

And Did Those Feet

a novel

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For Ione and Ivo. The future is yours.

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Preface

“Kill them all!” His eyes wide in rage, the king glared at him. “They did not come back. I will not be made a fool of! You must go immediately. Take who you want with you but, you must kill them all!”

Flavius Gracchus saw the anger in his king's face, saw the ticking pulse beneath his right eye, and knew better than to offer any sensible objection. It had been nearly a year now since the news had first come. Every day that passed created changes that would make his mission more difficult. “It has been a long time. People might have moved away.”

“If they have, find them and kill them. I don't care how long it takes. Just get it done!”

Gracchus bowed low and left the presence of the furious king. This mission was going to take some time. The first part was easy enough. He could just send a troop in to do the dirty work without him. But those who had moved away, they would be most difficult to find. Still, those were his orders. He scratched his head and looked around at the town bathed in glorious sunlight. Everything looked golden in the early morning. It might be years before he would see this place again. He turned from the palace and headed down the road to the Roman barracks. He had his orders. He must kill them all.

Chapter 1

The boy watched the hollows of green mystery fill as wave after wave rose beside the bows of the great ship. He remembered with a kind of joy the thrill that trickled through him when he first saw this monster of wood and iron and canvas. There was a smell he had not known before, a smell of the salt sea mixed with the familiar smells of fish and sweat. There were sounds too: sounds of oar-shafts stamped on the decking to the bellowed orders of the master, and sounds of the many voices, shouting, laughing, and some crying as they clutched loved ones in a final embrace.

The thrill increased with the knowledge that this ship would carry him out into the blue distance to ride the rolling waves, to find a new world beyond the horizon.

The journey began in apparent confusion with passengers claiming their little square of deck space, getting in the way of the master as he tried to organize his crew to row away from the shore. The men had grunted as they heaved on wood or rope; the master had shouted and the passengers had quarrelled.

But the oars were still now. The huge sail was straining against the mast, a great billow of red and brown that occasionally whipped with a sound like a breaking pot as it caught a deviant gust, pulling the boat into the rising swell.

Slowly the thin line of brown hills and sandy beaches faded behind them and they were at the mercy of the rolling sea.

He was a slender child of about nine summers. His face was thin and tanned with eyes that looked wide with wonder at the scenes before him.

“Joshua!”

He turned and looked up at the tall man, his mother's uncle, who had brought him on this journey far from his home.

“Are you frightened of the waves?”

Joshua turned back to the sea. “It's not the waves that frighten me, Uncle. It's the darkness beneath them which would drag us down if this boat foundered. It makes me shudder to look at it.”

“Come and eat.” The tall man took his hand and led him away from the ship's side to where a group of travellers had rolled out a mat and were preparing food.

A strange mixture of Jews, gentiles, Greeks and Egyptians, shared this small space beneath the sail. Some looked poor, others wealthy. Merchants mingled with men of God and Roman soldiers sat down with thieves as the great boat heaved and fell through the green waves.

The boy nibbled on a piece of bread but could eat little. Through all their travels this was the first sea journey. They had hopped on river boats before, or slipped beside the coast from town to town, from Alexandria to Cyrene, but this was different. This was deep green water, out of sight of land on a nasty stretch of rolling sea. It would take some time for them to reach the further shore. They were avoiding Rome and heading for the coast of Gallia and the northernmost reaches of the Empire. Somewhere in the northern mists was a land called Britain, and Joshua knew that it was on those shores that some of his uncle's family lived their strange lives outside the empire that was Rome.

Rome! He had never been there, but its ways were

spread throughout the world. Its laws governed even here on this great boat as it sailed the Mere Internum. Its soldiers controlled the harbours and the cities and kept the empire safe from barbarians. Its engineers built the roads that linked the empire together and enabled men like his uncle to trade their precious metals: metals from the craggy hills of the island at the edge of the world where he was a prince.

Joshua leaned on a bale of wool and listened while his uncle talked to the small group of Jews aboard. They always ate together and following their meal would talk about grown-up things that Joshua was not concerned with. He had heard some things which would stir some interest: stories of great fish rising from the deep to devour the sailors. There were always stories like this if they were near the sea, or of great monsters flying from the mountain tops if they were on land. Joshua liked these stories when he felt safe, but at this moment he did not want to hear any such things. His stomach did not feel right, and the boat was pitching in an alarming way. He could imagine great fish lashing the waves with their tails and waiting for the ship to sink. He felt even worse after this thought. His uncle saw that he was feeling sick so gently took him toward the bow where the rising was more predictable and the spray refreshing. As they watched the sturdy craft climb the waves Joshua's fears subsided and he settled himself down to enjoy the journey.

The boat sailed on as the days went by, each much the same as the one before. No major storms or giant fish disturbed the crossing. Joshua was able to eat well most of the time, even finding the dry land uncomfortably still when they stopped to replenish supplies of food and water at Syracuse.

The mist cleared, and from the wooden jetty Gen and Ban could just make out the bows of their father's boat returning to the island from the market. It was always the boys' job to wait on the jetty then run to tell the villagers that the boat was on its way home. It took two days for a boat to get to the market at the head of the great water beyond the Brue, to trade the village goods, and return. Each time the moon was full, men from the village made the journey with their baskets of smoked, freshwater fish, duck eggs, and goat's cheese. The boats returned with cloth, fresh fish from the sea, wine and grain for making bread. Sometimes there would be something special from some distant land that the villagers would marvel over, or a message from some long-lost traveller. Always there would be stories. The women would rush to prepare the meal on banked-up fires, men would hurry from their fishing nets to gather on the green to share the gossip and the goods.

Gen grabbed Ban by the hand and ran, calling to their mother. The news spread like the fires that burnt the high country on summer days, making the children glad they lived here among the reed-beds with the lake to protect them.

There was feasting in the village that night. Not only had the men brought fine goods back from the market, but they had met with a traveller from a land far away to the south, a land ruled by the men in bronze. He had news from the boys' uncle who traded there with the precious metals that could make bronze for their warriors. When their uncle visited the lake, it was to buy copper and tin. The hills of the high country were rich in the green ore that made the red metal. Gen and Ban's uncle would be visiting again and wanted their father to meet him in Gallia as he would be bringing gold back to the village and may need to protect it

through the dark valleys. Gallia was not always a safe place to bring gold.

“Can I go with you, Father?” Gen asked when his mother had moved away from the fire, leaving baby Flur in the arms of Grandmother Anna, to fetch another jar of the strong brew they made from sweet apples that grew so easily there. “I’m grown a lot bigger than Ban now and could be helpful.” His eyes widened with the anticipation of a trip to a new world which, according to the stories, was so different from his own. Ban sat by the fire, watching his big brother. His grandmother raised her eyes, gazing at her son-in-law with a look of warning.

Oban looked back at Gen. “I will think about it,” was all he would say. Gen knew that that would mean a long discussion with his mother while he was out of the way, but at least he hadn’t said “No!” which would have been his answer a year ago.

There was other news too. Great troops of soldiers were moving across Gallia. Would they be coming here?

The old men began to talk of the time when the soldiers had come with their crested helmets and their eagle standards. How the tribes had risen, each king sending his best men, yet they failed to stop the advance. How the wise men had stood before them and by raising the power of the sea, had wrecked some of their ships and driven them away. They began arguing, as the fire burnt down, about how some of the kings had wanted the soldiers to come. How the wealth would flow through the land more easily if they were here. And the wonders that would be built here would rival any of the wonders anywhere else in the world.

Gen slept that night with his head filled with dreams of great armies rushing towards each other, noises and smells simply imagined, as Gen had never seen such things,

only listened to the stories of the old men. How vividly he built the pictures; how brave the men; how great the victory for his warriors, and how much he wanted to be there. He had grown up through a time of peace with the apple blossom falling sweetly each spring, scenting the days; and the winter fires warming the hut driving out the biting cold from the snow-covered land. When Ban arrived, Gen had taken on some of the chores while his mother tended the baby, and Anna had looked after the family.

Oban was an important man in the village. His hut, larger than most, was set on the high land near to the chieftain's hall. In the summer he farmed the hillside beyond the fences and the marsh, helped with the animals, and hunted with the Chieftain for the rich red meat that filled the hut with its heavenly aroma.

During the last year Gen had begun to accompany his father more and more, leaving the hut and the women and younger boys, to venture out beyond the marsh to the high moors where the red kites flew and the wild boar lurked. The men would laugh at his feeble attempts to throw the spear, shoot the bow, and hurl a stone with the leather sling. But he had practised and now they laughed less and praised more his good aim and growing strength.

*

During the week following the boat's return, the village was all of a bustle. More stout poles were cut from the trees in the high country and brought to the village where they were used to strengthen the palisade that helped keep wild animals away from the causeway linking the island to the shore. But some were sharpened at both ends and driven deep into the watery places. Gen knew that these were to catch unwary soldiers who might be attacking the village.

There was an air of excitement. All the weapons were being sharpened, and more were being made. Even the children were being shown how to throw the spear more cleanly or shoot the bow with quick and deadly accuracy.

Gen's favourite weapon was the sling. He had used one all his life to drive away the heron from the catch pond, or kill a rabbit. He could hit a tree fifty paces away with a stone the size of a blackbird's egg, stones which he found in the many streams that fell from the high land to feed the lake-land marshes.

The sun was shining now as he picked up another stone to fit into his sling. He noticed his mother watching him at the practice. Was she proud of the way his stone shattered the potsherd when others missed? He wasn't sure. She paused in her task to watch, then turned to the other women grinding the corn or spinning the wool, spoke softly and continued her chore. She seemed less happy than usual. There were no bursts of laughter that usually accompanied the work; an air of melancholy seemed to hang over her. Not till the evening did he learn the truth. His father had convinced her that he was now able to work with the men and so would take him with them into Gallia. "After all," he had argued, "if he remains in the village the king will expect him to fight alongside the men if the soldiers come." She had wept and now she hugged him to her. He hugged her in return offering up a silent prayer to the god of the trees to protect her if it came to fighting, then he ran off to tell his friends.

They were to set off the next morning. Oban had gathered a small group together. The village chief, Dyfnwall, had been uncomfortable at their going, especially after hearing of a possible invasion. However, he knew that little work would get done if the village was preparing for

war, and all this on a rumour. He needed facts, and one of the best ways to get facts was to send someone to find out. He was prepared to send his youngest son with them to help, and to bring back up-to-date knowledge. His son Nial was slightly older than Gen and at least a head taller. He was as fit and strong a boy as a chief could wish for in a son, and Gen really liked him.

At the setting of the sun Nial's long shadow fell through the doorway of Gen's hut, making his mother jump.

"Come with me Gen," he said. "We can seek out the old druid of the hills to send us on our way with a charm." A druid lived in the village, and spent his time advising Nial's father on actions to take, times to plant, and other useful things, but the boys in the village despised him. He seemed to hate children, cuffing them around the ear if they came too close, and always advising Dyfnwall to refuse their requests. He strutted about and demanded respect, but the boys laughed at him and laughed at his feeble attempts at magic. Up in the hills however lived a druid with amazing powers. He was left alone as people feared him, but in times of need it was to him they went; he had made the hens lay again when they had stopped, advised on the best places to plant, and cured sick villagers brave enough to seek him out. The children held him in awe, but, though they were frightened of his powers, he was always kind to them.

Remembering his manners, Nial bowed to Gen's mother, lifting his eyes towards Oban. "Oban willing," he said.

"Go, both of you, a charm from the holy ones will do us no harm."

Gen felt so proud, not only was he going with the men in the morning, and him no more than twelve

summers, but now he was climbing the hill away from the marshes following Nial for all to see.

Nial led the way towards the Valley of Apples where the edge of the lake lay like burnished silver reflecting the sky. A great hill rose from the low ground here and the druids had claimed it as their own. It was a hill of magic. On the night of Samhein the dead dance on its summit amidst the fires. Gen had seen their wispy forms like smoke trapped against the earth, writhing and struggling to gain the air. His mother had pulled him away. "It's unlucky to watch the dead dance," she had muttered, shuddering, and her fear still gripped him now. They passed the hill quickly and headed out across the flatlands to where the ground climbed at the start of the heather-topped hills. Forests looped and fell across the undulating landscape and streams rushed past, eager to be at rest among the reeds at the marsh's edge. Up in this high land the red kites wheeled on the thermals, and the deer scampered from the thickets as they approached. They followed a shallow defile which ended in a wall of rock. A rough cave opened near the base of the wall and they could see the fire-light playing on the rocky entrance as they approached. There was no sign of the old druid who lived there. Gen's delight at being with Nial was rapidly turning to uncertainty. Druids were strange folk. They dealt in magic. They could conjure up storms, talk to animals, and turn people into frogs. At least, that's what the older boys in the village had said.

Suddenly there was a noise so horrible it made Gen's breath catch in his throat, and his skin turn cold. He grabbed Nial's tunic. It was mixed comfort to see that Nial seemed to be as frightened as he was.

"Let's get away from this place," he whispered.

But as they turned to flee, a cold, rasping voice like

the sound of a great snake hissing in words came out from the mouth of the cave.

“Who is it that disturbs my rest?”

Unable to move they watched the blackness beyond the fire and heard dry bones rattling and the voice hissing, as out from the cave came the druid. He held a pole with bones strung to it, which rattled as he lunged forward. His hair was a shock of white that made his head look to be twice its normal size and he was hopping up and down on one leg which looked most unnatural. Gen wanted to run and hide, but his legs were like jelly. He knew that if he ran now, he would not be able to control his bladder. So, clenching his muscles he stood watching the approaching druid.

“Your entrails will become squirming worms that will eat you from the inside,” the druid was screaming.

‘Is that what’s happening to me?’ Gen thought, clenching his muscles still tighter.

The old man’s voice was eerily snake-like and he kept leaping into the air from one foot. Then he suddenly stopped, rubbed his eyes, peering at them.

“Is that you, Nial?” he asked in an ordinary, slightly squeaky voice. “Well, why didn’t you say something. I’ve fair worn myself out dancing about like that. I was just about to give you the full works too.”

Gen wondered what that would have been like. As if reading his mind, the old man turned to him.

“That would not have been nice, boy. Who is this?” he asked turning back to Nial for an instant then continuing to peer at Gen in a most disturbing way. “Never mind now,” he said, interrupting Nial who was trying to explain why they had come. “There’s a good fire and things are cooking. Come on.” He beckoned the reluctant boys. Gen relaxed his

muscles very carefully and followed the old man who was walking quite normally now and muttering to nobody in particular, "Boys! What will they be doing next? Never content to stay at the home-place. Have to be off into the men's world before they're ready. Come disturbing the old ones. I don't know. Sit down. Sit down, you're making a mess of the place. No, not there." He grabbed Gen, stopping him from sitting on a woosack which suddenly got up, bleated, and walked to the other side of the fire. "Can't even recognise a sheep. What good will you be to the men?"

The old man seemed to know their business even before Nial told him, but he listened attentively none the less, tutting every now and then.

"They won't come, you know," he said when Nial had finished. "They won't come again just yet, and you will be alright on your travels."

Gen wondered how he knew these things, but he knew better than to ask. The druids were fearsome, engaging in the balance of life and death: one wrong question could tilt the balance against you. Gen's father lived in fear of the druids. "Keep out of their way!" he had commanded his children, especially the boys. Boys, particularly fair-haired boys, disappeared at certain times of the year. People believed that they were offered by the druids as a sacrifice to the gods to make the harvest good or to protect the village from some of the many evils that could strike. Gen's hair had always been lighter than some of the other boys. It hung low around his shoulders, his mother proud of the way the light caught it, reflecting the sun. She had rejected his father's pleas to cut it shorter, and hoped for at least one more summer before he would wear it like a man.

The druid paused, raised his hand. He was obviously listening for something. Gen could hear nothing but the crackle of the fire and far away the sighing of the wind. The old man leapt to his feet and as he did so the cave began to tremble. Fear struck Gen like an icy hand, but before he could move, the old man was up and out of the cave. He returned moments later when all was still again. He held a large pot in his hand which he placed beside the fire. He smiled at the boys' obvious fear. "It is only water. There is nothing to fear. The spring fills each day to overflow down here. I catch the water and it saves my aching limbs from climbing for it. Come nearer boy," he said, gesturing to Gen. "Let me look at your hair. Hm, a fine colour. We will meet again I think."

Gen shuddered.

"Now, let me see, you will need some things, beside my blessing, for your journey." He moved to the back of the cave, peering into the gloom and moving pots and sacks about. "Some of this, I think, and a little of that."

He handed a small bag to Nial and put into it a red pot sealed with skin. "If you cut yourself playing with that dagger of yours, rub some of this in and it will heal. This herb will keep your water fresh, and these berries will give your enemies a sleep almost as close to death as death itself.

The old man searched about among his little pots again and brought out another one, smaller this time. "Now," he said, looking sternly at them. "If you insist on travelling with the men you need protection. Take off your tunics."

Gen looked at Nial, but both boys did as they were told. The old man opened the pot and, using a small stick with an end blackened from the fire, proceeded to draw

strange patterns on the boys' chests. The patterns swirled and interlocked like the vines that grew in the warm places at home. When he had finished, they noticed that the designs were identical.

“This is a charm. It will dye your skin, and last for some time. Even the rain can't wash it away. It will protect you from harm, arrows will veer away from it, and evil will be defeated by it. It will not last forever however, so take the pot and draw over the pattern when it fades to a pale blue. It will spring into life again and protect you. And now a drink before you go.” He lifted the jar he had brought in from the spring and sipped from it, passing it to the boys. To Gen's amazement the liquid was sweet and spicy. The druid laughed. “Now go and enjoy your journey. I will see you again when you return.” Into the hand of each boy, he placed a small stone. “Keep this safe and it will do the same for you,” he said. Each stone had a hole through it which was not drilled or cut but which seemed to have occurred naturally.

Out in the low sun of late afternoon the boys felt elated. They had talked to the druid, had his gifts and a charm to keep them safe. The fear that had gripped them while they were in the cave was countered now by a joy and exuberance unknown to them. This is what it's like to be a man, Gen thought as they sprang through the heather. He could feel strength grow in his limbs with every deep breath and the world looked wonderful.

As soon as he got home Gen showed his mother the design the druid had drawn on his chest. He felt so proud of it. It made him feel like a man. His mother held his shoulders and pulled him to her. She hugged him tightly, and when she let him go, Gen noticed tears in her eyes.

That night around the fire, they talked about the

people they would be meeting.

“He's quite a warrior, your uncle,” Gen's father said, turning to his wife as she fussed about making sure they had everything they needed for the journey. “Gen, you must treat him with great respect. He is a prince in this country and this is his home.”

Gen settled himself comfortably beside Ban who had found a good place not too near the fire waiting for the story that was sure to come. Stories were the jewels of the evenings, setting dream worlds to haunt the sleep. And Father's stories were the best. They told of daring and courage, warriors and battles. Gen loved them, building fantastic pictures to explode upon his mind. He knew his uncle was a great man. He had grown up with the knowledge that he was related to important people, but he didn't know much about them, and he didn't feel important. True, his father was close friends with the chief, but then so were a lot of others.

It was warm in the hut. The cooking fires of summer were mostly outside, but now the evenings were closing faster they had begun the winter pattern of cooking indoors again. Gen loved the winter. The warmth of the fire drove out the frost to become their private sun, trapped within the walls of his cosy home. But at this time of the year, it was over-warm with the smoke reluctant to find a way through the thatch; the air outside too mild, as yet, to draw it out efficiently as it would later in the year, in the winter cold. Grandmother Anna was helping Mother; so, curled up at their father's feet, Gen and Ban listened.

“Our life here has not always been peaceful as it is now. The mists of war rolled in from the northern hills and the painted men would come screaming at us out of the darkness, bringing fire and death. Sometimes they would

rise out of the sea to burn our houses and steal our children.” Gen shuddered, but felt warm and safe beside his strong father.

“Your grandfather was a prince and a very powerful man. When he married Anna, she thought he was the most wonderful man in the world. He was a warrior who led our men into battle with the northern tribes. He had a scar that ran from his right eye down to his chin.” His father’s finger ran the stroke down each boy’s face. “Even his beard could not cover it. When the battle was over, he had changed. His temper would rise over little things and he became violent with everyone, particularly Anna. When your mother was no more than a baby, he beat Anna so badly she crept away on a trading ship taking the baby with her and nobody knew where they went.”

It was hard for Gen to think of his grandmother being frightened of anyone. She ruled this little family, kindly but with an iron strength.

“Your uncle Joseph was not much older than you when his adventures began. He was your grandmother’s brother, but a lot younger than she was. He hated Beli, your grandfather, for what he had done. One day Beli had been hunting and returned with a stag, a monster of a fellow, enough to feed the whole village. He was burning with passion and too much drink, and he set about the village boys with his sword. Joseph picked up one of the pronged spits used for cooking. Twice Beli lunged at him but your uncle parried the strokes. Then with all his strength he pushed the spit at Beli. By pure luck, for Beli was a great warrior and had he not been drunk would have cut Joseph to pieces, the spit ripped through his throat spilling his red blood over the hearth, killing him.”

“Did Uncle Joseph not get into awful trouble?”

“He did! The king had him dragged before him, but took pity on the boy, he was, after all, his kin, and sent him on a mission instead. The mission was to find your grandmother.

Nobody thought he would be able to do it and would die in the attempt, but some years later he returned, bringing them with him. He had grown into a strong and handsome young man and was welcomed home. Your mother had grown into a fine woman by then,”

Gen noticed his mother pause, the cloak, partly folded, drooped over her knee.

“She had a sister by then who had become a strong girl and had fallen in love, so when Joseph wanted to bring them all back, she refused to come. He still sees her and tells us how she fares. He never stays here for long though. He set up home near her. Some people say he feels responsible for her, and now only visits us to trade. He always brings plenty of gold.”

“I've never seen my uncle. Is he old like Grandmother?”

“No, he is about the same age as me.”

“So old!”

Oban cuffed him round the ear. “That's enough cheek from you young man.”

Ban always missed the end of stories. He now lay with his dark curls falling over his father's feet as he slept.

Chapter 2

Uncle Joseph looked wary as they wandered through the streets of Carales. He had chosen to take the ship that they were now travelling on because it kept away from Rome, but this island stop was necessary to take on water and food, and was too close to the watchful eyes of the empire for him to feel comfortable. He kept a hand on Joshua's shoulder as if expecting to lose him at any moment. Joshua could feel the tension in him, unusual for this great warrior who seemed to fear nothing. Joshua had heard the stories of how his uncle had travelled the world looking for his sister. He had fought wild men and giants. He had fought against the Roman legions as they squashed rebellion in the East. And it was there that he found her, living poorly in a small village with her two daughters. When Joseph finally managed to take his sister home, Joshua's mother had stayed in the village to marry his father, but after he was born, things got difficult and they were forced to leave. Uncle Joseph came back to them, helped them, and now that they wanted to return to the village, he had taken Joshua with him on his travels to keep him safe if all was not as they expected. If you fell out with Rome, it seemed, your life was at risk wherever you went.

Carales was a busy place with narrow streets, shops and people dressed in rich clothes. Carts rolled by, their wheels grinding in the stone ruts and just missing the stepping stones which were always set just the right distance apart to let them pass. The stepping stones were certainly necessary. The streets were awash with the slops

from the houses mixed with the dung of the horses and mules. The smell, after the clean air of the sea, was like a thick blanket of putrid suffocation, but as they walked, the senses dulled to leave smell as a mere background irritation. They climbed a small hill leaving the thick stench of the close streets behind. A temple to one of Rome's many gods crowned the summit, and white stone houses, inns and shops straggled away down the hill in all directions. They could see the harbour from here, and watch the ant-like crew of their boat scurrying about with bales and jars and great amphorae filled with wine. They could see too the sky darkening from the east, a long flat line of deep grey cloud.

“Let us eat now,” Joseph said, leading the boy towards one of the open-fronted shops.

They bought bowls of fish soup and sat watching the bright clouds sink towards the west as the darkness approached. The air chilled noticeably when the last piece of bright sky had gone.

When the rain began, they sheltered in the temple, a tall stone building with a huge statue of the god seated at one end. Joshua looked up at the stern face.

“There is nothing here, Uncle. Why do people come here? Do they really think this lump of stone can hear them?”

“Hush boy, we don't want to anger the gods when we have another sea voyage to make.”

“You don't believe that!”

Joseph bent towards him, “When we are in someone else's house we must treat it with respect. Look! They are watching you.”

Joshua looked and could see three men dressed in white who had stopped their conversation to watch this stranger with the boy. Whether or not they had heard what

he had said, they looked distinctly unfriendly and so Joseph gently eased him out into the rain and headed back towards the harbour. The wind was rising noticeably and the rain was driving in their faces. The houses on the hillside broke the force of the wind a little so they slowed down, taking what shelter each wall offered. Looking back towards the summit, Joshua caught a glimpse of the three men. They were standing in the temple doorway, shielded from the wind by the vast columns, watching them.

“Keep moving!” Joseph hissed “And stop turning round.”

When they reached the boat, they found that the master was reluctant to set sail before the morning, as the storm was worsening. Joseph was most unhappy. Joshua looked at the raging sea, the black hollows that groaned and sucked at the quay making the boat tilt and fall at the moorings, and listened to the booming of the great waves as they struck the shore, and was quite content to stay another day on the island. Other merchants from the vessel had already left to find lodgings in the town.

“It will blow itself out tonight,” the master said, “then we can sail with the tide in the morning. There's not much else we can do for now. Will you be staying on board?”

Joseph's unease was growing. He looked back at the rain-lashed town, felt the heave and shudder of the boat beneath him, and asked, “Will the cargo be guarded?”

“You have nothing to fear,” the master laughed. “Look, over by that jetty is the imperial barge. The quay will soon be swarming with Caesar's guards. There will be no looting tonight.”

Joseph's frown deepened. “We will go into the town,” he announced abruptly, and with a hand on Joshua's shoulder led the boy hurriedly towards the shelter of the

narrow streets. They spent the night in a rough little inn on the far side of the town.

“I would like to just get one glimpse of the emperor, Uncle,” Joshua offered as they sat beside a smoky fire in a close and noisy room that evening.

“You know that would not be a good idea. Now talk about something else. I shall not be happy until we are at sea again.”

Joshua said little, using the time to watch the people, farmers mostly, he judged by their fat, gnarled hands, rough clothes and speech. But they were honest folk enjoying a trip to the town to trade their goods just as Joseph was travelling half way across the world to trade his. He listened to the snatches of their conversations, caught the expressions in their faces, and was fascinated by their casual good humour. These were a people at peace. So many of the people he had seen in his young life had been struggling against domination by one nation or another. These were free men and it showed.

Joseph slept little that night, but they awoke next morning having been undisturbed. The storm had subsided during the night, but as they descended the hill, they could see the now crowded harbour with boats jostling each other in the high running sea.

“More boats have come in to ride out the storm,” Joseph grunted, then grabbed Joshua and pushed him into a narrow side street, and started to run. They turned at the end of the street to look back, but no one was following them.

“I’ll swear that was Gracchus with a squad of the emperor’s guard. They are marching toward the temple. He must have come in on one of those boats.” He struck the wall with his fist. “I thought we were being followed when we left Egypt. They must not find us here.”

“Look Uncle,” Joshua pointed. “We can get to the harbour this way.”

They edged through the stinking back streets until they came to the sea, then followed the sand line to the harbour.

Besides their boat three others had joined the jetty. One was a high-prowed Egyptian craft, slender and fast compared to their broad-beamed Roman trader.

The master was hurriedly checking everyone aboard when they arrived. The oars were soon pushed out and they left on the tide. Joseph watched the harbour shrink away. No other boats followed, and by the time the sail was spread and filled with a healthy wind, the island had vanished.

“Is Gracchus really dangerous, Uncle?” Joshua asked when he sensed that the tension had eased.

“He is a fanatic. He will never give up the hunt. It was people like him your mother feared most. This is why I suggested taking you with me to Britain. It will give your parents a chance to re-establish themselves safely before we return.” He stood with his hands resting on the rail, his gaze fixed somewhere out among the white-crested waves. Then he laughed and squeezed Joshua's shoulder. “At least if Gracchus is following us your parents will be safe for a while.”

The wind was strong. They were making good time and no boat showed on the horizon.

*

“A boy you say?”

“Yes, I have followed them from Egypt. They may have avoided the island altogether and headed straight for Massilia. We only landed because of the storm. I was

surprised to find Your Majesty here.”

Augustus reclined upon a low couch. The room was large and additional heat was provided by a charcoal brazier at its centre. Slaves stood mute against the walls ready to serve any of the emperor's noisy retainers who drank, laughed and generally behaved badly around him. The wind blew cold and noisily about the building, humming past the window openings and finding all the little gaps beside doors and shutters.

Flavius Gracchus stood uncomfortably before his emperor. He had been away from court for some time now, serving the kings of the east. There had been rich pickings there as a result of extreme cruelty and greed. But where such things exist, the powerful who execute the terror are themselves insecure lest the mob rises to exact revenge. Poisonings, drownings, stabbings and other forms of brutality were quite common ways of getting rid of kings. All the people needed was a cause. It was to stop such a cause that Gracchus found himself uneasily confronting Augustus in a draughty house in the middle of the Mare Internum.

Augustus was not well. He sneezed and pulled his cloak more tightly round him, then turned to a slave and bellowed, “More wine, another cloak, and by the running nose of Jupiter, stop these confounded draughts!”

Three slaves immediately withdrew, but stopping the draughts was impossible and so another brazier was brought in.

Gracchus fidgeted distractedly.

“Are you still here?” Augustus demanded. “What did you say you wanted?”

“I need some men to help with the chase. I have only two companions with me, and once we reach Gallia the

search will become more difficult, and the bandits a major problem.”

Augustus peered at him over the cloth with which he had been wiping his streaming nose. He did not like to get involved in the petty squabbles of the jumped-up tyrants who held his eastern kingdoms for him. “I can spare you two. Go to the harbour and ask the commander there to let you have Vilius and Maximus. They fight well.” He sneezed again. In fact, a veritable bout of sneezing ensued during which, with a gesture of his hand, Augustus indicated that the interview was over.

Maximus and Vilius were certainly good fighters. They had been left out in the cold to guard the boat as a punishment for scrapping during the voyage, and Augustus was about to have them thrown overboard when he realized that they were too close to the harbour. While he thought up some nasty punishment for them, he had left them out in the storm, but here was a chance to get rid of them without having to think too hard. He sneezed again and cast them out of his mind forever.

It took little time for the soldiers to gather their packs from the boat. The commander seemed quite pleased to be rid of them, and Gracchus noted with interest how tired and bedraggled they looked; they must have been out all night. Together they marched up the hill towards the temple.

*

Joseph was happy again. The strong warrior, so trusted by Joshua's people, smiled and made light conversation with the other travellers, asking about their stay on the island, and if they had met with the emperor. None had, and the journey continued peacefully. It was not until the fourth day of sailing that a ship was seen far in the distance behind

them but following a similar course. It had a high prow and was probably from Egypt.

Chapter 3

Oban's party left the home place on a beautiful autumn morning with the sounds of birdsong in the bushes and a soft wind making the leaves stir. They were few in number, only six and that included the two young boys Gen and Nial. But the three warriors accompanying the party, each equipped with hunting bow and sword, Cadoc, Lud and Elfan, were strong and experienced, none more than Elfan whose scars proved he had seen many battles. Elfan was the oldest person there and possibly the wisest. He had ceased hunting and fighting to advise the chief, and teach the young boys the ways of the tribe.

They had taken ponies and mules to help with the boxes of goods they hoped Joseph would be bringing. These sturdy creatures would be left at the harbour for their return. They were heading southeast and had a two-day journey before them to reach the narrow sea. They had chosen this route, as the one from the head of their own river would have meant a dangerous sea voyage, and at this time of the year it was too risky. The narrow sea would be crossed in a day or two of fair wind, and they would have a good river trip across Gallia to look forward to.

They passed through woods and crossed hills. The last hill was more a high ridge that ran from west to east and had a trackway along the top. They followed the track eastwards, and as the sun was dipping behind the last cloudbank that ringed the sky, they came to a vast hill fort dominating all the land around. It was occupied and well-guarded. News of their approach had reached the fort

before them and a welcome had been hurriedly arranged. An old druid came through the gates to meet them, followed by a cluster of young warriors wearing very little save the blue pictures which covered most of their bodies. The blue was of the same hue as the pattern on Gen's chest. They carried short stabbing spears, each with a human head impaled on the blade.

“You have had good hunting,” Oban observed. The heads were very fresh with the skin drooping below the eyes, and the mouths gaping in silent screams, making them look like lost souls. Gen shuddered. Brought up in the isolation of the marshes, he was too young to have seen how his tribe treated its enemy in the wars just before he was born. Brought up, moreover, in peaceful times when farming took priority and the children were shielded from some of the harsher realities of the world. He was out in the world now and the realities were falling in on him. He looked round to see if Oban had seen his reaction to the heads, but he was too engrossed in conversation, laughing and exchanging news with old acquaintances, to notice anything else. Nial had seen though, and that was enough to make Gen's cheeks glow hot with shame. One of the painted boys ran over to him waving the spiked head in his face. Gen forced himself to see this grisly trophy as nothing more than the head of a stuck pig about to be served at festivals. He reached out his finger and wiped it in the blood, sticky like jelly now, then rubbed it as a mark across his forehead. The boy made a whooping noise, raised the spear and ran back to his friends. They all smiled and shouted, then ran through the gates back into the fortress.

Gen felt a hand grip his shoulder.

“That was well done.” Elfan said quietly, and led him in through the gate.

Because of the fighting, the fort was filled with people. Normally only a small garrison would live here, watching over the trackway and tending the sheep that roamed the escarpment. War had come with the autumn mists as a raid on winter stocks. The fortress had been ready, and the villagers who lived down in the valley had gathered their stores and moved up to the safety of the huge banks and high wooden walls. There was celebration here with a heightened level of excitement everywhere.

The huts inside the fortress were round, thatched dwellings partly sunken into the chalk of the hill. There were dozens of these, apparently randomly spread about. Grass and animal droppings made up the ground with chalk-white trackways weaving between the huts. The ground sloped gently upward towards a great wooden building, thickly thatched, with intricate swirling carvings around the door. It was to this building the party was led. As they walked between the huts, the noisy group of whooping youngsters grew into a throng, jostling the newcomers in a friendly, but intimidating way. The painting of their bodies and faces made a mask behind which they hid their humanity. The spilling of blood, for some a coming of age, had kept their pulses at danger level.

“Stay close, and do nothing to show you are afraid,” whispered Elfan, holding on to Gen and Nial.

They stopped before the Great House. Gen was comforted by the easy way his father was talking to the elders. A small, fat man emerged from the building and the boys waved their spears, shouting louder than ever. This was Eubulus, the chief of the tribe. He raised his hand and they reluctantly fell silent. “About your work,” he shouted in a high-pitched voice. “Back to the gate in case they come again.” He looked at Oban for a moment, smiled and added,

“They won't, of course, we beat them well this time, but it will keep the boys out of mischief for a bit longer.”

Beckoning them to follow, he led the way into his house.

A circular corridor ran from the doorway around the house, following the outside wall. It opened to the interior, which was a wide smoky space divided into small bays on one side with sleeping mats laid in them. Men were working here at repairs to shields and spears, some were just sitting talking. They stopped to watch the strangers as they entered. The chief led them on towards the fire in the centre on a great, stone hearth; food in sacks and nets hung above their heads beneath the high, smoky thatch. On days like this, mild with dampness in the air, the fire drew poorly and the smoke lost its way, drifting round the edges of the room. A cauldron bubbled over the fire and was tended by a woman in a long, grey robe.

Two boys slightly younger than Gen, naked to the waist and streaked with blue markings similar to the older boys at the gate, were rolling about in the rushes that covered the floor, play fighting. But they stopped when they saw the strangers enter.

The chief showed them where to sit, and so began the customary sharing of news: a long process accompanied by ritual and drinking. Oban said something to the chief who turned to the romping boys and told them to show Gen and Nial around. Thankfully they left the great house and breathed with relief the cold, clear air of the hilltop. The sun had made one last appearance through a gap in the grey cloud, gilding the roof-tops, grass and grizzled heads, but deepening the shadows into blackness.

“Come on then, we'll show you the pit.”

The pit was at the lowest point of the hill up against the high wooden palisade on the southern side. Strictly

speaking there were lots of pits in this part of the fort. They were used to store grain and other food. Some were covered in strange, roof-like thatch making them look like little houses. But the pit the boys were going to was special. It was circled around the rim with spears, each sporting a dripping head, and from the depth there came a strange sound. It was an animal noise, high pitched, undulating, but not a cry of pain, more a statement to the air; a statement that sounded tired.

The two young, blue-streaked warriors danced around the edge pointing and chanting strange sounds. Gen and Nial peered into the semi-darkness. Curled up at the bottom of the pit was a child. Her long blond hair lay matted with chalk and mud, and clung in strands around her shoulders. She looked up at them with vacant, tear-stained eyes. The sounds from the pit had stopped with the first cry from the little warriors, and Gen wondered how so small a creature could make such an unearthly sound.

“She is the bringer of the moon,” one of the boys announced proudly. “Our harvests will stay fresh and our winter will be well.”

They led the boys away from the pits to the other end of the fort where a dew pond lay black and still in the shadow of the massive timbers that formed the wall. There they spent the rest of the time trying to outdo each other by throwing stones as far as possible out into the water and watching the circles race back across the murky surface like tiny tides. Gen noticed that the eerie calling began again as soon as they had left the pit.

Darkness crept upon them and reluctantly they returned to the chief's hut. The cauldron which had made the place hot and uncomfortable before, now yielded a good meal for everyone.

Eubulus gave them one of the thatched huts, dug into the chalk, for their night's rest, and so, as the moon rose over the hill in a thin crescent, they lit their fire and settled down on the sheepskin beds and talked about the journey ahead. Gen lay listening to the conversations of the men. All four of them were the worse for the strong ale with which the chief had been so generous earlier that evening. The wind had risen with the moon and now hissed through the thatch, drawing the smoke from the small fire and brightening the embers. Nial lay beside him also listening. He nudged Gen. "Listen," he mouthed more than whispered.

Gen listened. An owl was calling from the distant trees in the valley; a fox barked; but these sounds mingled with the hissing of the wind were not new.

"I can't hear anything," he whispered back.

"That's the point! What's happened to the sound from the pit?"

Gen realized that the girl's call had been a background sound all the time they had been at the fort, but it had stopped.

Oban was watching them.

"Did you know they have a girl in a pit up there, Father," Gen ventured, not liking to disturb the talk of elders.

Oban waited a moment to clear his head. "The chieftain here is a good man, but overly cruel. We have lived in peace for so long that the evils of war have become strangers to us. There is still more blood to let before this war is over."

Elfan and the others were nodding in agreement.

"What do you mean, Father?" Gen asked.

"Talk in the big house was much about the battle. It

seems this girl came with her father on the raid. He had been one of the leaders, and one of the last to die. She had fought like a vixen, killing two of the young warriors before they captured her. They will sacrifice her on the night the moon dies. By so doing they hope to ensure the moon's return and make for themselves a safe winter."

"But the moon will come back as it always does, without her having to die," Gen ventured.

"Of course it will, but these are battle-weary and need omens."

"She seems so lonely and so sad."

"Killing in battle is one thing," Oban said. "But the killing of children as sacrifices is a thing from the past. We should be greater than that." He looked at Gen; saw the long fair hair framing his face as he lay with his head on his hands; thought of how such children were prized by old druids for winter and spring festivals, and shuddered. Quite soon, lulled by the wind, they slept. Gen's dreams danced with the wild savages as they jumped the bonfires and made their winter sacrifices.

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Rain greeted them as they left the hut in the morning; not lashing rain, but the insidious, misty rain that soaks everything, making travel dreary and limiting the view to an even greyness. Gathering their ponies and mules, and thanking their host, they made their slippery way down the chalk paths to the wooded valley below. There was little comfort amongst the trees, as the leaves dripped a heavier rain of big droplets upon them. By the time the sun should have been high in the sky, they were thoroughly miserable and soaked through to the skin.

Oban decided to find some shelter and try to dry out a

bit. They found a small chalk quarry where flints had been dug by the old ones long ago. The walls were hollowed out, forming shallow caves. One of these was quite deep enough for the entire party to get in, out of the rain. The mules and ponies, unfortunately, had to stand outside, munching the sweet grass that covered the centre of the hollow. They did not seem to mind overmuch.

After foraging for a while, they managed to get enough dry twigs to start a fire. Then even the wet branches they brought in burned brightly, after the initial hiss that drove out the water. As the day drew on, the rain eased and a watery sun could be seen dropping through the trees. Their clothes were dry, they had plenty to eat. The ground was hard, but by using things from their packs they were comfortable enough. They built up the fire and settled themselves for the night. The owl was louder here in the valley, and other noises filled the trees. Gen thought back to the girl in the pit. How wet would she be after a day like this? He looked up at the moon. It was narrower now; little more than a sliver of light.

“Father how long before the moon dies?”

Oban looked at him for a moment reading his thoughts. “Tomorrow night there will be no moon, I think. Now get some sleep. We have time to make up tomorrow.”

Gen lay awake. He could hear the deep breathing of the sleepers around him. He gently shook Nial.

“It's alright. I'm not asleep,” he whispered back.

“I can't stop thinking about that girl in the pit. Do you think we have any chance of getting her out?”

Nial had the vision of the heads on the spears in his mind and it worried him. Those fighting men in the fort would think nothing of adding their heads to the collection. He knew also that Oban would forbid any interference with

the tribal rituals. Oban would also forbid his son going into such danger.

But Nial was a chief's son who, from an early age, had been taught to take on even the hardest challenge. One day he might have to lead his people in war against this very fort. "Quietly then," he hissed, pulling his tunic around him, and thrusting his knife in his belt. Then, mouse-like, they left the cave, not daring to rummage in the packs for anything that might help them, for fear of disturbing the sleepers.

Away from the fire, the night was dark. The thin thread of moon gave little light, disappearing every now and then behind gathering clouds. Before they reached the first ditch of the fortress, it was lost completely and the rain had started again.

As they had made their way from the quarry they had planned to get to the fort; look and see if there was any chance of getting in away from the gate; get in if they could, or go back before the men awoke and missed them. They were excited and fearful, but now that they stood before the first ditch, with the hill and palisade looming over them, their bravery began to melt. Suddenly they heard the strange eerie cry from the pit. Somehow it gave them an unexpected feeling of strength, as if they were meant to be here, and that the call was meant for them.

They slid down the wet chalk, turned greasy now with the continual damp, and had to use their knives to help them climb the other side. The rain was falling again, not the mist of the morning but a steady, hard rain.

"This will keep them in their huts, with any luck," Nial hissed.

The cry led them to a part of the wooden wall on the far side from the gate, but the climb had been steep and

they were exhausted.

“How are we to get in?” Gen mouthed.

Nial took his tunic off and gestured for Gen to do the same, then tying them together and fixing a stone into a corner, Nial threw the length of tough home-weave up to the top of the wall. The stone fell behind the wooden poles and caught between them. Nial began to pull himself up. By adjusting the tunics when they were on the wall, they were able to lower themselves inside the fort.

Gen's heart was pounding fiercely behind his ribs and he hoped that Nial would not see and know he was so scared, but the rain was beating down upon their skin and there was no time to think. Sliding to the pit like shadows, they looked in. The sounds had stopped and all was in darkness.

Nial pulled one of the spears out of the ground, knocked the head to the floor, then gestured to Gen that he should use it to go into the pit while Nial held the other end. There was no time to argue.

Gen slid, rather than climbed, into the darkness. “Don't cry out. I've come to rescue you,” he said softly to the blackness around him. He nearly died of fright when a man's voice answered him.

“Thank you, Son. We have been waiting for you.”

Through the darkness Gen made out the shape of an old man draped in a grey cloak. The girl was leaning on his arm.

She looked at Gen and said gently, “Tell him he must come with us.”

“No, my dear,” the old man said. “If I stay, I can continue the call. They will not know you've gone. It will give you more time.”

Gen agreed with him and would have said so, but the

girl sat down and stated that if he didn't go, neither would she.

Gen, feeling the terror rising inside him now, just grabbed the old man and thrust him towards the spear shaft Nial was holding, but before he could begin to climb, there was a noise from above and Nial slid down on top of them. He grabbed hold of Gen, pushing him against the side of the pit.

The commotion above grew louder. There was laughter. Some food was dropped in, and the laughter continued. It sounded as if the drinking from the day before had yet to end. These warriors were definitely drunk. The head that Nial had taken from the spear came thudding down amongst them. There was more laughter. Then the rain came down even faster and the laughter turned to cursing and the sounds above faded away.

“Thank the gods they were drunk,” Nial whispered. “If they had seen the tunics, we would be the next heads on poles.”

The boys slid out from the cover of the overhanging grass.

“Now we've got to get out of here,” Gen muttered.

With the spear butt resting up the side, Nial could stand on it and reach nearly to the top of the pit. “Come on, Gen, you'll have to climb up.”

Gen was light and wiry, and with the help of the old man, managed to get a foot onto Nial's hip, then his shoulder. From there he was able to pull himself over the top to lie panting on the wet grass with the rain thundering around him. By reaching in, Nial was able to grip his wrist and wriggle himself up using Gen as a kind of rope. Gen's body was made so slippery by the chalk and rain that he nearly didn't make it, but once his hand had grabbed Gen's

belt it was much easier. The old man pushed the girl up, then with the help of all three, managed the climb out himself.

After the pit, the wall was relatively easy. On a fine night the four of them sitting astride the top while the tunics were pulled up and dropped down the other side, would have been easily seen. But the moon had died, plunging the earth into darkness, and now the sacrifice had gone, it may never rise again.

They had to leave the tunics hanging from the palisade as there was no way to dislodge them once all four were down. They just hoped that they would not be recognised as belonging to Oban's party. They slithered their way out of the earth-works around the fort, and slunk into the wooded valley, keeping the wall of the fortress between them and any guard on the gate. Then they ran; they ran as if all the hounds of hell were on their trail. Gen's and Nial's trousers had soaked up the rain making them heavy, and without their tunics the rain beat on their bare backs; the robes of the old man and girl were drenched through, but running warmed them, and panic stole their senses.

The sky ahead was brightening as they got back to the quarry. Oban was courteous to the old man and the girl, offering places to rest and reassuring them that they were safe with him, but he was furious with Gen and Nial. Gen could sense the deep displeasure eating at him each time he spoke. "Did you not think what danger you would be putting us all in with such a reckless venture?" he growled at them when they were away from the others.

The boys stood wrapped in their winter cloaks, still shivering from the cold of their rain-soaked night.

"If Eubulus suspects us, even our village could be in

danger.”

The rain was still falling, and the fire of the night before was out. The three of them stood by the ponies in the centre of the quarry. The mules had wandered over to a bush and were cropping the grass around it.

“We just wanted to save the girl, Father. She must have felt terrible waiting there to die. We didn't think...”

“You didn't think!” Oban interrupted, but he was looking hard at his son. Suddenly he reached out pulling him to him and held him tightly. “You didn't think that you might have been killed. What would I have told your mother? Nial you are my responsibility. How could I have faced your father if your head was now stuck on a spear at the fort's gate? You must both promise me never to act alone again. We are on a journey together, and together we must face the dangers.”

“But would you have let us go, Father?” Gen asked looking up at him.

Oban hesitated, then added, “We must leave this place, now. We dare not waste a moment. The rain may wash away your tracks; but the ground is soft and tracks are deep.”

They scattered the ashes from the fire trying to disguise the fact that anyone had stayed there for long.

“With any luck,” Elfan pointed out, “they will think we only ate here and would have been too far away to have been involved with the girl.”

As they followed the narrow tracks through the forest, there was little chance to talk. The rain fell steadily until midday, then settled back into the misty drizzle of the day before. The trees were heavy with water, dripping great splashes upon them to add to their discomfort. They stopped when they came to a river, and taking what shelter

they could, ate a small breakfast. Oban was worried that they had taken the wrong path in their haste to get away and that this was the wrong part of the river. The banks were steep and the flow fast and deep. It would be a risky business crossing here. Oban sent two of his warriors to explore. Cadoc went upstream and Lud down to see if they could find the crossing. Lud was first to return with news that another stream joined the main flow some five miles down and the ground became treacherous with marsh, so, not waiting for Cadoc, they gathered their things and followed the river westward in the direction Cadoc had taken.

Oban stopped his pony abruptly and motioned to the rest to be quiet. They all listened. There was a commotion somewhere ahead; branches thrashing and cracking as if a large animal was on the rampage. For a moment they stood uncertain of what to do, then a figure darted out from the cover of the trees and grabbed Oban's bridle.

It was Cadoc looking anxious. "Back! You must go back!" he hissed.

They turned, not knowing what was behind them, and retraced their path with Cadoc, on his pony now, following behind. The track beside the river was narrow, allowing only single file for some way and so it was quite a while before they knew what had caused the problem.

"There's a small army there," Cadoc said when they reached a clearing large enough to gather in. "Some of the young ones from the fort with some of the old warriors. They are blocking the ford and searching for prints. I nearly walked straight into them. It won't take long before they find some now, then they'll be after us like a pack of wolves."

"But we've nowhere to go," said Oban quietly. "This

path ends in a marsh.”

They headed for the marsh. The old man and the girl rode together on one of the mules. Gen rode with Nial, both boys wishing they had stayed in bed last night, and both angry that they had brought such danger upon them all. They spoke little. Nial blamed himself as he was the older boy and thought what a fool he must look to Oban, his father's friend. Gen was remembering how proud he had been to be allowed to join the expedition, and thinking what a disappointment he must be to his poor father. Oban was angry at the way things were turning out, but deep in his heart he was proud of the boys. With bravery against injustice like this from the youngsters, there was real hope for the future of his tribe.

The path had meandered from the river bank and the forest had receded, but the earth was sodden, with light green tussocks suggesting marsh. Their village was built in such a marsh; the lakes, floods and sinking earth had protected them for generations. There would be some irony here if this proved their downfall. But they knew the signs better than their pursuers, and with skill, Oban led them to a small patch of harder ground where, at least, they could turn and fight.

The rest of the story awaits you...

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