empty, but he was still thirsty, and still angry. He dipped his cup in the basin of the fountain, and brought it up overflowing with clear cool water. He hoped that all the Romans watching him would be scandalised as he drank. The water had a delicious taste that clung to the sides of his tongue, a mixture of sour and sweet. He remembered that the water supply of Londinium was distributed through lead pipes, and that lead was the cause of the agreeable taste.

It was time to leave.

“I’m returning to Gododdin. No doubt the *agentes* will tell you when I go back through the Wall. Thank you for your friendship.”

“I hope it isn’t at an end,” Magnus Maximus replied.

He escorted them back through the palace, and exchanged farewells at the top of the imposing steps.

Austalis and Artus descended the long flight of steps, down, down from the highest centre of Roman power, down from the high Roman building to the level of the soil of Britain. Austalis realised that he had been thinking to himself in Latin about Britannia: he must forget Britannia. This was Priten.

They walked to the gate that was the beginning of the long road north. Outside, the country was empty, as though the city wall marked a boundary between life and death. The road shot straight ahead. On one side lay the stinking marshes that came right up to the walls,

and to the left lay the wooded hills that overlooked the city.

“Do you see those hills?” he asked Artus.

“What about them?”

“Notice that they are uninhabited. So close to the city, and yet nobody lives there. The Roman government doesn’t allow it. So much for everyone being an equal citizen of the Empire. Britons aren’t allowed to live on hilltops anywhere south of the Wall.”

“They used to be hill-forts!” Artus exclaimed.

“Perhaps not these two hills, but, yes, hill-forts were just as common in these parts of Britain as they are in Gododdin. I saw quite a few of them when I came south. The palisades and towers are gone, and nobody is allowed to climb them, but the ditches and earthworks still exist. Have you ever seen the northern Wall?”

“The one that was abandoned? The one made of turf?”

“The Romans call it the Wall of Antoninus, after the Emperor who built it. It’s not a subject they like to talk about. Well, the hill-fort defences look like the northern Wall, overgrown and subsiding. I’ll show you one a day’s journey from here.”

The two men travelled fast, and they arrive at the deserted hill-fort on the afternoon of the following day. They climbed the hillside on the slope that was shielded from the nearby village, whose inhabitants were no doubt the crushed descendants of the proud warriors who had once lived on the hilltop.

Austalis and Artus walked around the defences. The ditches were clear enough, although they were soggy from the accumulation of many years’ fall of leaves from the trees that now grew in a copse where once some lord’s hall must have stood. The piled earth defences were now covered with grass and dock leaves and the late flowers of the year.

Artus surveyed the ruined stronghold with a light of intelligence in his eyes that Austalis rarely saw.

“It wouldn’t take long for a warband to put this place back in order. They could enslave the people in the village and make them do the work. Look how far you can see!”

To the south, the city of Londinium made a dark low shape on the horizon like a sinister advancing beetle.

To the north, there were no cities to be seen. The hill-fort looked down on an open plain, scattered with small farms in the clearings that made gaps like old wounds in the forest. It might almost have been Gododdin, except for the straight Roman road that shot for the north, a silver spear flung by the distant Emperor.

Artus was impressed by the view.

“This is the kind of place we should have taken in the Great Raid.”

“But you didn’t, because there was nothing to steal or destroy here. In any case, the Romans would have besieged you. You couldn’t conquer the Roman provinces just by seizing the hill-forts.”

“Who said we wanted to conquer the Romans? If we destroy Rome, then we’ll have nowhere to raid and nothing to plunder. The Romans don’t send raids into Gododdin, do they?”

Austalis turned back and looked at the hazy city of Londinium in this new light. Was it the case that none of Rome’s enemies wanted to destroy her, because she was the great adversary, the fount of all wealth? He now considered himself an enemy of Rome, but only because Rome would not give him the citizenship. Because he could not be accepted as a citizen, he could not have Marcella.

He stood on the hill-fort in the gusty wind, looking down on the tidy Roman lands, standing higher perhaps than any Roman in the island at that moment. He had a debt of anger to collect from Rome.

Artus interrupted his thoughts.

“A large warband, or several, could hold a great part of the country for a long time.”

“Who would organise it, and keep it together? We free Britons haven’t had a leader since Queen Boudicca.”

The wind was blowing rain-clouds over the horizon, clouds that had already rained upon Deva, upon the Wall, upon the kingdom of Dunadd, upon the bestial Atacotti in their miserable huts on the far western isles, and on the empty ocean beyond. It was time to descend from the hilltop before the sun set and the ghosts took back their fort. They did not want to be about when the lord’s hall took shape again in shimmering outline, and a dead bard sang silent praises with a broken harp.

They travelled north more slowly than Austalis had wished. There were few merchants to give them rides in a cart. Rich men in private carriages passed by and never even saw them behind drawn curtains, and no military vehicle would pick up two men who were obviously from the unruly darkness beyond the Wall.

Autumn was setting in day by day, more noticeably the farther north they went. As human settlements became more scarce, so the signs of passing summer became rarer, as if all life was fading away together, and that when winter came there would only be death everywhere. Austalis wondered if there would be snow. The old men said that snow had once been common all over Britain, but now it was not often seen.

There were long stretches of time when he and Artus walked by themselves across empty moors, with no other human being in sight, no buildings of any kind, and only the road itself to show that man even existed.

Artus became more cheery, apparently now happy to accept that he was returning to his homeland.

“I almost feel that we could be back already. Look at the country around us. Except for the road, this could be Gododdin.”

“Once Gododdin was like this, too, Romans, roads, and all,” Austalis replied. “Nearly the whole kingdom was once part of the Empire, even Din Eidyn, right up to the northern Wall.”

“We can be proud that we forced the Romans back.”

“If we did. Perhaps they wanted only to establish a line of defence closer to their main bases at Deva and Eboracum. You know, I’m sure a sort of agreement was reached. We wouldn’t dispute Roman rule south of the Wall, and they would rule only in name, and only in their own estimation, north of it.”

It was a northern, dark, windy morning when they first saw the Wall ahead of them. Artus had never passed through the Wall, having come to southern Britain by sea, but Austalis found himself unwillingly still as impressed by the Wall as he had been in the early spring when he had first approached it from the other side.

This time, something was different, and it took him a few moments to realise what it was. The gates were closed. As far as he knew, they were always open, except at night. He wondered if the long journey up from Londinium had all been for nothing. Roman couriers travelled faster than horseless barbarians, and Magnus Maximus had warned Austalis that the *agentes* would be keeping him under observation. Had Londinium sent a message to

Eburacum, and Eburacum to Vercovicium, to bar the gates to him? It might be the governor's idea of humour, to make his targets travel all the way to the Wall instead of arresting them in Londinium.

He said nothing to Artus about these fears. Artus probably thought it was normal practice to keep the gates closed.

Nobody challenged them as they walked through the fort, not stepping outside the pathway that was marked out for civilian traffic. Smoke rose from the bath-house; Digern must be busy at his stoking.

The inner gate was open, but there were four soldiers on guard in the tunnel under the watchtower and the outer gate was closed.

One of the soldiers challenged Austalis in bad Latin learnt from what had been shouted at him in the ranks, and Austalis answered him in British, to the soldier's relief. Austalis and Artus were checked for concealed weapons.

"How long did you spend south?" the soldier asked.

"Five months," Austalis replied. "My friend here spent six years as a slave and I have obtained his freedom."

The soldiers did not seem to know or care who these two men were. Austalis feigned barbarian ignorance.

"Can we pass through? Why is the gate closed?"

"We've been given orders to be more careful about letting men come south. Anybody is free to go north, so long as he pays whatever duties he owes. Have you got any trade goods?"

"Nothing. We're not traders, and we're leaving with fewer personal possessions than we brought in."

The soldier consulted his companions with interrogatory looks but nobody made any objection, so he shouted up to the men on watch behind the crenellations of the tower.

"Everything in order on the other side?"

"Nobody in sight," was the answer from above.

"Open the gate," the soldier ordered.

The bolt was drawn back with a long sighing creak, and the crunch of splinters being broken off. The gates were pulled open, and the soldier waved to Austalis and Artus to move along and get themselves out of the gate, out of the fortress of Vercovicium, and out of the Empire.

Austalis accepted the invitation, and he and Artus walked through. The gate was immediately banged shut behind them, and they heard the thump of the bolt being pushed back into position. Looking up, Austalis saw the watchtower sentries leaning over the parapet.

Artus muttered some prayer to some god.

"Farewell to the Empire," Austalis said, not forgetting that he had passed through the Wall with such hope in the spring. "Let's get ourselves home as quickly as we can."

They scrambled down the slope, and Austalis nearly tripped on an angular piece of metal that was lying on the soft earth. He picked it up. It was a gilt letter A, a little bent and twisted and stained by having soaked in the mud and rain. The proud message on the north face of the Wall now read: AVE ROM DOMINA MUNDI. Austalis wondered which letter would be the next to fall, and why nobody had been ordered to restore it to its proper place. Were the Romans afraid to come out on the north side of the Wall, even a few steps into insecure territory? He slung the fallen letter on his shoulder.

“Perhaps that was an omen,” he thought, walking northwards again, the gilt letter the only trophy he had to show.

Once they reached a point far enough away from the Wall that Austalis thought they were beyond the reach of patrols from the *exploratores*, he and Artus parted company. Artus came from the western part of Gododdin, and Austalis sent him away into the service of his own lord. He watched the solitary figure slowly draw further away across the rough empty moors: Artus, who had known the luxuries of Sebenium and Venodala in the beautiful river-valley. In spite of the life to which Artus was returning, Austalis was sure that it was as right for Artus to return as it was for himself.

The next day he was challenged for the first time by a fellow warrior of Gododdin. Austalis was climbing up a wooded hill when he saw a man on a horse, standing on the crest, with a shield on his arm and a long sword at his belt. It was as if the man had been patiently waiting for his return all these months.

“Stop and declare yourself and your business,” the warrior commanded, and Austalis saw that he was quite young. He had very likely been admitted to manhood only in that same year. Austalis tried hard to recognise the warrior’s face from memories of the boys who had been finishing their training in the spring, but it was hard to do with the backlight from the sun, that dimmed the brilliant blues and reds and gold of his scabbard and harness.

“I am Austalis, of Caeravon, the son of Notfried, and the subject of King Ceredig. I’m returning home after spending the spring and summer south of the Wall.”

“Really?” the warrior exclaimed, suddenly an eager boy again. “I’ve always wanted to go there. My brother went on the Great Raid.”

“Is somebody planning another one? The Romans guarding the frontier are nervous. They’re keeping the gates of the Wall closed in the daytime, which they usually never do.”

“I don’t know what they fear, but people here have the same feeling. That’s why we’re guarding the travel routes. Everybody seems to be waiting for something to happen.”

“In early autumn? The campaigning season is over. Even the raiding season is ending!”

“I don’t know. There’s a feeling of war.”

“There’s a tension between the Roman provinces and the free parts of Britain. We haven’t tested our strength against each other.”

“There was a brilliant light in the sky, and it made a roaring sound, and trailed smoke. It hit the ground and started a fire. Most people said it was a dragon, but all that was found was a strange rock.”

“It may be a dragon’s egg.”

“That’s what King Ceredig said, and he ordered the rock to be guarded all the time in case a dragon hatches out of it.”

Perhaps there really was going to be a time of war. Such portents were not often seen.

“Are you going to stay on guard here?” Austalis asked.

“Yes, but you’re free to pass.”

Austalis smiled to himself. The young warrior was trying so hard, here on this lonely escarpment, as if he were a legendary hero guarding the kingdom on his own. Perhaps he was; this was, after all, the eastern invasion route in Gododdin, and he might be the man who gave the warning.

“I wish you a good guard,” Austalis told him, continuing on his way home. He looked behind: the warrior still sat on his horse, guarding Gododdin against an unknown danger. Austalis remained baffled. He was certain that the Romans had no plans to attempt a

reconquest of the land between the two Walls, which made up most of the territory of Gododdin. They were content with letting the *exploratores* make occasional appearances, more and more rarely, as a token of Roman ambitions that had died long before.

Only the bones of those ambitions remained: ruined towers and forts along overgrown roads that had once linked the two Walls, and that were now deserted. Nobody wanted to live in such places, which must be filled with bitter ghosts. Perhaps those unhappy spirits were the source of the tension in the air, whispering unheard incitements to war into the ears of living men. Austalis clambered up yet another hill, and found himself looking down on a pastoral village with smoke rising from the apexes of thatched conical roofs, and then a light burst in upon him.

It came to him that he was the source of all the unease and preparations for battle. The idea of revenge upon Rome for his rejection was so powerful that it had spread out of himself to seep through the fabric of the world and dye it black and red.

There must be war with Rome, and he was the leader who could organise another raid, far greater than the last, one that might push the Romans and the Romanised Britons across the sea, back to the great continent. No other man could talk to the Germans, to the Britons, even to disaffected Romans. Let the Irish be brought in as well, even the distant Atacotti from the northwestern isles. That was the key: an attack by Germans, Irish and Atacotti by sea, while the men of Gododdin overran the Wall. If they could all strike at the same time, the Roman defences would be overwhelmed.

The vision that had come at him like a knife now wrote its words and carved its pictures on his mind. He shouldered his gilt trophy, and his great purpose, and scrambled down the slope on the next stage of his journey.

Soon he found himself close enough to Caeravon to feel that he was in thoroughly familiar territory. He knew the trees in the woods, the mosses on the damp moors, and the stones that broke up the rivers.

He met boys herding the cattle home. It would soon be the time of the great slaughtering and the strange mixture of joy and fear, celebration and mourning, that was the feast of Samain. Everybody asked him what the metal object over his shoulder was; some actually recognised it as a Latin letter, and shied away. They believed that the complex letters of Latin held sinister magic powers, just as many Romans believed the straight finger-language that Britons carved on trees and rocks was a sorcerer's code invented by the Druids.

The herds of cattle and sheep grew thicker until Austalis came in sight of the stronghold of Caeravon, on its proud hill above the river for which it had been named. The guards at the gate snapped their spears across the entrance to bar his way, but it was only a formal salute in recognition of his rank, and they snatched their spears away again at once.

Austalis walked up the ramp, and went straight to his own house in the citadel. The other members of his warband had seen that it was kept clean and in repair during his absence. A bucket of water sat by the fire, and a dish of wood ash stood next to it. He washed himself carefully. The elegant Romans, for all their hot baths and dizzying perfumes, despised the use of ash soap. He shook the mint leaves out of his clothes, put there to keep the moths away, and dressed in the manner of a young noble.

Now he was ready to report to King Ceredig, to give an account of his adventures, and to ask, as custom required, if the King needed him to fight anywhere. Austalis smiled, thinking that tradition provided no polite way to ask a king to make war on the initiative of a subject.

He picked up the gilt letter, and wiped it with the wood ashes until it shone more brightly. He managed to bend it into almost its original shape.

As he came out of the house, on his way to the king's hall, a heavy figure walked towards him, dark and strong like a bear, with long moustaches: his cousin Graelen. Graelen had always reproached Austalis, since childhood, for his foreign blood; Graelen's father had been a distinguished warrior who had died on a northern campaign.

Graelen looked at him, and at the Roman letter.

"So you came back. What's that thing you're carrying?"

"It's a Roman letter, that once hung on the Wall. I'm going to present it to the king as a trophy."

Graelen examined the letter without interest, and turned his eyes on Austalis.

"I'm glad you came home. I don't know why you left the Roman lands, and I don't want to hear, but I hope that now you will follow your own people's gods."

## CHAPTER TEN

It was the end of the harvest, the end of the slaughtering, the end of all things: it was Samain. Like everyone else on that evening when the fires were lit as a farewell to the departing sun, Austalis had put on all his protective amulets and rings. He had gone to the priests to have benign spells laid on him, because this was the night when the spirits were freed of all restraints and the ghosts of the dead wandered the world.

He stood in a place of honour near King Ceredig, by the greatest fires. He could not remember such high winds on any previous night of Samain. The flames were flung about like rags, showers of sparks spat up against the dark sky, and often a part of the fire itself was blown out among the celebrants, forcing them to scatter in a rush.

The children had already been to every house in Caeravon, masked and painted as demons. Representing themselves as the malignant spirits whom everybody knew to be loose that night, they extorted little gifts of cakes and sweet dried fruit from the inhabitants, who always pretended to be utterly terrified.

Austalis smiled at the memory of all the times he had run about Caeravon as a demon himself, and wondered if he was now going to play the role himself in an adult and far more dangerous form.

He unobtrusively edged himself up close to King Ceredig, who stood in all his gold ornaments, torch, arm-rings, and crown, reflecting the flames as though he were on fire himself.

He noticed Austalis.

"These are fine bonfires this year, Austalis. Perhaps it means we'll have a good spring and summer."

The fires symbolised the prayer of the people to the sun that he would return after the oncoming winter.

"It's the wind," Austalis replied. "I would like to speak with you at a more appropriate time," he added, shifting his speech into the formal mode of grammar and diction to show that he wanted to discuss high and serious matters.

"I find this a suitable time," the King replied in the same elevated style. It was not a comment; it was an order to proceed.

Austalis had told him all that he had seen on his visit to the Roman provinces, to the interest of Ceredig, who had seen the Wall but never passed through it. Now Austalis put forward his vision, the first time that he had revealed it to anyone.

"I have a plan to suggest, that could bring greater glory to you and to your kingdom than has ever been seen in this island. It is nothing else than the destruction of Roman power in Britain."

The other warriors standing about stopped talking among themselves and paid close attention. King Ceredig nodded to Austalis to continue.

"This is the meaning of the winds that are blowing our Samain fires higher than they have ever reached before. High winds have always been considered omens of war."

A loud voice bellowed from the shadows.

"Are you a priest now, to prophesy to us?"

Austalis, together with everyone else within the wide circle that the voice reached, recognised it as belonging to his cousin Graelen, although King Ceredig pretended not to.

"Silence!" he roared. "I want to hear Austalis, not you."

Austalis went on, encouraged.

"I spent the spring and summer in the Roman provinces, and I saw how unprepared they are. They are ready for ordinary raids, even for a Great Raid like the last one. What I propose is the greatest raid ever mounted, by land and sea, to strike from all directions at the same time."

"We could not raise a warband large enough," Ceredig replied.

"I know, and so I am proposing that we time our attack to coincide with attacks by others."

"Alliances never hold among us. That is how the Romans must have conquered most of Britain."

"There will be no alliance. Each kingdom will be acting in its own interest alone, so there is no danger of betrayal. Gododdin will overrun the Wall. The Germans will land on the east coast. The Irish will invade the west coast. The Atacotti - "

"The Atacotti?" someone exclaimed.

"The Atacotti will come down by sea at the western end of the Wall. The Romans cannot meet so much pressure at the same time. We can plunder them as never before, and you will be free to extend the territory of Gododdin south of the Wall, just as your ancestors extended it south of the turf Wall when the Romans were driven off it."

"When is this to be done?" Ceredig asked. "And who is to arrange this great war with the help of the Germans, the Irish, even the Atacotti?"

"Make me your herald, and I will. I can spend autumn and winter travelling from one court to another, setting dates for a campaign in the spring."

King Ceredig studied the wild flames of the fire before giving his response.

"So when we set the fires in the spring, for the festival of Beltane, we will be ready to set out on the greatest war than Britain has seen since the Romans came. This is not a decision to be made in a moment on the advice of one man, here in Caeravon. The chief men of the kingdom must be consulted. I call a council in Din Eidyn, ten days from now."

"A council in winter?" Graelen interrupted. "There has never been a council between Samain and Beltane! And Din Eidyn is your summer stronghold. No king of Gododdin has ever held court there in the winter months."

"Then be there in ten days' time, Graelen, to see a wonder!" King Ceredig told him. "I believe I will speak in favour of Austalis. For too long the kingdom has been stagnant. For a hundred years we have been at peace with Rome, proud of our petty raids. You call yourselves warriors. Let us go to war. Present yourselves at Din Eidyn if you wish to take part in this decision. Now," he added, dropping into everyday pronunciation and grammar, "let's get on with observing Samain".

The animals that were to be slaughtered were herded together, puzzled at so much activity in the dark, and frightened by the fires. The last sheaf of corn to be harvested, plaited in the form of the harvest spirit, was set up on high in its place of honour, the loose strands of straw fluttering in the wind and the upwash of heat from the flames.

The king had given his word: Din Eidyn in ten days. Tomorrow the heralds would disperse all over the kingdom, summoning the warband to an unprecedented winter council.

Austalis wandered away from the fires. He would have only one chance to state his case at the council, and if he failed, the great plan would come to nothing. Whoever the gods were, they would decide, but he was confident that the council would come down on his side. He could still feel the strength of some force outside himself, pushing him on, and using him as

the instrument of its own purposes.

Nine days later, as the dark bulk of Din Eidyn hung over him against a sky that was already a wintry grey, Austalis was not so confident. He grasped the full weight of the action he was proposing, and as he dismounted to lead his horse up the steep slopes of the citadel, he felt like a child who had amused himself by striking sparks with his father's flints and now finds he has started a fire that may consume the forest and himself with it.

Graelen was next on the path behind him, puffing and blowing like an elderly horse.

"Why do kings always have to hold their councils on hilltops?"

"For a sense of occasion, I suppose," Austalis replied. "You have to admit this is an impressive site."

Graelen let out a grunt, which Austalis recognised to be an admission.

They entered Din Eidyn by the great double gate, under the watchtowers where the perpetual torches burnt from sunset to sunrise every night of the year. The flames had been put out an hour earlier, but the smell of burning oil and fat still hung in the air along with the sharp odour of the night's frost.

Austalis never tired of the view, no matter how many times he visited Din Eidyn. This huge rock, surely shaped out of the earth by some proud god, was one of the wonders of Britain. He had never met a Roman in the south who would admit to having heard of it, although the Romans had once ruled here: Din Eidyn lay within the old frontier of Roman Britain, south of the turf Wall. It was as well not to mention that fact to King Ceredig or to any warrior of Gododdin.

Men and boys bustled about, taking care of horses and directing the visitors to lodgings where welcome fires burnt. Austalis found himself wishing for the efficient central heating conduits of the Roman buildings, with their skilled Digerns to tend to them.

He had expected to be a focus of attention, because he had been the cause of this assembly, but nobody gave him more than ordinary greetings. Austalis resigned himself to the fact that this throng of warriors and servants had been assembled by the will of King Ceredig, and not his own. Austalis began drying his sodden clothes and boots by hot fires. He knew that when the council was called into session, he would have all the attention a man could wish for, and possibly much more besides. Other warriors around him were steaming the rain and sweat out of their own clothes, and the hall filled with the smells of autumn and of men.

The next day, the council met in the main hall of the citadel. Although Austalis knew that a Roman would see it only as a gloomy structure of rough wooden beams and prickly thatching, a poor hut in comparison to the governor's palace in Londinium, he could not help but be impressed as he stood at the king's right hand, below the dais on which the throne was set.

Four young warriors stood as guards around the throne, and the men who packed the hall, muttering and laughing, were all dressed in their ceremonial clothes. Stray beams of grey light caught gold torches, bronze brooches inlaid with red and blue, and silver arm-rings. Austalis wore all of his father's ornaments, except those that were honours for feats of war, to which no other man had the right.

The king nodded to his herald, who stepped to the front of the dais and blew a long deep blast on a horn. The crowd instantly became silent, and those on the edges of it deftly ejected dogs, cats and chickens through doors and windows.

The herald lowered his horn.

"King Ceredig is ready to speak."

Ceredig rose from his throne in one smooth motion, to show off his strength.

“You will listen to Austalis, son of Notfried, of Caeravon. He proposes that we make alliances to wage a greater war than has ever been seen in Britain since the Romans came. You will hear him out.”

Ceredig sat down again, and Austalis stepped up to the dais. After holding out his hands in ritual submission to the king, he turned to face the curious but suspicious eyes of all the warriors who had travelled to Din Eidyn only for this. He paused, waiting for the spirit of whatever force was guiding this dream to enter him. He felt the power awaken like a snake uncoiling in the depths of his body, spitting sparks of golden fire through his arms, and making his eyes hot as though he were about to cry.

“Lords and warriors of Gododdin!” he began, surprising himself as well as them by using the most formal level of pronunciation and grammar, which was employed only in the highest and most portentous religious ceremonies. Everyone’s interest was firmly caught, and Austalis put his trust in the unknown spirit. “This citadel of Din Eidyn was once ruled by Rome, when the boundaries of the Empire stretched to the northern Wall and beyond.”

That startled them even more, and Austalis had not known he was going to say it, but it gave him a good lead to continue.

“Today, the Roman army is gone, and the northern Wall is overgrown with grass and weeds. We have beaten the Romans before, and we can do so again. Many of you went on the Great Raid, and I can assure you that the memory of it is still painful in the Roman provinces. I propose another raid, but greater yet.”

Some of the warriors were beginning to look bored or angry. They had been summoned to Din Eidyn after Samain, and only to hear a proposal for another raid?

“This will be the greatest war seen in Britain since the Romans first landed.”

This roused their interest again.

“We shall make agreements; not alliances, but agreements, so that the Scots will attack from Ireland, the Saxons will attack from Germany, and the Atacotti will sail down from the northern islands. All the enemies of Rome will strike at once, which has never happened before. The prime glory will go to the men of Gododdin, because we shall capture the great stone wall as our ancestors captured the turf wall, and place it under the rule of Gododdin.”

“How are we to gain these comrades in arms?” asked a voice from the shadows.

Austalis was about to answer, but King Ceredig spoke from the throne behind him.

“I make Austalis my herald. He knows the language of the Germans and that of the Romans too. The spirit of war has chosen him. He will travel to Ireland and to the northern islands and across the eastern sea to the land of the Germans.”

King Ceredig stopped speaking, and Austalis could hear the wooden dais squeak slightly as the king settled himself back in his throne.

The faces of the warriors looked at Austalis with more attention. Austalis knew he had to speak, while he wanted only to think about the rigorous winter voyages that King Ceredig had just charged him to undertake. The spirit filled him again, and gave him the words he needed.

“This is a council, where any leader of men may speak. Is there anyone who opposes the great war against Rome?”

He waited a long time, long after it was clear that no voice would be raised against the great war. Rain began to fall on the arching thatched roof, and a gust of cold wind blew in through the doors on the north side of the hall and out through the south.

“The wind blows from north to south!” Austalis shouted, in a voice that he had not known he possessed, and a surge of terror ran through him as he feared that a god had taken possession of his body.

The warriors in the crowd stood still for an instant, and then, like corn stalks in the wind. Some man’s voice cried: “The wind from the north! The wind from the north!”, and they all took it up.

Now that the plan for war had been accepted by the king and his council, Austalis felt the power lifting away from him. Its purpose was accomplished for the moment, and he knew that it would return.

King Ceredig dismissed the council.

“Remain in the hall, and the feast will be served!”

The crowd broke into a thunder of noise, as the servants carried in jugs of ale and even skins of wine. The warriors reached down to their belts and eagerly held out their drinking-horns, while Austalis turned to the king and made his final ritual submission.

“Come with me, Austalis,” King Ceredig said, rising from his throne. He strode out of the hall, with his guards around him and Austalis following, wondering what was to come.

They ducked quickly into the next building, jumping across the smooth rocks that had been laid on the ground so that the king would not have to walk in the mud. Somebody must once have been impressed by the sight of Roman paving, and done his best to imitate it in the ruder surroundings of Din Eidyn.

Austalis found himself in the kitchen of the royal hall, lodged in a physically separate building to lessen the risk of fire spreading. The servants had been cleared out; they would have been getting ready to serve the feast to the visiting warriors. The king and his guards looked around as if they were expecting someone, and two warriors whose faces Austalis had seen in the crowd slipped furtively into the empty kitchen.

King Ceredig indicated with a gesture that they should go over into the most deeply shadowed part of the room, obviously in case anyone passing in the street should happen to look in and see them. He then presented them to Austalis.

“These are Cadmael and Baran. They’re senior commanders of the *exploratores*.”

Austalis could not speak for a moment. Why had King Ceredig chosen to betray him and the plan to the Romans? How could the *exploratores* have gained access to Din Eidyn itself?

King Ceredig, in turn, presented Austalis.

“Our herald Austalis is the son of the Frisian Notfried, a soldier in the Roman service.”

“The commander of the numerus Hnaudifridi,” Cadmael answered. “He’s still remembered at Vercovicium.”

“You’ve heard the plan for the great attack next spring,” Ceredig told them. “Your participation will be of great help, which is why I summoned you to this council. What do you say to the great war?”

“We’ve already made our decision,” Baran replied. “We shall take part with you.”

“Good!” King Ceredig answered. “Austalis, don’t look so stupidly astonished. Why do you think I gave ten days’ notice for this council? There had to be time to get an invitation to the *exploratores*. I’ll let Cadmael and Baran discuss it all with you.”

With that, King Ceredig and his guards returned across the street to the royal hall to join in the feast, leaving Austalis wondering how to start a conversation with the Roman auxiliaries.

Cadmael solved the problem for him by speaking first.

"So you're the son of Notfried. I never met him, of course, but I can tell you that the Duke of the Northern Marches misses him. The Great Raid would never have been so troublesome if Notfried had still been around to pass on the warning."

"Best agent in Gododdin that Rome ever had," Baran added. "He did so much for the Empire, and all he got for it was the citizenship. He was so grateful that he spent his retirement risking his life spying for the Empire without so much as half a denarius in pay."

"All right," Austalis said. "You would say my father had been an agent for Rome, even if it weren't true. Perhaps it is. I don't care. He was a citizen of the Empire, and I'm not."

"We know," Cadmael replied. "That's the gratitude of Rome for you. You didn't get the citizenship, and so you didn't get your Marcella."

"Look, stop trying to impress me," Austalis told them. "I'm not the simple barbarian Pict that you seem to think I am. I know that the Duke of the Northern Marches in Eburacum will have a copy of the file on me from Londinium, and he would have sent orders for the *exploratores* to watch me."

"Very well," Cadmael said, his face becoming serious. "You're going to ask us why we are willing to betray Rome. We ride all over the north, in the country where the legions no longer dare to go. We hardly ever get our pay, and if we survive to the end of our service all we get is the citizenship, which most of us can't pass on to our children. It's worth little now, and soon it won't be worth anything. Do you know that nearly all the soldiers on the Wall are there because their fathers were? It's the law in the Empire. All sons have to follow their father's trade, whatever it was."

"Soldiering was always considered a good trade."

"So it was," Cadmael agreed, "and so it still is, but the pay and prestige are less than they were. In the old days, a Briton could join the auxiliaries or the legions, be posted all over the Empire, and rise to heights that couldn't be thought of in Britain. Now the armies are small, and they're tied to one place. There are men who are born by the Wall, serve all their lives in some unit on the Wall, and die by the Wall."

"We've served the Romans for hundreds of years," Baran said. "Now let Rome serve us."

"Very well," Austalis said. "You agree to join the attack. Do you accept your part? You must keep me informed of all you intend to do, because someone has to see all the components of the plan. You must not move until I give the word. Everyone has to move at different times, so that they all hit the Romans simultaneously. You are to report that King Ceredig has banished me from Gododdin."

"We agree," Cadmael said. "We aren't soldiers of Rome any more. We're soldiers of Priten."

Neither of the two auxiliaries had anything else to say. Before Austalis could decide whether King Ceredig wanted him to bring them to the feast or not, they hurried out of the kitchen without a word, and Austalis, left alone in the cold dark room with the sound of the feast floating across from the other side of the lane, supposed that they would go back to the Wall to report that he was in disfavour and exile. He would still be watched, of course, but he would be safe so long as the watchers falsely reported that he was nowhere to be found in Gododdin.

He took a deep breath, as though preparing himself for a man-to-man fight. He was committed, and he could end either in triumph or in death. As he walked to the hall to join in

the feast, it occurred to him that there was a third possibility: he could end in disgrace. He shrugged off the thought, and went in to join the warriors.

He pressed his way through the crowd, trying to fight through to the joint of meat that was being carved away by the main fire. He could not see it, but he followed the scent of roast meat which succeeded in rising above the smells of men and dogs.

Austalis expected to be given nothing more than a scrap of gristly meat, all that a junior warrior was entitled to, but he found Graelen waiting for him.

“Carver, the herald’s portion for Austalis!”

The carver had saved the third-best piece of the meat for Austalis, as custom required when a herald was present at a feast, and presented it to him on the point of an ornamental bronze dagger, as custom also required. Austalis remembered to draw his own dagger and accept the meat point from point without touching it.

Graelen produced a cup that Austalis had seen before, in the hand of King Ceredig. It had once been white, many years before, but now it was a dull dark yellow from thousands of nights in smoky halls.

Austalis accepted the cup, while it was filled with ale. The cup was warm to the touch, unlike stone or metal. He recognised it as ivory. Examining it closely, he saw that it bore a relief showing men hunting the elephant from which it had come, a huge rotund beast with two horns growing out of its upper jaw. This must be a trophy from some past raid on the Roman provinces, or perhaps a memento left behind from the time when Gododdin had been ruled by Rome.

“*Absit omen*,” he murmured, feeling again that an invisible spirit was near him.

“What?” Graelen asked.

“It’s a Latin prayer. I was using it ironically.”

The ranks of warriors closest to Austalis were hanging on his words, forming an eye of tense silence in the storm of drunken conversation.

“What will you do now?”

“You and I are going to travel,” Austalis replied, shifting his speech into formal grammar and pronunciation. “We must assemble our allies, and proclaim the great war all along the frontiers of Roman Britain.”

“Where do we go first?”

“To the hardest places. We must cross the eastern and western seas. First we’ll go to Germany, to the part outside the Empire. When we come back, we’ll cross to Ireland and proclaim the war to the kingdoms there.”

“Cross the seas in autumn and winter?”

“Somebody has to cross them. How else would the Germans and the Irish receive the news? After we’ve finished in Ireland, we’ll sail north before we come home, and try for the support of the Atacotti.”

One of the warriors spoke up, also in formal language.

“There has never been a war on such a scale.”

“Not in Britain, so far as anyone remembers,” Austalis agreed, “but greater wars have been seen around the Middle Sea and in Asia. The secret of assembling this attack is that none of the nations is being asked to support any of the others. They are all in it for their own gain.”

“What if the Romans hear of it?” someone else objected, the first cautious note Austalis had heard in the universal baying for battles and plunder.

“What if they do? They probably won’t believe that the ignorant barbarians can organise such an attack. Even if they do believe it, they can’t respond effectively. The Roman army is already overstretched in Britain, and the Empire will not send any help from the Continent.”

“What about the Wall?” the sceptic persisted.

“We shall go by sea, and sail around it. The Wall is undermanned, and the soldiers are unhappy. I don’t think they’ll fight. Many will probably join us.”

Graelen refilled the ivory cup for Austalis.

“I am sure that somewhere a god is behind this,” he said, and the words struck Austalis like a shock, because they confirmed his own inner belief. The god should be honoured and invoked, but which god was it?

Austalis looked into the ivory cup. The reliefs carved on its side suddenly seemed to press out into his fingers, as if the carved elephants were in motion, coming alive to prompt him with the answer.

The god of ivory? Who might that be? Ivory must be ruled by some distant god in a hot land of strange beasts, who would have no interest in foggy Britain at the edge of the endless ocean. In any case, this was probably the only ivory cup north of the Wall, perhaps the only one north of Eburacum or even Londinium. Such a cup of honour would normally be made of silver.

Silver. Britain had a god who ruled silver, the noble and mighty god Nodens. Austalis felt the power filling him again, and in a joy of understanding and triumph he knew that he had found his god. Mithras had failed him, and Christ had failed him, but Nodens stood by him and had chosen him as his instrument to wage war against Rome, against Mithras, and against Christ.

“We shall fight in the name of Nodens,” Austalis announced to Graelen and the circle of men around him. There was some surprised muttering as the name was passed back. Nodens was an amiable, minor god, associated with healing and the useful arts rather than with war. Why Nodens?

“I have felt Nodens act through me,” Austalis said, “and I vow to build a temple to Nodens on the site of a place where silver is found”.

Austalis had not known that such power and authority had lived within him, and he thought that perhaps he would cease to exist as a person; that Nodens was using him as a body to inhabit in the same way that the Christians believed that their god had sent a part of himself (or was it his entire self? They were endlessly quarrelsome over such points) to inhabit the body of the carpenter’s son, Jesus.

“I need a fast runner, to bring back the two men, Cadmael and Baran, who have just left the citadel, going south.”

A young man raised his hand like an eager pupil being instructed by the priest.

“Go, then,” Austalis told him. “Tell them I need their help.”

The young man nodded, and rushed out of the hall as though it were on fire. His paces faded away in rhythm with the cold rain, hurrying down the hill.

“Now, Graelen, will you come with me to Frisia, where my father came from?”

“I’ll come anywhere to serve Nodens and the war.”

“This is the plan. The Romans will still be sending grain to their army in Germany, even this late in the year. They used to get their supplies from Gaul, but Gaul is too disturbed to meet all the demand. Cadmael and Baran will tell their Roman commanders that we fled to

them for protection after we failed to incite the king of Gododdin to make a raid against the Wall. Cadmael and Baran will take us as captives instead, march us down to Pons Aelius, and expel us from Britain on the next grain ship. Are you ready to leave?"

"Well, yes, at once."

"Good. The Romans may have other spies here. Tomorrow morning you and I will be driven out of Din Eidyn in disgrace, and King Ceredig will send a formal apology to the Romans for our misbehaviour."

"This will make a splendid epic for a bard," Graelen said.

## CHAPTER ELEVEN

Austalis had never been conscious of being an islander until he first saw the coast of the Continent, still far away. The crew of the ship paid no attention: for most of them, it was home, and it appeared no different from the last sight of the coast of Britain: a dark line between the sea and the cloudy sky.

His cousin Graelen was as uninterested as the sailors. He seemed to be asleep, having somehow managed to make himself comfortable among a stack of empty clay amphoras. Austalis did not want to disturb him, and nor did the crew of the soldiers aboard, to whom Graelen had been described as an anti-Roman fanatic. The fact that he resembled a huge bad-tempered bear also helped to protect him from being woken up.

The clouds over the land broke open a little and the sun lit up the coastline. Austalis saw that it was much closer than he had thought; what he had taken to be high faraway cliffs were actually low muddy hillocks. So far it might have been Britain: Austalis remembered the fable the Druids had taught, which they claimed to have had from the Atacotti who had ruled the whole island before the Britons came. It seemed that Britain had, long ago, been not an island but a part of the Continent. The sea had worn away the neck of land that connected them, until one night a great wave had washed away the soft chalk into a channel that widened so fast, the Atacotti said, that you could see it grow as you watched.

Whether that was true or not, Britain had been separated for so long that even the Atacotti could not tell the number of years. It had become almost a different world.

One of the Roman sailors tapped Austalis on the shoulder.

“Look. There’s Dorestad.”

Austalis looked in the direction the man was pointing, and saw a group of long buildings, set far apart. As the ship drew closer, he saw that they were separated by channels, the many arms of some river estuary, and that Dorestad stood on a collection of low brown islands linked by wooden bridges.

Graelen woke up, and rose. The displaced amphoras rolled and clattered against each other. Austalis feared that some of them might break, at Graelen’s or (more likely) Austalis’ expense, but the crew ignored them. Amphoras were built to last for years and survive many adventures from one end of the Empire to the other.

“So this is the continent,” Graelen said. “That’s a big town!”

Austalis remembered that Graelen had never seen the cities of the Roman Empire, or any place larger than Din Eidyn.

“It’s the greatest trading centre the Frisians have. It’s called Dorestad. I don’t know if the Romans have a name for it.”

“I don’t see any sign of all the stone buildings you told me about. Are you sure the Romans rule here?”

That remark, in Graelen’s warrior voice that carried all over the ship, brought a comment from one of the sailors.

“The Frisians who live inside the frontier are a peaceful lot. They’re traders, not fighters, so the Romans don’t even keep a garrison in this part of Frisia. Not like us, eh?”

“So where do you come from?” Austalis asked the sailor, kicking himself for assuming that nobody on the ship except himself and Graelen understood the British language.

“I’m a Gaul. I come from Gallia Belgica, south of here. We still have our own language. Would you believe that down in Gallia Narbonensis, beside the Middle Sea, they don’t speak

anything but Latin any more? Excuse me,” he said hastily as a roar came from the back of the ship, “I’ve got work to do!”

“No warriors here!” Graelen remarked, having lowered his voice, to about a normal person’s volume. “We’re going to have problems recruiting for the Great War among a crowd of fat merchants and traders.”

“The man was talking about the Frisians who live inside the Roman province. The free men outside the frontier are different. That’s where my father came from. He was born outside the rule of Rome, and he died outside it, too. He made use of Rome for his own benefit.”

“Rome made good use of him!” Graelen retorted.

They both fell silent as the shore drew closer. As they saw more details of the town, their other senses began to make contact with it as well.

The sounds of shouting voices, barking dogs, and hammers falling on metal came across the muddy water. The mud itself gave the strongest smell, although Austalis could not detect much more than the odour of fish. The wind was still mainly off the sea, with only occasional back-breezes to carry the scent of Dorestad.

The harbour was guarded by a wooden palisade of long stakes driven into the water, which masked the town as if it were staring through the iron bars on the windows of a Roman prison. The gap in the palisade was watched over by two wooden towers, standing alert as if ready to pounce together on any unfriendly ship daring to pass below.

Neither the towers nor the men watching from them showed any interest in this particular ship, which was obviously Roman and coming from Britain, that dank, foggy island inhabited by Druids and evil spirits.

Graelen was less awed now that he had a better view.

“All mud and wood. No stone at all.”

They stood aside to let the sailors get on with the task of landing the ship at the wharf, a wooden wharf, merely a larger version of the one on the riverbank at Venodala. Damn Marcella and Varrus and all of them! They had driven him to this place.

As soon as the ship tied up, Austalis and Graelen were reminded that they were prisoners being deported from the Empire. The soldiers formed a ring around them, and they were marched down the gangplank.

When he stepped from the wood of the wharf onto the muddy soil of Dorestad, Austalis felt elation, occasion and disappointment all at once. He was now standing on the great continent of which no man knew the limits, on the same piece of land as Rome, Greece, and the distant lands of India (where Demetrius the Cypriot had proudly told him, the Greeks had made conquests), and China, a vast empire to which even Greeks and Romans had hardly ever travelled.

He had placed himself on a huge continent that stretched to unknown lands lying towards the region that the morning sun came from: but the immediate part of it on which he was standing was a patch of soggy grass resting on mud, and the soldiers were impatient for him to move from it.

Austalis let himself be prodded forward without protesting, but Graelen could not restrain himself from a growl and a glare. The soldiers pushed him a little more roughly, and Austalis decided that some shoving would help to maintain the fiction that they were subversives being deported from the Empire.

They splashed through the sticky mud, and were guided across surprisingly solid

wooden bridges, obviously built to accommodate the size and weight of loaded carts going to and from the wharves.

"It's all islands," Graelen said. "Little islands with bridges linking them. What a place to build a town."

"It prospers," Austalis pointed out.

"I don't see any great wealth," Graelen replied. "I wouldn't waste a raid on it."

The soldiers led them to a wooden building that turned out to be an informal barracks where soldiers stayed when visiting the town, which had no garrison of its own. Inside, a welcome fire burnt in the centre of the floor, and Austalis and Graelen were given the same hot porridge and rough wine as the soldiers.

They sat at a separate bench, like honoured guests, but their status as prisoners was shown by the fact that none of the soldiers spoke to them, even though they were aware that Austalis knew Latin better than they did.

At last, when they had returned their borrowed cups, bowls and spoons to the suspicious (and silent) cook, one of the soldiers did come over and address Austalis.

"This is one of the last meals you'll get at the expense of the Empire. You're on your way out."

"That suits us," Austalis answered.

"I hope you make new friends among the barbarians. You can find out whether German barbarians are worse than British barbarians."

"I'm sure they will receive us with courtesy as fellow warriors," Austalis replied, hoping that this would prove true.

"They don't like men of their own nations who go into the service of the Empire," the soldier said, "or so I hear. You'd better be quick in telling them you're enemies of Rome, before they lay you out in the rushes on the floor and cut the ribs away from your spine. Or, no, not for treason; I think that's the offence for which they tie you up, put you face down in the mud, and then they put a big flat wicker frame on your back, pinning you down. Then they start marching up and down in place, so that you're pressed down into the mud until you drown. That's what they do to men who desert to Rome."

Austalis tried not to imagine this punishment, but the force of the image was stronger than his will, and he could feel the thick cold mud pressing into his face while his lungs tore themselves struggling for air and that terrible pounding weight on his back drove him down to death. He wondered whether his father had remained in Britain rather than returning to Frisia because he would have suffered this shameful form of execution.

Graelen's face was darkening. He obviously suspected that the soldier was insulting Austalis, and himself, and the kingdom of Gododdin, and the whole island of Britain.

Austalis replied to the soldier.

"It so happens that I have some knowledge of the Germanic language, so I don't expect we shall have any trouble."

"You won't make any, either," the soldier answered, and he walked back across the room to join his companions.

Austalis explained the substance of the conversation to Graelen, and expressed his fear that he might not be the best man to have sent on this mission.

"This plan won't move forward if the king's herald is drowned in Frisian mud because his father commanded an auxiliary regiment for the Romans."

“Oh, don’t worry,” Graelen said. “I don’t think that can be true any more. There are too many men from outside the Empire serving in the Roman army, especially in the auxiliaries. When we were travelling down from the Wall, I was amazed at how many Germans we met. They can’t all be outcasts and renegades.”

“Some of them were born in Britain,” Austalis pointed out. “The Saxons have been sending men to the Roman army in Britain for many years. They have Saxon wives and children, and even little Saxon villages.”

“Well, not all the Germans in Britain were born there,” Graelen persisted. “Funny, isn’t it, referring to Britain as ‘there’, not ‘here’”. Anyway, does the boundary of the Empire mean as much as it once did?”

“There’s still a Wall,” Austalis pointed out, “and here in Germany they have one too. It’s made of turf, like the old northern Wall in Gododdin. You’ll never see plainer boundaries than that.”

“Oh, on the ground, yet, but in men’s minds, what about that? There are so many Romans north of the Wall in Britain, and probably east of the Wall you say they have here. There are so many non-Romans inside the Empire. Does Rome mean anything any more?”

“If Rome means nothing, why are we here in this place today?” Austalis asked, not daring to refer directly to their real mission. The sailor from Gaul might not be the only man who could understand them.

“Look, I don’t know anything about history,” Graelen replied, “I’m not a bard or a Druid; but I’m sure that when the Romans first came, they were foreign invaders, the enemy. Today, everybody’s a Roman, whatever their ancestors were,” he continued, painfully, reminding Austalis of Marcella, so proud of being a citizen of Rome. “If everybody’s a Roman, Rome is meaningless, and the Empire is only a form, the shell of something that died within, long ago. Let there be no more Rome. Let’s all face reality.”

Austalis saw no reaction from the soldiers, and judged that none of them had understood. In any case, Graelen had not mentioned the plan for the great war, and he and Austalis were playing the parts of disaffected Britons being thrown out of the Empire.

One of the soldiers left the tight knot of drinkers and came over to Austalis. “Get ready to move. You’re travelling with a group of merchants going to Frisia; the part outside the Empire.”

“Are we leaving now?”

“As soon as these Greeks, Jews and Syrians can get themselves organised.”

Austalis passed the word on to Graelen, and they waited by the door, hearing the sounds of wheels, protesting animals, and loud exclamations in incomprehensible throaty languages. Eventually two soldiers strode in, and roughly cuffed Austalis and Graelen towards the street with signs and pointing.

“Why don’t you just tell us what to do?” Austalis asked them, in Latin, and they simply glowered in response.

The procession, while it could hardly be called organised, had at least formed itself into a recognisable collection of men, animals and vehicles ready to depart in relatively close company in the same general direction.

Austalis and Graelen waited for someone to give them orders. Graelen was disdainfully looking over the dark jabbering merchants in their gaudy robes, out of place in a background of brown Frisian mud and grey wattle buildings. Austalis noticed that whenever any of the

merchants returned Graelen's stare for a moment, he did so with a haughty glance showing that Graelen was, to him, a low uncouth barbarian whose disapproval was of no consequence.

Suddenly Graelen's expression turned from contempt to shock, and then to rage, the rage in which Austalis had seen him kill men. As soon as Austalis looked in the same direction that Graelen had, the cause was obvious.

Two soldiers were approaching in the rain that started to fall. They were carrying a chain with two iron collars in it. The soldiers beckoned Austalis and Graelen towards the largest cart.

"No!" Graelen roared. Everybody understood his meaning, even if, as Austalis desperately hoped, nobody was around who could understand his language. "I'm not a slave! I'm a warrior of Gododdin! I won't be chained!"

"Please, Graelen," Austalis hissed. "Don't ruin it all now. Follow me. All this will be repaid later."

Austalis took the chain from the soldiers and thrust his head into the front yoke. The soldiers immediately clamped it shut around his neck, and then dragged Austalis to the cart. They bolted the end of the chain to the tailboard, which Austalis had not foreseen, so he could not turn round and see Graelen's reaction.

Austalis prayed fervently to the god Nodens, begging him to prevent Graelen from breaking out in a fighting rage that would lead to them both being killed.

Austalis could hear Graelen breathing heavily and stamping about in the mud.

"Please, Graelen, it's not important. It doesn't matter. We're here for a greater purpose."

"I'm not a slave," Graelen growled behind him.

"I know. All of Gododdin knows. Take the chain this once."

There was a silence, and a long groan, and then Austalis heard the chain being lifted and the yoke being clamped into place.

"Right, Graelen. Just remember who did this to you."

"By Nodens, I swear I'll make Roman soldiers wear chains."

"So we shall, Graelen, with the help of Nodens."

Austalis hoped they would not have to suffer the humiliation of being inspected by the merchants, but the dark faces did not approach. Nobody seemed interested in making an offer to buy this pair of "Picts" as slaves. Austalis did not know whether that should make him feel proud or insulted.

With much pushing, shouting and braying, the front wagons of the convoy began to move forwards, and the motion passed slowly back like a spasm of movement proceeding along the ribs of a snake. When the moment came for the cart to which Austalis and Graelen were chained to move, the cart lurched forward as its two mules were whipped into a sharp heave to pull the wheels out of the mud. The yoke yanked Austalis' head almost free of his neck, and he stumbled forward, catching the tailboard with his hands to save himself from falling in the mud and being dragged through it. He almost lost his grip as Graelen bumped into him from behind.

"Graelen, it's all for show. They would have chained our hands behind our backs, otherwise. We're meant to be prisoners. Just bear it until we're out of the Empire."

"Show it may be, but I don't like being the performing animal."

"It will all end. Think about the future."

Graelen stepped back, and Austalis soon adjusted himself to the pace of the cart. Since he was forced to take this walk, he decided that he might as well try to enjoy it.

The rain did not help. It fell in cold, heavy drops and slid around the iron collar before trickling down Austalis' neck and back under his tunic. The mud became deeper and stickier. Once the cart suddenly halted, and Austalis fell forward and bumped his head against the tailboard before he was snatched back by the force of Graelen falling flat in the mud with a splash that made even the grim-faced merchants laugh, increasing Graelen's rage as he clawed himself out of the wet mess.

Even when progress resumed, there was little to see. The rain and damp in the air had created a thick mist. As far as Austalis could see, there was not a hill or a tree, only dark muddy ground lying in all directions, with no sign of settlement. He wondered how the convoy could find its way without a stone Roman road to follow or the sun to figure an easterly direction from.

Once Austalis thought he saw a dark shape in the mist, walking alongside the procession. He consciously tried to take account of his own steps, and Graelen's, and those of the resentful mules, to see if he could pick out the sound of another set of steps. After a little while, he was certain that someone was accompanying them.

"Nodens be with us," Austalis murmured.

"Yes," Graelen said from behind, "but that isn't Nodens out there in the fog. I don't think much of these so-called Roman soldiers. Why didn't they halt the convoy and investigate? Why haven't they put out flankers?"

"This is a peaceful part of the Empire," Austalis replied. "War hasn't been seen in living memory, and there are no forests to hide robbers."

"In that case, why does the convoy need to be protected at all?"

They walked on, their clothes soaked in rain.

A metallic clang sounded to the left. Austalis saw that the mysterious figure had vanished. Another clang came from the right, then one from somewhere ahead, and another from behind. The convoy halted in a babble of different languages.

Suddenly the clanging broke out in a circle around them, growing louder, like an iron ring being tightened. Austalis realised that he and Graelen had no hope of escape, chained as they were to the cart.

A single voice, deep and reverberating, cut through the fog like a shaft of light.

"Heer agenen Romingas!"

Austalis was amazed to see the Roman soldiers throw down their weapons and shields with a series of dull thuds and splashes.

Dark figures like the ghosts of Samain appeared through the fog, grey and silhouetted with drawn swords.

One warrior came from directly ahead.

"Salvete, milites Romae!"

It was the same voice that had bellowed the challenge. The warrior emerged into view: a tall man with red hair, whom Austalis had seen somewhere before.

"Ubi est Austalis?" the warrior demanded, and Austalis suddenly recalled a memory from the spring: a cookshop in Eburacum, and a tall, red-haired English auxiliary who had spoken to him in Germanic.

"Childeric! What are you doing here?"

"Austalis, in chains? Set him free!"

The soldiers rushed to carry out the command.

"This is my cousin, Graelen, who accompanies me on a mission to the warriors of Frisia," Austalis explained. The soldiers were already taking the collar off Graelen's neck.

"He will be honoured as you are," Childeric replied, as his men surrounded the nervous soldiers and the surprisingly cool merchants, who offered their contemptuous stares to everyone.

"You haven't answered my question," Austalis said. "I thought you were in Eburacum."

"I left the service of Rome," Childeric replied, "and came home".

"To England?"

"England stretches further west than it used to."

"But we're inside the Empire here."

"We decide just where the Empire ends."

With that, Childeric turned, and walked off into the fog, beckoning Austalis to follow.

"Will someone tell me what's going on?" Graelen demanded as the other warriors fell in with Childeric.

"I know this man," Austalis replied. "We'll go with him. I'll explain as much as I understand myself."

Graelen growled, and joined Austalis in tramping through the mud behind Childeric, while the soldiers sheepishly retrieved their weapons from the mud. The merchants continued to look with disdain upon everyone.

Austalis realised that the rain had stopped, but since there was so much dampness in the air his clothes would not even begin to dry. In the distance behind, he heard the convoy start moving again. The merchants would certainly be sharp enough to have seen that the whole show was a prearranged plot, but they would also be wise enough not to mention it.

The cool humid air smelt of leaves and soil, and then suddenly of smoke. Smoke, in this wet treeless landscape? The knot of men walking in front of him broke up into a circle and spread around a new fire.

"We had to carry the wood in oiled cloth," Childeric explained. "We knew we wouldn't find any dry firewood here. Come and sit down with us."

Austalis and Graelen were given the places of honour next to Childeric, who surprised Austalis by opening conversation with Graelen in fluent and quite grammatical British, no doubt learnt in Eburacum's cookshops and other places of entertainment.

Childeric began his explanations while handing out chunks of bread and lumps of preserved meat, ready to be warmed up on spear-points over the fire.

"One of the *exploratores* told me about the plan for the great war for next year, and asked me if the Saxons and the English would be interested. Well, he knew well enough that there have been plenty of raids on the Roman provinces. I decided that the Roman army is no longer the great opportunity it once was, and that I should come home. I've got good connections; I'm English, I've served with the Saxon auxiliaries, and I had a Frankish mother. That's why I've got a Frankish name. Well, we got the message to say when you would be coming, and here we are to meet you."

"Your blood is almost as mixed as mine," Austalis said.

"Ah, the Romans have built this alliance themselves, Childeric replied. There's been so much mixing of peoples who used to be each other's enemies. Now they only have one enemy, and one common field to plunder: the Roman Empire."

"The Romans plundered all of us," Graelen remarked. "I don't remember that free Britons ever fought Germans."

"Those in the Roman provinces have. First the Romans fight us, and then they let us settle in the Empire because they need farmworkers and soldiers. Look at all the Saxon and English villages in the Roman provinces of Britain now. I've heard it said that the Count of the Saxon Shore holds his title from the fact that the south and east coasts have so many Saxons living there, and not because the shore has to be defended from Saxon ships."

"Saxon, or German ships of any kind, are what we hope to see bringing companions in war," Austalis said. "I hope you will take us to the king of the Saxons, so that I can speak to him as the herald of Gododdin."

"You've never visited the Continent before, have you?" Childeric asked.

"No. I've never been off the island of Britain until now."

"If you had, you would know that the Saxons have no king. Each band has a chief, and a council of warriors and priests. The priests don't count for much. The English have a king, Wulflaeth, and I can tell you that he's very interested in this project for a joint attack."

"Who wouldn't pass up a chance to steal treasures from Rome?"

"Wulflaeth has deeper intentions than that, but it's not my business to tell you about them."

"Will we meet him?" Austalis asked.

"No, I'm to take you to Osbert, the strongest Saxon chief at present. He's been to Britain before. He led the warband that sacked the Saxon Shore fort at Regulbium a couple of years ago."

The other warriors began holding their tunics up to the fire to dry them out. Austalis stood up and did the same, and he noticed that the iron collar had left a mark around his neck. He hoped it would not last; he did not want to bear the sign of slavery all his life.

Graelen had finished eating, and was impatient to move on.

"Childeric, when do we get to meet this Saxon chief? I like your fire, but we can't sit around it all day."

"I know. The fog will lift soon. Feel the east wind now? That's the wind that will blow you back to Britain, in a Saxon ship. You're right, Graelen. We must move through the fog, and it won't last long now." He beckoned to his men. "Childeric's heer, oot, oot!"

The warriors put on their half-dry tunics, and carefully buried the embers of the fire. The march continued, but now Austalis could see further ahead as the fog dispersed. It had thinned out to a light mist with the promise of sunlight above. Soon there were brave little copses of trees scattered over the muddy plain, and when the sun finally broke through it lit up a distant wooden palisade.

"See, there?" Childeric asked. "That's Osbert's town. Not what Romans would call a town, but Saxons don't like stone buildings and crowds of people."

Austalis judged that the simple wooden fortification would not last long under attack by Roman soldiers or auxiliaries helped by fearsome rock-hurling siege engines, but it might well hold off an attack by barbarian warriors armed only with swords and spears. Barbarians? He was a barbarian himself.

Austalis wondered if the village lay within the nominal frontiers of the Roman Empire, although there was no stone wall here to mark it, only a river which Austalis had not seen. It could be that Osbert's village was an officially sanctioned settlement, like the Saxon and

English communities in Britain, or else the Romans had neither the wish nor the ability to remove it.

By now the day had ripened into a sunny afternoon, and faint breaths of mist rose from the ground as it began to dry out. The sounds of domestic animals were carried by the east wind like a rude chorus of welcome.

The rough gates opened as if by magic, obviously when the watching sentries saw Childeric lead his men up to the palisade.

Inside, the village looked like any in Britain, except that the people wore different hairstyles and brooches. Austalis looked at everything with interest, because it was from a place like this that his father had come. Some of these people might even be kin to him.

Childeric walked straight to what was clearly Osbert's hall, and when they entered all the men stacked their weapons in crude wooden racks placed just inside the door. Austalis reached into his tunic to take out his concealed dagger, but Childeric stopped him.

"You are a guest here, the herald of Gododdin."

At that moment, a voice inside the hall made the formal announcement of his arrival.

"Austalis and Graelen, emissaries of King Ceredig of Gododdin!"

After such a grand introduction, Austalis thought that he and Graelen would hardly make an impressive entrance, covered in mud. He pulled up his tunic to try to hide the shameful mark on his neck, and let Childeric usher him into the hall.

Austalis expected that Osbert would be sitting on a throne, flanked by guards, but when he pushed his way past the heavy leather curtain he found a scene that could have been in a barn in Gododdin.

A dozen men sat on stools that were simply sections chopped from a tree-trunk, around an elegant table that was obviously of Roman origin, evidently looted. He found time to wonder who had carried a heavy table all the way back from a raid.

The biggest man at the table looked belligerently at Austalis.

"You are the herald of Gododdin?"

"I am, and this is my cousin and companion in arms, the lord Graelen."

"Then come and sit down with us, and we'll have a real warrior's feast! Food, drink, and talk of war!"

## CHAPTER TWELVE

Osbert did not want to engage in any talk of war until the feast was well in progress. Austalis had not found a moment to ask whether they were in Roman territory, so he was still unsure if they were within the frontier of the Empire or not. It was in any case a dangerous question to ask, just as one did not remind the king of Gododdin that Roman rule had once extended to Din Eidyn and beyond. Nevertheless, Austalis found it amusing to think of a “barbarian feast” being conducted on the very territory of the Empire.

Graelen was certainly at home, seated on a stool at the far end of the luxurious table, carving chunks of bread and drinking hornfuls of Gallic wine. Austalis, after a suitable interval of eating, and trying not to drink too much of the wine that these Germans drank neat, not mixed half-and-half with water as the Romans drank it, a habit observed even in Gododdin, felt it was time to broach the subject of war with Osbert.

“Do you have a date that you prefer for your attack?”

“We’ll sail so we arrive when the Picts attack.”

“Wouldn’t it be better to time it so that the attacks are staggered?” Austalis suggested.

“That way, the Roman commands in Eburacum and Londinium will first hear of Picts coming by sea around the Wall, then of Irish and Atacotti landing in the west, and then of Saxons and English landing in the south and east. If there is at first only one attack to deal with, the Romans may not commit all their force to deal with it. The idea is to confuse them so they disperse their forces.”

“If we hold back, the Picts or the Irish may arrive in the rich lands of the south first, and take all the best plunder.”

“If you hold back, the Romans will send a stronger force to resist us, and you may then find that they have had time to call in reinforcements from the continent.”

Osbert drank another horn of the wine from Gaul.

“Nobody will order us when to attack Rome.”

“Just so,” Austalis agreed. “We are not allies. We are comrades, each with his own reasons for waging war. The plan we propose means only that it is to the benefit of all of us if we strike the Romans simultaneously so that each separate force will have fewer Romans to deal with.”

“I agree, for my part, but I can commit only myself and my own followers. Do you know how our nation is organised?”

“I understand the Saxons have no king.”

“That’s right. We’re all free and equal warriors. What that means is that you can’t get an agreement from one ruler than will bind all the Saxons in the world. The Romans have never understood that. They come to an agreement with the chief of one warband, and then get angry when another warband doesn’t observe it.”

“What can we do to encourage more Saxons to join this war?” Austalis asked. “Graelen and I have only a limited time, so we can’t travel all around Frisia and the rest of north Germany to meet with the chiefs of all the different warbands.”

“That’s not counting those who are over in Britain at this moment,” Osbert replied, “either raiding or serving as auxiliaries in the Roman army.”

Osbert’s men roared with laughter, and pounded the delicate Roman table with their mugs and drinking horns, accelerating the ruin of the beautiful polished surface. The women took the pounding as the signal to bring in more food and drink.

Austalis picked up the remark about the auxiliaries.

"Do you have any information on the attitude of the auxiliaries? Would they revolt and join in the war?"

"I'm sure they will. If there's raiding and plundering to be had, the Saxons will be there."

"What about the English?"

"For that, ask Childeric. They're his people, not mine."

Childeric turned round from a conversation with Graelen.

"Who has a question for me?"

"I do," Austalis replied. "Will the English join the war?"

"I can't answer that. Only King Wulflaeth can tell you, and I won't take you to him until I see what the Saxons are going to do. If Osbert says his warband will go, then every other chief will probably bring their warbands too. In that case, Wulflaeth is likely to agree to send over an English force as well."

Austalis turned back to Osbert.

"You are an important man, Osbert. This war, and the fate of the Roman Empire, are hanging on you now. If you say yes, the greatest war in the history of Britain will be launched. If you say no, we shall all stick to our separate petty raids. Are you ready to pledge your word that your warband will come?"

"I must consult my warriors," Osbert answered.

He rose from his stool and pounded on the table with the pommel of his knife, adding a cluster of scrapes and shallow craters to the surface of the table. There was not immediate silence, but a slow subsiding of talking and growls until the hall was quiet enough for Osbert to make himself heard.

"Sword-companions! It is proposed to us by the king of Gododdin, in the north of Britain, that we should join him in the spring in an attack upon the Roman provinces of the island. The Roman forces will be so overstretched by the greatest invasion they have ever seen that they will be unable to offer effective resistance. It will be the richest plundering season we have ever known."

Another warrior, sitting next to Childeric, stood up.

"I'm for the war."

At that, every other warrior leapt up, all shouting their agreement, and Osbert roared above their voices.

"If you are for the war, then I am, too!"

The warriors pounded on the table till it rocked and threatened to break, having been built for gentler Roman manners.

Austalis became aware that somebody was standing at his right shoulder, but when he turned round there was nobody there. He stood up to accept the cheers of the shouting Saxon warriors and felt the presence again.

"Thank you, Nodens," he said, quietly, before he joined in the uproar.

By the late afternoon, there was quiet again in Osbert's hall. Most of the warriors had fallen asleep in the rushes on the floor, or with their heads on the table. Tiny insects disturbed by all the commotion, crawled down the lank strands of long greasy hair, retreating at once if the sleeping warrior moved his head. They would not risk not being able to make their way back to such a comfortable home.

Austalis had succeeded in keeping down his consumption of drink, without anybody

noticing and accusing him of being a poor excuse for a warrior. Childeric had done the same, and Osbert, though he had behaved as wildly as anyone, proved capable of sobering up instantly when the topic of the war came up again.

Austalis questioned him on how his warband would get to Britain.

“Can you find enough ships, and all at the same time?”

“The Saxons are the greatest sea-raiders in the world! How do you think we’ve been attacking the coasts of Britain for a hundred years? Of course we’ll have enough ships.”

“What about the English?”

“Well, they mainly attack by land, but they raid Britain too. That’s a question for Childeric, or better yet for Wulflaeth.”

“Would the Saxons transport some of the English?”

“Certainly, if Wulflaeth makes an agreement with us.”

“We’ll propose that to him, if he says he needs more ships. Childeric? How long will it take us to reach Wulflaeth’s palace?”

“Three days. We should start tomorrow morning, if Osbert gives us leave to go.”

Osbert waved a mug as though about to offer a toast, and then paused, lifted the mug, and emptied it without a word.

“You may go tomorrow, with my good wishes, and three horses, courtesy of the Roman cavalry. The *strator* gave them to me.”

“Strator?” Austalis queried.

“Remount officer, in charge of horses and transport,” Childeric explained.

“Wulflaeth can keep them. We’re not cavalrymen. My warriors don’t want to learn, and I’ve got nobody to train them anyway.”

“We’re grateful for this help,” Austalis replied.

Four of the girls came in to begin cleaning up the hall, briskly lifting snoring warriors off rushes and tables to wipe beneath them, and then letting them fall back again. The girls were supervised by a tall, better-dressed girl with golden ornaments, who took no part in the work herself. Austalis noticed how effective the Germanic language was for giving orders. Latin was good for formal speeches, and British for passionate exhortations.

Osbert took the tall girl by the arm as she passed.

“This is my daughter, Kairann. I’m going to marry you to a king one day, aren’t I?”

The girl tossed her head with a silent laugh. Obviously she was used to hearing this fatherly promise trotted out for visitors.

“None of us are kings,” Austalis replied. “If I find a king looking for a noble wife, I shall commend Kairann to him.”

Kairann looked at him in surprise; she had not been in the room before and had not expected him to be able to speak any variety of Germanic. She then glanced at Osbert, with an inquiring expression that was obviously a plea for permission to speak to Austalis directly, and Osbert nodded.

“Make sure he’s a young, wealthy, handsome king, with a beautiful palace and a splendid court.”

“Our King Ceredig is married already, but I don’t think he would meet your qualifications. You wouldn’t like his hall at Din Eidyn, high up on a rock in fog and rain and frost.”

“What nonsense!” Osbert protested. “Never mind what she thinks. I’ll decide who is a suitable husband for her, and I won’t even ask her opinion.”

“Well, I’m sure you’ll have plenty of royal suitors for such a noble daughter,” Austalis replied, while thinking that Kairann did have a queenly bearing to her, even if her father was only a Saxon bandit who owed his success to ability rather than to distinguished ancestry.

“Enough,” Osbert said. “Occupy yourself with cleaning the hall.”

The girl returned to supervising the servants, who were probably not servants at all, but the daughters and sisters of warriors. Once the hall had been tidied, she left and did not reappear, even during the quiet dinner later in the evening.

The next morning, equipped with three horses that had once belonged to the Roman army, Austalis set out with Childeric and Graelen. Osbert had his warriors dress in full harness to give the little embassy a shield-clattering, roaring send-off, and Austalis saw Kairann looking out from the doorway of the hall.

The sun was in the riders’ faces as they rode along a muddy trackway that some helpful group of people had once paved with planks pinned down to a wooden foundation. It was evident that nobody had repaired the trackway for a long time, because the wood was full of splinters and rotten patches. Sometimes the horses’ hooves clapped briskly on sound planking, and sometimes they padded on soft decayed wood or splashed into puddles of grey water. Austalis thought that he could have found the trackway by its smell. When he closed his eyes and turned his head from one side to the other, he could fix the line by the unhealthy smell of the trackway, a mixture of dead wood and grassy mud. He wondered if the wood was so rotten that it glowed in the dark. If it did, the trackway would be an eerie straight shining road through the night, a fit pathway for the spirits and the armies of ghostly warriors who rose up out of the earth on the night of Samain.

Such questions could not be answered on this sunny morning. Graelen rode close behind Austalis.

“That Osbert was convinced easily enough. Do you trust him?”

“Of course not. That’s why I didn’t offer him any treaty on the king’s behalf. I don’t need to accept his word, but I believe he’ll join in the war, for one good reason: it’s in his own interest to do so. He doesn’t care whether the Romans rule in Britain, or even whether they rule in Germany. He sees that this is the greatest opportunity for raiding and plunder than he’s ever heard of.”

“So now we’re going to try the same story on the English.”

“I’m sure they’ll respond in the same way, but we’ll have to behave more formally. This Wulflaeth is a real king, with a fixed stronghold to rule from.”

By noon, when they had paused for a meal, the day was warm for the time of year, had it been Britain. Since Austalis did not know what was normal weather, he accepted the gifts of sunshine and calm wind from whatever god had bestowed them.

The three men sat under a lonely spinney of trees, while the horses made the best of the last of the year’s grass, growing bravely in sand.

A sudden wind shook the branches of the trees, and streamed the horses’ manes in the same tossing movement that bowed the blades of grass.

Childeric muttered a string of words that Austalis could not follow.

“What did you say?”

“I wasn’t talking to you. I was reciting the prayer to winter. That was the first touch of the east wind.”

“The east wind is cold in Gododdin too, but you know that. You’ve lived in Eburacum, which isn’t so far away.”

“Do you imagine that I’ve never ridden with the *exploratores* into Gododdin? I know Gododdin as I know winter. The east wind in Britain is softened by passing over the ocean. Here on the continent, it blows straight from the eastern plains, where the Cimmerians and Scythians live.”

Austalis once again felt the uneasiness of knowing that an immense landmass stretched away from there, and that no man could tell him how far it extended or what peoples might be living on its distant boundaries. The farthest land he had heard of was China, and who in China would know of Britain?

“The east wind is a good sign,” he declared, even while he took the heavy cloak that he had been wearing, rolled around his chest and back, and spread it over his shoulders. “It will blow us speedily back to Britain. It’s all been so easy. The Germans are eager to join the war. The god favours us,” he added, not specifying what god he meant, but he silently thanked Nodens, the Lord of Silver.

At the end of the day they came to a small village that owed allegiance to the English king. His protection was obviously effective: only a light defence of posts and upright wicker hurdles encircled the village, and that was to keep out animals, not men. It would not stand for long against Legio VI Victrix, but they would never come here.

Childeric was known: two young men pulled back the gate to welcome him. He explained who Austalis and Graelen were, and they were welcomed, too.

The horses were led away, with much joking that Childeric had been cruel to deprive the Roman cavalry of their very last mounts, who must now endure the indignity of being stabled with the oxen.

The evening fires were coming to life in the high thatched houses. Austalis could not get used to the square or rectangular houses of the Saxons and the English. He accepted the stone buildings of the Romans, and the rectangular wooden halls like Ceredig’s stronghold of Din Eidyn, but farm buildings and village houses looked unnatural if they were not round as they were in Britain.

Soon the three guests were seated on benches around the fire in the largest house. Even Graelen found someone to converse with: one of the older men had passed several years in Britain, living in one of the English communities in the south-east of the Roman provinces, and he seemed delighted to practise the British language again.

Austalis and Childeric talked with the village chief, who, like apparently everyone else on the continent, had heard about the proposed war in Britain.

“Everyone is excited about it,” he said. “I wish I were young enough to take part.”

“I’m pleased that the plan is so well received,” Austalis told him, “but knowing the reputation of the English as warriors, I expected nothing but enthusiasm for a proposal of war. One thing worries me. If so many people already know, won’t the Romans hear about it?”

“We can keep secrets from the Romans. Ask Childeric. There are thousands of English living in Britain, but the Romans think there are only a few hundred.”

“It’s the same with the Franks in Gaul,” Childeric added.

Cups of the summer’s mead were served. The village chief reminded Austalis of his father, who had come from somewhere nearby. Although his father had not been English, his speech had been very close to the dialect of these people. In Gododdin, Nottfried the former Roman soldier had been an exotic curiosity. Here, everyone talked like him. It was as if the dead Nottfried had been reduplicated many times over. Austalis even heard two of his father’s favourite jokes being told.

Some of the young men approached, asking to be allowed to join in the war.

"That is for your own leaders and kings to decide," Austalis told them. "I have no power here. I am the herald of the king of Gododdin, and he does not rule you."

Austalis and Childeric were lodged as guests of the village chief, whose house this proved to be. They were given wooden box-beds, filled with clean straw, in one of the aisles. Graelen went to spend the night at the house of his new friend.

In the morning, Austalis woke up early. The first cooking fires were being lit with the previous night's embers, and the young women were taking their buckets and stools to milk the cows. It might have been a village in Gododdin, but for the sense that this was on a transitory settlement on the open plain. Tomorrow the word might come to pack up and move on, while the people of Gododdin had been settled in the northern moors and hills of Britain for hundreds of years. The bards had made Austalis memorise the epic poems telling of the kings and heroes who had led them in fleets of ships from Europe, but even the bards could not say how long ago this had happened.

The women of the house gave him a cup of the morning's first milk, still warm, and two twice-baked cakes. He took them out of the darkness of the long house with its posts and beams and mysterious wicker partitions, and the murmuring of people and animals coming to life.

Austalis carried his milk and hard cakes out into the yard. The sun was about to rise, and the air was still and cold. Austalis hoisted himself up onto the back of a waggon, and sat uncomfortably on the rough chilly wood to eat his breakfast.

He heard one of the horses whinnying somewhere in one of the other buildings, and then someone began hammering on something metallic. That would wake up anyone who was still asleep.

So far, this embassy had been a success, Austalis thought. The Saxons had already agreed to join the war. Austalis knew very well that this meant only that they would coordinate the date of the raid that they would have made anyway, but that was the whole part of the plan. Although the king of the English had not given his word yet, he seemed disposed to agree, if he was willing to receive the Gododdin embassy.

The sun came up, and the black silhouette of the carts and wagons and ploughs gained detail and shape, as though they were being transformed from ideas into real objects. Mist rose from the muddy yard, churned by wheels and hooves.

The hard part of the plan would come later. It would be necessary to travel to the islands of the Atacotti, and in winter, and he would need to travel to Ireland as well. It would not be as easy as travelling through comfortable Roman provinces and German lands where he could always gain a friendly reception because of his father. What would the Atacotti or the Irish care about his father?

He saw Graelen come out of one of the other houses, and hurry towards the long house, from which a healthy plume of smoke rose. There would be hot bread to be had.

Austalis slid down from the waggon, and walked back to the house to return the cup he had used. Inside, he found Childeric eating breakfast, and Graelen enjoying a wordless conversation of laughs and gestures with the women, none of whom could talk to him. They were not taken on raids to Britain, and women who settled there never came back to Germany.

Childeric came over to Austalis.

“Ah, I was going to see if you were up. I suggest we leave as early as we can, and then we’ll have a good chance of reaching Wulflaeth’s burg by tonight.”

“Is it that close? I thought the English mainly lived further to the east.”

“They did once, but the centre of their power keeps moving west, like a sword cutting slowly through the flesh of Europe. That’s why they’re interested in Britain.”

“Just as soon as we can drag Graelen away from his admirers, we can get ready to go.”

Childeric asked the young men about the horses, and they were brought out at once. Austalis gave polite thanks to the people of the village, and before it was fully morning, the little embassy was on its way again, led by Childeric, who had been this way before.

Austalis noticed that the direction was different.

“We’re going northeast,” he remarked.

“Right. We’re quite close to the sea again. That’s why Osbert told you to leave the horses. We’ll sail back to Britain without having to cross Roman territory again.”

Now there was no wooden trackway, only a narrow path of bare earth. The wind carried a faint message of forests and grass, except when it veered to the north in short gusts that smelt of water and salt.

Soon they met a group of English warriors, walking briskly along the path, going west towards the Empire, and its promise of wealth and battle.

“Hail,” the leader of the warriors shouted, when they came within talking distance.

“Warriors on horseback, in Engaland?”

“Warriors of Gododdin, in Britain,” Austalis called back.

The English warriors exclaimed to each other, and hurried forward.

“Are you the herald of the great war?” their leader asked.

“I am. We’re going to meet King Wulflaeth and lay our plan before him.”

“You’ll have no trouble,” one of the warriors said. His helmet had been dented by a heavy blow, and Austalis guessed that its previous owner had now passed on to join in the warriors’ feast that never ends, with the gods. “The king has talked of nothing else for days.”

“Woden be with you,” the leader said. “You’ll see us again in Lunnium.”

Austalis was about to ask where Lunnium was, and just as he realised that the man was mispronouncing Londinium, the warriors swung off on their way.

Childeric watched them go.

“Look at them, swinging their swords at their belts. They think they’re the greatest fighters the world has ever seen.”

“Let’s hope it’s true,” Austalis replied.

In the afternoon, the wind blew billowing white clouds over the horizon, making the day seem like early spring rather than late autumn. Graelen came to life, and sang loud songs of battles in times past.

The flat plain gave way to wooded hillocks set in sandy heathland, dark green knots of trees in a landscape of brown and purple.

Suddenly one of the copses of trees shuddered, as though it were being shaken by a violent gust of winds, and a pride of armed riders burst out of it, galloping towards the three lonely horsemen in the empty waste.

Graelen reached for his sword, while ostentatiously being careful to complete the line he had been singing.

“No, Graelen,” Austalis said. “It must be Wulflaeth’s men.”

“They don’t look welcoming to me,” Graelen replied, and as the approaching riders drew up, they did look aggressive rather than friendly. Two warriors holding upright lances rode forward.

“Ave regi Votadinorum!” they shouted in unison.

“Hail to Wulflaeth, king of the English,” Austalis responded.

This made a stir among the warriors, who had obviously not expected anyone from Gododdin to be able to speak their language. They all turned to one man, whose face was masked by a metal plate fixed to the visor of his helmet.

The masked warrior came forward, until his horse stood next to that of Austalis. Two eyes, greenish-blue, stared out of holes in the mask, which was decorated with a metal moustache.

“You are Austalis, herald of King Ceredig of Gododdin?”

“I am. This is my cousin Graelen, and the warrior Childeric.”

“I know Childeric. He should know me, unless he is still serving Rome.”

Childeric leapt down from his horse, and saluted the flat dead mask in which the bright eyes turned and glittered. The man looked down at him, and lifted up the mask, which proved to be hinged to the helmet.

The face below was eerily similar to the face of the mask. including the moustache.

“Well,” the man said, “my subject recognises me now”.

At that, his retinue struck their shields, shouting “Wulflaeth!”

“Do I have the honour of appearing before the king himself?” Austalis asked. “If so, I apologise for not offering proper respects.”

“I am the king, and the respect is due to you and your cousin for having come so far. Many an Englishman has travelled to Britain, but as far as I know you are the first Britons to visit England.”

“The fame of your kingdom is widespread.”

“I am glad to hear it. Come to my hall.”

The king turned, and two warriors took up station behind the embassy. Austalis obediently nudged his horse into motion, and he followed a suitably respectful distance behind the king’s straight back.

Wulflaeth’s hall proved to be only a short distance behind the low sandhills beyond the trees. Above a light palisade, there rose the thatched roof of a great structure that would have impressed anyone except a Roman.

Childeric came up close to Austalis and spoke to him quietly.

“That was once a Danish thane’s hall. The English haven’t been here long. We don’t build such grand structures. Don’t mention that to Wulflaeth.”

“I won’t. I’m a herald of war with Rome. I’m not trying to start a war between Gododdin and England.”

The gate opened, roughly, bouncing and scraping over the ground. Austalis noted that the Saxons built better-constructed gates, and opened them with more skill.

The area within the palisade turned out to be surprisingly empty. The hall was the only large building. A few huts stood around, and a well, isolated and with a neat little roof. In Britain, Austalis would have guessed that it was a sacred well, but he did not know what the custom might be among the Germans. This was evidently a place of assembly, like Din Eidyn on its rock and not a hall which was ordinarily lived in.

The procession rode straight into the hall, and wide double doors were opened,

impressively this time, to receive it. Once again, tables were set out for a feast. A welcome fire burnt in the centre of the hall, and a smaller one roared from the end of it, behind the table of honour.

The king slid down from his horse, so the warriors and guests did the same. Servants swarmed like mice out of the shadows to lead the horses away.

“To the feast!” Wulflaeth commanded, taking the chair at the middle of the table. “You, herald, sit on my right, with Childeric next to you, although he doesn’t merit it. Your cousin on my left. Does your cousin understand English?”

Austalis realised that he had spoken the language with his father since childhood without knowing it had a name. No doubt the Saxons called it Saxish and the Frisians called it Frisian.

“No, he doesn’t.”

“Then Eldred will sit next to him.” Wulflaeth beckoned to an older warrior. “Eldred spent several years in Britain.”

When everyone was seated, and mead had been served out, Wulflaeth turned to Austalis.

“What did you say your name was? You don’t need to recite your ancestors, although they will of course be most distinguished.”

“I am Austalis, and my cousin’s name is Graelen.”

“You are welcome. Your king has sent you to invite us to join in the great war next year. We would have raided Britain in any case, although not the parts where we have settlements.”

“All your settlements are within the Roman provinces,” Austalis pointed out. “Can you attack Rome without your own people getting in your way?”

“Oh, all the English live in two small areas on the east coast.”

“Then this embassy I lead is a courtesy, due to our respect for your kingship. We have no need to persuade you.”

“We have only to agree on the dates.”

“Do you have enough ships? The Saxons are willing to transport you.”

“I’m sure they are, if we agree to raid different areas. We can come to a treaty with Osbert’s people about that.”

“Osbert told me to leave our horses with you, as a gift.”

“I shall thank him. A horse will not take you back to Britain, but we have our best ship, my own royal ship, waiting to take you home tomorrow, while the wind still holds from the east.”

“Then how will your men sail back?”

“They’ll row. They’ve done it before, but the wind is usually from the west.”

“Strength to your warband,” Austalis wished him, raising his mug. “May we meet in Londinium.”

“To warbands meeting in Lunnium.”

## CHAPTER THIRTEEN

“You have to look hard to see the Roman scout ships,” the helmsman explained to Austalis. The day was clear and breezy and Austalis could see so far that, from time to time, he thought he could see the dark line of the British coast as a thin border of black decorating the western horizon.

“I can’t see any other ship,” Austalis said. “Point them out to me.”

The helmsman laughed.

“There aren’t any to be seen. I’ve learnt to make them out, but it’s not easy. The Romans have a clever way of hiding their naval ships. The ships are painted dark green, like the sea, and so are the sails and the rigging. Even the sailors’ clothes are green, and they smear their hands and faces with green dye.”

“That would hide their approach, but you would be able to see them when they came closer.”

“Ah, but they never do. The Romans never fight at sea. The job of the scout ships is to detect raiders from a distance, and then rush back to the nearest fort of the Saxon Shore to report it. The Romans try to guess where we’re going to land, and send their soldiers to what they hope is the right place.”

“Wouldn’t it make more sense for the Romans to engage your ships at sea, to prevent a landing?”

“Yes, it would, but the Romans have no big warships any more. In the eastern part of the Roman Empire, at the far end of the Middle Sea, it’s different, I’m told: there are great ships that can shoot liquid fire, and even pirates don’t dare sail those seas. Mind you, those ships are manned by Greeks, not Romans.”

“I’ve heard about that,” Austalis replied. “My friend Demetrius the Cypriot told me about it.”

There was a shout from the bow of the ship. Austalis looked, and now there was a definite coastline in sight.

“There you are,” the helmsman said. “The island of Britain. We’ll land you north of the Wall.”

The ship stayed just close enough to keep the coast in view, until the dark line between sea and sky turned to white.

“There are long sandy beaches along this shore,” the helmsman explained, altering the ship’s course. “That’s where we’ll land you.”

“Aren’t you worried that the Romans will spot you?”

“No, the nearest fort on the coast is a long way south of here. North of the Wall, there aren’t any naval forces.”

Austalis knew well enough that the only land forces north of the Wall were the *exploratores*, and Cadmael and Baran had sworn to support the great war.

The sail was lowered and the ship drew inshore, oars beating in perfect rhythm. The ship swung its prow around at the helmsman’s command. It drifted gently parallel to the beach, casting a complicated shadow on the sand, until it halted gently.

“We’ve run onto the sand,” the helmsman explained. “It’s as close to the beach as we can get.”

After exchanging compliments with the ship's captain, Austalis and Graelen leapt over the gunwales and splashed into the cold water. Graelen waded ashore first, and Austalis paused to shake the water off his boots.

A great chorus of shouting came from the ship. When Austalis and Graelen looked, the ship was pulling away from the shore, under oars until it would meet a westerly wind. The entire crew roared out another cheer, or farewell, or battle-cry; Austalis could not make out the words, so he gave a warrior's salute in response, and Graelen copied him.

The ship's prow turned eastward, towards Germany, towards England.

"Well, Graelen, I'm glad to be back on this little island at the end of the world," Austalis said. He felt relieved of the weight that had hung upon his soul all the time he had been in Europe: the picture of that vast mass of land stretching away into the unknown.

"So am I," Graelen replied. "I never knew Britain was home to me until this moment."

They turned and walked up the sand dunes. As they clambered over the crest, grasping tussocks of long yellow grass for handholds, six horsemen rode forward to meet them. Austalis saw that they wore the uniform of the Roman auxiliary cavalry, and his first thought was that the war was lost months before it could begin, that it would end with himself and Graelen bleeding into the sand, or dying under interrogation in Eburacum.

At once he realised that these must be *exploratores*, and he looked at the faces under the plumed helmets to see if Cadmael or Baran was among them. He had to squint because of the backlight from the sky, but the third face he examined was one that he had seen before.

"Baran! I saw you in Din Eidyn, before I left."

"You're doing well. The Romans are worried. They lost track of you after you joined the merchants leaving Dorestad."

"So how did you know we'd be landing here?"

"Your ship was sighted, and we've been riding all the way up the coast to meet it. I wish you had landed somewhere further south! Here, we've got horses for you."

Austalis and Graelen mounted their horses, and rode with the auxiliaries towards the nearest Roman road. Austalis briefed Baran on his success with the Saxons and the English.

"Where will you go now?" Baran asked.

"We still have to approach the Atacotti and the Irish, but I intend to include them both in one journey."

"You're not going to risk the crossing to Ireland at this time of year!" Baran protested.

"Not if I can avoid it. I'm going to visit the Atacotti first, in the Northern Isles, and then I'll travel down the coast to the Irish colonies in the lands that used to belong to the Silures."

"They have a treaty with Rome. You couldn't prevent the Romans from hearing about it."

"I believe I can. People will usually keep a secret if it's in their interest to do so."

Austalis and Graelen separated from Baran and his men before they reached the road, in case anyone saw them together. Baran led his men south, towards the Wall. Austalis and Graelen turned north.

They soon came to the road. It had been built to link the Wall with the outlier forts that lay to the north of it as a screen. Because the forts were now either abandoned or used only by the *exploratores* for brief stays, the road had received little maintenance for some years. Grass was growing up between the stones, and the drains on either side were clogged with soil made from all the twigs and leaves that had been blown into them.

Austalis and Graelen rode briskly along the Roman road, on their Roman horses,

plotting against Rome. Austalis decided to keep the horse for his trip to the Northern Isles.

“Go without me,” Graelen said. “I’ll work training the young warriors. It’s a good way to pass the winter.”

“Make sure you explain to them the importance of a simultaneous and disciplined attack. It will ruin everything if the Romans meet only with a mass of separate attacks by small warbands at different times.”

They rode on in silence for a while, as cold rain clouds built up over the hills, and the wind began to blow strongly from the west, a wind that would help to speed the English ship back to Germany.

Graelen broke the silence with a question.

“All these attacks at once, by so many nations. Which one will you take part in? Ours?”

“No, I’ll be in Londinium.”

“Londinium! Why there?”

“Because that will be the centre of events, and I am the only man whom all the contingents will know. I’m the only man who can talk to them all. If I can contribute anything, it will be in Londinium.”

“You’ll be recognised.”

“It doesn’t matter. If the Romans wanted to seize me, they could have done it by now. Besides, as far as they know, you and I have been expelled from the Empire and we’re wandering somewhere in Germany. They won’t be looking for me in Londinium.”

“You couldn’t pass through the Wall undetected.”

“I’m not going through the Wall. I’ll travel to Londinium directly from the lands of the Irish colonists. The Romans don’t expect me, and if they do, they’ll be watching for me to arrive from the north or the east, not from the west.”

Before long, on the second day, Austalis and Graelen rode home into Caeravon, not having met any sentry on the way.

After the welcome, Graelen declared that he would stay in Caeravon for a while, before the preparations for war began.

“I’ve got to report to King Ceredig,” Austalis said. “Where is he to be found?”

“He’s still at Din Eidyn,” an old retired warrior explained.

“At Din Eidyn! But it’s nearly winter! No king has wintered at Din Eidyn before.”

“Well, it’s happening now.”

Austalis spent two days in Caeravon, resting himself and his horse, because he did not know how hard the *exploratores* might have worked the animal in the previous few days. In any case, there was a snowstorm during the first night, so that Caeravon was cut off from the rest of Gododdin. Austalis took the snowstorm as a sign of divine approval.

During the second night, the air warmed up and then it began to rain, washing the snow away.

Austalis finally rode away northwards, slowly because of the mud, and so the farewells and good wishes called to him from Caeravon followed him for a long time. He was tempted to turn round in the saddle to see if Graelen was standing there, like the colossal statues the Romans were said to place outside some of their cities, but he remembered that it was unlucky to look back after starting a journey.

When he reached Din Eidyn, he had to dismount and lead the horse up the slippery path to the citadel. The icy rain blew into his eyes and blurred his vision. The sentries at the gate recognised him, and lifted their spears to let him pass. He led the horse through the streets,

noticing that nearly all the houses were occupied even at that time of year when usually only a few guards and household servants watched over Din Eidyn.

He came to the king's hall, and looked in through the door. The hall was filled with idle warriors, and fires burned in the hearths. Austalis tried to blink the raindrops out of his eyes.

A man with a vaguely familiar face, blurred, stepped forward and took the reins of his horse.

"Austalis! I've been waiting so long for you to come back - let me take your horse to the stables."

Austalis blinked again, and his eyes cleared.

"It's Artus! What are you doing here?"

Artus held the horse, which shifted and fidgeted, eager to be warmed and fed in the stables.

"I spent many years at Sebenium, when I was the slave of Elafius. This war is my cause, too."

"The war won't reach as far as Sebenium," Austalis told him, "and if it does, it will be the English who attack that part of the Roman provinces".

"I have a debt to pay to the Empire and to the Christians," Artus said, and he looked Austalis full in the face as one warrior addressing another.

Austalis understood.

"You were baptised in the Christian faith, too, weren't you?"

"As I said, I was a slave still."

Artus took the horse out into the rain, walking away so fast that the horse had almost to trot to keep up with him.

A throng of warriors now came forward out of the smoke and rumble of the great hall to greet Austalis, pressing a mug into his hand, and dragging him towards the high table where King Ceredig was sitting.

The guard standing at King Ceredig's shoulder bent to hear a command from his king, and then straightened himself up and pounded the shaft of his spear on the floor.

"Silence! Silence for the king's herald, Austalis!"

Austalis had never known the command for silence to be obeyed so instantly, not even in the presence of the king.

"Make your report, herald," King Ceredig ordered, using formal pronunciation and grammar.

"The English and the Saxons will join in the war, and will make their attack in concert with ours."

The hall roared with approval, and the guard banged on the floor for silence once again.

"I ask permission to go to the Atacotti and the Irish, to bring them into the war."

"You do not intend to sail to Ireland in winter?"

"I mean to travel up the coast to the islands of the Atacotti, and then to visit the Irish colonies on the west coast of Britain."

"You have my commission to go, but not until you have feasted with me and rested in Din Eidyn for a few days."

As it turned out, the succeeding days brought such bad weather than Austalis would have made little progress travelling in any case. He took advantage of the king's hospitality to eat as much as he could from the royal kitchens, trying to fatten himself for the rigours of a winter journey. He visited the stables to make sure that his horse was being prepared in the

“Why do you hang around here?” Austalis asked him once. “Are you guarding the horse? We’re fast in the capital of Din Eidyn. Nobody’s going to steal him.”

“It’s my way of participating in the war against the Roman provinces. I can appoint myself your groom. You’ll need one on the road, won’t you? The king’s herald won’t travel unattended.”

“In this case, he will,” Austalis told him. “I have to travel fast. The king has agreed that I can go alone, with no escort, no personal servant, and not even a groom for my horse.”

“I can at least be your groom until you leave.”

“Very well, I allow you that. If you want to be useful to the war effort, I suggest you offer yourself as a guide. I don’t believe anyone else in Din Eidyn has ever been as far as Eburacum, let alone further.”

“I can show the armies the way through the southern parts of Britain!” Artus exclaimed.

“Talk to my cousin Graelen. He’s in charge of training the young warriors. None of them has even seen the Wall.”

Austalis was glad he had thought of a place for Artus, whose skills as a warrior were probably rusty after all the years he had spent as a domestic servant in Sebenium. It would be better for him to be an effective guide than to endanger himself and others as an ineffective warrior.

On the day Austalis left Din Eidyn, three men saw him off in the early morning. Artus, bringing him his horse, ready for the road and loaded with all a king’s herald would need; the chief priest, with the green ribbon for Austalis to wear on his arm or on his horse’s bridle, to show that he enjoyed the protection of all the gods, who would curse any man who attacked or impeded him, and King Ceredig.

King Ceredig gave Austalis a leather packet, containing a wooden tablet on which was written the king’s formal proposal of war to his allies. King Ceredig had dictated it to Austalis, who had written it down in sooty ink, and in Latin.

“May your gods go with you, and all the strength of Gododdin be yours,” King Ceredig recited.

The king stood aside while the chief priest tied the green ribbon to the horse’s bridle, and muttered a prayer in the priests’ secret language.

Artus watched, and said nothing.

“I go to serve my king,” Austalis declared in formal pronunciation and grammar, and since neither the king nor the chief priest replied, Austalis took his cue to depart and rode away from the gate of Din Eidyn, slowly down the steep and icy path, not looking back, because this was no time to break that most ancient of prohibitions.

For all he knew, a crowd might have gathered to see him go, but because the king had remained silent they would have had to do the same.

Austalis reached the outer gate of the fortifications, in the same silence. The guards opened the wooden gates for him, and said not a word. He rode out into the icy stillness of a windless winter morning, with nobody to accompany him but Nodens, the Lord of Silver.

In the succeeding days, he made better progress than he had expected. The weather was cold enough to keep the ground frozen, so that he did not have to struggle through mud, but no snow fell.

As he travelled though the empty lands to the northwest of Gododdin, Austalis thought that anyone who descended by magic in those bleak hills would find it hard to believe that he was on the same island of Britain as the gardens and vineyards in the far south, where the

Roman Empire ruled in serenity and the little shallow river flowed past the red-roofed villa at Venodala.

Down there, far in the south, there was colour and crowds of busy human beings, rushing along straight stone roads and thronging the halls of great buildings constructed to last for eternity, like the Empire itself.

Often, Austalis might have been the only man in the world. The only life was an occasional predatory bird hovering overhead, looking for small animals in the bracken.

A citizen of Londinium would have missed the rich colours he was used to seeing all around him, in cloth and plaster and wax paint on statues. Up here in the lonely north, there was only the dull brown and green of the moorland, and the grey of the sky coming down like a sword of correction upon the fallen world.

On the fourth day, Austalis turned north to take a gap through the uplands, and to do so he had to cross the long-abandoned northern Wall.

Even the road leading to the Wall had decayed into a broken track. Austalis dismounted, and led his horse by the bridle.

Had he been approaching Hadrian's Wall, he would have been able to hear its sounds from the point he had reached: the chatter of the civilian settlement, the clash of arms as the soldiers trained, the tramp of the sentries on the battlements. The northern Wall itself was silent and dead.

Austalis remembered the speck of light he had seen when he had first come to Hadrian's Wall, which had been the gateway of the fortress of Vercovicium. He scanned the low line of the northern Wall, and was rewarded by a dim point of light, faint and grey, showing only the dullness of the clouds beyond. He walked towards that gateway.

The fort itself was stone, but the plants that grew on the Wall itself, built of turf, not stone, were beginning to grow over it. The fort was intact. There was no farm within three days' journey, and so nobody had come to take the building stones to make field walls.

No sentry challenged Austalis at the gate. He inspected the internal buildings of the fort, still not badly damaged by hundreds of years of weather. Some unknown force had overturned a squat square granite pillar. Austalis managed to heave it over, and found that it carried a dedicatory inscription from a cavalry cohort of Gauls, Cohors IV Gallorum Quingenaria Equitata, which had served there.

A rainstorm began rolling in over the hills, and Austalis decided to take advantage of the shelter offered by the fort to spend the night there. He lit a fire on a dry space on the floor, and sat down to eat his supper.

The cold rain poured on the tiles of the roof as darkness fell, and splashed on the floor under the holes where tiles had fallen away under the blows of weather and old age. The flames of the little fire flickered in the draughts, briefly lighting up patches of wall.

Austalis had no fear of the angry ghosts of the Fourth Cohort of Gauls. Nodens was with him, and no Roman cavalrymen had been in this fort since before the memory of storytellers. The only sign of Roman cavalry was the horse that the *exploratores* had liberated from the Roman army.

In the morning, the storm had passed, on its way south to fall into the fountains of Londinium. Austalis rode out of the fort in bright sunshine, which was already drying out the mud. He left the fort behind to its quiet dissolution, a perfect symbol of the great truth that Rome was not invincible.

After two more days, Austalis turned west, intending to reach the coast at a point opposite the islands where the Atacotti lived. The country remained bleak and empty, with not even a shepherd's hut, and no warriors to challenge the single foreign horseman riding through. Occasionally Austalis saw small herds of cattle, backs braced against the cold wind, but nobody guarding them.

Eventually Austalis rode down the valley of a small river to the shore of the western sea. A heavy grey island frowned over a narrow strait, and Austalis rode along the shoreline, looking for a ford or an abandoned boat. Although the strait became narrower, there was no sign of either. He peered across the ruffled water, and suddenly he saw a movement like the point of a spear being brandished.

He waved back, deliberately, with both hands, hoping to show that he was not the outrider of an attacking army.

The spear stopped its threatening jabs. A few men came down to the opposite shore, and produced a small boat. As the boat began to cross the water, propelled by busy paddlers but no sails, Austalis hoped that these were indeed the Atacotti. He had never encountered them except in fearsome stories of their violence and savagery.

He remained in the saddle of his horse, to make himself more easily visible to whoever was guiding the boat across the choppy water.

As it came nearer, Austalis saw that there were four men in it, of whom two carried spears braced under their elbows as they paddled, making the advancing boat resemble an oncoming water-beetle with a pair of stiff grey antennae.

The boat found a suitable spot to land, and Austalis slowly rode over to it.

The two men with spears leapt towards him, pushing the points of the spears at his chest.

Austalis raised his hands again, to show that he was not holding a weapon, and tried to look friendly as he gazed down at the two men.

They had long hair and thick disorderly beards. They were both lightly dressed in animal skins, leaving their chests and arms bare in spite of the cold.

A third man, wearing a coin on a thong necklace, came forward and addressed Austalis in perfect Latin.

"Who are you, and why do you approach our islands?"

Austalis wondered if this was a formula that the man had been taught without understanding it.

"I am Austalis, the herald of King Ceredig of Gododdin. My mission is to invite the Atacotti to join a great war against the Roman provinces of Britain. My request is to be conducted to your ruler."

"We know what your mission is. You have been observed ever since you returned from Germany."

Even Marcella or Magnus Maximus had not spoken Latin with so clear and elegant a pronunciation.

"If you know of my mission, you must have an answer ready for my question: will I be allowed to cross to your islands and present my king's message?"

"You will. You took a long route to get here. You failed to notice an old overgrown road leading west when you left the fort on the northern Wall. I watched you take the wrong way."

"Why didn't you redirect me?"

“We never show ourselves on the island of Britain, except when we are disguised. At this moment we are violating that rule, and my warriors are keen to return to our own islands. Are you ready?”

“Yes, I am,” Austalis replied, wondering how they intended to transport his horse. The boat was far too small.

“Dismount from your horse, and remove your luggage from him.”

Austalis stepped down to the ground, and stripped the packbags from the horse.

“Now stand aside,” was the next order, which he obeyed.

The two spearmen lunged forward and killed the horse, which fell to the ground so heavily that the earth shook. Before Austalis could speak out his astonishment, the men produced long stone knives and began hacking through the horse’s neck.

Austalis finally found his voice.

“Why did they do that? I needed that horse!”

“No horses are allowed in our lands. You must also give up any objects made of iron that you may be carrying. The Britons came hundreds of years ago, and conquered our ancestors because they possessed horses and iron weapons, which we did not. For that reason, neither horses nor iron are allowed on our islands.”

Austalis was still enraged at the killing of the horse, but he knew that he had no choice but to play by whatever rules the Atacotti chose to lay down. He threw down his iron knife, and searched his bags to make sure he had no other iron objects with him. It would have been foolish to jeopardise his mission by offending the Atacotti.

“There. I have nothing else made of iron. You may trust me. My devotion is to the god of silver, not of iron.”

“We trust you. Come to the boat.”

The two spearmen had now succeeded in cutting off the horse’s head, which they flung away onto the ground, away from the sea. Austalis could feel heat radiating from the headless carcass, still leaking frothy blood.

He turned away and followed his guide towards the boat.

The spearmen pushed Austalis into the boat, and then leapt in as it pulled away. They cocked their spears under their arms, and took up their paddles.

Austalis sat next to the man who had spoken with him.

“May I know your name?”

“I am Eghulex. The Romans call me Egulius.”

“The Romans? I wondered where you had learnt such excellent Latin. Have you spent many years in the Empire?”

“I was a centurion in a Roman legion, the First Italica.”

“The First Italica doesn’t serve in Britain.”

“I did my 25 years’ service in the province of Moesia Inferior, in eastern Europe. There are auxiliary units of Atacotti in Italy, but I preferred to serve in a legion. I am, after all, a Roman citizen.”

Austalis could hardly believe he was hearing such a speech, in almost comically precise Latin, in a rough boat paddling across cold water in the remotest part of the known world.

“How did you claim Roman citizenship?” he asked.

“Through my father,” Eghulex replied. “The Atacotti are everywhere, but neither the Romans, the Britons, nor the Irish can detect or recognise us.”

“You have seen the richest parts of the Empire, yet you came home, if this is your home.”

“This land is the sun that warms us, wherever we are, and illuminates us anywhere in the world and keeps us knowing what people we are.”

The shore of the island grew closer, a wall of grey and purple rocks tumbling down from a sky full of heavy clouds that blew past and swirled around each other as if stirred by the hand of an angry god.

“So you are the mysterious Atacotti, of whom everyone in Britain has heard but nobody has met.”

“We are spread widely, but we prefer to be hidden. Britain was our land once. In Ireland they call us the Shee.”

“Are you a ruler in this land, or are you a herald like me?”

The boat grounded on a shingle beach.

“I am neither ruler nor herald, for we have none,” Eghulex replied. “I am a kind of priest, but then all our adult males are priests. Welcome to our islands.”

He and Austalis climbed out of the boat, and the crew dragged it up the beach with surprising ease.

“Can they speak Latin, too?” Austalis asked.

“No. They know only our own language.”

“I have learnt one thing from listening to you,” Austalis told him, “that there is no truth in the fable that the Atacotti can’t pronounce the letter ‘f’”.

“I can pronounce it because I know Latin,” Eghulex replied. “None of these other men can. Even if they could, they would pretend they couldn’t. It’s a kind of token, to show that one really belongs to the people.”

The crew turned the boat over, and set it down on a row of stones. They covered the boat with turves, and put rocks on top of them to prevent the constant westerly winds from blowing them away. The boat was so skilfully hidden that it would be difficult to detect even from only a few paces away.

“It’s almost magical, how they’ve made that boat look like a natural rock,” Austalis commented.

“If it is not magic, it’s close to that. Our divine protectors have given us the gift of hiding and disguise. We walk openly in the streets of Londinium and nobody knows us for what we are.”

The other men stood around expectantly, adjusting their skin capes on their shoulders, waiting to move on.

“We must start walking, if we are to reach our destination before the sun sets,” Eghulex said. “The winter days are short in these northern islands. There are times when I miss the sunshine of Italy.”

One of the spearmen led the way, Austalis followed, and Eghulex walked beside him. The other spearmen walked at the rear of the group.

Once they had scrambled over the hill, they lost sight of the sea, and because it was to leeward, Austalis could no longer smell it on the wind. They tramped over bare rock and thin purple lichen. Austalis could not see a single tree, and there was hardly any soil on the island. He could not image how people could live here. The land would support sheep, but it would be a hard life to live entirely on the products of the sheep, and the skins the men were wearing had come from other animals.

They did not halt once, and Austalis was cold and hungry by the end of the afternoon when Eghulex suddenly stopped.

“We have arrived.”

Austalis saw nothing, until the leading spearman ran down a hole into the earth like a rabbit. Eghulex went next, and beckoned to Austalis to follow him. Austalis suddenly remembered being buried alive in the Mithraeum, but he was a warrior, and he followed.

## CHAPTER FOURTEEN

At first, Austalis could see nothing in the darkness, and he was aware only of a wave of warm air blowing towards him. A man bumped into his back, so Austalis walked on.

He expected the ground to slope downwards, but it levelled out just as his eyes began to adapt to the dim light.

“Can you see?” Eghulex asked him. “This is a great privilege. No foreigner has ever entered here in possession of his whole body.”

Austalis bridled at being called a foreigner. Was this not still Britain, even if it was an offshore island? He was also puzzled by the reference to men coming here without their whole bodies.

“How far do we go?” he asked Eghulex.

“Not much further. Don’t ask me how far the underground chambers go on. Even we don’t know. The tunnel system is very ancient. The tunnels were made to connect natural caves. There are places where you can hear the sound of the sea, and you can’t be sure whether it’s above or below you.”

Austalis caught the flicker of flames ahead, and as he came closer the light of the flames was reflected from pale rocks embedded in the tunnel walls.

“Do you see what I mean by incomplete bodies?” Eghulex asked, pointing at the wall, and immediately Austalis saw that what he had taken for pale rocks were human skulls. There were the skulls of defeated enemies displayed outside Caeravon, too, but the deceased enemies of the Atacotti, in uncountable numbers, were forced to stare with empty eyes as their conquerors paraded by, for age after age.

The wind changed direction, and whirled around Austalis. The smoke from the fires must escape through holes, which would generate air currents.

“This place is vulnerable,” he told Eghulex. “If the Romans came, they could keep you trapped in these caves.”

“They would have to seal all the entrances first. In any case, the Romans will never come. We keep these islands because neither Roman nor Briton nor Irishman wants them.”

More people appeared, dressed in skins or rags, going about their business. Austalis now saw a sparkle of tiny points of light in the distance, like the twinkling Pleiades in the constellation of the Bull. That made him think of Mithras, who had slain a bull, so he tried to think of the lights as tiny silver coins made from the metal ruled by Nodens.

“The warriors are assembled to hear you,” Eghulex said.

Austalis saw that the many little points of light were the tips of spears held by a crowd of men sitting on the ground, silent, and looking at each other with eyes as blank as the empty sockets of the skulls on the walls. The warriors had seated themselves around an empty space. Eghulex led Austalis into the middle of it, making him feel like an animal in a Roman arena.

Eghulex made an announcement introducing Austalis, who could understand only his own name in the rattle of harsh consonants. From his knowledge of Latin, British, and Germanic, Austalis knew that those three languages had so many similar words that they must all have descended from one common ancestral language, but he could not detect one recognisable word in the language of the Atacotti.

“Make your speech, and I shall translate it,” Eghulex said.

Austalis laid out his plans for the simultaneous attack on the Roman provinces, mentioning that the British kingdoms of the north and the Saxons and English of Germany

had already agreed to take part in it.

After he had finished, there was murmuring, and a voice shouted a harsh phrase, which was taken up and cheered by others, echoing around the cave like thunder and making the torches waver. Austalis waited for Eghulex to translate the words.

“They say that the Atacotti want no allies. We have always held aloof from the other peoples who have come to live in these islands, the Britons, the Irish, the Romans, the Germans.”

“I have heard the same objection from other peoples,” Austalis replied. “We are not proposing an alliance. Each nation will wage war by itself, under no command but its own leaders. The idea is to wage these wars at the same time, so as to overpower the Roman defences. In any case, so many warriors are already committed, that the great war is certain to take place. My task as herald of Gododdin is to inform the Atacotti of the plan and the date of the attack. I merely propose that you consider whether it may be profitable to you to take advantage of the pressure on the Roman army at that time. Ask them whether the skulls of the Duke of the Northern Marches and the Count of the Saxon Shore would not make fine decorations for the walls of your stronghold.”

Eghulex translated this reply in a loud voice, which reverberated in the cavern, so that each phrase was heard two or three times. The warriors began a roaring, which at first sounded to Austalis like a meaningless spontaneous cry, but as it continued he realised that it had some ritual meaning. The warriors roared in the dimness of the cave, swaying their spears, and some tore off their animal-skin capes and whirled them around their heads.

Eghulex shouted in his ear, above the noise.

“You’ve convinced them! We shall join in the war.”

“Who decides? Isn’t there a king, or a chief of the warband?”

“We are all priests and kings and warriors. We have all decided.”

The roaring began to fade, and some of the warriors began to get up from the floor. Some walked off into the further depths of the cave, their spearpoints dimming away like dying stars. Others pushed past Austalis, going towards the outer entrance of the tunnel. Some clapped him on the shoulder, and some said “Salve!”, the only Latin greeting they knew. Austalis wondered why they did not seem to know any British greeting.

One man said “Salve, prater!” as he passed, baffling Austalis for a moment until he realised that the man had meant to hail him as a brother, but had not been able to pronounce “frater”.

Eventually, the crowd of warriors had all dispersed. Only women and silent children remained in sight. Eghulex brought Austalis over to a square of polished rock on the floor.

“This is a place of honour for you to sit in,” he said, and so Austalis squatted down uncomfortably on the hard rock. A meal of meat and warm milk was served to him, and Eghulex by two women who retired immediately into the shadows.

Austalis tried to see what lay beyond in those further corridors, but he could not.

“I didn’t expect to see the classical underworld before I died,” he remarked.

“Only Orpheus saw that, when he went to fetch Eurydice,” Eghulex replied. “This isn’t the realm of Pluto. The strait of water you crossed wasn’t the river Styx, even if our boatmen looked like Charon to you.”

“How is it that you, a former centurion of the First Italica legion, who has seen so much of the cities and wealth of the Empire, have chosen to return here?” Austalis asked.

“You might as well ask why a warrior-priest of the Atacotti should choose to spend so many years of his life in an alien Empire. Mind you, there is one place in the Empire, in the mountains on the borders of the provinces of Iberia Tarraconensis and Gallia Aquitania, where our nation still lives openly today, speaking its own language, with not a single ‘f’ to be heard and offend the loyal ear.”

“Have you been there?” Austalis asked.

“I don’t need to. This is my home and my capital, even though I like much of Latin culture. Do you know any Latin poetry?”

“I regret that I don’t. My father learnt his Latin as a soldier, and if he knew any verses, they probably weren’t literary. Wait, I know two lines. They were on a mosaic floor I saw in a villa at Venodala, in the south of Britain:

Invida si tauri vidisset Iuno natatus  
iustius Aeolias isset ad usque domos”.

Austalis had stared at that couplet picked out in the blue-grey stones in the mosaic floor many times, while Marcella had spoken to him about Christ and of her love for her villa in its wooded hills.

“That’s from Virgil’s *Aeneid*,” Eghulex replied. “Jupiter has taken the form of a bull to carry away Europa, and that’s why the verse says that if Juno had seen the bull swimming like that, she would have been more justified in going to the halls of Aeolias. He’s the god of the winds.”

Austalis sat on the uncomfortable rock, and studied Eghulex in his rough skin clothes, with a Roman coin around his neck, and could not reconcile the savagery of his dress and way of life here with his knowledge of Latin language and literature and his experience as a polished centurion of Legio I Italica in the bright sophisticated lands around the Middle Sea.

“I think you must be like me,” Austalis said. “You want to fight Rome, but you love many Romans and their way of life.”

“That’s true, but we do not love the Empire that rules our lands.”

“The Romans were expelled from Gododdin two hundred years ago.”

“Not so,” Eghulex replied. “They chose to leave, because their soldiers were needed elsewhere to defend more valuable provinces on the continent of Europe. They could have stayed. For that matter, they could have come here.”

“I hear they sent a legion to Ireland once.”

“The Ninth Hispana. It was in support of a local prince. The Romans hoped to set him up as a client-king, and use that as a base from which to expand their control and conquer Ireland. It’s the method they used in some parts of Britain.”

Austalis tried to imagine what Britain might be like if the Romans had never come, but he could not. The influence of Rome permeated every corner, even this remote island where the Roman army had never been seen. Perhaps Ireland would give him some idea, but he had never seen Ireland.

“What happened to the Ninth Hispana?”

“They never came back. The Irish united against them, for once. They like their endless little wars, and they didn’t want the Roman army imposing peace and order. The Romans don’t like to talk about their defeat, and so that’s why no Roman has ever told you what happened to that legion.”

“My father told me that three whole legions were lost in Germany, once.”

“They don’t like to talk about that, either.”

Austalis knew that night must have fallen, but here in this cave there was no way of marking the passage of time.

“What must I do here now?” he asked Eghulex.

“Stay the night as our guest. In the morning, a ship will take you down the west coast to the Irish colonies.”

“I am honoured to have had this visit, even if it is so brief.”

“Few strangers have ever seen our underground strongholds, even though there are still some in the mountain regions on the mainland of Britain itself.”

“I am glad that you obviously trust me not to betray you.”

“You could never find that tunnel entrance again, and if you did betray us, the Atacotti are everywhere and revenge would be quick and certain. In any case, you want us to participate in your war, so it is not in your interest to betray us.”

After the meal, Eghulex lent Austalis a bundle of furs in which to sleep, and showed him a stone box-bed filled with heather instead of hay. Nobody could make hay on this bleak island. Austalis was surprised that he had not been presented to anyone other than Eghulex himself, but perhaps the Atacotti believed that the less he knew about them, the better. In any case, he was a guest, and it would be out of place for him to question the actions of his hosts.

He settled down to sleep. His eyes were still half open when he noticed a white patch on the wall above him, lit by a faint rushlight. When Austalis opened his eyes fully and sat up, he saw that what he had noticed was one of the skulls embedded as trophies in the walls. He lay down again, surprised to be comforted by the knowledge that he would be watched over through the night by the physical remains and the dead spirit of some ancient victim of the Atacotti.

Eghulex woke him with a bowl of warm milk and a lump of hot meat still on the bone.

“Is it morning?” Austalis asked.

“So the sentries report. We would never know otherwise. The torches burn for ever.”

A woman brought Austalis a bowl of icy water to wash with. He thought that this was probably a special courtesy to him laid on by Eghulex, because none of the Atacotti whom Austalis had seen seemed to have washed their faces or hands in recent years.

The woman took the bowl away.

“I hope you had a good wash,” Eghulex said, “because now we’re going to undo the results. Here are some clothes we’ll lend you for the voyage.”

He handed Austalis a long-sleeved smock, a pair of trousers, and a pair of canvas bags, all dyed in irregular patches of dark green.

“Put them on over your own clothes. These two bags are to cover your boots.”

Austalis obeyed, noticing that the clothes had a vegetal smell, as though he could peel them apart and eat them.

Eghulex gave him a bag made of the same material.

“Put your gear in this. Now comes the worst part. It’s too bad your father gave you blond hair.”

He produced a block of animal fat, dyed with the same green colour.

“I have to do this,” he said, and began smearing the green fat on Austalis’ face and hands, and then rubbing it into his hair. The vegetable smell now enveloped Austalis, so that he felt like a man-sized vegetable himself, and he guessed that he probably looked like one, too.

Eghulex stood back to check the result.

“You look almost black in this torchlight. It won’t look so dark out in the daylight.”

“Did you learn this trick from the Roman army?” Austalis asked.

“Not at all. The Roman Channel fleet picked up the technique from us. I told you we were good at disguise. In fact, sometimes the Saxons and English think they’ve sighted a Roman ship when it’s really one of ours.”

“I hope this stuff washes off,” Austalis remarked, not wanting to have to present himself to some Irish ruler looking like a victim of an appalling plague.

“You’ll have to scrub hard, because it’s fairly resistant to water,” Eghulex replied. “It has to be, to last for days at sea. Come on, we must get you away on the outgoing tide.”

He led Austalis out through the corridors and tunnels. None of the people they passed spoke to them. Eventually the air began to blow against their faces, and soon Austalis saw the tunnel entrance.

“It isn’t so far to walk this time,” Eghulex said. “The ship is waiting at a place which is much nearer. You have a tiresome talent for choosing inconvenient routes.”

“I can do no better, if nobody guides me through these strange lands and waters.”

When they emerged from the tunnel, Austalis found that it was only just after dawn, with the last morning stars fading in the cold clear sky. It would be a sunny but brisk day.

Austalis turned back, and could not see the tunnel entrance. It had been covered immediately with a screen of vegetation.

“No wonder your strongholds are so secret,” he said as he and Eghulex walked off.

“We work hard for that effect.”

“Don’t you ever lose track of day and night down there?”

“We don’t, because we’re used to it. Visitors often get confused.”

Austalis suddenly remembered all the stories of people who had gone down into the underground world of the fairies, and emerged to find that far more time had passed in the outside world than they thought. For that matter, the fairies were always said to be everywhere in Britain, to be adept at concealing themselves, and to live in secret places under the earth.

“Are your people the source of all the legends about fairies?” he asked Eghulex.

“How should we know? It’s your people who make up these stories, not mine. I can tell you one thing: we don’t believe in fairies.”

By the middle of the morning they had arrived at a gap between two hills, and they followed it down to the sea. From this part of the island there was no distant shore to be seen, and the sight of this empty ocean reminded Austalis of the sea on the other coast of Britain, which he had crossed to reach Europe.

“Is there any land on the other side?”

“Do you think I know the answers to all questions? Well, in that direction lie the outer islands, and then a little to the south and west of them is Ireland. Beyond Ireland, don’t ask me. There must be land if you sail far enough, because the world is round. Did you know that? It’s something the Greeks told me.”

“If the world is round - ” Austalis began, struck by a new idea.

“ - it therefore follows,” Eghulex interrupted, “that you would either reach unknown lands or sail on until you came to the coast of China. If you want to do that, you must find a bigger boat than that one.”

Austalis looked out over the empty sea, but he could not see any boat. Suddenly he noticed a patch of blue-green sea with no waves, and then he nearly jumped at the sight of

eyes, eight or ten eyes, staring at him from out of the sea. He could then see the form of the camouflaged boat waiting for him. All the crew were wearing green clothes like his, and he remembered another traditional belief about the fairies: they were supposed to consider that green was their special colour, and were reputed to resent anyone else wearing it.

“This is as far as I come,” Eghulex said. “Have a good voyage.”

“You’re making sure I leave, aren’t you?” Austalis replied.

“Yes, I am, but my farewell is genuinely meant nonetheless. If any of my people need to contact you, what password should they use to identify themselves to you?”

Austalis thought for a moment, and then remembered the mispronounced greeting he had received.

“Let them say “salve prater” with a “p”“.

Eghulex smiled.

“No Roman or Briton is likely to say that by chance. Well, so be it. Perhaps we shall meet each other in the great war to come. Go on, the tide will be running fast soon.”

Austalis splashed through the fiercely cold water, holding the bag with his belongings up over his head. One of the Atacotti crew took it from him, and stowed it under a rowing bench. Austalis sat on the bench, stamping his boots to try to warm his legs, which were aching from the chill of the water.

In a flurry of crisp orders full of harsh consonants, the boat was rowed out into the open sea, where the sail, green, of course, was hoisted, and the oars were shipped.

The boat heeled in the rough northwesterly wind, which, if it kept up, would blow them down the coast. Austalis hoped the crew would not have to row all the way back against it.

He wrapped a green-dyed animal skin which one of the sailors had handed him around his legs, and thrust his hands under it.

So far nobody had spoken to him, and Austalis thought it would be better for him not to break the silence himself.

Twice during the day, pieces of cold meat were handed out, but no bread. Austalis expected to be given water to drink, but instead he was allowed to take a turn drinking from a wineskin which turned out to be filled with milk. In Gododdin, warriors did not drink milk, but this was an Atacotti ship on the western sea and Austalis courteously took what he was given.

Still nobody spoke to him, and the men talked very little among themselves. Austalis wondered whether it was physically tiring to speak such a hard language with so many grating and emphatic sounds. Even Germanic sounded flowing and delicate by comparison.

Another meal was given out during the night, just before a period of rain began, making Austalis even colder. The green faces of the Atacotti, black in the darkness of the night, were invisible. The night seemed to last for ever.

When the dawn arrived, Austalis saw that they were approaching a coastline with blue hills in the distance, and brown fields close to the sea. The boat kept coming closer inshore, and finally it grounded gently in shallow water by a sandy beach.

Austalis clambered over the gunwale, and dropped into the water, which was not as cold as he had expected. His bag was handed to him, and the commander of the boat indicated with gestures that he wanted the return of the clothes Eghulex had given him.

Austalis set the bag back in the boat, and took off the green protective clothes. One of the sailors took back the bag, and gave Austalis his possessions, which he held up over his head.

The commander pointed, and Austalis took careful note of the direction, lining it up with what few landmarks there were on this low coast.

The boat pulled away, and Austalis waded through the shallows holding the bundle over his head, thinking that this was hardly a dignified posture for the herald of Gododdin arriving in a foreign kingdom.

He set the bundle down safely above the reach of the waves, and returned to the water to wash off as much as he could of the green dye. When his hands were almost clean, he assumed that his face and hair were washed as well. He wished he had brought a mirror with him, although this was not an article he would want to find in a warrior's baggage.

Because there was no wood in sight with which to build a fire, the only way Austalis could warm himself was by walking, so he set off up the beach.

After following the direction that had been pointed out to him, after a short distance he came upon a track leading away across the hinterland, which was flat and seemed to have once been cultivated fields. If anyone had ever lived there, they must have left or been driven away, because there was no sign of life now.

Even the Roman road was so buried under dead leaves that Austalis almost stumbled in the drainage ditch at the south side. He turned east, kicking the leaves aside to left and right as a form of exercise to make his boots dry faster.

This road must once have led to somewhere further west: the Romans did not build roads from one empty moor to another. Austalis knew that there had been forts on the west coast, to watch for the Irish just as the forts of the Saxon Shore watched for the Saxons, but he did not know if any of them were still in commission. There certainly could not be any near here, because the Irish had not only landed, but were permanently settled.

The clouds gradually thinned and broke up, and Austalis found himself squinting into the morning sun as he looked ahead on the road.

Eventually, he saw a low hill beside the road on the left, curiously regular in shape, like an artificial construction. If this was a fortress, he should soon meet guards, and, as he had expected, four warriors came forward to challenge him. They carried green spears and small round shields, with a bundle of what looked like tiny arrows at their belts.

Austalis tied the green ribbon that King Ceredig's priest had given him around his arm, hoping that the Irish would recognise this sign.

The leading warrior came up to Austalis, and addressed him in British, but in an odd accent which blurred the consonants.

"Are you the herald of Gododdin?"

"I am honoured with that task. I come to proclaim a great war, and to so inform your king if I may be granted an audience with him."

"Then you must return to the sea, because our King Eochaid is in his palace in Leinster, in Ireland."

"In that case, may I see his governor here in Britain?"

"You may. He has authority to speak for King Eochaid in all matters affecting the king's British domains."

Two of the warriors came around and fell in behind Austalis while the other two marched off towards the hill. Austalis felt like a prisoner with this armed escort around him, but he hoped that it was intended as a honour.

As they approached, Austalis realised that what he had taken for a natural hill was in fact a ring of fortifications, built of earth. Some of the earth was still bare, probably having

been worked on only that same year. Austalis supposed that the northern Roman Wall must have looked something like that, before the earth was overgrown with vegetation. Why had the Irish built such a fort? Austalis could see that they would not have the resources available to build in stone, but surely they could have built a wooden palisade.

It turned out that there was a gap in the fortifications guarded by a wooden gateway over which two sentries watched from a crenellated wooden tower.

Austalis thought that there would be a settlement inside, but instead he found himself facing another turf wall. He was led to the right, where it turned out that there was another gateway. It was set out of line with the outer gateway so that a rushing attack would not break through into the fort by carrying its momentum through the inner gateway.

After the inner gates had been drawn open, Austalis expected to see a town, or a palace. Instead, he saw a farm.

The interior of the fort was almost completely bare pasture, over which herds of cattle, obviously the survivors of the annual Samain slaughtering, wandered among a few thatched huts and one small house. Only a few boys were to be seen, minding the cattle.

"The warriors are in the royal hall," the leader of the warriors told Austalis.

The little house was obviously the royal hall. He was ushered in under the eaves, and immediately he realised that there had been a feast the night before.

Part of the evidence was a huge bare bone lying on the table, with smaller bones being industriously gnawed by enormous dogs, but most of the story was told by the dozen sleeping men lying in the straw and mud of the floor.

One of his escort roared an announcement in which Austalis caught his own name and the term "Votadine", which must be the Irish name for Gododdin.

Only one of the collapsed bodies showed any reaction, heaving himself to seat himself on a log in front of the fire. A woman came out of the shadows and began clearing away the table, and the man said something sharp to her. She pulled out a bone comb with at least half its teeth broken, and handed it to him. He carefully combed out his hair, sitting with his back to the fire, representing himself as a tough man who did not care who saw him using a woman's comb.

When he was satisfied with his appearance, he looked straight at Austalis for the first time.

"You come to propose an alliance," he said, in good British.

Austalis wearily recited yet again his response to this challenge.

"There is no need for an alliance. The Britons, the Saxons, the English, the Atacotti, and, if you join the war, the Irish, will time their own individual attacks to coincide so as to overwhelm the Roman defences."

"Ah. I am Niall, King Eochaid's commander here. These warriors you see are the only ones who did not return to Ireland for the winter. That shows you how the king holds me in his confidence, and how his name is feared in this part of Britain."

Austalis was glad to feel the heat of the fire.

"King Eochaid's power and eminence are not in doubt. That is why my King Ceredig of Gododdin hopes Eochaid will add his strength to this war."

"Eochaid is interested," Niall replied. "Ireland is overflowing with too many young men, who may profitably be sent to turn their energy against the Romans in Britain instead of making trouble at home. Furthermore, Eochaid has no doubt that the British and the Atacotti

will do their part, because they live on these islands; but what guarantee can we have that the Saxons and the English will cross over from Europe?"

"They have sworn, and it is to their advantage - "

"Yes, but Eochaid wants an alliance between these distant Saxons and his own kingdom of Leinster."

Austalis felt serious resistance for the first time since he had begun his travels as the herald of Gododdin. There was no time now to return to Germany and negotiate the terms of a formal treaty. If the Irish were adamant, he would accept their refusal and count on them coordinating their attacks with everyone else's simply because that would be to their benefit. He probed further.

"What type of alliance does King Eochaid have in mind?"

"My king's wife, Mongfind, princess of Munster, consort of King Eochaid of Leinster, High King of all Ireland, has recently departed from this life. The king now seeks a Saxon or English princess to confirm the alliance for this war, and to build a link between the two kingdoms for the future."

A Saxon princess? Austalis remembered Kairann, the daughter of Osbert, who wanted to marry her to a king.

"I can offer you a Saxon princess to seal this alliance."

## CHAPTER FIFTEEN

Austalis hoped that Kairann would be accepted as a princess by the Irish when they met her. He knew that she would never deny that status. Austalis put forward her candidacy at once.

"I offer you Kairann, the daughter of Osbert of the Saxons." Austalis did not dare go so far as to claim explicitly that Osbert was a king. "I saw her when I visited her father's hall in Germany. She is a beautiful, intelligent and dignified girl who will make a fine queen to please your king."

"I have a personal interest in such a marriage," Niall said. "Eochaid has promised me that if he ever has a son he will be named after me. It will be a great honour to have another Niall to strut in the world as the king of Leinster."

"Then let a pact be made, and heralds be sent to Leinster and Germany, to arrange the marriage."

Niall leaned back on the log, bringing his hair dangerously close to the flames of the fire.

"Can you write?" he asked unexpectedly.

"Yes, I can," Austalis replied.

"Then you may write the message. I will have the women clean a couple of bones for you to write on."

Austalis realised that Niall intended him to write the message in Ogam characters rather than in Latin letters.

"The Saxons cannot read Ogam. For that matter, I don't think even the Gauls have many men who can read it."

"Write to the Saxons in any kind of letters they can read," Niall replied. "There is no hurry in this matter, and you must receive our hospitality. I will have the bones prepared."

It would not be easy to write in Latin letters by scratching them on a bone, but Austalis knew he would only make himself look like a fool at a turf-walled Irish fort by asking for a stylus and a wax-coated wooden writing tablet. He was under the protection of Nodens, the Lord of Silver, not of Lud, the god of humour, and this was not Lud's festival day, the 1st of April.

Niall invited Austalis to put his wet clothes and boots in front of the fire to dry out. Austalis sat wrapped in a rough blanket, chewing the scraps of the previous night's feast. From time to time, one of the unconscious warriors sprawled on the floor like the casualties of battle would revive, stagger to a standing or tottering position, and blink suspiciously at Austalis. Once they saw that he was receiving Niall's hospitality, they lost interest in him and lurched outside into the cold fresh air.

Niall stretched himself and yawned.

"The winter is a dull time for warriors. There's no fighting to be done, and no enemies to face. Britain is a dull island. It needs incessant petty wars like Ireland."

"Don't you guard your borders?" Austalis asked.

"I don't even know where our borders are. I'm not even sure we have them. The Romans don't bother us, and the Britons abandoned this land to us without a fight. Of course, they can't fight any more. The Romans don't allow anyone except the army to bear weapons within the frontiers of the Empire."

"Aren't we within the frontiers of the Empire now?" Austalis replied. "We're certainly south of the Wall."

“Ah, well, life is not as simple as it once was, with Roman citizens inside the Empire and the rest of us outside. Look at all the peoples who live in Britain now: Irish, Saxons, English. The Wall doesn’t mean as much as it once did.”

The same female servant brought in two scrubbed flat bones and laid them on the table. She put her apron over her head before going out again, and Austalis heard rain beginning to fall on the roof.

Niall sat on the table, making it groan.

“Let us compose our messages. I’ll say them, and you can write them down. Here’s a knife,” he added, whipping out a pointed dagger and slamming it into the table so quickly that Austalis nearly leapt with surprise.

Austalis had to use a fair amount of force to pull the knife out of the wood of the table. He tested the point on the back of one of the bones. It cut a clean straight scratch.

Niall took a deep breath, as if to recite a verse.

“To Eochaid, High King of Ireland and king of the parts of Leinster in Ireland and in Britain. Princess Kairann of the Saxons is offered to you as a worthy bride. Got that?”

“Yes,” Austalis replied, “but you’ll have to go more slowly when I have to put down the other message in Latin letters. Carry on.”

Niall coughed, and spat into the fire. The flames shrank back for an instant.

“This marriage,” Niall continued, “will cement the alliance between our peoples in the great war against Rome, and in all other wars to come. Sign it with my name, Niall.”

Austalis did so, and set the bone down on the table. He picked up the other one, and poised the knife.

“Now for the one to Osbert. What do you want to say?”

“Well, I’ll leave most of it to you. You know him, I don’t.”

Austalis suspected that Osbert would be won by anything which addressed him as if he held royal status.

“All right,” he suggested, “how’s this? To Osbert of the Saxons, King Eochaid, High King of All Ireland and king of Leinster, seeks the hand of your daughter the princess Kairann.”

“You didn’t say anything about the war,” Niall objected, although he did not seem to have noticed that Austalis had not named Osbert as a king.

“That’s what I was coming to,” Austalis lied. “This great king will make a worthy husband for your noble daughter, and a strong partner for you in your war - ”

“Ally,” Niall insisted. “Ally, not partner.”

“ - ally for you in your war against Rome,” Austalis concluded, telling himself that he could probably find an ambiguous word when he translated the message into Germanic.

“That will do,” Niall agreed. “Write it down.”

Austalis had to spend a long time scratching angular Roman letters into the bone. He hoped that Osbert would have someone readily available to read the message to him. Austalis had no idea how to spell Germanic words, never having seen them written down, so he spelt them as they would be spelt according to the conventions of Latin.

Only when he had finished scratching out the text, and blown the tiny scraps of bony dust out of the grooves forming the letters, did Austalis remember his father having told him that the peoples of northern Germany, such as the Frisians, the English, and the Saxons, usually wrote on tree bark, in the signs called “runes”, which looked similar to Ogam.

Austalis did not waste time worrying about it. He did not know how to write in runes,

and could not have found prepared tree bark to write on even if he did.

"How are you going to get the message to them in time?" he asked.

"No problem. We've got all winter. Every so often Eochaid sends over a courier with his greetings and a few simple orders for me. Of course, the man is really a spy, sent to make sure I'm not plotting to set up a kingdom of my own here."

"What about communicating with Osbert?"

"I'll let the courier take care of that. He's paid to be a courier of messages. He can take his ship into the Channel. The Saxon pirates are sure to investigate."

"If they take him to Osbert, he'll probably send Kairann back on the same ship," Austalis guessed.

"What of you, Austalis? It's a long road back to Gododdin, and you'd have to pass through the Wall."

"That's one reason I'm not going back to Gododdin. I intend to stay in Londinium until the war begins."

"Why Londinium? It's full of Roman soldiers and spies. You could never hide there. Why don't you stay here?"

"I mean no disrespect to the lands you command, but this is too far from the centre of events," Austalis said. He certainly had no wish to spend the next five months in this remote place with only a band of drunken warriors for company. He did see that Niall had a valid point. What if he met Mannius Paulinus in the street, or (his heart jumped) Marcella? Austalis was sure that the Roman authorities had lost track of his movements by now.

"If you find our kingdom too rude and distant, as I admit I do sometimes: it's so far from the centre of civilisation in Ireland; then go to a small place, such as Calleva."

"Calleva? I don't know much about it."

"It's a small city between here and Londinium. Nobody there will know you. Pretend to be a native Briton."

"I am a native Briton."

"From the Roman provinces, I mean. Take a job. Nobody will suspect that you're really a Pictish warrior, and the herald of Gododdin."

Austalis was outraged at the idea of a warrior suggesting to another warrior that he should demean himself to take work as a common labourer, but then reason began to supersede rage. It began to look like a good idea. The Romans would be looking for him in Gododdin, or on the Wall, or in Londinium, not as just another ordinary worker in Calleva.

One problem did occur to him.

"I'm a Briton, a Pict, but I don't look like one."

"Paint yourself blue with woad. The Romans think that's what everyone north of the Wall does every morning."

"Well, we don't. In any case, I don't want to look like someone from north of the Wall. My problem is that I look like a German. Not many Britons have blond hair like mine."

"Dye it green, then, but do a better job than you did before."

Austalis realised with embarrassment that the green dye was obviously as resistant to water as Eghulex had claimed.

"Of course, nobody will notice me with green hair."

"Look, in the cities, there are people descended from all the nations of the Roman Empire. Do you think that people will stare at blond hair? There are black men who speak

perfect British, and so they should, because their fathers and grandfathers were born here. Nobody notices the Shee.”

“The Shee? Oh, the Atacotti.”

“Right. The fabled Little People. Nobody will notice you. Anyway, there are plenty of jobs available.”

Austalis already knew that. There was a chronic shortage of labour in the cities of Roman Britain, and, he suspected, in the European provinces as well. That was very different from Gododdin, where there was always an over-supply of young men who spent their time training to be warriors with no wars to fight. Well, since they would never dream of taking jobs in the Roman cities of southern Britain, Austalis had found them work as fighters in a real war.

Austalis decided to take the risk.

“All right, I’ll go to Calleva. What kind of job should I ask for?”

“Don’t ask me; I’ve never had a job, and I’ll have to sink into deep disgrace with my king before I take one.”

“Well, I’ve got no trade, either.”

“Just go to a wineshop and ask who needs a man for unskilled work. Pretend you’re an ignorant man who can’t read.”

Austalis doubted that Niall could read anything other than Ogam, and probably not even that: after all he had asked Austalis to write the message to Eochaid.

Niall stretched himself again.

“Your clothes should be dry now.”

Austalis checked that they were, and put them on. He looked over the two messages scratched on the bones, taking them out to the door. He stood in the doorway to keep out of the rain, turning each warm bone in his hands until the light caught the shallow scratches at the sharpest angle. He memorised the messages because he had no way to write them down, and blessed the bards and priests who had taught him the habit of memorising texts.

From behind, Niall bellowed at him.

“You won’t leave yet, not in the rain. This is a royal hall, and you’re the honoured herald of the kingdom of Gododdin. I know it’s not much of a hall, and I only have thirteen warriors, and drunken pigs at that, but I’ll do my best.”

“I’ve only just got here,” Austalis replied, turning back from the chilly doorway to return to the warmth of the fire. “Who would leave in this rain?”

“Good. I don’t think you’re in a hurry, anyway.”

“I’m not. This was the last part of my journey. My mission is completed. Now all I have to do is to wait for spring and the war.”

He sat down on the log next to Niall, letting the fire warm his back while he looked out of the doorway at the grey misty rain in which the cows stood stoic and motionless.

“This reminds me of Germany,” he remarked, “though I’m not sure why. Perhaps it’s the rain.”

“It rains a lot in Ireland, too,” Niall said. “So much that the grass is actually greener than in Britain.”

“Rain usually goes from west to east. This rain must already have fallen on your kingdom of Leinster.”

“Well, it will go on to fall in Londinium tonight,” Niall replied.

Austalis imagined this rain drumming on the roof of the Governor's Palace in Londinium that evening, with Mannius Paulinus working late, wondering where Austalis was. Austalis remembered Marcella's town house in Londinium. Perhaps she was there at that moment, in the city on business, looking at the clouds. Perhaps she was where she said she preferred to be, in her villa at Venodala, where the night rain would swell the little river, just as it would have made the fountain play in the courtyard of the house in Londinium.

Austalis shook his head to clear these Roman pictures out of his mind. The interior of the Irishmen's hut, and the grassy enclosure of their turf fortress, were the real Britain to which he belonged and for which he was proclaiming this war. He got up from the log bench and went to the door.

The rain was beginning to ease off. Austalis looked out, and forced himself to forget about Roman things, by concentrating on the smell of mud and rain and cattle and damp timber, and the sight of the grassy ramparts of the fort, and the drunken warriors wandering and stumbling around in circles, groaning in unison with the lowing of the cattle. Mud and rain, grass and cows, wooden huts and drunken men: this was Priten, which would prevail over the Romans' elegant painted marble Britannia.

Austalis stayed in the Irish fortress for another day, until the sun broke out, and the rain had travelled far enough away to have cleared the island of Britain and be wetting the gloomy mud of Dorestad. Trusting Niall to do his best to deliver the bone message to Eochaid and Osbert, if only because of Niall's desire to have the High King of Ireland name a son Niall, Austalis set out on the road for Calleva.

There had been no Irishwoman in the fort who was wealthy enough to own a mirror, and no water wide enough to show him a reflection, so Austalis had to hope that the last of the Atacotti's green camouflage dye had now worn off his face. He did not want anyone to ask him questions.

Ever since the Atacotti had set him ashore, Austalis had officially been within the boundaries of the Roman Empire, but he had to travel for most of the day before he began to feel that he was in territory which the Romans truly ruled.

A convoy of merchants met him on an intersecting road and gave him a ride on the back of one of their waggons. One infallible sign of the local grip of Roman power was the state of the roads. Where the army still controlled the land, the local commanders would make sure that the roads were kept in good repair so that its men and vehicles could move quickly to meet any attack.

Here, at least, the roads were well kept up. Austalis knew that the peasants in the Roman provinces resented the unpaid labouring work that the army made them do, and did not look forward to the appearance every few months of a forceful centurion with an escort of soldiers to back up his orders for repair work to be undertaken immediately, and to his standards.

Austalis watched the grey ribbon of road unfold behind the cart on which he rode. The landscape might have been rich and colourful at other times of the year, but now the fields were brown and sleeping, and the trees were leafless apart from the evergreens on the low hilltops.

Eventually the cart began to be pulled from one side to another to make way for oncoming traffic. Austalis watched other carts go by in the opposite direction, with much exchanging of bad oaths and insults by both drivers. Obviously they were coming close to a city, and since Austalis had met the road after it had passed through Glevum and Corinium,

Calleva was the next town.

Sunset came early in the short winter day, and it was nearly night when the convoy passed a huge earth rampart which reminded Austalis of the northern Wall, and then another, and then the cart halted with more shouting and swearing up ahead.

After the cart had remained motionless for some time, Austalis decided to see whether he could make faster progress as a pedestrian instead of as a passenger. He jumped down from the cart, and when he came around it he found, as he had guessed, that they had stopped at the gate of Calleva.

Even the first cart in the convoy was held back behind a string of other vehicles, which had been waiting for the sun to set before they could enter the city, in conformity with the law that applied to all the cities of the Empire.

Austalis stepped off the road and jumped across the ditch. In the distance, flaring torches were burning over the gateway, and more flames burned on watchtowers along the wall, so that the city wall, invisible in the darkness, showed as a line of flames against the cloudy night sky.

Austalis tramped through the ditch, full of the fallen autumn leaves which the wind had blown into it, and muddy because of the previous day's rain. He made his way past a long line of vehicles, and was surprised that so much traffic should be coming to a small provincial city.

The first vehicles were being admitted through the gate as he reached it, and he saw the reason for the delay. Only one vehicle was allowed to pass through at a time. The outer gates were opened, and then shut. After a few moments, Austalis heard the inner gates being swung open, and the creak and rattle of the cart passing through. The outer gates were not opened again until the inner gates had been barred. Austalis could understand that Calleva would not leave its gates open at night. He knew better than anyone present how dangerous that would be, and he could see that it might prove a problem for young warriors from the free parts of Britain, who had never had to attack stone walls.

Austalis saw that there were small gateways to the side of the main gates, obviously intended for pedestrians. He approached the guards on his side of the road.

"Can I pass through? I'm by myself."

The soldiers looked him over. The harsh, intermittent light from the torches accentuated the lines and bristles of their hard and craggy faces, and lit highlights in their suspicious eyes.

Austalis suddenly realised that he was uncertain whether he had spoken to them in British or in Latin. He ran the scene over in his mind, and it seemed right in whatever language he remembered himself speaking. To his alarm, it worked just as well if he put the words into Germanic. Had he spoken in Germanic, and made the soldiers think he was a scout for some band of Saxon or English pirates raiding far inland?

To his relief, the answer, although unfriendly, was in British.

"If you're not with the convoy, then who are you, coming to the gate of Calleva after dark?"

"The convoy gave me a lift. They must have arrived late because they knew they couldn't bring their vehicles into the city till after sunset. The only reason I'm arriving now is because I was with them. I would have come during the day otherwise."

This long speech in British seemed to convince the soldiers that he was a native Briton.

"What do you want in Calleva?"

“I’m looking for work. I can do labour, and I can read and write.” Austalis thought fast. “I’m not a slave. I was employed in a villa, but it burnt down.”

Even as he told this story, Austalis realised how silly it sounded, but he counted on Calleva suffering from the general shortage of manpower that afflicted the Roman provinces.

“All right, go in,” the soldier said, unbarring a door, and Austalis went through into an unlit passage under the gateway.

The door was slammed and bolted behind him. The passage was unlit. Austalis groped forward in the total darkness, until he felt another door. It was bolted shut.

He thumped on it with his fist. Was this a trap, or a cruel joke? Would he be left locked in the darkness for days? Both doors were so stout that he could not possibly break through them, and there was no other way out.

Austalis pounded on the inner door again, and to his relief he heard the bar being pulled aside. The door swung open, and Austalis expected another interrogation. Instead, the man who had opened the door, a civilian, not a soldier, baffled Austalis by saying only two words.

“Two nummi.”

“What?” Austalis asked.

“Two copper coins with a silver wash. For your dues. What are you, a barbarian, or something, not to know what a nummus is? Pay up or go back.”

Austalis pulled out his stock of coins. He had not needed to use money since leaving through the Wall in the late spring. He turned the coins in his hand so that they caught the light from the torches on the ramparts, and picked out two coins of the right denomination, which the man snatched without thanks.

“Where can I stay the night?” Austalis asked him.

“Ask at a wineshop. Go down that street, take the third street on the right. That’ll bring you close to the Forum. There are wineshop there. Follow your nose and the noise.”

Austalis peered into the darkness of a Roman city street, wondering how he could find his way through the unlit alleys, but then the first cart burst through the inner gate. It was preceded by two men carrying torches, which lit up the street that the surly tax collector had pointed out.

Austalis fell in behind the cart, and followed the blazing torches and the rumbling cart. It was not quite like entering the city of Rome as an Emperor in a triumph, but it was as good a way as any of entering the city of Calleva as the advance spy of a hostile army.

The torches threw enough light for Austalis to be able to pick out the intersecting streets as they passed. When they reached the third street, Austalis left the cart and turned right as he had been directed. Following the instructions, he followed the smell of wine and the noise of over-loud conversation to a house where lights burned behind shuttered windows, so that half a dozen horizontal bars of light shone out between the slats.

Austalis pushed open the door of the wineshop. There were about ten customers sitting around. Austalis was surprised that the proprietor used so many candles for such a small clientele. He could almost believe that there was a danger that the flames of all the candles might set fire to the air which was saturated with the fumes of the wine.

Austalis went to the counter and took a stool.

“A cup of wine, please. British.”

The proprietor poured him out a cup of the local product.

“Not many people ask for that,” he said.

"I like it," Austalis replied, showing the man how many coins he had, to prove that he had not asked for British wine because he was too poor to pay for an imported product. "Tell me this. I've only just arrived in Calleva, and I've never been here before. Where could I find work? I can do physical labour, and I can read and write, and count, and do sums."

"Try the church. They need someone to look after the building."

"I'm not a skilled tradesman," Austalis replied, which was true: he had been trained only as a warrior.

"You don't need to be. The army sends over carpenters and masons to do the technical jobs. The local commander is a devoted Christian."

"Are you a Christian?" Austalis asked.

"Hey, you don't ask questions like that if you want to drink in here," the proprietor snapped, as most of the other customers turned to Austalis with hostile murmurs. "This is a place where everybody can be friendly, and we don't want any arguments, right?"

One of the other customers added his support.

"More men have been killed in fights over religion than for any other cause."

"All right, I'm sorry," Austalis said, embarrassed, but he was glad that he had not learnt his lesson about Roman religious sensitivities the hard way, by a knife in the ribs inserted by an offended believer. "I've never been to Calleva before."

"The penalty for the first offence," the proprietor told him, "is a round for the entire house".

"Serve it out, then," Austalis replied, putting more coins on the counter. The other customers joined in a unanimous cheer of "Ave!" as the drinks were poured.

"What's the penalty for a second offence?" Austalis asked.

"You don't want to know, and after it's been inflicted you won't want to remember."

The atmosphere improved after Austalis had paid his round, and the other drinkers began to engage him in conversation. They were labourers and craftsmen, but there were no soldiers. Calleva was not a garrison town like Eburacum.

The proprietor let Austalis buy the remains of the evening's supper, and told him that he could sleep in the bar that night.

When the last two customers had reeled out into the frosty night, Austalis helped the proprietor to clean up, partly out of gratitude and partly to show that he was an ordinary labourer, accustomed to work. Through his mind, as he swabbed tables and collected mugs, there ran the knowledge that if his mission succeeded, the wineshop might be ashes in the burning rubble of Calleva, and its hospitable owner might be a corpse on the floor which Austalis was now mopping. Austalis felt no guilt: these future events were as unreal as the prospect of personal death and seemed just as infinitely remote. Thousands of men would wage this war under the guidance of Nodens, and Austalis could not feel like a spy in the man's house.

Austalis woke up at dawn, to the smell of wine being heated on the stove. He insisted on paying for his breakfast, and unlocked the door himself before stepping out into a bright sunny morning.

The proprietor of the wineshop had given him directions to the church, which was close to Calleva's forum, but the forum was easy to find. It was the only empty space in Calleva, the only gap in the sea of thatched roofs belonging to timber buildings, and red tiled roofs belonging to stone buildings. All the space within the city wall of Calleva was filled with buildings, so that the city was like a nervous island trembling in a sea of hostile fields.

The forum was being swept clean of dead leaves, which the wind had blown over the ramparts. Apart from a statue of the Emperor Claudius, it was empty. Austalis supposed that it filled up with carts and stalls on market days. The church lay nearby, down a street, and as he approached, he heard the sound of voices singing from within. The voices were mainly female, but they were led by a throaty male one.

Austalis decided to wait outside until the service was over. He no longer cared anything for Christ, but he wanted to make a good impression on the priest.

As he lounged outside, Austalis noticed a mysterious five-word message inscribed in a tile set into the plaster of the wall. ROTAS OPERA TENET AREPO SATOR : Arepo the sower carefully holds the wheels. It seemed to mean nothing, and Austalis had never heard of a saint called Arepo.

In the church the singing died away, but not before Austalis had recognised the tune as being a hymn to Mars that his father had used to sing. Obviously someone had changed the words. After the muttering of prayers for a little while, the door was opened by a tall man in a white robe, who placed his hand on the head of each departing member of the congregation as they filed out into the street and dispersed about their business.

When the last person had departed with the blessing, the man lowered his hand, on which a gold ring twinkled in the sunlight, and deigned to notice Austalis.

“The service is over. Come again at sunset.”

“Are you Senicianus the priest?”

“I am.”

“I was told you might need a man to work in the church.”

“Are you baptised as a Christian?” Senicianus asked.

“Yes, I was baptised by Augurius, the Bishop of Londinium.”

“Really! Can you count?”

“Up to the thousands, and I can read and write, too.”

“Come inside, and we’ll settle the terms of your employment.”

From the brightness of the street, Austalis followed Senicianus into the blackness of the church.

## CHAPTER SIXTEEN

The candles on the altar shone in the dimness like stars in the night, and the incense in the air made it smell like a summer hedgerow.

Austalis realised that the church must receive generous financial support from its congregation, because there were candles everywhere, and few of the usual small oil lamps fitfully casting a faint smoky glow.

“Would you like to say a prayer?” Senicianus asked out of the darkness. It was as if the painted Christ on the wall had spoken.

“I said my prayers privately,” Austalis replied.

“Well, you’ll be joining in our services. What do you want to be paid?”

“I’m mainly interested in finding a place to live.”

“You can live in the church. There’s a room for the caretaker. There’s a kitchen, too. We use it for the feast days. How much do you want in wages?”

Austalis asked for a small sum, and sealed the bargain by shaking Senicianus’ hand before the image of Christ. Senicianus then departed, telling Austalis that he spent every morning visiting the sick and elderly who could not come to church. He showed Austalis where the church’s tools and cleaning materials were kept, and left.

Austalis threw his belongings into the room where he would live. He set to work at once, sweeping dust and breadcrumbs out of the door. He used the broom to bring down spider’s webs left from the previous summer. The church must have gone a long time with either no caretaker, or an idle one.

Austalis was determined to do a good job. Though he was really a warrior, he had taken a contract as a labourer, and his honour as a warrior of Gododdin held him to working faithfully. Though he was now the declared enemy of Christ, he had accepted Christ’s money and the hospitality of his house, and so he had to serve Christ diligently.

By the end of the morning, Austalis was tired, and developing a headache from the enclosed air and the traces of the incense, but he had removed most of the dust and dirt. He snuffed out the remaining candles, and threw both the north and the west doors open so that the fresh winter wind would change the air.

The wind brought traces of the smells of the working city, but the church was fresher after a little while, and the light from the two open doors let Austalis see more of the furnishings and decorations.

He looked for more wall-paintings, but there were none, apart from the mournful visage of Christ. Austalis confronted his enemy, giving the warrior’s salute to a hostile champion, a sign of defiance and respect. Christ was dark-haired and brown-eyed, as no doubt the real Christ had been, since he lived in the province of Judaea. His still hand blessed Austalis.

Austalis remembered the rich variety of wall-paintings in the villa at Venodala: the nymph in her grotto, a pagan symbol of the spirit of the river which flowed by the house, and the portraits of praying Christians, all with red hair and blue eyes. Austalis understood now just how wealthy Marcella’s family was, to have commissioned all those pictures of themselves, and to have maintained their sumptuous villa and the townhouse in Londinium.

The voice of Senicianus interrupted his thoughts, once again startling Austalis from an unseen direction.

“Admiring our picture?”

“Yes, I was.”

“You’re paid to clean the church, not to gawk at pictures.”

“I finished cleaning. See for yourself.”

Senicianus looked around, inspecting the floor and walls and windows.

“You’re right. You did a good job. Anyway, you could be spending your time in worse ways than contemplating the face of Christ. Come outside, I want to show you something else.”

He pointed to the mysterious words in praise of Arepo the sower.

“Oh, I already noticed that,” Austalis said. “I wondered what it meant.”

“In itself, nothing. It’s a code. You can rearrange the words into a cross, reading PATERNOSTER both vertically and horizontally, between an ‘A’ and ‘O’ to represent that Christ is Alpha and Omega, the beginning and the end. That’s how churches were marked when Christianity was illegal and persecuted. Believers knew the meaning of the inscription about Arepo the sower, and they could tell that this building was a church.”

“Yet you still keep it, although Christianity is the official religion of the Empire.”

“We must honour those who suffered when being a Christian was not as easy as it is now,” Senicianus replied, digging a scrap of dust out of one of the inscribed letters with the finger that wore the gold ring. Austalis noticed that the crown of the ring was engraved with a face.

“Is that the face of Christ on your ring?”

“No. It’s Venus. Look.”

Senicianus slipped off the ring and handed it to Austalis, who examined it closely. The engraved face was framed by an inscription identifying it as VENVS.

“A pagan goddess?” Austalis remarked.

“Yes, but it was originally worn by my father, before he was converted to Christianity. Before he gave it to me, he had a Christian inscription added to it.”

Austalis looked at the outside of the ring, where a Latin inscription wished “Senicianus, may you live in God”.

“That should Christianise it,” Austalis said, handing back the ring.

“Ah, well, my older brother still resents my having it,” Senicianus replied, putting the ring back on his finger. “He was angry at my father for giving the gold ring to me, the younger son, but I was baptised at the same time as my father while my brother Silvianus remained a pagan. He still does. He told me he deposited a tablet at a pagan temple, imploring the god Nodens to curse me for ‘stealing’ ‘his’ ring. Well, if Nodens has cursed me, I don’t see any effect. Christ lives, Nodens doesn’t.”

Austalis could say nothing, but he knew, perhaps better than any other man, that Nodens was alive and wielded power that might strike Calleva and Senicianus in only a few months’ time. Austalis was intrigued by the implication that a temple still existed within the Empire where Nodens continued to be worshipped. He knew he should not question Senicianus directly, since a simple Christian floorwasher ought not to be interested in the whereabouts of the nearest temple of Nodens.

In any case, Senicianus changed the subject of conversation immediately, telling Austalis that some items needed to be purchased for the church. He gave Austalis a list of what to buy, and money to pay for it, as well as instructions to bargain firmly with the shopkeepers, but in a Christian spirit.

Austalis appreciated the chance to get out of the church and familiarise himself with the streets of Calleva. He was struck by the contrast with Londinium, not only in size, but in

appearance.

Londinium and Eburacum were stone-built cities, and their walls were wide and flowed around the city like friendly rivers. In Calleva, only the buildings on the main streets were built of stone, and the wooden buildings, along with tiny gardens, seemed to have grown up in the gaps between the stones like the signs of a disease. The high wall constricted the city like a bandage.

In the evening, Austalis participated in a service of prayer for the first time in the church of Calleva. The congregation was mainly female, with a few old people: Christianity had been in Britain for centuries, but it had not really taken hold until about thirty years before. There were no middle-aged men among the crowd of worshippers forming up in the candlelit chill of the nave: men of that generation worshipped Jupiter or Mithras, or were faithful to the gods of Britain.

Quite a few young men were present. Austalis could not tell whether they were truly moved by religious faith, or attended services to benefit their civil careers by being seen to practise the officially approved religion. Austalis told himself that he was not in a position to criticise anyone else for insincerity.

“Ave Deo! Gloria Christi!” shouted Senicianus from the altar.

The congregation spread their arms wide to pray, and began to recite the Lord’s Prayer. Austalis was astonished to hear a few voices around him saying the words in British, each person using slightly different words, obviously their own private version.

Senicianus led the congregation in prayers for the Church, for the Pope, for the Emperor, and for the safety of Britain from the barbarians across the sea and beyond the Wall..

More prayers followed, naming six members of the congregation, and, interestingly, those who had lapsed from the faith.

Austalis felt tiredness and aching building up in his outstretched arms, and he was grateful for his boyhood training as a warrior. He and the other boys had been made to hold rocks at arm’s length in order to develop strength, and had been beaten if they lowered their arms too soon.

Austalis saw some pairs of arms begin to droop, and he wondered why the Christian church did not adopt a more comfortable posture for prayer. Even the priests of Gododdin, preaching a martial religion for warriors rather than a peaceful one for merchants, did not require such strain.

After the service ended, Austalis cleaned up the church by the light of the last few candles. There was little to do. The Christians were tidy, and he had already swept up in the morning.

Austalis had expected that Senicianus would live in the church, but it turned out that he had a house in the city. He told Austalis how to find it in case of emergency.

“Don’t try that unless the problem is really desperate,” he warned Austalis. “It can be dangerous wandering the streets at night. Not everyone in the city is a Christian.”

“I already know that,” Austalis replied.

Senicianus went on to explain that he lived with his family and that the house really belonged originally to his wife. He thereby revealed that he did not believe in the new idea that priests should not marry, the principle that Varrus had held so strongly, grieving Elafius, who had so strongly urged him to find a wife to found a new generation in the villa which he would one day inherit.

When Senicianus had left, Austalis tidied his little cell and cooked his supper. Afterwards, he gave thanks to Nodens for bringing him this convenient lodging, and then pinched out the last candle before rolling himself up in his blankets against the frosty night.

The next day followed the same pattern, and Austalis was happy enough to settle into a fixed routine. He spent his days at the church, and in the evening, after Senicianus had gone home, he would often go to the wineshop.

He was confident that he was unlikely to run into his employer there. Austalis found that the clientele of the wineshop, like that of the church, was made up of regulars who came nearly every time.

Austalis was quickly accepted as a regular customer, and although personal friendships, by unspoken rule, were never made in the wineshop, he was always warmly greeted and invited to join in the conversations and gambling.

The betting was usually on chariot races held in the northern parts of the provinces, because there was no arena in any nearby city. The results were brought in a few days later, passed along a chain of merchants, carters and soldiers.

"How do you know the results are accurate?" Austalis asked. "It might be to someone's advantage to lie."

"Ah, but then we could check. We would get several accounts of the races, as different people arrived in Calleva. You'd have to organise a great conspiracy, and the reward wouldn't be worth the effort."

"Well, why not bet on the races in Rome, then?"

Everyone in the wineshop laughed at that.

"We wouldn't get the results for nearly a month, probably, and none of us would trust the message. Anyway, the racing fraternity in Rome is split into two teams, the Blues and the Greens, and the rivalry is so intense that they battle in the streets. We'd have to divide into two wineshops, one for the Blues and one for the Greens, the way they do in Rome."

Austalis joined in the betting, but he never managed to work up much interest in it. Gambling was unknown in Gododdin, and even games were rare. A simple board game like "Romans and Sabines" would be too dangerous for the proud warriors of Gododdin to be allowed to play. A disputed move could become a touchy point of honour, and within a moment the board would be overturned, swords and spears would be snatched up, and a seven-generation blood-feud would be started.

The winter progressed. Unusually, snow fell and piled up against the western wall of Calleva, and the guards often had to dig and sweep to keep the west gates clear. In any case, few travellers presented themselves at the gate, because not many men wanted to travel through the drifting snow.

Austalis found this reassuring, and it bolstered his confidence that the Romans were not spying on him. He doubted that they knew he was in Calleva. Even if they did, and if they were observing him, they would learn nothing. Austalis pitied any Roman agents who were assigned to watching him, because it would be an extremely boring job. He deliberately led a dull, unchanging life of fixed routine, such as would be led by an unemployed domestic servant who had been lucky enough to find a job with the Christian church in Calleva.

Such a man would have limited horizons and interests. Austalis knew he had made a mistake by being so talkative and pushy with Senicianus on the first day, and that he should not have admitted to being able to read and write, although literacy was in fact quite common in the Roman provinces. He tried to cultivate the image of a placid ox at the church, attending

to his duties quietly and efficiently, and not speaking unless he was spoken to.

At the wineshop, Austalis presented a cheerier picture of himself, with the same aim of blending in with the group and not drawing attention to himself.

Neither at the church nor at the wineshop did anyone mention that a major offensive against Roman Britain was expected in the spring. In fact, Calleva seemed to have lived for ever in a dream of eternal peace. Even the Great Raid had not come near the city. The inhabitants heard of attacks on the coasts, and skirmishes north of the Wall, but believed that such things could not happen to them.

At the end of December the church celebrated the birthday of Christ, on the same day that Mithras was said to have been born. It was another of the parallels between the two religions, and in making false worship in the church services Austalis let himself feel that he was repudiating two gods who had failed him and proved false themselves.

To the Romans, the new year began at the start of January rather than in the spring, so Austalis had the sense that his great year was beginning while snow still whistled around the rough wall of Calleva and piled up in the cavities between the stones.

Senicianus numbered the young year for him.

"It is the one thousand, one hundred and forty-third year since the founding of the city of Rome, the three hundred and thirty-fourth since the Passion, and the three hundred and sixty-seventh since the Incarnation of Christ. I haven't heard yet who the consuls for the year will be."

Austalis knew that the Romans customarily dated events by the names of the two consuls who had held office in that year. It was an unwieldy and inconvenient system, but since nothing better was in use in Gododdin, Austalis felt that he was in no position to criticise it. In any case, the idea of datable history did not really exist outside the boundaries of Roman rule in Britain. There was legend, but legend was set in the vagueness of a past with no reckonable number of years between the events of the bardic stories and the prosaic present.

Among the conquered Britons of the Roman provinces, as Austalis had discovered when he had lived in Marcella's villa at Venodala, almost all memory of the past before the Roman conquest had been lost. The people thought of themselves not as Britons, but as Romans, and the continual immigration of peoples from other provinces of the Roman Empire and beyond had reinforced that. Even in Calleva, far from the ports and trade routes, there were Greeks and Jews, Nubians and Egyptians. Austalis' father Nottfried had been one of the very few foreigners to have come to live in Gododdin.

After the turn of the year, the winter became milder. Austalis did not have to buy as much wood to feed the fires in the church. Those fires filled the church with soot that he would have to laboriously scrape off. Or somebody would have to scrape it off. Austalis did not intend to still be in Calleva when the soot would have built up enough to be noticeable.

The congregation enjoyed the warmer temperatures. Austalis had watched them swaying from side to side during those parts of the service which required them to stand outstretched for prayer. Austalis wondered if anyone had ever frozen to death during a service in that posture.

By now Austalis had succeeded in becoming part of the church furniture, no more alive than the painted Christ on the wall. Senicianus hardly spoke to him. Austalis did his work well, and did not need to be instructed or reprimanded.

As the winter approached its end, Austalis watched more carefully for signs that the

plans for the great war had been detected. He had no way of knowing whether Eochaid and Osbert had received their messages and acted on them, or whether the Atacotti were arming in their deep tunnels. He was a spectator who could not see the action, and who could not even be sure that the action was taking place.

If nothing happened, his position was clear enough. If the spring and summer went by without a coordinated war being launched against the Romans, then he had nothing to do, and he could return to Caeravon and take up the ordinary life of a warrior of Gododdin.

That possibility remained before his eyes, until the first warm day of spring. Austalis was coming back from the weekly market with a basket full of food and candles for the church. He was reflecting on the derision and disgrace which would have fallen on him in Gododdin if he, a warrior, had been seen carrying a shopping basket, when a short dark man caught his sleeve as he passed.

Another beggar! Austalis was about to pull out the smallest possible coin to give him, when the man spoke.

“Salve prater. You are wanted in Londinium.”

The shock was as welcome and unbelievable as the arrival of spring itself. Austalis pulled the man into the next alley.

“We can’t talk in the street, unless you know Germanic.”

The man grinned.

“I know Latin, British and the language of the Atacotti.”

“All right, stick to Latin, but quietly. What’s the situation?”

“Speak more quietly yourself. And hold your basket straight: it’s about to tip over.

What a slovenly servant! Anyway, I only know what I’ve been told to pass on to you. The marriage between Eochaid and Kairann is arranged. The Irish are bringing warriors over. Your people will sail around the Wall in small boats. The Saxons and the English will attack by sea, and so will the Atacotti. You must go to Londinium to be the point of contact through which messages can be passed.”

“When?”

“Today, if you can. Stand under the colonnade in the northeast corner of the Forum in Londinium four days from now. You will be met.”

The man began to slip away round the corner of the alley.

“Wait!” Austalis called. He hurried after the man, full of questions to ask, but suddenly the Atacotti spy was gone. Austalis could not see him anywhere in the street. He might have dived into one of a hundred doorways, or run into one of the many tiny gardens between the wooden shacks. Austalis abandoned the pursuit. Once again, the Atacotti talent for disappearing and hiding had been demonstrated to him.

Austalis straightened the contents of his shopping basket, and walked to the church. Senicianus was out visiting members of the congregation, and the church was empty.

Austalis put the candles in their holders, ready for the evening service. He had intended to put the food away in his room, but he packed it up instead with the rest of his belongings. Since it was the first day of the week, he had just been paid by Senicianus, so he would not lose any wages by leaving early.

When he was ready to leave, Austalis took a blank wax tablet and scratched out a farewell message: VALE SENECHANIE. He signed it AUSTALIS PICTUS, and propped up the tablet on the altar where Senicianus could not fail to see it.

Austalis picked up his gear, halted before the painted face of Christ on the wall, gave it the warrior's salute, and left the church, closing the west door behind him.

He left Calleva by the east gate, taking the road to Londinium. He was given rides for most of the way by convoys of merchants, and he did not see any unusual numbers of soldiers on the move. He heard no rumours of impending war. He travelled through spring sunshine on a peaceful road, up to the bridge leading to the twin western gateways of Londinium.

The auxiliary soldiers guarding the gate were bored. They did not even collect customs dues from the incoming travellers. Austalis was absently waved through by an unkempt soldier who was more interested in fending off the first insects of the year.

Passing through the gate was like awakening from a dream to the urgency of reality. The quiet wasteland outside the city, kept bare so that the soldiers on the wall would have an unobstructed field of fire from the ramparts, was replaced by the bubbling noise of the city within.

Austalis was no longer the ignorant, astonished Pict that he had been a year earlier when he had first seen Londinium. He walked purposefully eastward through the streets, heading for the Forum which lay a little to the east of the city's geographical centre.

The open expanse of the Forum held a square of sunshine, bounded by the shadows cast by the east side of the colonnade. Austalis walked diagonally across the Forum, obstructed and buffeted by the throng of Romans and foreigners.

Two Christian priests, both trying to preach yelling sermons to the indifferent passers-by, fell to blows over some disputed point of doctrine that one of them had aired. The ensuing clumsy, pawing fight succeeded where the sermons had failed in gaining the attention of part of the crowd.

Four auxiliary cavalymen strolled across the Forum, chattering in a language that Austalis did not recognise, and ignoring the squabbling Christians.

Vendors forced their way through the crush, selling cakes and cold pies. They bargained with the exotic cavalymen in pidgin Latin.

A Roman officer, escorted by six legionaries, strode out across the Forum. The crowd parted as if before a knife, and Austalis ducked into the shadows under the colonnade as soon as he saw that the officer was Mannius Paulinus, his former brother in the cult of Mithras.

Mannius Paulinus did not seem to have noticed Austalis, who ran through imaginary scenes in his mind: Mannius Paulinus, pointing to him, and the legionaries rushing to stab him with their swords.

Austalis cooled down in the shadows of the pillars supporting the colonnades. Nobody seemed interested in him. The Romans probably knew he was in Londinium, and in any case they would find out sooner or later.

He bought a hot cake, and leaned against a pillar. He decided that it was impossible to hide, and that if he met anyone he knew he would tell them that he was in Londinium to pursue another religion, since neither Mithraism nor Christianity had answered his needs.

"Austalis! Godan daga! You came a day early!"

Austalis nearly choked on his cake as he was startled by the booming voice of Childeric, greeting him in Germanic.

"Childeric, what are you doing here in Britain? I last saw you in England."

"I'm waiting for my friends to arrive. You know who they are."

"Is everyone else coming, too?"

“Well, I can’t speak officially for the people from the north and from Ireland, but I’ve got no reason to doubt that they’ll play their parts as agreed. Nobody can afford not to participate.”

“Is there somewhere we can go to discuss this?” Austalis asked. Even if Roman ears did not understand the oblique allusions in which he and Childeric were talking about the forthcoming war, the very fact that they were avoiding plain talk might arouse interest.

“Not far away. I agree. The public Forum of Londinium is hardly the best place. Come along.”

Childeric led Austalis down a street, and then turned right into another street which ran parallel to the river Tamesis. Austalis followed him through the shops and temples. He realised that if they kept going they would pass the Mithraeum, and he forced himself to march on. He would not show weakness in the face of the Mithraeum. He would defy Mithras as resolutely as he had defied Christ.

In the end Austalis did not have to face that test. Childeric turned right again, away from the river, and walked into a shop displaying clay jars, lamps and amphoras.

Austalis followed him into the shop. Inside, there was almost no room to stand. The pots and jars filled the back of the shop, stacked on the floor, and the customers had to move carefully between them and the amphoras stacked against the walls.

Childeric took shape in the gloom like a warrior’s ghost.

“This way. There’s a door here.”

Austalis found the door at the back. Behind it were stairs leading up to the upper floors of the building, and Childeric went up to the top floor. When Austalis reached the landing, Childeric was holding another door open for him.

Austalis was shown into the main room of one of the residential apartments into which these blocks, which the Romans called *insulae*, “islands”, were divided.

“Meet your brothers in arms,” Childeric said. “First, here is the representative of the Picts.”

Artus gave Austalis the warrior’s salute.

“But, Artus, I told you to stay in Gododdin to act as a guide to the armies,” Austalis said, forgetting for a moment to return the warrior’s salute.

“The warriors can find their way south to Londinium by following the roads,” Artus replied. “Anyway, I only know my way through the countryside east and south of Londinium. Graelen told me to wait in the city.”

Childeric interrupted the conversation.

“I am the representative of the English, the Saxons, and the Franks. Now meet Finn, the emissary of King Eochaid.”

A tall young man, dressed like a Briton, came forward.

“My king is looking forward to the marriage you arranged for him,” he told Austalis, in perfect Latin. “The bride should have arrived in Leinster by now.”

“Kairann will make a worthy queen for the High King of Ireland,” Austalis replied, hoping that Eochaid would not reject his bride when he found she was not really a princess.

“Last,” Childeric continued, “you must meet the representative of the Atacotti. He’s down below.”

“The Atacotti are usually to be found down below,” Austalis said.

“The Shee will never change,” Finn commented, as Childeric went out to the landing.

“Hairless! Come up here!” he roared.

A few moments later, Austalis heard someone coming up the stairs, and a short dark man in a workman's smock came in.

"You're interrupting my sale. There's a Gaul downstairs who wants to buy some British jars as a souvenir of his visit. Don't ask me why. Oh! Is this the herald of the war?"

"It is," Childeric replied. "Meet Austalis, the herald of Gododdin."

"I am Harilusk," the man replied. "This is my shop and house. Anyway, excuse me. We'll talk later, I've got to part that Gaul from his money."

Harilusk scuttled back down the stairs.

"So here we are," Childeric said. "The Council of the war. We sit here in Londinium waiting for news. Our job is to communicate among the armies."

"Then I must stay here too," Austalis answered. "Do we all live here?"

"Oh, no, that would be too dangerous. Harilusk has found you a room in another part of the city."

Austalis sat down on an uncomfortable couch against the wall, while Finn squatted on the floor and Artus took a high-backed wicker chair. Childeric remained standing.

"So," Austalis said. "Fill me in on the news."

"There's really no news," Artus replied. "The young men in Gododdin are trained and ready for war, thanks to your cousin Graelen. All is according to plan." Artus smiled. "I began speaking Latin again out of courtesy, and it's starting to come back to me now."

"Eochaid has already sent warriors over to his lands in western Britain," Finn said. "They should be starting to arrive now."

"As for the Germans," Childeric said, "they are all ready to sail."

"So there's nothing to do but wait," Austalis said.

"Yes," Childeric replied, "but we won't have to wait for more than a few weeks now."

A shout came from the pottery shop below. Austalis froze, thinking that this might be the Romans breaking in to arrest them all, but it was only Harilusk sending up a tray of bread, wine, and dried fruit for them to share.

"Eat well," Childeric told Austalis, "and then Artus will take you to the house where you will be lodged".

## CHAPTER SEVENTEEN

Out in the street, Austalis found that he still knew Londinium better than Artus did. He pointed out places that he had learnt to recognise on his previous two visits, while Artus knew only the way to the block of flats where Austalis would live.

There was a bakery on the ground floor, instead of a pottery shop. Bakeries were a notorious fire hazard, but Austalis could only pray to Nodens that the building would not catch fire during his stay, especially as Artus showed him up to a room on the top floor.

"This is your room," he said.

The closed door had been fitted with a heavy lock.

"Here's the key," Artus added, handing Austalis a heavy iron key on a loop of raw leather.

Someone must have opened an oven door downstairs in the bakery, because a sudden wave of warm air smelling of fresh bread reached the top floor while Austalis fumbled with the key in the lock. He had never had to deal with keys and locks before, not even at Marcella's villa. She had not used the locks on her doors. Marcella had evidently placed her trust in Christ, but whoever had furnished this room obviously trusted nobody.

Finally, Austalis succeeded in performing whatever trick was required to make a lock turn over, and the door swung open.

The room was equipped with a low Roman bed on spindly legs, a table carved out of black stone, and one of those uncomfortable high-backed wicker chairs.

"The caretaker of the building can't keep it clean for you," Artus explained. "He hasn't got the key."

"I'll clean it myself," Austalis replied, noting that the room was extremely clean already. He went over to the single square window, and opened the shutters.

Sound as well as light burst into the room. The babbles of the city's thousands of voices rose from the streets below and the red-tiled roofs of Londinium. Austalis found that he had a view of the city wall. Work was going on at one of the projecting bastions. When he leaned out for a better look, Austalis saw a giant wooden catapult waiting to be mounted on the bastion.

Nearby, another "island" of tenements was being built. The timber frames were being put into place, soon to be filled with plaster.

Austalis tried out the wicker chair. Seated in it, he felt like the Emperor of Rome upon his throne, if indeed the Emperor did have a throne.

"This room suits me perfectly," he told Artus. "What am I supposed to do? Wait here until someone calls me, or until Londinium goes up in flames and war around my ears?"

"We meet at noon every day, at the pottery shop. Sometimes there's nothing to talk about, and sometimes messengers bring us news."

"How do we know that there isn't a spy among us?" Austalis asked. "Both you and Childeric have lived in the Roman provinces, and so has Harilusk. Finn I don't know. How can I trust any of you?"

"You have to," Artus replied. "You came down from the Wall yourself. I know you come from Gododdin, but after all your father served in the Roman army. In any case, the Romans are bound to be watching each one of us."

"They won't move yet," Austalis said. "They obviously don't know what's going on, or they would have seized us by now."

“Even we don’t know what’s happening,” Artus replied, “only what’s supposed to be happening. The first blow against Rome should be struck soon enough, within 20 days.”

Austalis tried out the bed, and found it far more comfortable than the chair.

“All right,” he said, studying the crude brightly coloured frieze of animals’ heads painted along the border of the ceiling. “Tell me the directions to get to the pottery shop.”

When Austalis was sure he had understood and memorised the directions, Artus left. Austalis lay on the bed a little longer, wondering how he would fill his days.

Before going out to buy some food and wine, he checked the operation of the key and lock to make sure he had grasped the trick of making it work. He did not want to undergo the embarrassment of having to call for help to get out of his own room.

Austalis spent the afternoon exploring the neighbourhood, partly out of simple curiosity, and partly because he might need to run at short notice. Although any route he took would lead him to the city wall or the river Tamesis, so that there was no way he could escape to open countryside, he could hope to lose himself in the narrow lanes and alleys between the buildings.

The first evening in his room, Austalis poured oil into the iron lamp hanging from the ceiling, and lay on the bed. From the next room came a woman’s voice reciting lengthy Latin prayers, which reminded Austalis painfully of Marcella. Perhaps she was in Londinium, too, staying at her town house. Austalis thought of going out for a walk so as not to have to listen to the urgent muttering of prayer, but just as he was about to get up and leave the building, the unknown woman fell silent.

Austalis stared up at the painted animals, who seemed to move and stretch themselves as the light of the lamp flickered. It was the last image he was aware of before he fell asleep.

He woke up to a chilly morning and the sickening smell of cold oil from the exhausted lamp. For a moment he feared that he might have been awoken by another endless prayer session from next door, but there was silence from that direction. Austalis went to the window and flung open the shutters.

It was raining heavily outside. The red roofs were a darker red because of the wetness, and the men constructing the new building had rigged up awnings of heavy cloth to shelter them as they worked.

Austalis put a blanket over his head, telling himself that he ought to buy a hooded cloak, of the type that the Romans called a *birrus Britannicus*. It had become popular all over the Empire, so he had been told. He went out into the cold rain as a *Britannicus* with only his blanket as a rough improvised *birrus*.

At least the hood helped to hide his blond hair, he thought, as he splashed through the streets. He turned into a street where wooden eaves hung out over the pavement, and provided shelter from the rain. Austalis guessed that they had been designed by some Italian or Greek, unfamiliar with Britain, to give shade from the sun.

Austalis shook the rain out of his blanket, contributing to the puddles. There was a bakery under the eaves, so he bought two hot cakes and a cup of spiced wine, and asked the counterman if the morning was well advanced.

“You’re clever enough to ask a slave,” the man said, while serving the next customer. “A slave always knows the time of day, because he’s always been up since dawn. We’re about an hour away from noon.”

Austalis could not remember ever having slept in so late. He took his time eating his cake, but it was still raining when he finished. He gave the empty cup back to the counterman, and set off through the rain to the pottery shop.

The other men had no news, because no messenger had come through the city gate. Childeric was not worried.

“We’ll hear soon enough. Meanwhile, Harilusk can sell his pots, and the rest of us can go about our business.”

“I haven’t got any business,” Austalis replied.

“Then make some. You’ll choke of boredom otherwise.”

Austalis decided to fill his days by exploring the city. He had never had so much free time in Londinium before.

On fine days he walked along the river wall, watching ships loading and unloading at the wooden wharves. One day he crossed the wooden bridge across the river Tamesis, and stood halfway across, looking at the red and grey city on the north bank, and the brown and green woodlands and marshes on the south bank.

He tried to visit the great fort in the northwest corner of the city, but the guards told him that no civilians were admitted. He could only get a glimpse of ordered buildings and an empty parade square, reminding him of the fortress of Vercovicium in the wild northern lands of the Wall.

Sometimes Austalis wandered aimlessly through one street and another, discovering districts given over to particular trades, or monopolised by people from one area of the Empire: Greeks, Gauls, Nubians. Strange songs and prayers rose from their houses to the grey British sky.

Still no news came. Time passed: the spring advanced and new flowers appeared in the public gardens endowed by generous Emperors and rich private citizens. The building under construction advanced towards its final shape every time Austalis looked out from his window. From time to time a thin young man in an official toga would look down from a window on the opposite side of the street. Austalis decided that the man was some kind of inspector, or perhaps the owner checking on progress.

Austalis hardly got to know the men he had met in the group. Finn was drily humorous whenever he spoke, but he had little to say. Harilusk was irrepressibly talkative, but his conversation was limited to a few panting words as he ran up and down the stairs. Even Childeric and Artus did not seem inclined to talk. Austalis would have liked to have gone around Londinium drinking with Childeric, but the rule was that the group should keep away from one another except for their short daily meeting.

On the first really warm day of the year, Austalis watched the workmen making tiles to put on the roof of the new building. They were taking advantage of the sunshine.

Austalis was getting ready to leave for the pottery shop when he saw a scene that baffled him. Just as the workmen stopped for their morning break, one of them produced a wooden stylus from his tunic, and, as the other men left, he scrawled a few words in the mud of one of the new tiles. He then glanced up at the building opposite.

The man in the official toga looked out of his window. The workman pointed down to the tile, and walked off to join his companions.

Only a few moments later, the thin young man came out of the building, without his toga, dressed in a common labourer’s smock. He examined the tile, and hurried away down the street.

Austalis went downstairs in a rush, nearly forgetting the tiresome ritual of locking the door. He wanted to see the tile before the workmen returned.

The mud of the fresh brownish-red tile glistened in the sun. Austalis read the Latin message scratched into it, beginning with an enormous, flamboyant curving letter A: “AUSTALIS HAS BEEN GOING OFF BY HIMSELF EVERY DAY FOR THE LAST THIRTEEN DAYS”.

Austalis walked to the pottery shop as quickly as he could.

“The Romans have been spying on me!” he told Childeric. “All this time, and I didn’t know.”

“Don’t go back to that house again,” Childeric replied. “The fort here has come to arms.”

Artus grinned.

“The forces of Gododdin have attacked the Wall. The news has just got here. The *exploratores* rebelled and joined them.”

“The war is on!” Austalis exclaimed.

“We’ve waited a long time,” Childeric said. “You should feel proud, Austalis. It’s all your achievement.”

“My patron god Nodens, the Lord of Silver, directed me,” Austalis replied, and he was about to ask if Childeric had more news when the sound of shouting came from the street below.

“What now?” Artus said, looking out of the window. “Oh, it’s the soldiers!”

Everyone joined him at the window. The shouting turned out to be from the shopkeepers and passers-by, telling each other that the soldiers were coming down the street. Soon the sound of marching could be heard, and Austalis saw a standard being carried in front of the approaching soldiers. He could see that it was in the form of a metal tablet with the letters SPQR, and he turned to Childeric as the expert on the Roman army.

“Shouldn’t there be an eagle on the standard? These are legionaries, not auxiliaries.”

“Yes, but the legionaries in Londinium are a mixture of detachments from all the legions in Britain, and sometimes from legions in Gaul and Germany. That’s why they’re carrying the general parade standard.”

“Never mind that!” Artus interrupted, as the marching soldiers passed by. “Where are they going?”

Some of the soldiers in the rear ranks broke discipline to answer questions from the spectators, until the centurion marching at the rear bellowed them into silence. Austalis caught the names “Eburacum”, “Lindum”, “Deva”, and understood the implications.

“Those are the headquarters of the army in the north. The fort must have got a message from the north asking for reinforcements.”

“They must be hard pressed up there,” Childeric said, “if they have to call for the ceremonial detachments in Londinium to be sent. What will the governor of Britain do for guards in his palace?”

“I suspect that’s the least of his worries at the moment,” Finn commented.

The soldiers passed out of sight, marching towards the northeast gate of the city which opened onto the main road north. The people in the street forgot their business and errands and gathered into small groups, urgently exchanging questions and opinions.

The men at the window heard Harilusk rushing up the stairs. For once, something had struck him as being more important as his sales of pots, or perhaps he had nothing to lose

because all his customers had joined in the rush out into the street. He burst into the room, with a look in his eyes that reminded Austalis of Eghulex. Austalis tried to picture Harilusk in animals skins, resting with a spear in an underground chamber lined with skulls, and found it frighteningly easy to imagine.

“Just to tell you!” Harilusk said, between gasps. “When the Atacotti come close to Londinium, I’m leaving my shop and joining them. You’ll have to go somewhere else.”

“We’re all planning to anyway,” Finn said.

“I’m waiting for the host of Gododdin,” Artus added. “Imagine, the armies of Gododdin at the gates of Londinium!”

Austalis tried to get more information.

“How much do we know for sure? Which of you is best informed?”

“Ask Harilusk,” Childeric suggested. “The Atacotti always know everything, and they know it before anyone else.”

“What I know is this,” Harilusk said. “The armies of Gododdin and the other northern kingdoms are now south of the Wall. The *exploratores* overpowered the garrisons and opened up as many of the gates as they could. The Irish have built up their forces in the west and will strike at any moment. The Atacotti are at sea, coming down from the isles, and will land in a few days on the south coast. The Saxons and the English will sail from Germany to strike further east.”

“It sounds as though there won’t be much left to do here in Londinium,” Austalis said, and Artus laughed.

“We can stay and watch the city burn.”

Outside in the street, the commotion rose higher, coming closer to panic. The Romans knew that they were under a greater attack than had been seen in living memory. Even in the Great Raid, the Wall had not been breached on such a scale.

“I’ll wait for news from the army of Gododdin,” Austalis decided.

“It will come soon,” Artus replied. “Your cousin Graelen has arranged for men to go ahead of the army, pretending to be Britons from the Roman provinces. Their job is to spread disorder by telling everyone they meet that they’re fleeing from an invincible barbarian army.”

“I didn’t think Graelen had that much imagination in him.”

Suddenly, the high sound of a trumpet burst out over the city. All the thousands of inhabitants of Londinium fell silent at once, but the trumpet did not sound again. Only Childeric understood.

“The men in the fort have been assembled for a parade. Someone is going to address them. I’ve never heard a trumpet call carry so far before.”

“You’ve never heard the city so quiet,” Harilusk added. “Can it be the governor who’s talking to them? We should have put a spy among the soldiers of the garrison.”

“Word will reach us soon enough,” Finn said. “In fact, we probably know less than anyone, shut up together here in this room.”

“That’s why we should disperse now,” Harilusk said.

“Not yet,” Austalis objected. “Let’s get clear word on where the armies are.”

The sound of voices rose from the street again, at first diffidently, as though talking had been forbidden by the Emperor, and then increasing to a roar.

Austalis could not stand waiting for news any longer.

“I’m going downstairs to see what I can find out.”

When he emerged into the street, Austalis headed towards the largest knot of arguing citizens. He seized the toga of a man who looked prosperous and important.

"Hey, I just woke up with the noise. What's happening?"

"The Picts have broken through the Wall. The frontier scouts betrayed us."

A man dressed as a workman interrupted in bad Latin.

"Don't worry. The army is going north to deal with those Picts."

"What about defending Londinium?" Austalis asked.

"Londinium!" the workman laughed. "The city is in no danger. If the Picts can defeat all the legions and auxiliaries in Britain, then we're really in trouble, and Londinium will be in danger."

The man in the toga looked at Austalis more closely.

"Haven't I seen you somewhere before?"

Austalis looked back, and to his shock he recognised the man in the toga. Austalis had seen him twice before, and in the same toga.

Austalis remembered sitting outside the Mithraeum, waiting for Mannius Paulinus to conduct him into his initiation into the cult of Mithras. One of the worshippers who had crossed the street ahead of him and gone into the temple had been a man in a toga, this same man, this man Fabius who had come to dinner at Marcella's house.

He tried a weak story.

"You must have seen me in Germany, then. I come from Dorestad on the coast. I've only been in Britain since last autumn."

"Well, I must have confused you with someone else. Now I come to think of it, he was a Pict, from north of the Wall. He proved to be as poor a specimen as any other Pict."

Austalis took this to be a reference to his own failure to complete the initiation ceremony: the terrified barbarian, fleeing from the temple and running into the street.

The workman declared his own views with finality.

"Fullofaudes will crush the Picts. You're a German. You don't know him. He's the Duke of the Northern Marches, based at Eburacum. I bet he's probably driven them out already, and chased them back over the Wall."

Austalis did not say that he knew well enough who Fullofaudes was, and that he had visited the fortress at Eburacum.

"I'll put my trust in him, too," he said, turning back to return to the pottery shop.

"These Roman citizens seem confident enough," he told the others.

"They haven't seen anything yet."

That night, Austalis stayed at the pottery shop. Still nobody came to arrest him. He was either forgotten or ignored. The military threat was in the north, not in a craftsman's shop within the city walls of Londinium.

The next morning, Austalis walked down by the governor's palace. He knew he was taking a risk, but even if the Romans seized and tortured him, they would get no useful information from him, because he knew so little.

There was only one guard outside the entrance. Austalis could not go in, but he listened intently as he walked around the courtyard wall. He could not hear the sound of many voices that he remembered from his previous visit.

He went back to the entrance and approached the guard.

"Can you tell me if Mannius Paulinus is in today?"

The soldier relaxed, and took his hand off his sword.

“Mannius Paulinus is not in Londinium. He left this morning.”

“Oh, he’s gone north to deal with the Picts?”

“No, he’s gone west. The Irish are making trouble there. He’s taken a detachment to the Temple of Nodens.”

“The Temple of who?” Austalis asked, as if he had never heard of Nodens.

“Nodens. He’s a pagan god. He has a new temple in the west, not too far from Glevum, built above a mine.”

“Thank you,” Austalis told him. “I’ll see Mannius Paulinus when he returns in triumph to Londinium.”

He strolled back to the pottery shop. Some of the shops he passed were closed, with their heavy wooden shutters closed. He wondered whether the owners were cowering inside, or whether they had fled to the country. It would make more sense to stay inside the walls of the city.

The information that the soldier had given him was confirmed when Finn failed to appear for their daily meeting.

“He must have gone west,” Austalis said to Harilusk. “What do you know about this Temple of Nodens near Glevum?”

“Very little. When the Romans had their anti-Christian Emperor Julian a few years ago, he founded temples throughout the Empire to promote the worship of the old Roman gods. Someone here in Britain took up the idea and founded a temple to one of the old British gods.”

“That must be the temple I heard about when I was in Calleva,” Austalis said. He recalled Senicianus saying that his brother frequented a pagan temple and had deposited a curse tablet there against Senicianus.

“The Irish have struck a little sooner than we agreed,” Childeric commented, “but not enough to matter. The armies from Germany will be landing at any moment.”

“The Romans must be fully engaged already. By the time the Atacotti arrive, Britain will be defenceless.”

“Strange that we aren’t receiving any messages,” Artus said. “I wonder where the armies of Gododdin are?”

“Somewhere between the Wall and Londinium,” Austalis replied. “Go and find them, if you’re so anxious. For myself, I’m going to the west. I want to see this Temple of Nodens.”

“We all know he’s your patron god, Austalis,” Artus replied.

“He’s not just my patron god, he’s the god who is directing this whole war. He inspired me to suggest it. How could I not go to worship him at his temple? I wouldn’t have believed that he could still have a temple dedicated to him within the frontiers of the Empire.”

“Gods don’t have temples in free parts of Britain,” Artus said. “You know that very well. Where is there a temple of any god in the whole kingdom of Gododdin? It’s a Roman idea.”

“There’s nothing wrong with taking over Roman ideas, as long as we choose only the good ones, and I can’t think of a better idea than a Temple of Nodens. I’m going there. You all know where to find me.”

Austalis left Londinium by the west gate. The sentry (only one! The Romans must have stripped the city’s garrison down to the minimum) looked at Austalis, and offered some friendly advice.

“Why are you leaving? Listen to me. Stay in the city. You’ll be safe here.”

"I'd like to, but I have to go to the west. My family is there," Austalis lied, "and I'm worried about them".

"I'm sorry to hear that," the sentry replied, turning to deal with a string of waggons drawing up to the gate. "The Irish are making trouble in the west, taking advantage of the Pictish attack in the north. Good luck."

"Thank you," Austalis replied, setting out over the bridge which crossed the river flowing beside the western wall of the city into the Tamesis.

Certainly the traffic was all coming the other way, fleeing from the Irish, or from the power of Nodens, or from whatever terror was driving them. Austalis decided that his spontaneous story of looking for relatives in the west could be a useful one, and he employed it to question the people in the oncoming stream of waggons, pack-animals, and weary pedestrians.

"Is there anyone here coming from Calleva?" he asked. "Anyone from Calleva?"

A woman trudging behind a heavily loaded two-wheeled cart answered him.

"We got out of Calleva just in time."

"What do you mean, just in time? Don't tell me Calleva has fallen!"

The woman ignored him and hurried on, wanting to keep up with the cart which was carrying all her family's belongings, but a young boy who had been perched on the luggage jumped off and ran back to Austalis.

"Calleva is all right, but the fighting is getting closer. That's why my father sent us to Londinium."

"How close?" Austalis asked.

"People were saying that the Irish were a day away when we left," the boy said.

"They've already captured the pagan temple."

"You say they've taken the Temple of Nodens?" Austalis demanded, trying not to sound too eager.

"Yes, Senicianus says it's the only good thing that's happened so far. He's the Christian priest. He says he hopes the Irish destroy it so completely that nobody will know it was ever there."

"Thank you for telling me," Austalis said. "You'd better run on and catch up with your mother."

The boy ran off, and Austalis called out after him.

"I hope your father is all right!" he shouted, surprised that he meant it quite sincerely. He could not remember the woman and boy from the faces of the church congregation in Calleva, and obviously they did not know him. Perhaps the father was the only one who was a Christian and came to church.

As he walked on and looked at the long line of faces coming towards him, one after another, Austalis could feel no personal responsibility for their suffering. Each person looked at him in the eye for a moment, and he wondered what their reaction would be if they knew he was the cause of this whole war. As it was, their eyes in the brief moment of contact they each gave him contained only weariness, as if they hoped they could transfer some of their exhaustion to him.

Eventually, he became dizzy at the procession of anonymous faces. The further west he travelled, the more tightly the carts and animals and people were packed on the road. Now he often had to step off the road altogether and walk on the grass embankment beside it.

There came a time when the people fleeing eastwards were no longer walking. They

were running, holding on to whatever they could carry, sometimes throwing away objects that were impeding them. Often, when the road was too jammed for anyone to run on it, they went beside it where Austalis was walking westwards, scurrying through the grass like hares.

Only one person drew a conclusion from the fact that Austalis was going the wrong way.

A young man and woman were hurrying along beside the road, and nearly bumped into Austalis. He stepped aside to let them pass, but the woman stopped, panting and perspiring in the hot sun, and pointed a finger at him.

"Here, Brennus, look, a spy! He's a barbarian! He's going west!"

"I'm looking for my family," Austalis began, repeating his standard story for going towards the war instead of away from it. "They were in Calleva - "

"No, they aren't!" the woman yelled. "They're in some stinking German pigsty. Look at him, Brennus, I tell you he's a Saxon or an Englishman. Kill him - "

The man wearily walked back through the spring flowers. "Come along, Gwentyfara, we haven't got time. Leave the man alone, I'm sure he's got problems, too."

"My children were killed by the Irish!" the woman shrieked as the man dragged her away. "He's on their side, he's a German - "

Austalis did not know what to say to the woman, and he knew that she would never have listened to him. The sound of her voice, shrieking accusations and arguing with her husband, followed Austalis like a voice from the spirit world as he went on. Occasionally a gust of easterly wind brought a snatch of her voice from the mass of fleeing people behind. Would she cry her anger all the way to Londinium, perhaps to Dubris and the sea beyond? Well, she might, Austalis decided, because she was entirely right.

Quite suddenly, the mass of refugees speeded up, running as fast as they could, carrying nothing. Twice Austalis was knocked into the grass by men lurching to one side, falling over with exhaustion, but still frantically trying to push forward faster, to get to the safety of Londinium a few moments sooner.

All at once, there was nobody. The road ahead was clear. Looking over his shoulder, Austalis saw the last refugees bringing up the rear of the column like the tail of a giant animal lumbering eastwards. In front of him, the tide of bodies had stopped as instantly as a summer storm.

Soon the stillness was accompanied by silence, as the distance between him and the column of refugees widened, and he could no longer hear the jumbled clamour of angry and fearful voices. Only an occasional bird overhead cried from a living voice, and the only life he saw was a hare that jumped out of the grass from time to time. Austalis wondered whether he should recite a protective magical formula against the hare, because evil spirits, especially female ones, were said to adopt the form of hares.

He ignored the hare. Evil spirit or not, it could not harm him, because he walked under the close protection of Nodens. He trudged on towards the hill on which his god's temple stood, seeing nobody, but noticing two distant columns of dark grey smoke twisting up from the horizon like ropes reaching to the sky.

By the time he could see five columns of smoke, Austalis had come upon the first sign of war. He investigated what looked like a stick standing up at an angle out of the grass, and found that it was the corpse of a Roman auxiliary soldier with a crude spear, presumably Irish, protruding from his body. His killer seemed to have stolen the soldier's own army spear, because it was gone, as was his sword.

Austalis looked down at the bloodstained back and sprawled limbs.

“It was I who killed you, soldier,” he said. “I am not sorry, but I hope your spirit goes to a good place.”

## CHAPTER EIGHTEEN

The peaceful west was now the land of death. No man rose up to challenge Austalis. He met nobody who was not already dead. The corpses lay along the side of the road, and sometimes in the road itself. The efficient Roman gutters had caught the flowing blood and carried it off the cambered roadway just as they caught rainwater.

Austalis could not stop to bury the dead, or even to say a prayer for them. They were civilians, auxiliaries, Irish warriors, and even legionaries. Austalis knew he had caused their deaths, but it still did not cause him any feeling of responsibility.

When he came to the river Sabrina, the eastern shore was littered with abandoned boats, evidence of the scale of the flight from the war. He took one, and although he found that rowing was a more difficult skill than he had imagined, he succeeded in crossing to the opposite shore.

Eventually he saw a hilltop with no smoke rising from it. The hill was surrounded by earth ramparts, so it was one of the forts that the Britons had once built before the Romans came. Usually the Romans did not allow anyone to live in them, as if the meek Britons of the occupied territories would ever dare to rebel against Rome.

This hilltop was occupied, though. Wooden buildings lay at the bottom of the hill, and stone buildings on the summit, inside the ancient grassy ramparts.

Only now did it occur to Austalis that he might have a problem dealing with the Irish who had occupied the hill. He knew Niall and Finn, and the warriors were under the orders of King Eochaid who had certainly heard of Austalis, but would these men even listen?

The Irish were organised, at any rate. Four warriors barred the road, within view of four more in the distance, and so on, back to the hill itself. Obviously they had captured the hill several days before, and Mannius Paulinus must have had to turn away and take his soldiers elsewhere.

The challenge was in Irish. At least it was a challenge, not a spear-thrust.

"I am Austalis, herald of Gododdin. King Eochaid and Niall and Fionn know me," Austalis said, in British, repeating the speech immediately in Latin.

The men clearly did not understand, but they had caught the three Irish names. After some discussion, and when they had searched Austalis for concealed weapons, they indicated to him that he should keep going to the next patrol. They had obviously reasoned that if Austalis turned out to be a Roman spy he could be dealt with by the chief of their main force.

The performance was repeated at the next patrol, but at the third one, manned by a phalanx of warriors, there was a young man who understood Latin. He consulted his chief, while Austalis took the opportunity to look at the buildings belonging to the mine at the bottom of the hill. Nobody seemed to be working but Austalis reminded himself that he knew nothing of mining, and the miners could all be underground, out of sight. More probably, they had fled from the Irish, or been massacred on the spot.

The young man received his orders.

"I am to take you to Niall. He is up on the hill, in the Temple of Nuada."

"Nuada?" Austalis asked, as the two of them began the climb. "Nuada, Silverhand, the god of metal. This temple belongs to him."

"Oh, now I understand. He is known to me as Nodens."

"It's a great temple," the young man said. "I've never seen anything like it in Ireland. I'll be interested to see the huge stone cities they tell me about."

Austalis found the temple impressive enough as they reached it. Some of the buildings within the ramparts of the hill-fort were roughly constructed in wood, but most were in stone. Somehow, a lot of money had been found to build the temple complex in the face of the disapproval of the Christian Empire.

He looked down at the mine below. Now that he was viewing it from another angle, Austalis saw that most of the Irish were apparently encamped in the mine buildings, possibly by order, possibly because they were uncomfortable in the high temple.

Austalis began to feel uneasy himself, up in these windy heights, close not only to his patron god, but to all gods. He could understand why his ancestors had built their fortresses in these places. It was not only the military advantages of the site, but also the sense of breathing the same air as the great gods and sharing their power.

"Here is Niall," the young man said.

Niall came out of the largest building, wearing a clean Roman cloak over his dirty tunic.

"Austalis! The herald of Gododdin!"

He said a word in Irish to the young man, who ran off back down the hill, dismissed.

"So, Austalis, what news have you brought us?"

"No news, except that the road to Londinium is jammed with people fleeing from your army. Behind them, the roadside is full of corpses."

"That much I know," Niall replied. "It was easier than I had expected. In fact, Eochaid didn't need to send over as many warriors as he did. By the way, I hear he's very pleased with his new Saxon princess."

Austalis hoped silently that Kairann was happy with her Irish king.

"I am grateful to Nodens for inspiring me," he said. "I'm impatient to look at the god's temple."

"Of course, but you must receive our formal hospitality first. The temple isn't the only thing worth seeing here. Just look at the view!"

Austalis looked down on one of the richest parts of Britain, a land of villas and vineyards. The river Sabrina flowed by in the distance. From this height, there were no signs of war or death.

Niall invited him into the nearest building for a meal. It was a kind of barracks, with rows of low wooden beds, and a large hall for dining.

"Were there soldiers here?" Austalis asked. The rough food which the Irish served him did not go well with the precise elegance of the building.

"No, no. I don't think there have been any soldiers on this hill since the Romans conquered Britain. This building is to house the pilgrims. It seems they come here, stay a day or two to present their offerings, and then on their last night they sleep in the actual temple. You'll see the dormitory."

"Are there any priests I could talk to?" Austalis asked.

"No, everyone had run away by the time we arrived. The priests very likely passed you on the road, probably running away faster than anyone else."

"They won't get much help from the Christians," Austalis remarked, disappointed that he would not have a chance to speak to a Roman priest of Nodens.

"I suppose not. I hear these Christians are a fanatical lot. Well, you must know more about that than I do," Niall added innocently.

"What about the mines? Are they still working?"

“No, the miners ran away with everyone else.”

Afterwards, Niall gave Austalis a tour of the deserted temple complex. The buildings seemed relatively new, confirming the story that they had been put up during the reign of the anti-Christian Emperor Julian, a few years earlier.

While Niall was obviously not interested in the temples, showing Austalis around only as the courtesy due from a host to a guest, Austalis experienced growing excitement mixed oddly with serene reverence. He was exhilarated at having arrived at the shrine of his god, and confident of the rightness of the world and the heavens.

Inside the holy temple, Austalis would have prostrated himself on the floor, or flung open his arms, or done whatever a Roman devotee of Nodens was supposed to do. Since he did not know the outward gestures of worship, he asked the god to accept the inward fire instead.

Many worshippers had left gifts for the temple. A contractor to the Roman fleet had even donated a complete mosaic. Others had recorded blessings or curses on sheets of lead.

Austalis looked through the curse tablets, and soon found the one he was searching for. The message was easy to read, asking Nodens not to allow health to anyone of the family of Senicianus until the ring which Silvianus had lost was brought back to the Temple of Nodens.

“I know this story,” Austalis said to Niall after reading out the curse for him.

“You know about the lost ring?”

“I’ve seen it. Senicianus is the Christian priest in Calleva. He told me that his brother thought he ought to have the ring instead, and that his brother had made a curse at a pagan temple.”

“So the curse hasn’t worked?”

“Not yet, unless your warriors have sacked Calleva. I didn’t think Nodens would put recovering a ring before throwing the Romans out of Britain.”

“What’s the reward to Nodens if he gets the ring back?”

“Silvianus promises him half the value of the ring. I wouldn’t think that would mean much to a god.”

As the two men walked around inside the temple, looking at the stone altar and the alabaster jars where the faithful had left offerings of coins (now emptied by Niall’s warriors), Austalis was surprised by the emptiness of the temple.

“There’s nothing, nothing,” he said, not realising that he had spoken aloud until Niall replied to him.

“Come on, my men didn’t steal everything. I admit they took all the money, but they didn’t desecrate the temple. You just said yourself that the god had no use for money. Anyway, we Irish all have great respect for Nuada Silverhand.”

“No, that’s not what I meant,” Austalis said. “I wasn’t complaining about your men. I don’t care about the money. It would only go to the priests. What’s bothering me is that I can’t feel the presence of the god himself.”

“Do you often feel gods near you?”

“Yes, but sometimes they’re false gods.”

Niall walked away from Austalis.

“I think I’d better leave you to try to get in touch with Nuada. Come and see me when you’re ready. I’ll give orders that nobody is to enter this temple.”

With that, Niall left.

Austalis was grateful for the silence and solitude. He wandered around inside the

temple, running his hands over the rough walls and smooth pillars as if they were the real body of the god, as if Nodens had incarnated himself in this temple on a western hill.

The air was warm and thick. These would certainly be a thunderstorm in the evening. A fly buzzed around inside the temple.

As hard as he tried, Austalis could not succeed in making himself feel that this temple was a holy place. The noisy, insolent fly emphasised that it was just another stone Roman building.

“Nodens, where are you?” Austalis cried, and then he corrected himself. He had said “ubi es”. The god would not wish to be addressed in Latin by the herald of his own war against the Roman power in Britain.

Austalis repeated his plea, in British. The liquid British words, so different from the hard emphatic Latin, echoed in the temple, but the echo was overpowered by the buzzing of the fly.

Austalis listened, silent. He heard distant voices laughing outside on the hilltop. A beam of sunshine threw the shadows of the windows and pillars onto the bare stone floor in a threatening pattern of spikes and bars.

The god did not answer. He did not even refuse to answer. He was simply not present in the temple at all.

Austalis was baffled, and he felt more deeply rejected than in any human relationship he had ever known. He stood waiting a little longer, until he began to feel foolish standing in a deserted stone building, waiting to be spoken to when there was nobody else there.

He walked wearily out of the temple, and lay down in the grass with the summer sun shining on his face and closed eyes. He was suddenly conscious of feeling heavy, of the weight of all his travels and journeys settling on him at last like an old debt. He was still sure that he had received the benediction and power of Nodens in the hall at Din Eidyn, on that icy day in the previous year’s autumn.

Austalis began to fall asleep, but he was woken by a voice.

“Austalis! Have you succeeded?”

A thrill of fear and joy went through Austalis. The god had spoken at last! The surge of happiness turned to embarrassment as he eagerly sat up in the grass and saw that it was Niall who had called him.

Austalis was about to confess his failure, when an idea came to him at the moment when Niall stepped to one side and the power of the sun struck Austalis full in the face.

“I know, Niall!”

“You know what?”

“Why Nodens isn’t here. He’s not present in the temple. I thought the fault was mine, and that Nodens was rejecting me, but it’s not that at all. He’s away from his altar because the mine is inactive.”

“Not because the priests and pilgrims have run away?”

“No, that doesn’t really matter. Nodens is a god of metal. What keeps him alive is not prayers and coins and incantations, but the mining and working of the sacred metal which he gives to men.”

“Austalis, you’ve started an enormous war in the name of Nodens. Britain is on fire from the Wall to the Channel. Isn’t that enough?”

“Not while the mine below the god’s own temple is inactive. I’m going down there. I want to see it.”

“All right, but I’ll come with you. I admit I don’t understand this strange mood of yours, but I want to look at the mine myself. We intend to move on eastwards tomorrow, before the Atacotti get the best pickings in the villa country.”

Niall led the way as he and Austalis scrambled down the hill.

The Irish warriors tried to speak with Niall, but he waved them away with the promise that he would hear them later.

Austalis would have rushed into the open entrance of the mine, but Niall held him back.

“Run in there, and you’ll get lost! Besides, there could be traps set. Wait while I get a light.”

Niall shouted, and two young men came running to serve their chief. They rushed into the entrance of the mine, and came back with a torch. Niall sent one of them back to where his warriors were encamped.

“The miners leave these torches at the entrance. I sent the young fellow to light it from the cooking fire.”

The man ran back, cupping the small flame. Niall took the torch, and waited until it flared up to its full brilliance.

“Let’s go in. Watch out for puddles, and for ruts in the floor.”

As soon as they entered the mine, they were enveloped in darkness and silence, apart from echoes.

“What do you want to see?” Niall asked.

“I don’t know. I’ve never been in a mine. I just wanted to be here. I didn’t mean to drag you in as well.”

“I appointed myself to watch you. The way you’re behaving, I’m afraid you’ll run off down some corridor in the darkness, shouting for Nodens. Shouting so loudly that you’ll bring the roof down on yourself.”

“You could have watched from the entrance,” Austalis said. He stopped and looked back.

The two young men who had gone to fetch the torch were watching from the entrance to the shaft, and others had gathered behind them. For Austalis, it was like looking from the world of men into a fairy hill, or perhaps the other way around; for Austalis, standing next to the mysterious figure of Niall with his flaring torch, he might as well have been himself a spirit of darkness looking out into the world of men, where all those puzzled but respectful faces watched.

Austalis walked on a little way into the shaft. There was nothing to see. Timber props supported the roof and walls, and, as Niall had warned, there were parallel ruts in the floor where cartloads of ore had been hauled out, probably by men. Austalis remembered being told by Demetrius the Cypriot that a term of slavery in the mines was a common Roman punishment.

“Even the slaves have run away,” he remarked, to Niall.

“They probably escaped, or else the mine overseers took them along. Did you see any gangs of chained men passing you on the road? The slaves are valuable tools.”

“I suppose they are. The mines couldn’t be worked without them. No slaves, no silver.”

“Silver? What silver?”

“The silver ore from the mine,” Austalis explained. He began to sweat in the damp air of the mineshaft, and suddenly he wanted to run out into the sunshine, into the welcome of

those massed Irish faces. A warrior of Gododdin did not panic and run. Austalis stood still, trying to control a burst of shaking that was trying to control his body.

"But, Austalis," Niall replied, "it's not a silver mine. It's an iron mine. It produces nothing but iron."

The ceiling of the mineshaft seemed to fall on Austalis, and the floor seemed to carry him up to meet the crashing ceiling, so that Austalis felt himself crushed between them.

He lay on his belly in the rutted mud, weeping. Somewhere a voice roared words in a foreign language, and the floor of the mineshaft rumbled beneath him as men came running, and many hands lifted Austalis up and carried him out into the warm air and sunlight.

He gradually regained control of himself, lying on the grass. There seemed to be low mountains looming over him, but as his mind cleared, Austalis saw that they were piled heaps of earth, the ore from the mine.

"It's iron!" he cried. The words were not formed by his own will, but from some source deeper than his soul, which he could not master. "It's all iron, it's not silver, there's no silver, it's all nothing!"

He was raised up from the ground, with russet iron ore clinging to his clothes and hair. Niall spoke close to his ear, anxiously, as a friend.

"Are you possessed by a spirit?"

Some of the men close by had heard Niall's question, and they moved away.

Austalis slowly shook his head, and looked up. The scene became clear before his eyes. The dirty faces of the warriors were as hard to face as the sun behind them, but Austalis had an answer to give them all.

"Not any more. I've been possessed by spirits for a year, I think, but now I'm free. I'm Austalis again."

"When have you not been Austalis?" Niall asked.

"Ever since the moment I first decided to leave Gododdin and enter the Roman Empire. It's all right, I can stand now."

The hands released him, and he stood calm and steady.

"Now," Niall demanded, "will you tell us the meaning of all this?"

"For you, or for me?"

"Are there two meanings? Speak clearly, like a warrior! You sound like a Christian missionary, telling us there are three gods, but that really there's only one."

Austalis was shamed into cooling down.

"For you and for me, the Temple of Nodens here on this hill is false. Nodens has never lived in it."

"You mean there is no Nodens - no Nuada?"

"I say only that he does not live in this place," Austalis answered.

"I don't understand," Niall objected. Austalis realised that he had unconsciously slipped into speaking in formal British grammar with elevated vocabulary. He switched back to ordinary language.

"Nodens does not live here. He is the Lord of Silver. This temple doesn't matter, because it's never been the abode of the god."

Niall took Austalis aside. The curious Irish warriors dispersed and drifted away.

Niall confronted Austalis.

"Austalis, is the silver hand of Nodens really supporting us? Is this a false war?"

“It’s a true war. I felt the presence of the god in Din Eidyn. What is the problem for you? The Irish and the other nations aren’t the allies of Gododdin. I proclaimed the support of Nodens to Gododdin alone. You are making your own separate war, for your own purposes.”

“No, Austalis! You’re like the sun-god who is the only being who can’t look upon the face of the sun. All these warbands, ours, yours, the Atacotti, the English and the Saxons and whoever else may be landing on the beaches at this moment, could have made a joint war before. They’ve never done it till now. The new factor is you.”

“Me? I’m an ordinary warrior from one kingdom among many in the world. Thousands of men are like me.”

“Only one man has travelled so far and organised such an assembly of armies. You’re special, Austalis. Everyone can see it except you.”

“All right, I can’t judge how I look to others. I will say this, though: they should all know that this is a successful war. It will be remembered long after I have been forgotten.”

“Just don’t say anything to dishearten my men. Come back to the pilgrims’ dormitory to rest. I hope to get more word from Eochaid by tonight. I’m waiting for another shipload of warriors from Leinster, but, even if they don’t come, we’re moving on tomorrow.”

Austalis slept for a while on one of the beds left for pilgrims. The beds were lined up in neat rows as in the legionary barracks at Eburacum. A tablet set into the wall said NODENS BLESSES ALL DREAMS IN THIS PLACE. Austalis knew that this practice was not confined to this cult of Nodens. In the temples of other gods throughout the Empire, pilgrims spent a night in the precincts of a temple, and in the morning the priests interpreted their dreams for them.

Austalis hoped that Nodens would guide him, even if this was an empty temple.

For the first time ever, he dreamed of Marcella. She stood by the river in front of her villa at Venodala, and held out her hands to welcome him. Austalis took her hands in his, and even in his dream he was amazed at the warmth and pressure of her hands. Marcella led him across a green garden with fountains to the villa, and suddenly he was inside the villa, alone. He wandered through rooms and corridors. The paintings on the walls blazed in colours too rich to ever exist in life.

Austalis wandered in his dream through the empty villa, searching for those kind hands and wise blue eyes, calling for Marcella.

“Marcella!” he shouted as loudly as he could, and his words echoed back from the walls and ceiling.

Austalis had shouted so loudly that he woke himself up. He sat on his bed, still thinking that he was at Venodala, and found that someone was standing there.

“Marcella!” he exclaimed, but then he saw that it was a man, the young man who had conducted him to Niall.

“I don’t know who Marcella is, but she isn’t me,” the young man said. “Niall sends me to tell you that he has received reinforcements from Leinster, and he bids you to join the feast in the temple.”

With that, the polite young man left.

Austalis sat on the bed, trying to clear his mind of the disturbing visions. The picture of Marcella had been painfully real. The fountains were a memory of the courtyard of the governor’s palace in Londinium, and the glowing colours inside the house had been an exaggeration of the real wall-paintings.

Austalis stood up, and stretched himself. He could not make up his mind whether

Nodens had blessed his dream or not. Perhaps it made some difference that he had slept by day instead of by night.

Now it was nearly night. He had slept away the afternoon and most of the long summer evening. He stumbled across the floor of the empty dormitory, and opened the door which the unfailingly polite young man had closed carefully.

From the temple Austalis heard shouting and laughing. He forced his way in through a press of bodies, pushing between massed shoulders until he got to Niall.

"Austalis! Welcome to the feast!"

"How are you going to feast?" Austalis roared back above the noise. "There's hardly enough room to stand in here."

"It's outside. They built a fire on the other side of the building, and we carried tables outside from the dormitory. We found sheep in the valley, too. Come on, it should be ready now."

Niall bellowed a few words of Irish, raising a cheer that made Austalis involuntarily put his hands to his ears. His head buzzed.

The crowd of warriors, singing and swaying, tumbled out of the narrow door of the temple into the warm twilight. Austalis stood back until he and Niall were left alone.

Austalis tried to shake the buzz out of his head.

"Your visitors seem happy enough."

"They should be. They met an Atacotti boat on the way. They were astonished when the Atacotti steered towards them. You know how secretive the Shee are. Anyway, the Atacotti hailed them in perfect Leinster Irish, and gave them the latest news of the war."

"Which is?"

"The Romans are shattered. The English and the Saxons are pillaging and burning all of eastern Britain. The men of Gododdin and the other kingdoms beyond the Wall are doing the same in the north. As for us, we're gaining more gold and silver than we knew there was in the whole world."

"What about the Atacotti?"

"They landed in the south, where they had never been seen in arms before. They're doing so well that they had to send that boat back to the northern isles for reinforcements. Here, we'll talk about it over the table."

As they went out, Austalis guessed that the returning boat had been loaded with at least a few skulls to decorate the walls of the underground Atacotti fortress.

The warriors were already sitting at the tables, roughly carving up the sheep. They roared and cheered as Niall took his place among them with Austalis on his right.

Niall laughed.

"It's you they're hailing, Austalis. You made this war."

"I was acting out the will of Nodens."

One of the warriors shouted a string of words at Niall, who gestured to him to come closer. The man got up from the bench, and poured out some long story at Niall's shoulder.

Niall turned to Austalis.

"He brings you greeting from Fionn, who's gone back to Ireland to give Eochaid news of the progress of the campaign."

"I wonder what the other members of our group are going now?" Austalis said. "I suppose Childeric is out with the Germans somewhere near the east coast. Harilusk is probably on the south coast with the Atacotti."

The Irish warrior said something else to Niall, who translated it for Austalis.

“He says he has a message from Harilusk. The Atacotti in the boat told him that Harilusk had told them to pass on his respect for you as an organiser of warbands. The same greeting comes from Artus.”

“Artus? He ought to be somewhere north of Londinium, guiding the army of Gododdin.”

“Well, obviously he must have chosen to stick with the Atacotti for some reason. It doesn’t affect you, anyway.”

The feast continued. Austalis could see that there was vigorous discussion developing over some question. Groups of men were walking away from the table, into the shadows, arguing, while others pursued the dispute at the table emphasising their points by gesturing with handfuls of meat.

“What’s the argument about?” Austalis asked Niall.

“Oh, it’s the old plunder versus settlement question again. I already knew where most of them stood. Some say we should take advantage of the destruction of Roman power in Britain to expand the territories we hold. Others say we should seize all the gold and silver we can, and go home. They say that if we don’t leave the Romans something, then we’ll have nothing to plunder in future.”

Because the night was warm and dry, the men began to walk off to sleep out in the open, under the stars of summer which wheeled over the hilltop. Austalis told Niall he would sleep in the dormitory again.

“I’m not sure whether Nodens blessed my dreams this afternoon, so I’ll try again tonight.”

By the time Austalis lay down on the same bed, the hilltop had become quiet. The arguments had apparently been settled or, more probably, adjourned until the next feast. The feasters had either made beds for themselves in the grass, or stumbled down the hill to the main encampment. Austalis and Niall had left only one man on guard, to watch the fire burn down. It would be visible for many Roman miles, high on its hillfort.

Austalis found that he could not fall asleep. He lay staring into the darkness where the tiled roof lay between him and the stars. He became aware of the tightness of the woven strips of cloth which supported him, of the tiny scuffles in the corners of the dormitory which meant that the mice were active.

Because he could not dream, he lay thinking instead, trying to imagine what Graelen, Childeric, Fionn and the others might be doing. Dreaming dreams unblessed by any god? He wondered why Artus had not gone north to meet the forces which King Ceredig had sent down from Gododdin, and had chosen to go south of Londinium with the savage Atacotti instead.

Austalis suddenly twisted on his bed as a shock convulsed his limbs. He had been on the edge of sleep, but now he leapt up and staggered to the window.

He looked out at the stars and the black expanse of grass. An owl hooted on its way over the hill to swoop down into the woodlands below.

Austalis rested his head against the cold stone of the window. Of course Artus would go with the Atacotti. Artus, the bitter slave who had spent six years as a captive in the villa at Sebenium. Why would he want to come back from Gododdin, except for revenge upon the Romans, and especially upon the Romans who lived in that happy river valley?

Austalis felt his body and soul melt into water and then freeze into ice. Artus would

have told the Atacotti where they could find two rich villas to sack and destroy.

Austalis, on impulse, hoisted himself through the window and wandered about on the grass, which was strewn with snoring sleepers.

He knew he would not sleep that night. He would leave in the early morning, going east and south. If he could reach Venodala in time, he might be able to warn Marcella.

## CHAPTER NINETEEN

Austalis actually ran a large part of the way. The roads were too hard and uneven to run on, so he ran on the grass beside them as the refugees had done. Nobody mistook him for a refugee. There were no more refugees. They were all in Londinium, or dead in the ditches beside the road.

Austalis was ahead of the Irish, so he did not have to fear meeting an Irish warband who would not know him, and who would kill him as just another stray Roman. Germans and Britons he could deal with, but not the Atacotti.

He left the road whenever the milestones told him that he was approaching a town. In a town, he might be detained, either for his own supposed protection, or on suspicion of being a spy, or on suspicion of being Austalis of Gododdin.

Austalis went south of Londinium, keeping the chalk hills in view on his right. He met no raiding party from any nation.

There was nobody alive in the countryside. Even the domestic animals were lying dead in the yards of farms, and smoke rose from burning villas. Austalis hurried on in desolate solitude, like the last man on earth.

He knew that all these Romans who had lived here were not dead. They had crowded into the walled cities. Calleva and Londinium, Noviomagus and Durovernum, must be packed with bodies, starving together, suffering famine in midsummer.

Austalis began to turn north once he was certain he was to the east of Londinium. He came to a river that seemed to be trending north, and which looked as if it might turn out to be the river that flowed past Sebenium and Venodala on its way to join the Tamesis.

In the valley he met a party of warriors coming along the same bank. As soon as he saw them, he dived into the cover of the waterplants, and hid there until he heard them singing in Germanic, swinging their spears and shields. It was unbelievable, an impossible sight: a German warband marching happily in Roman Britain.

Austalis stood up and hailed them.

*"Godan daga!"*

They looked at him, and shouted back. They turned out to be English.

They were well pleased with the war.

"King Wulflaeth promised us that Britain was a rich land, but we had not even imagined this."

One of the English warriors, more suspicious than the others, demanded to know who Austalis was.

"My name is Austalis, from Gododdin, north of the Wall. I visited Engaland while I was the king's herald."

"You're Austalis? Let us have the privilege of carrying you on our shields, wherever you are going, all the way to the Wall and beyond!"

"I'm not going that far. I'm following this river valley to a place where there are a couple of rich villas. Did you come from there?"

"No, because we heard that the Atacotti were heading that way, and that means there'll be no plunder to be had. Where the Atacotti have been, there's nothing but ashes and bones."

"Not even all the bones, at that," another man remarked. "I hear they take the skulls away as trophies."

"I must get there" Austalis cried, startling the English.

“Good luck, then. We’ll meet again.”

“Not unless I visit Germany another time, which I don’t expect to.”

“You may see us again here. King Wullflaeth explained that to us. You probably don’t know that Engaland is becoming a dangerous place to live. People from the east and the north are beginning to push against our frontiers. They’re being driven by some other force deeper inside the continent.”

“With the Roman power destroyed in Britain, we could find a secure home on a defensible island,” another man said. “Many English already live here, in the army, or the civil settlements.”

Austalis had never imagined this.

“A new Engaland, here in Britain?”

“Why not? It wouldn’t be your land we are taking. We want these fat southern lands, not the northern moors of Gododdin. They would be too much like the home we have already.”

Austalis did not want to hear any more.

“May I earn the right to join you in the place of heroes,” he said, and he pushed his way through the willow boughs to the open riverbank.

He became more certain that this was the right river. It turned further towards the north, while his thoughts went in a northerly direction, towards darkness, cold and endless night.

He might be responsible for the establishment of a kingdom of the English in Britain. For the moment, he did not care. He was obsessed by the idea that he was responsible for bringing the Atacotti to the river valley.

He found a small boat tangled in the waterplants. He looked inside, and saw a dead man whom he did not recognise. Killed by the Atacotti? The corpse still had its head attached. Birds sang in the cheerful summer light, and the river bubbled past the trapped boat. Austalis remembered the Greek and Roman legend of Charon, the boatman who ferried the souls of the newly dead across the river Styx into the underworld. Was this Charon himself? Had so much death been created in Britain that even the servant of death had died?

Austalis left the corpse in peaceful possession of his boat, and pushed on. He looked for smoke rising over the hilltops, but he saw none. This made him think that the villas were still far away, so he was surprised when he suddenly came upon Sebenium.

There was no smoke. Nothing was burning. The villa itself seemed undamaged from a distance, just as a recently dead body might seem asleep except for its greyness.

Austalis ran forward, tripping over the remains of slaves and peasants, even of dogs and cats.

“Varrus! Elafius! Varrus! Elafius!”

He expected no answer, and he received none. He ran into the villa, baffled by unfamiliar rooms and curtains. There were bodies inside the house, and they were all headless, with black crusts of blood at the crudely severed necks. For an instant Austalis was angry at the dumb painted walls insolently flaunting their bright colours while the dead lay in darkness and shadow on the floors.

Austalis saw a door that had been broken down, with its iron lock torn out. When he went into the room, he found the body of an elderly man sprawled headless on a low bed.

He examined what was left of the elderly man. It was Elafius. He had been destroyed together with the life of his beautiful villa.

“Varrus!” Austalis shouted, but nobody answered.

Austalis noticed that the bodies were still stiff, so they could not have been killed many hours before. Perhaps there was still time for him to get to Venodala while it was still alive.

Austalis ran breathlessly along the valley. This time there was smoke ahead, and in a moment of joy he saw the great red-tiled roof of the villa at the same time as he heard, echoing from side to side on the hills, the sound of men's voices raised in a high reverberating yell.

There was life at Venodala, but whose?

"Marcella!" Austalis gasped as he ran. He had meant it as a yell, but he had no breath to shout with. He was whipped and cut by branches like the scourge of a wrathful god.

His vision began to narrow and blur. Pain filled his chest and flooded his arms and legs. Ahead of him, the villa swayed and rocked as if it were floating on a turbulent sea. Out of the darkness at the edges of his vision shaggy demons with spears poured out to intercept him.

A bearded face sprang up, and a voice roared.

"Austalis! *Salve prater*, Austalis!"

Austalis was caught by arms. Animal smells overwhelmed him. His legs weakened and gave way, and he fell to his knees. He wanted to speak, to shout, to wail, but he had to recover his breath. The body had defeated the spirit.

For a few moments the most important facts in the world seemed to be the blades of grass in front of his eyes. This vision widened, and the dark curtains at the edge of his sight slid away. The pain in his chest and limbs subsided.

Still on his knees, Austalis looked up at the man who had greeted him.

"Eghulex." Austalis felt he could say only stupid things at that moment. "What are you doing here?"

"Your friend Artus brought us here to attack the villas and be the instruments of revenge for you both."

"My friend?" His mind suddenly came to life. It was as if the sun had broken out of clouds and was shining behind his eyes. "Where's Marcella?"

"The woman? She's over there."

Austalis jumped up. Dizziness struck again and subsided. He looked to where Eghulex pointed, and let out a howl when he saw Marcella dead on the grass, her blue eyes open to the sun.

He ran towards her. The blue eyes twinkled in the sunlight. He lifted her up. She was still warm. He shook her warm body as if he could force the life back into it.

"Austalis, we are avenged," Artus said.

Artus! Austalis looked past the dead face of Marcella. Artus sat on the ground beside the sprawled body of a young man. Artus was grinning, and wiping the blade of a knife.

Artus met his eyes, and gestured with his thumb at the dead man.

"That was Varrus. He was trying to persuade Marcella to escape with him to Londinium. We got here just in time!"

Austalis dropped Marcella as roughly as if she had been a sack of vegetables.

He sprang at Artus.

"But Austalis," Artus squealed as Austalis seized him, "it was for us both! They humiliated us!"

Austalis snatched the knife, and used all the strength of his body to force the knifeblade through fat and muscle into the throat of Artus.

As his blood sprayed out, Artus raised his hand, seeming to try to point a finger of accusation at Austalis.

Austalis watched him die, but he knew what the accusation was meant to be. Austalis had started this war, preached it to the Picts and the Irish and the Atacotti and the Germans, and none of these deaths would have happened but for him.

Austalis dragged out the knife and threw it away. He picked up Varrus and laid him down next to Marcella. He arranged their limbs to give them as much dignity as was possible in death.

He realised that Eghulex was standing over him.

“What was special about these two?” Eghulex asked. He was dirty and shaggy, wrapped in ragged furs.

“They were my dear friends,” Austalis replied. “Help me carry them into the house”

Eghulex had two warriors pick up Varrus, while he and Austalis took up the body of Marcella. They carried her up the wooden ramp into the silent house. Austalis laid her on the bed.

“I want to see them buried with honour,” Austalis told Eghulex. “You can do what you like with the corpses on the estate.”

“Nobody else is dead,” Eghulex replied. “We didn’t kill anybody.”

Austalis remembered that there were no bodies inside the villa, as there had been in the villa at Sebenium.

“You mean only Artus killed here?”

“He hated them so much. He wouldn’t talk about anything else, all the way here. The peasants are all under guard in the granary”

Now Eghulex seemed civilised again. Austalis made himself look down again at the body of Marcella, still bleeding onto the bed and onto the floor below.

“What’s real, Eghulex? Sometimes you behave like a centurion of the First Italica, and sometimes like a primitive savage.”

“What’s real yourself, Austalis? Here you stand mourning this one woman and that one man, but you say nothing about all the men and women who are being killed in your war.”

“I know. I’ve been listening to that from myself. I want to ask only one thing from you and the Atacotti. Please don’t kill the servants and farmworkers on this estate. Take whatever possessions you want, burn the villa if you like, massacre the entire population of Londinium if you feel like it, but don’t kill anyone else here.”

“For your sake, we’ll do it. We owe you this glorious war.”

“Not for my sake. For Marcella.”

“For her, then. What else can we do for *you*? Now that we know this place is dear to you, we won’t damage it. There are plenty of villas to sack.”

“You can do one thing. Take the head of Artus and set his skull in the wall of your underground fortress in the northern isles.”

“But Austalis, we didn’t kill him. You did.”

“Nevertheless, please do that.”

“All right. We’ll all eat the rest of his body.”

Austalis looked away.

“Let me talk to the people of the estate.”

He laid his dagger on Marcella’s body, knowing that the Atacotti would not touch iron, and left her.

The Atacotti had settled down on the grass to eat stolen food, and some were wading in the river. Austalis found it hard to believe that this was the same villa where he had known such joy, the same river in which he had received his sunny baptism. As he approached the granary he heard sobbing and wailing from inside.

He paused at the door. The Atacotti guards had gone, and the captives could have escaped, but they did not dare even to look. Austalis, trained as a warrior in the hard northern kingdom of Gododdin, now felt fear at having to face these unarmed servants in a soft southern valley.

Austalis was afraid of Osgirn, and now he admitted to himself that he had hoped to find Osgirn dead. He became furious at his own weakness, and burst into the granary.

Cries of terror broke out in the stuffy darkness. Austalis thought for a moment that he had been recognised, and then he realised that the prisoners' nerves were so taut they had reacted involuntarily to the flinging open of the door. The opening of the door was the moment they had been dreading, when the Atacotti would rush in to massacre them all.

"Where is Osgirn?" he called.

"I am here," Osgirn replied, coming forward into the pool of light falling through the doorway. "Are you happy with your work, Austalis? What has become of our mistress?"

Female voices began crying at that.

"Your mistress has been murdered by Artus, the slave from Sebenium."

"At your urging!"

"I came here, right across the island of Britain, to try to save her. My grief is greater than anyone's. You know what she meant to me."

"Your own Picts started this war."

"It would not have happened if you had not prevented our marriage. If there is any guilt in this place, you share it with me. Bring the people out of here."

"To be killed?"

"You will be safe. The villa is untouched. I want you and the people of the estate to help me build a mausoleum for Marcella and for the priest Varrus of Sebenium who was murdered with her."

"You have the power," Osgirn said, "so we have no choice".

He led a move to the door. Austalis heard many people shuffling and moving in the dark recesses of the granary. He went out and stood on the riverbank.

Osgirn led them straight to the wooden ramp leading into the house.

Austalis turned and looked downstream along the river. It still flowed and reflected sparkling sunlight, even though Marcella was dead. He wanted to leap into the water, hold up his arms, and hold back the water by the force of his will and grief. The river and the sun did not care that Marcella was dead.

Eghulex came up behind him.

"My men are leaving, Austalis. We're moving on to some other villa, or a town, perhaps to Londinium itself. Will you come with us?"

"No. I'll stay here until the tomb is raised."

"The tomb?"

"I'm going to build a mausoleum to Marcella and Varrus. It's all I can do. Take the head of Artus and go back to the northern isles."

"The head of Artus is in a leather bag. I'll carry it myself all the way home, and set his skull in the wall."

Austalis saw that the Atacotti warriors were picking themselves up from the grass and assembling into groups. They looked expectantly towards Eghulex, who gave a Roman salute to Austalis, as perfect as anyone could expect from a former centurion of Legio I Italica.

"Salve prater, Austalis."

Austalis could not refuse him an answer.

“Vale, Eghulex.”

Eghulex led his men away northward along the riverbank. Austalis heard them crashing and rustling through the trees for a long time. He could not reproach them for destroying Sebenium and killing Elafius and his household. Austalis knew that he was responsible for bringing the Atacotti to southern Britain. It was not the fault of Nodens or Christ or Mithras: it was the fault of Austalis, and he knew he had to bear the burden.

He went into the house. The women would not let him enter the room where Marcella lay, because they were washing her body. He found Osgirn checking through the ornaments in the living room.

“Osgirn, I promise you I will leave Venodala and never come back here again, if you will help me build the mausoleum.”

“I will help you. Look, your friends haven’t stolen anything. They’re such savages that they don’t know what’s valuable.”

“If you must know, their leader was once a centurion in a Roman legion. They spared the villa for me, because I asked it for the memory of Marcella. Come outside with me.”

They walked out to the tree that stood behind the bench, on which Austalis had sat with Marcella.

“You know this estate better than I do, Osgirn. Where should we put the mausoleum? Near the river?”

“No, it floods. We can float boats into the granary in the autumn, load them with grain, and send them downstream to the Tamesis.”

“Where should we put it then, so it will last?”

“On the hill, just behind the villa. It will last as long as there is a Roman Empire to defend it. I don’t know if the Empire even exists in Britain any more.”

“Let’s go and look,” Austalis replied. He and Osgirn had been enemies from that day when Austalis had run from the Mithraeum. Fate had intended them to meet and be enemies, and Austalis knew that wise men do not dispute the rulings of fate.

They clambered up the hill, into dark bushes growing out of muddy earth. Austalis saw that there was a flat place that could be cleared away.

A child’s voice called out hesitantly from hiding.

“Osgirn? Osgirn, is it safe for me to come out?”

Osgirn glanced with hate at Austalis, and then called back.

“Yes, come out, whoever you are.”

A small boy scuttled out, with mud on his smock and leaves and thorns in his hair. He stood up defiantly, strong and stocky.

Osgirn recognised him.

“It’s all over, master Pelagius.”

“Who’s that?” Pelagius demanded, pointing to Austalis.

“I am Austalis of Gododdin. I remember hearing of you. You’re the son from the villa at Sebenium.”

“Where’s Varrus? I ran away when the savages came.”

Osgirn looked at Austalis again, with that old familiar expression of hate.

“Are you brave enough to tell him?”

“It’s my duty. Pelagius, Varrus is dead. So is your father, and the villa at Sebenium has been given over to death.”

The boy howled, and ran forward to Osgirn, who held him with a tenderness that Austalis would not have believed Osgirn could show.

Pelagius drew back again.

"They are all with Christ now," he declared, talking like an earnest old priest, but with a child's tears running down his face.

"We are going to build a mausoleum in this spot for Varrus and for the lady Marcella," Austalis said.

"Marcella too? Oh, she was so kind and good!"

"Yes, she was. I know that very well," Austalis replied. "Sebenium is yours now. You will have to grow up quickly."

"I will study to be a priest, and serve Christ."

"You still believe in Christ, even after what you've seen today?"

"I still believe in Christ, and I still believe that people can be made good."

"Come down to the house," Osgirn said. "I'll have the baths heated for you, and we'll give you some clean clothes."

That afternoon, the men from the villa began cutting down the trees and bushes. By the evening, there was a clear square of brown earth, ready to be built on.

It turned out that the estate had always been capable of constructing its own buildings, because the villa itself and the granary and other outbuildings required constant maintenance. Austalis left the craftsmen to get on with the job, while he watched in a vigil over Marcella's body.

The women had tried to keep him out of the room, crying that it was a violation of tradition, but Austalis forced his way in and then threw them all out. He had to remain alone with his guilt.

Austalis kissed the icy face of the only woman he had ever loved, and stood in the warrior's upright guard posture by her bed. He would fast and keep his vigil until the mausoleum was ready to receive her.

The servants peered through the door after a few hours, bringing a tray of food, but he roared at them to go away.

Later, when it was full night and the room was completely dark, he heard Pelagius call from outside in the corridor.

"Austalis, it's me, I'm coming in."

A shifting puddle of light under the door showed that Pelagius was carrying a candle. He pushed open the door.

"I brought you some bread and water," he said, setting the candle on the table next to Marcella's bed. The rich light made her flesh take on a colour nearly that of life.

"I shall fast until she is buried," Austalis shouted.

"Well, drink then, or you'll kill yourself, and that's a sin."

Pelagius carried in a jug of water, and poured out a cupful. Austalis drank it, and stretched his body to ease his stiff joints and muscles.

"I've got so much sin to carry as it is, a little more doesn't matter."

"You should confess to a priest."

"I'm not sure I'm a Christian any more. Anyway, the only priest I know is lying dead in the next room. That's part of my burden of sin."

Pelagius sat on the floor, clasping his knees. Austalis guessed that Pelagius would grow up to be a powerful and burly man.

The child's eyes glinted, large in the pointy light of the candle.

"Do you want to tell *me* about it?" he asked.

Austalis, suddenly weary, drank another cup of water. He sat on the bed and caressed Marcella's hair, his fingers skimming over the cold skull below.

"I come from Gododdin, north of Hadrian's Wall. It was Roman territory, too, once. My father had served in the Roman army ...".

Austalis found that he could not hold back his story, any more than he could have held back a rush of tears. He could not help telling the whole tale of what had happened to him since the blustery spring day when he had first seen the gate of Vercovicium across the northern hills.

Pelagius squatted in silence, awake through the hidden hours of the night. Austalis could not believe that he was really hearing his own voice. He was sitting with his lost beloved, pouring out his confession of shame and violence to a young child. Even though Austalis was talking to a small boy, he left nothing out of his account, including all the details of his failed initiation into the cult of Mithras.

Sometimes he stopped for more water. Pelagius went out once to the kitchens, returning with another candle and a lump of bread which he held in his soft round hands as he bit chunks off it.

The short summer night ended when the first light of dawn leaked through the shutters, illuminating the brown floor and the half-burnt candles.

"So you see," Austalis muttered, his voice hoarse and his throat sore, "it's all my fault! Britain is burning from the Wall to the Channel, and Sebenium is destroyed, Elafius and Varrus are dead, and so is Marcella whom I wanted more than the Empire, and the guilt is all upon me!"

"If you repent, and I see that you do, God will forgive you."

"For more than a year I've heard talk about gods. People have preached to me Mithras, Christ and Nodens. I don't know what I can believe in now. They all seemed real to me. Everything seemed real to me, but now this is the only reality."

He stroked Marcella's hair again.

Pelagius got up and clumsily stretched himself, a child once more.

"I'll bring you something for breakfast."

"No. I vowed to fast until the burial."

"Which god did you make your vow to?" Pelagius asked over his shoulder as he left the room. Austalis admitted defeat, and he accepted the grapes and the bread and honey that Pelagius brought him.

As Austalis hungrily ate the food, he became aware of the sound of voices and hammering from the hillside behind the house.

"It sounds as if they're working on the mausoleum," he remarked.

"Osgirn says it will be ready tomorrow," Pelagius replied. "The longest part is waiting for the concrete to set."

"Concrete?"

"There's going to be a concrete dome on the top. Are you going to stay in here?"

"Yes. I won't leave Marcella."

"I'm going to say my prayers. I'll remember to mention you. Then I'm going to bed."

Pelagius left Austalis alone again.

Austalis stood in the room. Although he could hear all the noise from inside and outside the house, and although he watched as the bars of daylight projected by the slats of the shutters moved across the floor as the day progressed, these sounds and sights did not seem to belong to his world. They were like manifestations from another kind of existence, spirit voices and unearthly lights as unreal as the pulsating blue bags of light that were said to float over marshlands.

For Austalis, the world in which he lived was an enclosed dark room with the body of a young woman lying on a bed.

In the afternoon, he became thirsty, and he noticed that Pelagius had left him the jug of water. Drinking the water seemed a significant event, the only physical act of the day.

When the evening fell, he longed for a candle, but he would not call out for some servant to bring one. Even Pelagius did not come to visit him. Austalis reminded himself that he had sworn to keep a solitary vigil over Marcella, so he stood as a warrior through most of the night in the dark room. Occasionally, the projected flicker of flames danced on the floor. Austalis thought this might be another raiding party, Saxon or English, perhaps another band of Atacotti, perhaps Graelen with warriors of Gododdin.

He made ready to burn with the villa, but he heard voices from the back of the house and realised that the flames belonged to fires illuminating the site of the mausoleum while the men worked on it all night.

At dawn he heard someone in the corridor approaching. He expected Pelagius, but it was Osgirn, tired and dirty.

"The service will begin as soon as the morning is full. Let the women back in, so they can put the body in the coffin."

Austalis followed Osgirn out, and saw Pelagius waiting.

"Austalis, your vigil is over," Pelagius said. "Come to the kitchen for breakfast."

Austalis went with him. The kitchen was full of exhausted men, and the women serving the food looked tired as well. Austalis recognised faces from the services of worship in the chapel. He had never bothered to get to know these people, and their faces told him clearly enough that he would be wasting his time if he tried to gain their friendship now.

"Would you like to wash before the service?" Pelagius asked. "You can't have a bath. The men have been too busy to spare anyone to stoke up the furnace."

"That's all right. A pot of cold water will be enough for me."

Pelagius stood beside him while he splashed cold water on his face and hands.

"Are you ready now?" Pelagius asked.

"No, just one more thing. I want to find something to bury with Marcella and Varrus."

"That's pagan! They were Christians. They still are."

"It's a sign of my love and grief."

Austalis searched through the house until he had found everything he wanted, and then let Pelagius lead him out of the villa. When they came out of the back door, Austalis thought that a miracle had arisen.

A wooden wall of planks had been built up to hold back the loose earth of the hillside, and on the flat terrace above a square building had appeared, with a sloping tiled roof surrounding a bare high dome which reflected the morning sun in pale red, like exposed wounded flesh. A silent crowd of people waited at the entrance.

Pelagius took his left hand, because the other held the gifts which Austalis intended to leave in the graves.

"They're waiting for us, Austalis."

Austalis let Pelagius lead him up the wooden steps to the terrace. The crowd let him pass, in silence. The first breeze of the day rustled the leaves of the trees, and a dog barked sharply in the valley.

Pelagius took Austalis under the eaves and in through the entrance between plain wooden pillars.

“It’s a miracle, it’s a miracle,” Austalis exclaimed.

“This is only the work of men,” Pelagius replied.

Inside, an empty colonnade surrounded a room built of great chalk blocks, pure white unlike the pale grey blocks of the dome. Austalis went in. Along the tops of the walls a frieze of human figures had been painted on a green background. The interior of the dome was the same grey as the outside.

“Look down, Austalis!” Pelagius whispered, catching his arm.

A ladder led down to a square chamber far beneath the floor, where two open lead coffins waited, decorated with moulded lines and scallop shells.

Voices rose outside.

“Here they come,” Pelagius said. “There’s no priest. I’ll find one later to say the prayers.’

Austalis had no place in the ceremony. He might as well have been an unseen observer in a dream as the procession brought in the bodies of Marcella and Varrus and laid them in the lead coffins. Austalis now understood that he had been brought there to contemplate his guilt to the last.

He watched as the lid of the coffin was secured over Marcella’s face, which he would never see again. Some of the people put gifts into the grave; a bronze pot, a large pottery jug, a glass bottle, and carved bone ornaments, which were precious possessions for poor farmworkers.

When they had finished, Austalis put in his own final gifts. His final gifts? He could not remember ever having given anything to Varrus and Marcella, who had given so much to him.

Beside the coffin of Varrus, he set out the gaming board and the glass counters for the game of Romans and Sabines. He carefully set out the thirty pieces, leaning into the grave, and he suddenly remembered the thirty pieces of silver that Judas Iscariot had received for betraying Christ.

By the coffin of Marcella he put the silver spoons, the one bearing the name SAULOS, the other PAULOS, which he had received as baptismal gifts from Elafius and Marcella. The spoons rolled for a moment, and Austalis knew he would always remember that sound.

He stood up.

“I’ve finished,” he announced. “I have fulfilled my vow. I will leave Venodala, and you will never see me again.”

He walked out of the mausoleum as the men began piling earth onto the coffins in the deep shadowed grave.

“Where will you go, Austalis?” Pelagius asked him as they shared a final meal.

“Back to Gododdin. I can’t stay in the Roman part of Britain.”

“I hope you return to Christ.”

Austalis left in the middle of the morning, facing the road to Londinium and the north. He had searched the house until he found his father’s bronze diploma, and he resolved to carry it wherever he went like a vow laid upon him. Before he took the first step, he hoisted the child Pelagius up in his arms. Pelagius smiled.

“May God look after you, Austalis. He will forgive all your sins if you are truly sorry for them.”

“May whatever god is real bless you, Pelagius.”

## CHAPTER TWENTY

This time, Austalis knew he was approaching the Wall for the last time and it felt as significant as the first time he had seen it from the north across the empty hills.

He had bypassed Londinium and had made his way north up roads lined with smoke and ruin. He had expected to meet up with the host of Gododdin, but the people he met on the way told him that the “Picts” were retreating fast.

Neither Picts nor Roman soldiers challenged him as he approached the civil settlement attached to the fortress of Vercovicium. The place was deserted, but the houses were undamaged. Where were the families of the soldiers, and the civilian employees of the fort?

Austalis wandered around the empty houses. He called out, and explored some of them, but he found nobody, alive or dead.

Where could they have gone? North to Gododdin, accompanying King Ceredig’s army in triumph? West along the Wall, to another fortress? South to Eburacum, to seek the protection of Rome? That would have failed: he had avoided Eburacum, but he had been told that Fullofaudes, Duke of the Northern Marches, had been captured and taken as a prisoner by the Picts. Perhaps Fullofaudes was even now being feasted as a noble hostage in the royal hall at Din Eidyn. Perhaps the people had been taken away into slavery by the Irish.

Austalis walked around until he was sure he had found the house belonging to Digern and Brigid.

“Brigid? Digern? Are you there?”

There was no answer. He went into the dark house. There were two humped shapes in the dimness.

Austalis saw that the floor had been dug up and hastily thrown over the bodies. He gently pushed away the thin layer of stained soil.

Brigid had been clubbed to death and Digern lay with a dagger in his chest. This was the work of the Irish. Whoever did the murder had left in a hurry, called away to help herd slaves away to the coast.

Austalis found a shovel leaning against an outside wall, and he used it to bury the two bodies, in their own house, under their own earth floor, deep enough so the wolves and dogs could not get at them. He was weary of grief and guilt now, and he could not feel any emotion. Another burial with no priest, of two people whose death he had caused.

He found the fort deserted as well, with both the northern and southern gateways open. The southern gates had been wrenched off their hinges by the violent action of many men, and hung at impossible angles like broken limbs.

Nobody walked among the buildings of the fort, and a few dry flowers blew mysteriously across the empty parade square. The open northern gateway framed a view of the hills, as if there were no more barrier between Rome and Gododdin. Vercovicium was as deserted as the abandoned forts of the turf wall, and Austalis could hear no sound except the wind that always blew around the Wall, until a voice made him jump in a shameful manner unworthy of a warrior.

“Austalis! Austalis the herald!”

A warrior of Gododdin stepped out of the bath-house.

“I was ordered to wait for the last man, but I never imagined that the last man would turn out to be you.”

Austalis examined the young man, whom he did not recognise.

“What do you mean, last man?”

“Your cousin Graelen told me to stay here until I was sure that the last warrior of Gododdin had come through.”

Somewhere the wind blew out one of the thick panes of glass in the windows of the fort’s headquarters building, and it shattered on the parade square with a sharp metallic sound. An idle thought came to Austalis: *I have learnt one more thing from my time in the Roman provinces of Britain : now I know what breaking glass sounds like.*

“I am certain that I’m the last. Has the rest of the army gone home?”

“Yes, with unimaginable treasure, and the Roman commander in the north as a prisoner!”

“So I heard. Where are the *exploratores* who operated out of this fort?”

“Gone, either with us, or gone to ravage somewhere else, who knows? They presented us with a couple of horses. I’ve got them stabled. You’ll need one.”

“I’ve walked to Gododdin before.”

“You’ll need to move faster this time. The Romans are bringing soldiers from across the sea, and they’re turning Britain inside out, looking for Austalis the herald of Gododdin.”

“They’re going to come to Gododdin, where the Roman army hasn’t ventured for seven generations, only to kill me?”

“Oh, they don’t want to kill you. They want to take you to Rome and parade you through the streets.”

“Before they kill me. I don’t want to be marched as a prisoner in some Roman general’s parade of triumph.”

Austalis imagined crowds of citizens assembled to jeer at the Pictish barbarian who was being driven past them in chains.

“No true warrior would accept such a disgrace,” the young man agreed.

“It’s more important than my own fate,” Austalis told him, beginning to foresee the events that would precede his capture: the Romans bringing more forces over from Europe, perhaps fresh legions from the Rhine, perhaps heavy auxiliary cavalry, which the men of Gododdin would not know how to oppose. More deaths, more burials, more graves and smoking fires caused by the actions of Austalis the son of Notfried.

“It won’t happen,” he declared. “The Romans won’t come to Gododdin. I’ll evade them. Here, come with me. There must be writing materials in the headquarters building.”

The young warrior followed him reluctantly into the chilly stone building. Austalis hurried through the offices and corridors until he found one where sheets of wood with neat black script lay waiting to be filed on one side, and blank wax tablets lay ready to be used on another table.

He seized a clerk’s high stool and put it down by the table. Picking up the nearest sharpened stylus, he poised it at the top of the blank wax rectangle while he mentally composed his text.

The young man hung back nervously.

“You can write on those things?”

“Yes.”

“It makes me feel funny, like those windows.”

Austalis realised that the young warrior was manfully confronting the glass windows that gave a distorted view of the parade square.

The sun broke out of the clouds, and the windows twisted its light. Austalis saw his own face reflected on the surface of the wax, and because of the rippling of the sunlight caused by the thick glass it was as if he was gazing down at the surface of water. He could dive into those secret depths, but would he discover anything?

He briskly set to work, pressing the stylus heavily into the wax, so heavily that he sometimes felt it scratching the wooden backing underneath it.

“To the Tribune Mannius Paulinus, at the Palace of the Governor of the Provinces of Britain, in Londinium.

Know that I have left Britain, and it is useless for Rome to send an army in pursuit of me.

AUSTALIS PICTUS MILES REGIS VOTADINORUM.”

Austalis found a leather bag to wrap the tablet and protect it from damage by illiterate warriors who could not understand the fussy pattern of scratchings on the smooth wax. He gave the bag to the bewildered young warrior.

“See that this is given to King Ceredig, to be handed to the Roman envoys who will come demanding to have me handed over to them. They will expect a refusal, so they can order in the armies. They must be given this instead. I lay this duty on you as a warrior.”

“Am I free to leave for Gododdin?”

“Yes, I’m sure there are no others to follow me. If anybody is following it is the Romans.”

“They’re supposed to be bringing soldiers over to a port near here, to save marching them up all the way from the south.”

“Pons Aelius. There’s a bridge over the river. The Romans ship grain for the legions in Germany from there. That’s where I’ll go.”

“Pons Aelius? How can you hide there?”

“I can’t. I’m going to take a ship to Germany. Once I get there, I’ll find somewhere to go.”

“Well, you’ll have a whole continent to hide in.”

“I won’t live on the continent. I feel oppressed by that great endless mass of land. I found that out when I went to Germany before. I need an island.”

“There must be other islands in the world apart from Britain and Ireland.”

“There are. Now I remember hearing of one. I met a Roman soldier called Demetrius whose father had come from the island of Cyprus.”

“Cyprus? Where’s that?”

“Somewhere near the eastern end of the Middle Sea. That’s all I know about it. I need a place to head for, so that’s where I’ll go.”

“Immediately?”

“Just as soon as I’ve visited one of the storerooms in the bath-house.”

The young warrior, still mystified and becoming more so, went with Austalis to the bath-house. It was gloomy inside, with no fires burning. Austalis had to strike sparks and light one of the torches from the wall. While he waited for the torch to come to life, he heard horses neigh and shuffle in some other room where the young warrior had stabled them out of the first cold winds of the declining year.

Austalis found the storeroom and shone the torch on the stone altar that Digern had hidden away.

The young warrior looked at it in fear.

“What’s that?”

“It’s the source of my mission, perhaps older than myself. My father was a soldier in this fort, and he dedicated this altar to the four goddesses of his own country, which was Frisia in Germany.”

The four Alaisiagae postured and twitched in the unstable light of the torch.

“What are their names?”

“Baudihillia, Friagabis, Beda, and Fimmilena. Strange names.”

“I’d heard that you weren’t a full-blooded man of Gododdin. I mean no insult by that, of course.”

“Ah, it’s that story again,” Austalis answered loudly, and he heard his voice echo around the cold empty bath-house. “In Gododdin I’m considered a Frisian, the Romans call me a Pict, the Germans address me as a Roman, and to the Atacotti I’m just one of the meaningless mass of humanity who aren’t Atacotti. Nobody has a place for Austalis.”

He gazed at the altar, running his fingers over the name of his father, HNAUDIFRIDI. He had left a tribal home, and his son felt the lack of one. Austalis knew this would be the last contact he would ever have with his dead father.

He stood up, and pointed to the Alaisiagae.

“Perhaps it was these four goddesses who drew me away from Caeravon.”

He gave the warrior’s salute to the Alaisiagae, and marched like a Roman soldier out of the bath-house. His steps echoed behind him as if an entire Roman legion followed him as he walked, an escort of ghosts that would cling to him like a blood-curse.

“Give me a horse,” he commanded the young warrior.

The young man took both horses out of the bath-house, into the light rain which was beginning to splash on the hard stone that Rome built everywhere.

He gave the better horse to Austalis, and spoke to him in formal grammar.

“I will see that your message is safely delivered.”

“Go, then. There is no reason for you to remain within the Empire.”

The young man mounted his horse, the property of the Roman army and a gift that the *exploratores* had no business to give him, and rode off through the northern gateway.

Austalis watched him go, and then mounted his own looted horse and departed by the southern gateway, past the deserted houses and the indoor grave of Digern and Brigid.

He was halfway to Pons Aelius before it occurred to him that he had not crossed into his own kingdom. By taking even one step outside the northern gateway of Vercovicium, he would have entered Gododdin. He regretted not having done it, but he would not turn back. Now, of all times, would be the worst moment to violate the rule against turning back from a journey once started.

He rode on through the rain, which was whipped into his face by the harsh east wind which would bring the end of summer, to be celebrated at a Samain bonfire which he would not see.

He found the city of Pons Aelius full of Roman soldiers, many of them talking in Germanic dialects. He heard Frisians, Franks, Saxons, English, and others which he could not identify.

Austalis sold the horse to a merchant who was glad of the sudden wealth he had gained by supplying the men who had come over.

“I tell you, I thought I was ruined for ever by the Picts.”

“Well, I’m getting away from them,” Austalis answered truthfully. “I’ve decided to go home to Germany. Do you know how I can get on a ship?”

“No problem. The grain ships haven’t got any grain to carry, because the harvest has been so disrupted, to say nothing of the problems of collecting it, but the ships have been pressed into service to ferry more soldiers over. Sit down here and have some of this Rhineland wine. I’ll be right back.”

Austalis drank the sharp cool wine, and listened to the rain on the red tiles of the roof.

The merchant returned, and shook the water off his heavy wool cloak.

“There’s a ship leaving as soon as the weather clears. She’s loaded with stone for ballast. There’s only one problem. She’s bound for Gesoriacum.”

“Remind me where that is.”

“On the coast of Gaul. It’s the headquarters of the main Channel fleet, the Classis Britannica. It’s a long way from Germany by land.”

“I don’t care. I just want to get off this island and go home.”

Austalis was still afraid that some soldier might recognise him, and he did not feel safe until the ship pulled away from the wooden quay by the bridge for which Pons Aelius had been named.

“Aren’t you worried about Saxon pirates, sailing alone like this?” he asked a resting soldier once they were out in the open sea.

“This time last year, or in the spring, we would have been. Not now. The Saxons are all going from west to east, running for their own coasts. They’re too busy trying to get away before Count Theodosius assembles his army. They won’t slow themselves down by wasting their time attacking a ship carrying only rocks and men.”

“Who’s this Count Theodosius?”

“He’s the general the Emperor sent to punish the barbarians in Britain.”

They sailed into Gesoriacum past white chalk cliffs exactly like the cliffs around Dubris on the opposite coast. As Austalis walked away from the wharf, he could hear a Roman officer telling the vessel’s captain that his ship must have its excess ballast unloaded at once, because it would have to return to Britain as quickly as possible with a load of soldiers, horses and equipment.

Austalis had to press his way past a chattering crowd of auxiliaries arguing in a language he did not know. He wandered about in the town, hearing Latin and scraps of many other languages, but even the ordinary workmen did not speak anything but Latin. Austalis supposed that a language like British must once have been spoken on the coast of Gaul, but it seemed to have vanished beneath the weight of Latin, just as the fields and scrubland had vanished beneath the heavy Roman buildings.

It was easy to buy a place in a waggon in a convoy of merchants leaving Gesoriacum for the city of Lutetia Parisii, and so Austalis began a long journey south and east.

He crossed plains, tunnelled through dark forests, passed quiet villas and vineyards that might as well have been in Britain. It helped him to avoid thinking about the oppressive endless mass of land stretching away into the unknown spaces of the east.

Lutetia Parisii turned out to be a little city, sitting on a swampy pair of small islands in a river that looked just like the Tamesis. At night, a million frogs croaked endlessly from the marshes on the riverbanks, and Austalis was glad that he had not come that way at the height of summer when the islands would have swarmed with mosquitoes.

He moved on, south and east again, and came to a vast river. He bought a passage on a ship as if he had been setting out on the sea, and travelled south straight downstream. In the cities, the natives spoke only Latin, but in the places where the ship stopped the people spoke a language so close to British that Austalis could easily understand it.

The sailors told him that he could travel by ship across the Middle Sea if he wanted, but that it might be hard to find one now that the rough weather of autumn was coming on. He decided to go as far as he could by land instead.

He left the ship close to the coast, and turned east into Italy. More plains, more rivers, more cities. He could hardly tell one from another, and he was astonished that even in the

north of Italy itself, the country people still spoke a cousin of the British language instead of Latin. The Empire was more complex than Austalis had ever imagined.

Now he had to decide whether to go to Rome itself. He pictured himself marching in, the defiant barbarian, and then imagined himself stuck there for years. It might have been a safe place to hide: nobody would think that he would lie low in the actual city of Rome. Nevertheless, he was apprehensive about entering the city at the centre of the world. His fear decided him. He would not be intimidated by the city of Rome. He was a warrior of the faraway kingdom of Gododdin.

Rome proved to be a giant, monstrous Londinium without the relief of the open woodland and marshes that surrounded the capital of Roman Britain. He wandered, totally lost, through its streets, but the vastness of Rome, with its crowded blocks of tenements four storeys high, meant nothing to him. Once he would have been excited by the idea of seeing Rome, when he had not even seen the Wall, but now that he was actually in Rome the impressions of his senses did not touch his soul.

He felt imprisoned within flesh that walked about, as if he were an evil spirit who had taken over a body which did not belong to him.

Rome was overcrowded with unemployed people who lived by public charity, so Austalis could not find work. Everywhere else in the Empire there was a desperate labour shortage and Austalis was always able to earn a few coins by carrying loads from one place to another. He could not do that in Rome, so he moved on.

From the southern Italian port of Brundisium, he took passage on a ship to Dyrrhachium, a little port on the opposite coast. He felt sorry for any Roman agents who had been following him all this way, but he was sure there were none.

Now, as among the Atacotti, he was faced with a language problem. He had entered the eastern half of the Empire, where everyone spoke Greek. It was only the second time in his life, the first being his visit to the Atacotti, that he had found himself in a society where he did not understand the language. Almost nobody understood Latin, and he often attracted open resentment by asking questions in Latin. He might as well have been in a different Empire.

He found Athens more impressive than Rome. On a great rock lifted into the sky, white temples gleamed in brilliant sunlight, while below them a squalid dirty city stank in the heat. Austalis was running out of money, but he travelled through Thrace to Nova Roma, which everyone called Constantinopolis, and which had once been Byzantium.

He found Nova Roma like a city without life. The Emperor Constantine had created it as an eastern Rome and seat of the Empire, but there were not enough people to fill the broad streets and squares between the imposing public buildings. A Roman soldier directed him to a merchant who needed labourers, and he worked through the astonishingly mild winter, loading ships. The merchant answered his questions about learning Greek by giving him the name of a freedman schoolmaster who gave lessons to the newly enslaved who would need Greek in their captivity.

Every evening Austalis sat with Goths and Vandals and bankrupts in a gloomy warehouse, listening to the droning voice of the schoolmaster reciting common words over and over. Austalis sat among slaves in chains, listening to lessons from a former slave.

Within two months, Austalis could make simple if ungrammatical conversation, and he could read the Greek alphabet easily. He found that most people in Nova Roma could read, although they all disdained to read Latin.

Austalis saved his coins and guarded them by keeping them in a bag tied around his neck even while he slept on a pile of sacks in a corner of one of his employer's stores, sharing the space with slaves, drunks, and rats, all of whom he considered to be happier than he was.

At Easter, the Church observed a Holy Day, and all workers were supposed to be given the day off. Austalis, being a free man and not a slave, got the holiday. He wandered along the Golden Horn, the arm of water stretching into the city, and watched hundreds of men fishing in the warm fresh sunshine of a new year. In the distance, boats of all sizes plied constantly across the narrow strait that separated Europe from Asia.

Austalis left his job, thanking the merchant for the employment he had provided. The merchant was astonished, never having been thanked before, and gave Austalis a silver coin as a parting gift.

Austalis crossed to Asia and travelled by land along the coast of Asia Minor. At every port he came to he asked, in a carefully-memorised short Greek speech, whether there was any ship due to sail for Cyprus.

Finally, he came to yet another white smelly port, and when he put his question to the other customers in a tavern, a man asked:

“Which port?”

“Any port,” Austalis replied, straining for the right word.

The man replied in a clutch of words from which Austalis caught the words “sail”, “Citium”, and “tomorrow”. Austalis managed to come to an agreement with the man, who held some kind of post of authority in the ship although he was neither the captain nor the owner.

Austalis looked for the ship at dawn, not wanting to risk missing this chance to get off the huge continent at last. He saw signs of life on only one of the three ships moored at the wharf, and recognised the man he had spoken to, who waved him aboard.

By the time the sun was hot, the ship was sailing on a blue sea, the startling deep blue of the Middle Sea, so different from the dull green of the seas around Britain.

After three days of sunshine and fair weather, the ship docked at the port of Citium on the south coast of Cyprus. Austalis stepped off the gangplank, grateful to be on an island once more.

He explored the narrow streets of this town to which he had come after six months of travelling almost from one side of the known world to the other. It seemed rich for a small place; everywhere there were temples, grand residences, monuments to local heroes and athletic champions.

Many of the buildings were under repair because of a severe earthquake two years before. In this alien world, the sun burned more brilliantly and unknown gods had the power to shake the Earth.

His first priority was to find work to support himself. Because he had some experience as a warehouse labourer, he looked for a trading house near the docks, and asked the foreman in bad Greek if there was work to be had.

“You are from Rome?” the man asked.

“No, from Britain.”

“Britain! You speak Latin?”

“Yes, and I read and write it, too. I’m not so good in Greek.”

“Wait here. The owner may want to see you.”

Austalis stood patiently under the roof of the open warehouse, enjoying the coolness of the shade it gave, while the workmen looked at him curiously, a blond Briton.

The foreman beckoned Austalis to come into a back room, where a heavy middle-aged man sat behind an enormous set of scales on a table, like a god preparing to dispense

judgment to a newly-dead soul.

"You claim to speak, read and write Latin?" the man asked.

"It's true. I come from the Western part of the Empire."

"Write down what I tell you."

The man handed him a square of papyrus, a pen, and a pot of black ink. Austalis was used to writing with a stylus on wax, but he grasped the pen, and dipped it in the ink.

"Write: from Theocritus of Citium to Paulus of Massilia, greetings. I send you forty jars of olive oil. All right - no, stop writing - give me the papyrus."

Austalis handed it over. The new writing caught the light and glistened like fresh blood. The man scrutinised it.

"You're good. You'll do. Will you work for me as a scribe, handling all the Latin correspondence? You'll also have to help with loading cargoes."

"I will be happy to do both," Austalis replied.

Within a few days he had settled into the routine of the job. He wrote letters to Massilia, to Ephesus, to Sidon, to places all around the Middle Sea. He wrote to Mediolanum in Italy, to Colonia Agrippina in Germany, and one day, after a few months, he took a sheet of his employer's papyrus to write a letter to Britain. Everyone else was asleep in the desperate heat and painful light of a summer afternoon in Cyprus. It was hard to believe that cool and rainy Britain existed somewhere. Austalis began to write.

"Citium, Cyprus, the Ides of July.

"To the Tribune Mannius Paulinus, at the Palace of the Governor of the Provinces of Britain, in Londinium.

"Perhaps I should have addressed this letter to the city of Augusta, as we hear that Londinium has been renamed as a reward for its welcome to Count Theodosius. Britain is quiet now, the news says whenever sailors and merchants bring it.

"I have found a life for myself here, in this distant Greek province. I write to tell you that I regret everything I did, and that I now understand the greatness of Rome. The Empire looks different when you see it from a point as distant as this: it has a place not only for every man, but for every people as well. Even in Gododdin, the peasants and warriors have a vision of something vaster and wider than their kingdom because of the nearness of Rome and the Wall.

"I still seek a god and a religion. Here, they are nearly all Christians, and of course Christianity came from Judaea, a day's sail away. I may visit there one day, although everyone tells me that it is now a poor and empty land, and there is nothing to be seen of Christ's Jerusalem. I suppose you are still steadfast in the brotherhood of Mithras, but I fear you will have to become a Christian if you want to rise to high rank in the service of the Empire.

"I ask forgiveness from all men, and I cannot see how there can ever be an end to my exile. Therefore, I greet you by letter and commend my memory to you."

AUSTALIS

He placed the letter in an expensive wooden box. He imagined it arriving in Londinium, perhaps still faintly perfumed even after being carried across the Empire. He imagined Mannius Paulinus opening it, reading the letter, and then turning to the palace window to face the north, from where the rest of history would come.

## HISTORICAL NOTE

The roof tile with the message about Austalis is on show in the Museum of London. The villa that I have named “Venodala” is Lullingstone Roman villa at Eynsford, Kent, which is open to the public. My villa of “Sebenium” is the nearby villa at Otford, of which there is nothing to be seen.

There was a general attack upon the Roman provinces in Britain in 367 A.D. by the Picts, the Germans, and the Irish, and the Romans called it the “Barbarian Conspiracy” because they suspected that it had been organised and coordinated by someone.

I have built my novel upon these three factual elements. Although my Austalis is imaginary, some of the characters are real. Augurius is recorded as being the Bishop of Londinium. The ruins of the Mithraeum have been reconstructed, and can be visited at the European headquarters of Bloomberg in London. At the time of writing, admission is free, but you need to select a time for your visit in advance. See <https://www.londonmithraeum.com/>

Pelagius became the first Briton to be famous in the Roman world, as a theologian. He lived in Rome for many years, and seems to have ended his life in Palestine. He is best remembered for creating the “Pelagian heresy”, which denied the doctrine of Original Sin. The ideas of Pelagius have been influential throughout the history of Christianity. Nothing is known of his youth in Britain.