

# **First King of Britain**

**Magnus Maximus, #1**

**by Brent Reilly, ...**

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*I dedicate this fun historical thriller to my wonderful wife and sons.*

Meet the greatest Roman you've never heard of. Magnus Maximus was a real Roman general who became Rome's only third co-emperor in 383 AD—an unprecedented three accepted emperors at the same time. Magnus Maximus translates as "Maximum Great"—that's his real name. His cousin Theodosius the Great was the last emperor of a united Roman Empire before it fractured into East and West. Magnus' descendant Petronius Maximus was emperor right before Vandals sacked Rome in 455. This intense historical thriller starts in 367 AD with real events: Saxons, Scotti, Picts, Hiberni, and Attacotti attack Britannia to drive out Romans, killing 100,000 Britons in what historians call The Great Conspiracy. Emperor Valentinian sends Magnus Maximus with four legions in a war that decides the fate of the Roman Empire—and western civilization. Meet the real-life hero who actually saved 4 million Britons from five allied invaders coordinating an unprecedented, extraordinary assault to drive Rome from Britannia.

After the first book, this saga adds epic alternative history as Brits discover the Americas and learn to colonize it without letting disease wipe out millions. They confront every 4th century kingdom in the Americas: the Mexica, Maya, Mixteca, Muisca, Moche, Totonaca, Tarascan, Huasteca, Zapoteca, Zacateca, Caribbean, Orinoco, Wari, and Chichimeca, plus tribes of the five great North American language families (Algonquin, Iroquois, Caddo, Muskogee, and Sioux), then all other ancient empires worldwide (Persia, India, China, Korea, Japan). These 30 thrillers average 85,000 words. It's a wild trip through ancient history to help you better appreciate today. Enjoy antiquity now!

## **Chapter 1**

## **Northeastern Gaul (France), the year 361**

The legion marched into a long valley looking for trouble. Alamanni savages had crossed the Rhine River with an ax to grind and the region quickly became hysterical. This latest Germanic invasion prompted thousands of peasant farmers to flee south, flooding Roman rivers and roads. While the emperor chased a distraction with his main force, this legion had to face 30,000 desperate barbarians by themselves. With the arms and armor of 5000 dead legionaries, the invaders would be as well-armed and armored as their southern foes.

Today's battle would launch a career on the bodies of the slain.

Vast forests cover Greater Germania, making farming difficult. The Alamanni needed bulk grain and cattle to survive the winter, but they also took portable valuables from towns and corpses to buy salted sardines from Baltic traders. Raiding determined which Alamanni families would survive to see spring. However, thousands of local villages under Roman protection would lose either their lives or livelihoods from these Alamanni raiders. Their sudden intrusion froze commerce, which impoverished regions untouched by the barbarians.

*Germani* had been fighting Rome for centuries. Caesar's uncle by marriage, Gaius Marius, defeated almost a million that invaded Italy before 100 BCE. Caesar fought the Alamanni over 500 years ago, then Emperor Gallienus in 268, Emperor Claudius Gothicus soon after, as Alamanni swarmed over northern Italy. Most recently, Emperor Julian beat them decisively at Strasbourg in 357 and took King Chnodomarius prisoner to Rome. Their new king, Rando, had people to feed and vengeance to satisfy. The Alamanni would become so successful that versions of their name became the word for Germany in French, Spanish, Middle English, Portuguese, Persian, and Arabic.

The last worthy Constantinian emperor, Julian had been defeating *Germani* since put in charge of Gaul in 355. He won such a spectacular victory in 360 that his troops declared him emperor. His cousin, Constantius II, the current emperor, objected, but died before their armies could clash, naming Julian his successor. Historians called him Julian the Apostate because he was the last non-Christian Roman emperor. Having pacified Saxons, Franks, Goths, and Vandals, these Alamanni *barbari* (savages) were the last of the troublemakers he had to deal with before invading Persia.

A burning town lay in a narrow valley by a swift stream. Over the years, townsmen had cleared the nearest trees for firewood, so the forest was a few Roman miles away. Rich grass replaced woodlands to pasture livestock. This nameless town must have prospered because it had a stamp mill (to crush iron ore), a gristmill, a lumber mill, and several waterwheels spinning in the current. The granary had already been emptied of corn, which is what they called grain until multi-colored maize from Mesoamerica evolved into uniformly yellow sweet kernels in another thousand years. What it didn't have was an outer wall. Given the piles of discarded slag, the Alamanni came here for iron, which they value as much as gold because they knew how to shape iron into weapons. *Germani* worked most metals, but it wasn't easy, fast, or cheap. Copper has a lower melting point, but smelting iron from ore requires turning wood into charcoal for higher temperatures sustained via blast furnaces and bellows. Helmets, armor, and arms

cost more than most peasants made in a year, unless they stole from richer neighbors. The *Pax Romana* (Roman Peace) started by Caesar had given Gaul five centuries of peace and prosperity, unlike the forests of Germania, with its thin soils and financially insecure souls. Stability, trade, and commerce enriched Celts and Western Germani (Franks, Saxons, Jutes, Angles, and Frisii) who settled in Gaul over the centuries. In contrast, Eastern Germani like the Alamanni reproduced faster than their food supply, so something had to give.

Smoke still rose from the town's smoldering ruins, so the *barbari* (barbarians) had hit residents just before dawn. The legion had arrived a day late and a denarii short. A few thousand fresh corpses had only begun to harden under the harsh sun and brutal breezes. Ravens plucked out eyes while vultures circled above. Hundreds of wounded men, raped women, and crying kids begged for help when the legion marched into view. Townspeople had lost their herds, their fuckable women, and their portable valuables. Even from a distance, the legion could see these poor folks would soon starve. Without shelter, it'd only take one snowstorm to put them out of their misery.

No enemy could be seen or heard, but something stunk besides the dead.

Since the legion crossed the Main River into Alsace (modern France), Flavius "Max" Maximus resented riding with the reserves. He was as good an archer as any and better than most. His Uncle Theodosius, the legate commanding this legion, wanted to keep him safe because Max was just 15. Since orphaned at 10 years old, he wanted to fight the *Germani* who fooled his father at the Battle of Four Hills. Dad had been a good general who died a bad death. Heartbreak killed Max's Briton mom soon after, forcing Uncle Theodosius to raise Max and his little brother Marc.

The Maximus family came from ancient noble stock. His most famous ancestor was Quintus Fabius Maximus, whose strategy of wearing down Hannibal (Fabian Tactics) saved Rome from destruction. Consul five times like his grandfather, Fabius was also dictator in 221 and 217 BCE. A member of the ancient Fabia gens, Fabius was named after an ancestor hero of the brutal Samnite Wars (343-290 BCE). Max's most recent claim to fame was his grandfather's grandfather, Marcus Pupienus Maximus, who was briefly co-emperor in 238 when traitorous praetorian imperial guards killed both emperors as they set out to battle Goths and Persians. With Rome ruled by rivals, most of the Maximus family moved to Iberia (modern Spain and Portugal), where they built up an ancient port city called Porto Gordo (Portugal).

Max had recently married his pregnant Heruli mistress without his uncle's knowledge, which could end his military career because troops should stay single. Only his friend and commander, Pelagius knew. A dangerously handsome youth, Max had bad-boy looks to match his attitude and swagger, with jet-black hair and piercing sky-blue eyes on a large, muscular frame. He moved with the easy grace of a champion athlete. Other legionnaires naturally hated him because horny ladies always picked him first. Their new Heruli unit, which fled Huns on the Central Asian steppe, were Rome's only horse archers, making them an elite unit. Max didn't just bang a super-hot Heruli, but the sister of their king. The legion welcomed Max settling down with his pregnant girlfriend to face less competition for local ladies as they marched from town to town.

Having a wife and baby to support meant Max had to quickly rise in the ranks to earn more money. Though his uncle was rich, Max was depressingly poor and therefore desperate to prove himself. If he couldn't make enough with the legions, he'd have to resort to crime rather than see his bride and baby starve. Without other options, he trained hard and looked for ways to stand out in combat. A husband should be able to support a wife, so Max felt more anxious to perform than afraid to die. Death was nothing compared to living in shame. Max had anger issues and the athletic talent to vent them. He was still only 15, so veterans called him a child. To get ahead, Max had to show he was as good as any centurion.

Like all Roman legions in the 4th century, this unit had few real Romans because Italians preferred cheap foreign mercenaries to keep them safe. Rome paid little for men to risk their lives, so Italians shunned service. In fact, teenage boys sometimes cut off their own thumb to avoid being stuck in the Roman military for 20 years, posted far from home and family. Though raised in western Iberia (modern Portugal), the year that teenage Max spent in Rome made him feel more Roman than the decade he spent in Iberia. He burned to become more famous than his illustrious ancestors—to shine bright before a cruel world snuffed out his light.

The vanguard's legate, General Theodosius (Theo the Elder) headed straight for town until something caught his eye like a fishhook. He suddenly rode to his cavalry commander. Though Theo had 5000 men, just a few dozen rode—mostly as scouts or messengers. Theo owned an Iberian horse ranch, so Max rode a beautiful white stallion named Caesar. Horses trained for war are rare and valuable. Theo then sent messages to warn Emperor Julian and General Valentinian with the main army. Uncle Theo looked more pissed than worried as he gave his officers what no one called a sit-rep:

“Scouts saw movement up the slope, so I assume the enemy is waiting in the woods around the valley rim. Reaching town will take too long and put us in the bottom of the valley, where we're most vulnerable. Instead, we're gonna run for that rocky mound across the creek to put water between us and half of our ambushers. Pelagius, I need all your horse to buy us time. We'll fight for our lives on the mound until Val smashes the thieving bastards. Centurions, distribute your weapons so everyone doubles up. Men, drink water now and tie a sack to your belt. If you have jerked meat, put it in your pocket. This will be a long day and you'll need your strength. Unless we get our wagons on that hillock, this will be our last meal.”

“Understood, sir.” Pelagius studied his cavalry, uncertain which would flee. He barely knew many because the scouts didn't even belong to him. The irony is 6,000 Heruli mounted archers were just a day's ride away. “Bowmen, get as many quivers as you can carry from the wagons. Lancers, I need you in front. Distribute excess lances to the mounted scouts and messengers. Hit them at a gallop at your discretion. We must mount that mound!”

Veterans stressed the importance of preparation because an army marches on its belly. Max enjoyed three horses, two of which carried supplies and extra ammo. Unique among European horsemen, he could shoot at a gallop after much practice, like nomads from the steppe, because he grew up on a horse ranch. Max hung quivers from the four saddlebows of each Roman-style saddle. Not until

Huns proved the superiority of stirrups would the shape of saddles change to suit the needs of a mounted archer. As Max stretched his cramped muscles, he watched 5000 men eat, drink, and reorganize their stuff. The luckiest slung a quiver of darts across their backs. The Roman Army only recently started widespread use of darts. Infantry can only carry a couple javelins, so a bundle of darts provided more firepower. Many rummaged through wagons for favorite weapons or extra ammo. Max noted which men were eager to engage the enemy. His friend Pelagius, also from a privileged noble family, caught his eye and laughed.

“It’s a good day to die.”

That made Max laugh loudly. Half the legion heard him and took heart. Max followed his uncle on campaigns as an aide. In five years he witnessed a few dozen battles and countless skirmishes, but had never been allowed to risk his life as a soldier. Sure, he shot arrows from ramparts or breastworks, but he had never killed face-to-face.

It was about damn time.

Most men worldwide were relatively short from generations of malnutrition—the Roman Empire was on its second century of tough times. Historians would even name the last one as the Crisis of the Third Century, not that the 2<sup>nd</sup> century was so stable. Rome had 25 claimants to the throne in just 50 years and had been declining since Marcus Aurelius’ death in 180. Max’s family, in contrast, owned farms and ranches for generations, making them as tall as *Germani*. To convince Theo he had what it takes, Max trained obsessively until he could beat all centurions. Being ambidextrous gave him an extra edge. Experts in hand-to-hand fighting had taught him well, but what really made Max stand out was his horsemanship; that’s why Heruli accepted him. At his family’s horse ranch, he rode as soon as he could walk and learned trick riding because daddy loved that. Riding is how father and son bonded, while talking about anything under the sun. Daddy’s death left an eternal hole in his son’s soul. Max worked hard to learn trick riding from his father, so he enjoyed amusing his comrades during the long boring winters.

Climbing over the wagons, Max finally found their caltrops: anti-infantry weapons made from rusty iron spikes welded together so sharp ends always pointed up, no matter how they landed. They worked best in knee-deep grass, which is what Max saw between the mound and the forested slope, where the enemy hid.

Pelagius approved. “While you’re out there, put on a show to distract them. Buy us as much time as you can.”

“You’re ordering me to show off? Is that even legal?”

Pelagius helped him strap down crates of tacks on his three horses—something that would tip over at a trot. Max carefully led his horses onto the other side of the creek, trying hard to look aimless as he slowly wandered closer to the enemy. Being young and in civilian clothes helped. Max had put on three leather vests under his cuirass and covered them with a bear fur he took off a dead *Germani* last month; arrows would need more power to hurt him now. He knew he looked even younger than 15, so he left his helmet hanging from his belt. No Alamanni would see his baby face as a serious threat.

His uncle angrily roared, "Max, what are you doing?"

"Buying you time, sir."

Singing the latest hit song, *The Girls of Rome*, Max dumped rusty spikes while riding parallel to the tree line so his horse would block the view. Once empty, he dropped the crate and grabbed another from his second horse. He rode back, the tall green grass brushing his boots as he emptied another box. The third he spread out closer to the mound. 30,000 rusty spikes now lay in the path of the enemy charge. The six crates of tacks still on the wagon would be scattered wherever it was easiest to sprint up the mound. Recovering them all with a hooked stick would be a long chore tomorrow.

The legion rested longer than usual because Theo knew they'd soon have to run for their lives. Once the Alamanni realized the legion was not going to the burnt town to save those hopeless people, they'd charge. All the officers except Theo hooked their horses to the wagons to speed them up. Once they got close to the knoll, a few miles from the smoking ruins, Theo ordered them to stop, turn 90 degrees to face the stream, then jog in formation to the mound. 5000 troops splashed waist-deep across the creek and up a gentle slope. The hilltop had barely enough room to hold them all.

A moment later, all hell broke loose. 30,000 screaming barbarians burst from the trees around the valley rim with spears, swords, axes, bows, and war hammers. The poorest held farming implements like hoes and scythes. Almost all were on foot because the Alamanni unit luring away the main Roman army needed their mounts. Unlike the Roman Army, the tribes wore hides and furs instead of heavy cloaks over uniforms.

Putting on his helmet, Max waited 400 paces from the trees with his custom-made bow. Max was larger than most men, so he spent a year making himself a bigger bow that shot farther and faster. Max positioned himself on a bump in the land that offered him a clear field of fire. As the only nearby target, enemy horsemen sought him out. On the practice field, Max spent mornings firing rapidly, then checking how many hit his strawman. That turned out to be excellent training. With a nudge of his heel, his favorite war horse, Caesar, walked diagonally downhill as Max emptied his first quiver of 30 arrows at their horses, rather than their horsemen. The Alamanni riders held either swords or spears. With so many mounts, it was hard to miss, no matter how fast he flung them. He prioritized the easiest targets, and down they went with screams, cries, and curses. A ton of flesh at 30 miles per hour can tumble for quite a distance. Some horses took more than one arrow, but when they fell, riders flew because the western world didn't have stirrups yet. Wounded horses reared up or danced on the ground, creating instant obstacles for the footman catching up. The teen used his knees to hug his horse for a steadier shooting platform, but the faster he rode, the worse his aim. Whenever possible, Max paused Caesar before firing. Hitting a big horse was also easier than a slender man. Most Alamanni wielded fire-hardened spears because they are cheap, but that meant they didn't carry shields because spears need two hands.

The *Germani* horsemen should have galloped straight to the wagons to spear the horses pulling them or else Theo would circle those wagons around the summit to enjoy a portable fort. Stranding the wagons would have forced the legion to protect

their stuff between the hill and the creek, while warriors commanded the nearby high ground. In their defense, what the Alamanni did was understandable because Europeans had never fielded mounted archers before. Bowmen always rode to work, then dismounted. These riders thought they'd quickly take out the kid on the beautiful white stallion and then stop the wagons as they crawled up the hill. By shooting their horses, Max won the battle. Their footmen now had to charge up a hill to a fortified position defended by men in armor. By removing the threat of Alamanni horsemen, the legion earned the mound, and therefore most lived to fight another day. By using himself as bait, Max won the battle just as it started. Mounted spearmen at a full gallop could have devastated the legionaries as they crossed the creek. Instead, they charged a mounted archer and lost their rides. Mounted archers are so dangerous that China built a great wall to keep them out.

Every time an Alamanni horse stepped on a caltrop and tumbled, Max laughed loudly to piss off the rest. Spikes crippled a few dozen horses, sending their riders flying or landing on their legs, breaking bones. The teen enjoyed a better bow, better horse, and was a better rider, so he danced among enemy horsemen, staying just out of range of their spears as he wounded their mounts. Max retreated from several until he whittled them down, then circled around to hit the rest. When warriors tried enveloping him, the Iberian darted into their center, shooting a big badass from the saddle, then laughing loudly as his comrades cheered. Instead of assaulting the wagons, the fools turned to vent their anger on the unimportant teenager. Avoiding their spears, Max shot over 100 horses that could have smashed a breach in the Roman line. Good horses are worth almost as much as common slaves, so it enraged the *Germani* to see so much wealth taken from them by a damn kid. Nearly 100 tons of horse steaks would feed the emperor's army for the next week. Legionaries would chew dried salty horse jerky for months.

Behind the horsemen came 10,000 on foot. On the other side of the river, 20,000 *Germani* flowed down the slope, but had to cross the creek while under fire. Neither side arrived in time to stop the legion from earning the hilltop. Hundreds impaled their feet on rusted iron and thousands slowed to search the deep grass for hidden metal. That bought the legion several precious minutes that they put to good use.

Max saved the legion, for which they'd gift him a grass crown.

After using both quivers strung over his shoulders, Max sat on the leather cord that his other quivers hung from. He hopped off Caesar, bounced while freeing another quiver, sat his horse again, and continued firing. Caesar walked a little slower than the men riding at him, but Max missed less as they got near. He laughed as horses dumped their riders, sometimes crushing them as they landed on their sides. Dozens of hurt horses slowed those on foot. The legion heard his laughter, which reduced their fear. Some swordsmen swatted aside his arrows, but that worked less as they approached. When too many swarmed him, Max kicked Caesar to open the distance. *Germani* had few slingers, but one rung Max's helmet like a bell. It took him six arrows to get that slinger to stop.

The Alamanni had spread out around the wood line, rather than mass together. Max, being a Roman mile closer than the legion, was an obvious target on their way to the hill. Yet they were too far apart for this to work. Caesar expertly darted



away or between Alamanni as Max shot down their fastest runners. Max lured them away from Uncle Theo. With their leaders wounded or on foot, the enemy didn't have anyone visible to rally behind.

Then, from the far side of the valley, a group of expensively dressed horsemen cantered across the creek and galloped to take command. Max headed for a bump in the land to intercept them. A dozen charged him, but the teen calmly fired at the guy wearing a triple crown until an impact knocked him off his high horse. King Rando would survive the morning to see his army destroyed. The Alamanni tried killing a mounted archer with sword and spear, which didn't work out. Though without stirrups, then unknown in the West, the teenager paused Caesar to shoot more accurately. The last three had circled around, so Max lunged forward to open the distance, then hit their horses to make them easier targets. The king's guards, like the king, died from a revolutionary warfare development—the accurate horse archer. Xerxes used them in his invasion of Greece, but their saturation volleys failed to decimate Greeks in bronze armor and heavy shields. Hugging his horse with his knees to stabilize his shooting platform, Max sniped them as they ran into range.

King Rando was apparently not the sharpest arrow in the quiver.

Once he finished the four quivers from his first horse and the two slung around his shoulders, Max grabbed more from a packhorse. Every three quivers he changed shoulders because he was ambidextrous; he shot as well with his left as his right hand. As the *Germani* charge lost momentum, the Romans sped up, pushing and pulling those wagons up top to use as barriers and shooting platforms. The first cohort ran ahead to form a shield wall around the rim, with spearmen soon behind them, followed by javelinists, then foot archers.

Of the 30,000 *Germani* flowing down from the valley rim, 20,000 were on the wrong side of the creek because they thought the legion would march to the burnt town. Those Alamanni had to run farther, and therefore would arrive later. Half of the remaining 10,000 targeted Max, but they were the fastest runners, after he ran out of riders. Only a fraction of the *Germani* had bows, and the teen prioritized them. Three arrows hit him, much to his annoyance. Two shafts stubbornly clung to his thick bear fur and one bled him in the side, where his front and back plates didn't protect him. Still, that was nothing compared to what he inflicted on the enemy. It's harder to accurately fire an arrow than swing a sword or thrust a spear, so fewer men mastered the skill. They should have shot his horses, but that was like throwing gold in a river. The teen had a better bow and had practiced for thousands of hours, so he enjoyed greater range, mobility, and armor.

10,000 from one side of the valley reached the mound long before the other 20,000, letting Theo strike down one before having to deal with the other. The Romans on the hilltop all faced the 10,000 coming from one direction, then moved to slaughter 20,000 coming from the creek. If all 30,000 struck at the same time, from all around the mound, then they might have overwhelmed the legion. Even better, if their riders had crippled the Roman horses pulling the wagons up the knoll, Alamanni may have gained the hilltop instead and then wiped out their southern rivals. Instead, 100 or so *Germani* horsemen chased a teenage distraction who shot their mounts. With that, they lost the ability to stop the Roman wagons between the hill and the creek.

Charges work best with surprise, but Theo foresaw the ambush. Attacks also work best when struck from behind or from all sides at the same time. Though the valley was narrow, the mound was much closer to one forest, so 10,000 enemies got there sooner. Rather than wait, like a disciplined army would, the rabble engaged with only a fraction of their force, without enough riders or archers. Tired from running a few miles, climbing the mound fatally slowed them down. It takes a tight mass of men to punch through a shield wall like a giant fist. The Alamanni simply didn't have the momentum to breach the barrier. Running into a proper shield wall was like sprinting into a tree. Those other five Roman lines held long spears to jab at enemies beyond sword range.

The Roman dart was rather recent. Each shield fit five and each quiver held ten. When thrown, they pierce flesh like arrows. Infantry threw them at whatever was most vulnerable, like legs. Alamanni fell, blocking others, who had to step over them. The cries of pain set the mood. Most men on the shield wall threw a few javelin and 15 darts. Those in the back passed theirs up before the *Germani* hit the shield wall. The legion had enough men and mound to ring the top six men thick, not counting the cohort of allied archers, shooting en masse from horseback or atop wagons. The first line of shields therefore had five other guys pressing their shields against his back. Even hitting an Alamanni shield was useful because the added weight dragged the shield down, exposing the enemy. The Alamanni had more men, but Theo had more ammo.

Max emptied 14 quivers, shooting 420 arrows, and his shoulders ached. Being ambidextrous, he rotated shoulders to shoot twice as long. He yelled Germanic insults to deprive them of critical mass when they hit the shield wall. Max ran out of arrows before the enemy cut him off, so he put on a show to distract them. Facing just infantry, he'd bounce off the ground to leap over Caesar at a gallop, which infuriated the enemy. A great warhorse is worth hundreds of plow horses. Plenty of warriors diverted from assaulting the mound to cut him off, only for Max to speed past them while laughing. Rows of Romans opened up to let Max through, to great cheering, only to close the gap. Hundreds of *barbari* still chased him, but up the longest slope, with the least cover. Pelagius handed his friend more quivers so he could resume firing without dismounting. By sunset, his arms were so numb that he couldn't pick his nose or lift his spirits. *Germani* couldn't break through, so they settled down for a siege. Then the emperor's army showed up, 30,000 strong, but exhausted from lightning marches. From a few miles away, Max stood on Caesar while forming an "O" with his empty arms.

"The hell is he doing?" Emperor Julian asked General Valentinian.

"He's suggesting we encircle the enemy, sire."

"Optimistic kid," the emperor conceded. Thousands of brutal barbarians were still assaulting the men on the mound. The legion lost few of its men, mostly to enemy archers, but the invaders lost half their force. Most Alamanni weren't dead, just too injured to contribute. "You think that *pedes* (the lowest rank foot soldier) should tell us how to win?"

"If we don't cut off the enemy by nightfall, they'll escape to raid Gaul another day," the general reasoned.

The emperor huffed a minute. "Fine! Let's alternate legions, marching them up the slope, along the tree line to trap those fools in the treeless valley bottom."

Which was the same tactic that the enemy had planned. The tribe saw columns of infantry enter the valley, but they posed no immediate threat because they walked to high ground. Rando, the frustrated Germanic king, wanted to slaughter those on the mound before dealing with the new men, but his frustrated warriors could not break the barriers. The Romans had wagons full of ammo, plus the time to use them all, while few *Germani* wore armor. It was like spearing fish.

By the time the Alamanni sounded retreat, it was too late. Once they broke off, Romans on the mound mounted their horses to pursue. Roman foot soldiers followed to harass the raiders. Julian ordered a general attack and his legions charged downhill. Some *Germani* stood their ground, but most wisely fled. Fighting is more exhausting than marching, so the Romans enjoyed an energy advantage as the sun retired for the day.

Desperate to seize the moment, Max led the most determined horsemen after the fastest invaders. Max's biceps couldn't pull a bowstring anymore, but he could still swing a sword. Other cavalry wielded spears or slings.

The 15 year old didn't return until dawn, wounded but smiling. His comrades greeted him with a special gift: the grass crown for saving the legion. This was an ancient Roman honor rarely awarded anymore. Instead of a medal from high authority, the fighters themselves made a crown from blades of grass. This literally was a grassroots award. Julius Caesar won one when he saved his cohort at 17 years old. Sulla's men gave him a grass crown when he saved his entire army during the Social War that Rome fought against most of Italy when Caesar was young. Pelagius stood on a wagon to praise and heckle his young friend. Centurions embraced Max like a brother and tribunes thanked him for using himself as bait to give the legion time to fortify the knoll. They all knew he had saved their lives and were not slow to tell him so he'd risk his life again for them soon. This addicted Max to applause and praise like the worst *prima donna*.

Later, Max sought out his uncle, hoping he'd be proud. "I fucked the enemy, so I'm no longer a virgin."

That's what veterans called newbies with no known kills. Max had actually killed dozens with his bow from behind cover, but never up close and personal. Yesterday, 10,000 hostiles had chased him to the hill and he still somehow survived. Theo was more unnerved by the risks he took than proud.

"You fucked up, Max. Your centurion says you shot a few hundred enemies or their horses. The emperor has promoted you to *circitor* (sergeant/two ranks up from the bottom). Congratulations: you're probably the youngest *circitor* in the Roman Army. Your cousin is gonna be pissed."

Uncle Theo's oldest son, also named Theo, was four years younger and obsessed with being better than Max at everything. Growing up, they literally measured dicks and had pissing contests. Because Theo still had a mother, however, he rarely got to attend his father in the field because that's no place for a normal rich boy.

Max smiled at his uncle, the happiest he'd been since losing his parents. "Yeah, he will."

Indeed, Cousin Theo would be pink with envy.

"Max, you are just not normal," Uncle Theo said not unkindly.

"No one is normal."

His father once wondered why men sought normality. No one mistook Max for normal. Because his father died in battle, Max was obsessed with becoming a great warrior and general. While other teens goofed around, he trained with sword and shield or bow and arrow. He read extensively. With a wife and baby to support, he needed to rise fast or lose everything. Many teens are driven, but few as much as Max. The troops cheered their young hero. Pelagius started a chant to brand the kid like a cow:

“Magnus! Magnus! Magnus!”

It was too good a pun to ignore. Max’s birth name was Flavius Julius Maximus. Flavius was common enough, and Maximus just means “maximum.” Adding “magnus,” however, made it distinctive because magnus means great, so Magnus Maximus therefore meant “maximum great” which borders on the absurd. Pompey started calling himself Magnus Pompey by 17 years old and many Romans used the term to stand out. Max did not want an ordinary life. He’d rather burn bright than long. Maybe he didn’t realize his comrades were just joking because the phrase settled in his psyche like a scar.

Max roared back, “Magnus Maximus! Magnus Maximus! Magnus Maximus!”

That’s the name that *Germani* would know him by and how history would remember him. While wary of Romans, *Germani* didn’t fear them like they feared Magnus Maximus. Over the decades, he’d beat them badly too often for them to take him lightly. Fathers would frighten kids during long snowy winters and mothers would threaten the disobedient with Magnus Maximus unless they behaved. Max became a menacing boogeyman in the dark years to come.

The happy, drunk, victorious troops chanted it because it sounded great. His uncle Theo, however, saw it differently. His young son competed with Max in everything, but how can anyone compete with maximum great? Still, the name stuck like a scar. Troops either loved or hated Max, but both called him Magnus Maximus because Flavius is just too common a name for such an uncommon man.

Magnus Maximus, the Roman from Iberia who’d rule Britain, was born in battle in Gaul.

## Chapter 2

### **Augusta Treverium, Gaul’s capital, 364**

General Theodosius watched his nephew work his elite Heruli cavalry unit. Romans are city boys, not born riders, and therefore used auxiliaries as horsemen. The “Roman” Army had so few Romans anymore that the difference between regular units and auxiliaries blurred. Most soldiers were Gauls or from the Balkans. Because his family raised thoroughbred horses, however, Max felt more comfortable ahorse. As he was a great archer, he asked his uncle for command of their Heruli auxiliaries. Like most pastoral nomads from the 5000-mile long grassy Eurasian steppe, which stretched from central Hungary to the North China Plain, Heruli grew up hunting from horseback. General Valentinian had a vast area to

patrol, along the Rhine and Danube rivers, and appreciated the speed that horse archers could hunt down intruders. *Germani* did not shoot from horseback, using spears and swords instead, so they were almost defenseless. Though only a tribune, General Valentinian put Max in command of the Heruli because he got along so well with their king, Naulobatus. Few knew Max had secretly married Naulobatus' sister, Fana, who had given him two sons. Wearing his officer uniform, Max had settled the Heruli in comfort and championed their security. Rome treated them better than they'd ever treat Goths.

Nomads roaming the great Eurasian steppe had shot arrows from horseback since the invention of the bow in forgotten antiquity, but they rode without saddles, much less the stirrup, which would let them to stand as they galloped. As they didn't farm, they had to hunt. Shooting a deer running at full speed was hard from a bouncing shooting platform; yet, the better they shot, the less often they starved. Shooting while standing didn't feed the family; mounted archery determined who survived. Chasing down deer or rabbits takes wicked archery and horsemanship skill. Natural selection therefore chose the most athletic over hundreds of generations, as opposed to farmers, which Mother Nature bred for long hours and dreary lives one bad harvest away from starvation.

In the 7<sup>th</sup> century BCE, Persian-speaking Medes helped conquer the Neo-Assyrian Empire. Famous for the quality of their horses, Medes were predominately horse archers. When they lost to Cyrus the Great of Persia in 550 BCE, he appreciated their value and made them the core of his military. With them, Cyrus drove nomads from the steppe back across the Jaxartes River in modern Pakistan. Not content with that, he led another expedition against the Saka, who killed him in 540 BCE. His son-in-law, Darius the Great, hired the Saka, instead of fighting them, and his son, Xerxes, would send them to Greece in 480 BCE, where they met their match against heavily armored infantry. Greek hoplites covered themselves in bronze and carried solid shields. Greeks won at Marathon and Plataea because the weak arrows fired from horseback lacked the power to penetrate bronze armor. Mounted archers without stirrups are best deployed using saturation volleys in lightning strikes against un-armored infantry caught on open ground, as opposed to behind fortifications or in forests, mountains, and swamps. At Plataea in 479 BCE, the Persian general withdrew his ineffectual horse archers and replaced them with more powerful foot archers shooting from behind a shield wall. While Greek shields are heavy and wrapped in metal to protect against spear tips and swords, Persians used woven wicker shields which, being much lighter, could be much larger to catch arrows. The greatly outnumbered Spartans and their hoplite allies charged, chopped up those wicker shields, and then the Persians themselves, who broke and fled in the most important victory that the West doesn't celebrate. Preventing Persia from turning Greece into just another satrap (the word means, governed in the name of the King of Kings) saved Western civilization. Defeat at Plataea meant no Solon, no Socrates, no Plato, no Aristotle, and therefore no Alexander the Great. Rome built itself on Greek culture, which would have died a forgotten death. Not just western culture, but science would have been lost. The East invents things, but never systematized experiments until long after the West left them behind with the Industrial Revolution. Athens tried democracy in 508 BCE; Persia burned and

demolished the city in 480 and 479, so losing at Plataea meant Athens would no longer exist and that democracy would not have a famous example.

While mounted archers remained the core of Persian armies, the lesson that Westerners learned from Plataea was their limited usefulness. However, General Valentinian was a cavalry officer who already had horsemen who could charge with spear and sword. He hired Heruli to finally enjoy horse archers. Huns had recently conquered eastern Heruli around the Aral Sea because Huns had the stirrup, which gave them more power and accuracy; then they beat horse archer armies by the Caspian, so Heruli who roamed the rich grass north of the Black Sea packed up and moved west, selling their services to Rome because they knew they couldn't beat Huns. They didn't yet know about the stirrup because they didn't use saddles. Heruli shot from horseback no better than Sakas (who invaded India a few centuries ago). Over 1000 years had passed since horse archery turned the Medes into an empire; Huns would rule the steppe because technical innovations (the double-curved composite bow, saddles with stirrups, and iron arrowheads) enabled them to out-compete their nomadic neighbors. Huns were still expanding south and west into India, Persia, and soon into Europe. Hence, Heruli wanted to live far away from the world's most lethal military.

Valentinian needed to intercept mounted *Germani* raiders; horse archers would be ideal, and his Heruli liked Max, so this worked out well. Max, however, didn't like that his Heruli couldn't maneuver like legions, so he put them in units, based on ability, and trained them according to new tactics. The 1st were the best shots and therefore got the best horses and highest salary; higher status got them better women. Badass men with highly paid positions, high social status, and stable employment attracted local ladies; Max encouraged them to multiply to breed more horse archers. His 10,000 Heruli cavalry had almost 100,000 kids because Rome subsidized food and shelter for their families. Val assumed he couldn't have too many mounted archers; having Romanized ones was even better. They earned twice what common *pedes* made, so the competition became fierce. They had to requalify annually, so great bowmen couldn't slack off. Max, especially, had to keep his edge to keep his position of authority. His ability to feed his growing family depended on it. Uncle Theo still didn't know he was married, and probably didn't want to know. Valentinian asked him point blank and Max lied to his boss' boss like a pro. If Val new Fana was his wife, instead of just a lover, he'd hold her hostage to make Max do things.

Theo and most officers in the area watched the Heruli qualify. Each rider raced towards a series of strawmen, but had to avoid obstacles while shooting from a distance. Max asked his uncle to judge to avoid complaints of favoritism. Theo watched a thin rider test the wind before launching himself on a blood mare. A better rider than archer, he slipped through the barriers faster than others, but missed his first shot. His friends groaned while others heckled the horseman. The skinny bastard scored 6 out of 10 and would end up in the 4th Century.

Mounted on Caesar, Max rode next. The ever-competitive 18 year-old avoided obstacles cleanly, lined up his shots, and nailed them like a carpenter. Sure, he designed the course, but he still hit 10 out of 10 and Fana went wild, blowing him kisses, while holding their second son, a babe named Eugenius. Their toddler, Andragathius, who everyone called Andry, watched proudly. Feeling like a

grandpa, Theo never tired of playing with the babies. Max graciously accepted cheers as he reveled in his ability. To be great at something is wonderful, but to be appreciated is so much sweeter. His skill put him within the best 10 in his unit. At 18, that was unheard of. He rode up to his uncle, who clapped because Max survived off food, but lived for praise.

“Max, you get better every year.”

Only Uncle Theo still called him Max. Even General Valentinian called him Magnus.

“Thank you, uncle. I look forward to using my new unit against old enemies.”

Theo remembered the day Max pitched his idea to Emperor Julian after the battle three years ago. “Superior archers on superior horses can better solve certain problems. With so much river to patrol, a rapid-reaction unit can slow invaders until the main army catches up.”

A great war horse cost more than 100 plow horses. Uncle Honorius and Cousin Honorius in Iberia sold their best horses for absurd prices because they were trained for war since they were colts. Better horses meant the Heruli could out-ride anyone. Traveling 100 miles a day became not just possible, but common.

Julian approved the proposal because he planned a war against Persia, and needed mounted archers to counter Persian mounted archers. In 360, Julian was proclaimed Augustus (emperor) by his troops in Lutetia (Paris), starting a civil war with his cousin, Constantius, who died before they could battle. Another civil war could have bankrupted the empire.

When Constantine the Great died in 337, his three sons divided the empire. The eldest, unhappy with his portion, invaded Italy in 340, only for his brother Constans to kill him in an ambush. The legions hated Constans and killed him in 350, elevating a barbarian leader named Magnentius to rule as Emperor, who lost to the remaining brother, Constantius, at the Battle of Mursa in 351. Almost half of the 95,000 troops suffered casualties that bloody day. In 353, Constantius beat Magnentius again, who committed suicide to avoid capture. The more that Romans fought each other, the less they could fight *Germani* invaders. The Alamanni beat Julian in 356 at the Battle of Reims, only for Julian to expel them from the Rhineland in 357 at the Battle of Argentoratum (modern Strasbourg). With just 13,000 men, he beat a force 3X bigger, taking their king, Chnodomarius, prisoner to Rome. This allowed Romans to restore the line of fortifications they had built along the Rhine that were destroyed during the devastating Roman Civil War of 350-353.

While Franks, Saxons, Vandals, and Goths were serious threats, the Alamanni were a royal pain in the ass. Alamanni threatened Rome in 259, but Emperor Gallienus beat them. Emperor Claudius II defeated them in 268, while Emperor Aurelian whipped them in 271 at the Battle of Placentia, the Battle of Fano, and the Battle of Favia. In 298, Constantius Chlorus beat them at the Battle of Lingones and the Battle of Vindonissa. The Alamanni would later invade Gaul in 406 and settle in Alsace, on the Rhine River plain. In 451 they joined Attila the Hun, invaded Italy in 457, and in 554 ravaged southern Italy. So, dangerous threats.

Theo enjoyed his position as *magister militum* (general), but wondered how long it'd last. In 363, Julian invaded Sassanid Persia, where he was mortally wounded

at the Battle of Samarra. He died 8 months ago, Rome's last non-Christian ruler. The army in Mesopotamia then declared Jovian, commander of the imperial bodyguards, the new emperor, which unsettled every other Roman army. Most officers found Jovian acceptable and all preferred avoiding another civil war, but Theo knew he wouldn't be favored as he was with Julian. Jovian had to prove himself.

Theo and Max turned to watch a messenger riding his horse to death. The beast was in a lather, foam flinging from its lips, and the rider looked just as exhausted. The two officers intercepted him before he entered the military base.

"What news, soldier?" General Theodosius demanded.

The scared rider clutched a scroll. "Someone poisoned Emperor Jovian in his tent on his way to Constantinople because he accepted a humiliating peace treaty with the Persians that cost Rome its five provinces east of the Tigris. We're without an emperor. Again."

Losing five provinces was disastrous, but nothing compared to a civil war so soon after the last one. The Roman military needed to choose someone who could rule, and do it before the fields started sprouting pretenders. The messenger rode through the gates to deliver his note to Sallustius, the *praetorian prefect* (dude-in-charge) of Gaul (and Julian's consul in 363). Sallustius sent word to every commander within easy riding distance and they came to the huge *basilica* (government headquarters) with a vengeance. Max heard cavalrymen scream themselves horse. The *prefect* banged a sword against a table to get everyone's attention.

"We need to find another emperor with proven military success, who hates barbarians as much as we do. Name, fame, and lineage also count. I'll start by refusing the job and taking my son off the list. We won't kill friends for a brief reign. I won't offer any names, but I'll veto unacceptable choices. Now, who do you want to lead us in these dark times?"

The commanders started muttering to each other. Max wisely kept his mouth shut, but higher officers dismissed applicants almost as fast as they were proposed: Aequitius, the tribune of the *Scutarii* (imperial regiment), was too boorish; Januarius, a relative of Jovian in charge of logistics in Illyricum, was too far away; and Dagalaifus, the *magister equitum*, was an absolute asshole. Not a partial asshole, which is disgusting, but a complete a-hole.

Max found choosing an emperor profoundly enlightening.

"This is how powerful men make history-making decisions!" his uncle whispered to him. "Angry, drunk, and scared. No wonder the world is falling apart. For the life of me, I want a man who'll make things right to rebuild civilization."

Sallustius was furious. No name earned the support of even a quarter of the commanders. "There must be someone qualified that we find acceptable! Who's a rising star in the next generation? I'll take young and brave over old and foolish like my friend Julian."

Theo leaned into Max: "Watch my back and be ready to run." He pushed his way forward and coughed to get their attention. Theodosius could have nominated himself, as he had the blood, the fame, and the battle smarts. He was well-liked and universally respected. Though young, he was not inexperienced, but had



never governed, which was a fatal flaw. Instead he asked, "What about Flavius Valentinian?"

His skin on fire, Theo waited judgment. Unlike everyone else, no one raised an objection. For the first time, Theo saw heads nodding approvingly.

"Val's a good man, a good general, and a natural governor," Sallustius conceded somberly. "Best of all, he hates *Germani!* That man prefers the field to getting fat in luxury. He won't kiss so much Senate ass that he forgets us. If no one has a specific objection, I'd like us to interview him to see what he'd do if given the empire. If he wants to go to Persia, I say we club him to death. Theodosius, how soon could you get him here, if he's interested in the job?"

Valentinian was in nearby Ancyra. "Tomorrow."

"Bring him, then. Remember it's only an interview, not an offer."

"Yes, sir!"

Theo sent Max, who liked marathon riding, for some strange reason. He had no idea that Val would spend years trying to kill him. When Val arrived, Theo had a bath and clean clothes ready.

"Do I look like an emperor?" Val asked excitedly.

"By Jupiter, I hope so," Theo answered honestly. "I don't want to elect someone who will have me killed."

The foreshadowing would haunt them later.

Ironically, everyone called the ruler of the Roman Empire the "emperor" except the empire. When Octavian succeeded his great-uncle, Julius Caesar (who was only dictator-for-life), he called himself Augustus (wise) because Rome famously spent 500 years as the world's only enduring republic. Athens tried democracy and found they couldn't even govern one city. A Roman calling himself emperor would negate that unique legacy and make the Senate more useless than usual. The first five rulers after Augustus gave themselves the title, Caesar, but over the next three centuries the practice evolved. Now, the emperor got the title Augustus and his deputy emperor/ second-in-command/ designated successor was called Caesar. Most emperors were generals or their relatives. If the emperor could not lead armies, then he made his best general, "Caesar." For instance, Emperor Constantius II made his cousin Flavius Claudius Julian his Caesar in 355, only for the fucker to challenge him just five years later.

It turned out Val had to work for the position because the troops felt betrayed by Julian and Jovian. Who gives a shit about Persia when barbarians are raping our women and burning our towns? Val gave a speech that put the Army first and vowed to spank the *Germani*. By winning over the rankers, Val won over the officers. Sallustius demanded the honor of being the first to make obedience to Rome's newest emperor, but Theo then followed, a grin on his face.

On his deathbed, Valentinian would bitch-slap that grin off Theo's face.

But the best was yet to come.

Though mortally wounded in Mesopotamia, Julian won that battle against Persia and held the field. Roman troops therefore looted the dead and found thousands of swords made of legendary Damascus steel. Invented in India a few centuries before Christ, steel was made at a sustained high temperature by removing impurities in iron. Romans used heavy iron swords, which dulled easily. One freezing winter could fatally fracture thousands. Steel was lighter, sharper,

kept its edge longer, was hard yet flexible, endured wear-and-tear, took longer to rust, and was in every way superior to iron. Greater structural integrity meant blacksmiths needed less metal. Being lighter, they made them longer, yet thinner, giving them better range and speed. Damascus steel stood out via its wavy patterns, as if dipped in water. Romans also stripped thousands of bodies of steel armor, superior to anything in the world. Helmets and breast plates were lighter, yet harder to penetrate. Marching 20 miles a day while carrying a full pack just got easier for a few thousand lucky soldiers. Emperor Valentinian would buy most and issue them to his elite troops and personal bodyguards.

Once Val had the support of the army in Gaul, he raced to Jovian's leaderless army crawling towards Constantinople so they could swear personal loyalty. Since not everyone would be thrilled to elect a stranger, the new emperor took a Heruli cavalry escort that included Theo and Max. In return for a pardon for the suspicious death of Emperor Jovian, the army from Mesopotamia accepted Val enthusiastically.

Then the leader of the imperial bodyguard gave the emperor a Damascus sword and all the new men wanted one. Lighter, sharper, stronger swords fly faster, making the difference between life and death. Having spent whatever plunder they took in Mesopotamia, many of the lucky few thousand legionaries with Damascus swords sold them. Those who didn't were killed by men who needed the better blade to survive combat longer. Other than officers, the political connected, and those who fled, most of those precious swords found new owners. Theo bought many, but Max used his first Damascus blade, which he named Eucherius after his father, to challenge others. In the epic party that Val hosted, Max organized swordfights for the emperor—not to the death, but with the winner earning his rival's weapon. Max won 22 before the emperor cut him off. Together, Theo and Max acquired over 100.

Theo sent word to his brother Honorius, in Iberia, asking him to buy blades through the family trading company. Max topped that by sending his little brother Marcellinus (Marc) to Mesopotamia, where he won over merchants and their maiden daughters. Mortgaging the extended family fortune, Marc hired the best apprentices in Damascus to make the finest steel in a forge, foundry, and factory that Marc built on Theo's estate at Porto Gordo. The family would soon mass-produce the West's only steel. Though just a teenager, Marc Maximus dedicated his life to eastern trade, training to become a ship captain and signing on with an Iberian crew that operated out of Arabia's Red Sea.

No fool, Max used these weapons to recruit the best troops for his elite regiment, who swore personal loyalty to him.

"We can't afford to just loan these expensive swords to total strangers," Uncle Theo reasoned.

"To survive, we can't afford not to," Max argued.

## **Chapter 3**

**Saxony, Greater Germania, 366**

Saxons, Angles, Franks, and Jutes were different West Germanic tribes on the coast of Gaul (modern France, Belgium, and Germany) who spoke similar languages, which was not German. The Alamanni confederation would evolve into the modern German language in several more centuries. Before expanding down the coast of modern France, these tribes settled in modern Denmark on a peninsula that juts into the Baltic Sea called Jutland. So many raiders from the kingdom of Anglia would move to Britannia in the 5th and 6th centuries that the island would bear a version of their name (England). Saxons would start the kingdoms of Essex, Sussex, Wessex, and Middlesex, presumably because they're horny. The term Anglo-Saxon didn't start until the 8th century and England didn't exist until the Anglos and Saxons defeated the Scandinavians kingdoms to finally unite the island under Alfred the Great in 899.

Noyon, king of the Franks (and ancestor to Charlemagne), stood on a bridge over the Elbe River waiting for his father-in-law. The elderly Saxon king Chlothar, with his son and heir, Childeric, walked to the other side of the bridge with a retinue of oddly-dressed men. Noyon waited for spies to blow a horn, alerting him to danger, but got silence instead. His newest wife, Herminia, ran across the bridge to hug her father and brother. She talked fast, excited to see them, and urged the servant carrying her baby son to walk quicker. The king and his heir held and kissed the baby, who laughed at them and pulled their beards. Noyon met them in the middle of the bridge, at the height of the arc.

"You made my youngest daughter happy," the old king said, surprised. "I never had that gift."

"Our beautiful baby made her happy," Noyon answered cautiously. "I'm shocked she named our son after me. She wanted to wait for warmer weather to show you, so your urgent message surprised me." The Frank squinted at the non-Saxons behind the Saxon king. The biggest brute looked like a total badass, with blue shit painted on his skin. "You brought company."

"They're the reason for this visit. They come with a ridiculous proposal, which reminded me of your great sense of humor." Noyon, who had no sense of humor, said nothing as King Chlothar waved them forward and put a strong hand on the first guy. "This rat-man goes by the name Valentinus to sound Roman, but everyone called him Pepin when I kidnapped him 32 years ago from Britannia. His father was chief of a poor tribe called the Attacotti who sent his clever prodigy to study the enemy first-hand in Londinium. I sold Pepin and a few thousand other kids for a huge profit and never thought I'd see them again, unless hiding in the shadows with a knife." The Saxon laughed. "Pepin still understands much of our language, so be careful. He came to me and introduced himself, as if I'd remember one boy from the thousands I stole over my lifetime. Pepin has a talent for languages, which he turned into an export-import business that made him rich. He even schmoozed his way into the imperial court of Emperor Valentinian to use those connections and multiple his income. Noyon, you're not gonna believe this, but the emperor got tired of him and exiled him home to Britannia!"

The king kidded. He knew Noyon recognized a worm when he saw one. Pepin was no warrior, unless words are weapons. He was a schemer, a con man, and a troublemaker with a prickly ego who saw everything as a slight. Noyon preferred

killing such men on sight. Though from the island, Pepin did not identify as a Briton.

“Normally, Noyon, I don’t like weasels any more than you do, but his proposal is the boldest I’ve ever heard. I was gonna torture him to death until he told us how we could sack Londinium. Pepin, please introduce the other leaders.”

The old king looked forward to seeing the reaction from his former enemy and recent son-in-law. Saxons and Franks often fought each other, as neighbors will, but tried to combined forces because they shared the same cultural heritage.

Pepin said he spoke for the Attacotti, who no one else had heard of. He described them as tough and hard, but the kings assumed that meant poor and desperate. The massive blue guy was a Pict in his 20s named Oengus, from the northern end of Britannia (Scotland). He was easily the most impressive man on the bridge, though the worst dressed. Only Pepin spoke his language, their tribes being neighbors, but he didn’t speak it fluently. Oengus claimed to be a warrior-leader, but not a chief or even a king, saying instead that Picts had many leaders. Oengus assured the mainlanders that all Picts favored the proposal.

Both kings believed him.

The Irish tribe backing the Attacotti were what Romans called Scotti, but what they called the Gaelic kingdom of Dai Riata from northeastern Ireland (modern Ulster) founded by the legendary king Fergus Mor (the Great). From their capital, in a hillfort at Dunadd, the Scotti developed a strong seafaring culture. The youngest son of the High King of Tara, a teen named Niall (later known as Niall of the Nine Hostages), said he spoke for his tribe. The last two men were a Hibernia chief called Benin and a druid named Ceretic. Though from the same island and speaking the same language, the two Irish kings distanced themselves from each other—even literally. The druid kept them apart.

“We are allies, not friends,” Benin said in Gaelic, which Pepin slowly translated. “As we both make a living on the sea, we agree not to fight each other. It’s better we hurt our common enemy, the Romans and their lackeys.”

Noyon was impressed and confused by Pepin’s plan. “You want several groups to attack Britannia at the same time? Your tribes will bribe your way south of the Wall to raid the interior while the Scotti and Hiberni attack the west coast and we mainlanders hit the east coast? Can you really sustain 60,000 to 80,000 troops through the winter? Man, we should have met in a tavern because I need a drink.” The Frank clarified the ask: “My fleet is small, so how can I help?”

His father-in-law commanded twice as many troops and enjoyed a huge fleet. “Noyon, I have more men than ships, so I’ll send what I can to raid Britannia while the rest help you burn mainland port cities. The longer it takes the emperor to respond, the more easy kills we get. I’m too old to cross the Channel, but my son is dying to raze Londinium to the ground.”

Now Noyon understand. “Oh, you want my ships to ferry your troops, plus my men with yours on the Saxon Shore so I won’t be tempted to pillage your cities. What’s in it for me?”

Romans put forts on both sides of the Channel, united under one commander, to stop raiders, smugglers, and pirates. To take all those forts would change the game.

“All the coin you can carry. Together we can conquer that coastline and keep it ourselves. We’ll be rich, with more ports to make us richer.”

Income taxes didn’t exist, so tariffs funded governments. Whoever controlled ports made money, so this risky proposal could be very profitable. That sleazebag, Pepin, leaned in and flashed a hideous sneer.

“Imagine the Roman Empire losing Britannia and the Gaul coast. Iberia would be next, then North Africa, the islands, and finally Italy.”

King Chlothar sealed the deal: “King Noyon, your son—my grandson—could become the first non-Roman emperor in Europe.”

The king of the Franks farted. “I’m in!”

## Chapter 4

### Hadrian’s Wall, northern Britannia, 367

Eboracum (modern York), the headquarters of the 6th Legion, was huge, covering 50 acres. It’s where the legion chose Constantine the Great for emperor in 306. Its massive walls and cavalry command dominated the area. The damp soil grew vast amounts of linen and flax, so the city exported linen shrouds across the empire to match wool exports.

Today, alarm bells rang to mobilize the garrison. Their naval fleet had already left to engage Saxons and their pirate allies preying on the eastern coastline, so a new threat had arrived. Dulcitus, the legion’s Prefect, was fourth in command, after the Duke, the legate, and the senior tribune. The Prefect had just retired after 20 years of excellent service, but was unhappy with the competence of his replacement. Though no longer in the army, he still dressed in uniform to annoy his wife, who wanted to move south for the warmth and the luxuries.

He marched into the *domus palatina* (imperial palace) that once housed Emperor Severus for three years, past marble columns supporting elegant colonnades. His leather boots thumped loudly on massive floor mosaics with scenes from antiquity. Officers, aides, and flunkies nodded silent greetings because Dulcitus was obviously in another of his killer moods. Good Romans liked to think of themselves as professionals, and Dulcitus thought of himself as a good Roman, though he had never left the British isles. An excellent hypocrite gave Romans central heating, so Dulcitus resented braziers warming the palatial rooms. Romans didn’t feel civilized unless they piped water indoors using terracotta pipes. He went outside to check the Duke’s favorite toilets (outdoor earth closets) because the old man spent an unusual amount of time sitting on them. He finally found the commander of Hadrian’s Wall in the *caldarium* (hot room), getting a rubdown from the equally hot masseur, whose firm tits defied gravity and whose body belonged on a statue. She had his cock in her mouth when the Prefect entered, but did not bother looking up at him. The commander’s name was Fullofaudes and his title Dux Britannorum, but everyone called him Duke rather than Dux Britannorum Fullofaudes. Wearing trousers and a fur cloak, because he had been outside packing the wagon, the veteran sweated

silently, mentally urging the expensive whore to hurry the fuck up. Dulcitus wisely waited for the Duke to finish. He shot so much cum that she coughed some out of her nose, which apparently burns a bit, judging by her horrified facial expression.

The nude commander finally noticed the Prefect. “Dulcitus? The fuck you doing here? I thought you took the family to Londinium yesterday. You either retired last week or I got you drunk for nothing.”

“Sorry, sir, but my replacement is slow to take on his duties, so tribunes still come to me. We just got an urgent message that Picts have overwhelmed Arbeia, we lost communication with Uxellodunum and Camboglanna, while the garrison at Caractonium mutinied, killed their officers and joined the Picts. You finally have the action you’ve been waiting for all these years.”

The Duke had wanted to engage Saxons on the sea because Germani are worthy opponents, but he was commander of the Wall. Instead, the *magister maritime* (naval commander) sailed down the river to the sea on his flagship, giving the Duke the friendly finger—a gesture that goes back to Socrates. Neither knew that Saxons, waiting impatiently, would soon sink those warships as they exited the river delta.

Someone sneaky had anticipated the Roman response and prepared accordingly.

In the hot room, the Duke’s smile somehow got bigger. “I always wanted to kill a blue-skinned Pict before I retire. I’ve been here since 353 and never once have Picts breached a fortlet.”

Boredom was the real enemy of wall duty. *Limitaneus* (frontier guards) and other common soldiers theoretically earned two denarii a day (before buying their own meals). In practice, few on the Wall got coin because officers inflated food prices to plump their pockets. Rankers felt like they worked for free, while resenting it intensely. Desertion was ubiquitous and morale in the toilet. Commanders took the best soldiers elsewhere, leaving only the dregs on the Wall.

Arbeia was the fort at the eastern edge of the 80 mile-long Wall, which was 15’ high, with another 10’ of parapet. 16 forts and 80 milecastles, each with two towers between them, guarded Britain from the northern savages. The towers were strong enough to support the weight of *ballistae*—huge catapults which hurled rocks painted with flaming pitch. Artillerymen soaked straw in pitch, slapped it around a stone, wrapped it in a sack, tied with twine, then piled them high. Every section of the Wall was within view of a garrison, so an attack on one was an attack on all.

Picts lived in the northern end of the island (Pictland). Romans invaded several times, but never conquered the people, who spoke something closer to Irish Gaelic than Brittonic. Celts were not native to Britannia, but instead drove natives to Ireland, where their language evolved into Gaelic. Pictland would become known as Scotland after enough Scotti from Ireland settled there. Picts didn’t call themselves Picts no more than those from Ireland called themselves Scotti or Hibernians; that’s just what Romans called them. Rome’s European enemies didn’t enjoy a written language, so those names stuck like tattoos. Picts raised cattle and sheep, didn’t farm or bathe much, painted themselves with blue-tinted woad before battle, and lived in circular stone homes in towns centered by stone

towers called brochs. When invaded, they'd vanish into the highland fog. Picts often raided the Votadini tribe in the lowlands, but rarely tried crossing the Wall in strength. Raids were small and temporary, not large and lengthy. Crossing the Wall only took ladders and starlight; returning was the challenge.

An army of Picts south of the Wall had never happened in the 250 years since its completion. A general with an army is like a bored guy with money to spend. Unlike the troops on the Wall, the 6th Legion was filled with veterans, each worth five Picts in battle.

Or so the Duke told himself.

"There goes the *Pax Romana* (the Roman peace)," the ex-Prefect said solemnly. A lot of guys he knew were probably dead if Picts had taken the 16 main forts. "Sir, I distrust the timing: the legion just got drunk celebrating the feast of *Liber Pater*. They're only good for latrine duty until tomorrow. I advise you to wait a day."

"Dulcitius, you're now a civilian, so this no longer concerns you, though I'd appreciate you staying until I get back because I am leaving you in charge. Your reputation is so fierce that the clever Picts probably waited until you retired." The Duke laughed and started getting dressed. "Oh, I hear the alarm bells now. I thought it was just my hangover."

By noon the Duke, wearing the *sagum* of a Roman general and a plumed helmet, addressed his tipsy officers. He only had one legion, so it didn't qualify as an army. Having defeated several groups of *Germani* in his youth, the Duke looked forward to smashing different *barbari*. He led four *turmae* of cavalry while the under-strength 6th Legion stumbled and puked in his wake.

From the battlements, Dulcitius watched 4000 men disappear over the horizon, followed by enemy trackers. A cold chill flowed down his spine, so he got his two fastest horses and, that night, rode after the legion dressed like a Votadini. He married the chief's daughter and learned to speak their language. Tracking 4000 men was easy, even by starlight. Every night a field army prepares a defensive camp with a ditch and earth rampart surrounded by pointy stakes to slow a surprise attack. Camps were rectangular, with rounded corners and two straight lanes. Everyone knew what to do and where to go because Romans organize their shit.

But the Duke thought all that work unnecessary, south of the Wall, so they camped without a ditch, berms, or stakes. By the time Dulcitius caught up, the enemy had already won, though the fighting would last until morning. It shocked the Prefect that Picts got through the Wall and attacked so close to the fort. Oh, crap, they had been waiting! He didn't know the Picts had so many warriors. Even in the darkness, they must have numbered in the thousands. The first wave were mounted archers, who covered spearmen who crashed through the hastily erected shield wall. Attacking when Romans were deep asleep and under cover of darkness maximized surprise and minimized reaction time. When the standard bearer died, the silver eagle fell and the enemy declared victory using a *carynx* (a pipe with a reed).

If the Duke waited a day, locals would have noticed thousands of Picts and informed the fort. Instead, the fool marched into an ambush.

Dulcitius found a thicket of brambles and ignored the sharp thorns scratching his skin. At dawn it all became horrifyingly clear. Archers on horses surrounded

the camp, with aides handing them arrows, while thousands of fighters engaged the hungover Romans inside. The enemy had six distinct groups: traitors (*limitaneus* from the Wall who stabbed their officers in their sleep), Picts, Scotti and Hiberni from Ireland, a small contingent of Saxons to monitor progress, and Attacotti, a tribe from the Western Isles. *Picti* (the Painted Ones) tattooed their face and body with blue swirls.

The Prefect now understood how the enemy took Roman forts: one at a time, from west to east, with overwhelming force, siege equipment, and the help of traitors. It reminded him of the time *Germani* ambushed three legions in the forest of Teutoberg, 300 years ago. That hurt so much that Emperor Augustus cried out, "Give me back my legions!"

Field armies bring catapults called Scorpions and wooden machines called Onagers that hurl 60 pound rocks about 180 paces, firing two a minute. The enemy had a dozen from forts on the Wall. This meant that the attack on the Wall began weeks ago, but Picts cut off communication.

"They're gonna take Eboracum!" he whispered to the dirt under his chin as he lay on his belly among the brush. The provincial capital was south of the Wall, but that now meant nothing. The grizzled veteran felt like crying. Six different enemies working together was a game changer. "It's all on me now."

Dulcitus wondered who had united them.

## Chapter 5

### North of the Wall, Britannia, winter 367

The Votadini tribe that lived north of Hadrian's Wall called it a Great Council, but it was more a great mess, with freaked out men lamenting instead of solving the problem. The timing was terrible; why can't surprise invasions happen when they're convenient? Word of the huge enemy army got the women started on turning herds into salted jerky, which lasts many months. Boys drove horses south so Picts didn't steal them. Veterans took a fresh look at defenses or starting making projectiles while warriors began forcing isolated villages to the capital. The city's population had multiplied since the last time Dulcitus visited because everyone wanted the safety of tall walls.

The contagion smelled of fear and panic. Dulcitus burst in and growled them into silence. He glared at his father-in-law and asked who was behind the attack.

"Valentinus," answered Patarn Redcoat, chief of the Votadini in the port city of Din Eidyn (modern Scotland). Romans called him Paternus, but the Prefect called him Patarn like a local. "Apparently he's from Britannia, though I've never heard of a Briton named Valentinus. His brother leads the Attacotti sheep-fuckers and he somehow convinced Saxons, the Scotti, and the Hiberni to join Picts in wiping out everyone friendly with the Romans. Dulcitus, I always wondered what my daughter saw in you. I believe I mentioned it at the time, once or thrice. Well, now I know. My son-in-law being a Roman is gonna get all Votadini killed."



“For centuries Picts have wanted to wipe you out and take the lowlands. Don’t blame me.” Dulcitus was 10th-generation Briton, but didn’t argue the point. None of these old bastards even thanked him for giving them shiploads of ammo, artillery, and food from the fort to withstand a siege. The enemy needed *ballistae* to crush stone walls, but catapults could destroy *ballistae* before they got within range of the city. Dulcitus felt underappreciated. “Their army will come here after they destroy Eboracum. Fill my ships with women and children to take to Londinium and have warriors ride to Eboracum. You can out-last them if you have fewer bellies to fill.”

Covering 50 acres, Eboracum needed many men to defend it and had just lost its legion. The few thousand guards left behind could not do it alone.

The chief was doubtful. “Son, I understand why you’d want my warriors, but why would you burden yourself with women, elderly, and kids?”

“As a Christian, I believe that no life is a burden. You must race the enemy to the fortress. 5000 people live in the town and most are going south, with whatever they most value. You must do the same or your tribe will cease to exist.” The chief glanced at the tribal council, at least whoever showed up. Many families fled to mountain hideouts. No one had a great solution because a coalition of foes had never assembled before. Not even Picts had ever united like this. Dulcitus grew impatient with his father-in-law. “My wife asked me to save her siblings, so you should give people permission to leave.”

Outside, his wife was screaming at people right now. They could hear her, despite the distance, yelling that the Picts brought allies to exterminate the Votadini forever. The capital was walled in, but the walls were old and crumbling. Terrified refugees overwhelmed their only walled city. The Votadini could not house or feed so many. Disease would break out, in such overcrowded conditions, because these illiterates did not plan for storm drainage, sewage, or trash disposal like every Roman town, city, and army camp. All that stuff was basic to every Roman builder because they were obsessed with cleanliness.

The oldest among them stood up to be heard over all the arguing. “I won’t leave, but it’ll be easier to defend Din Eidyn if the women and children are elsewhere. I propose we encourage people to leave without ordering them to. You know how stubborn they can be.”

The chief didn’t see anyone objecting, so he closed debate. “Stay or go, as you choose. Spread the word: the Great Council has decided to let everyone decide for themselves. But I want every herd driven south and all our valuables on those ships. Dulcitus, as chief, I cannot leave my capital, so you must take my grandkids.”

“Your walls cannot withstand Roman *ballistae*,” his son-in-law warned.

Patarn did not doubt it. He had seen those mammoth weapons up close. “Maybe we can sabotage them. My son Edern almost married an Attacotti and learned much of their gibberish. Perhaps he could lead a team, disguised as Attacotti, and break the giant wheels.”

The Roman roared with approval. “Tell him he could save Din Eidyn if he does.”

Dulcitus raced back to Eboracum to supervise defenses while the rest of the fleet filled up. Teenagers drove herds as far south as they could, guarded by a few thousand mostly female warriors, as men couldn’t abandon their only city. With

the Duke, the legate, and the senior tribune dead, the Prefect was in command. No one mentioned how he totally retired because no one wanted the job. He worked day and night until the enemy army arrived a week later without their heavy siege equipment. They moved at a quarter of the pace of a Roman army. Just setting up and breaking camp took them forever.

Of the Votadini, most female fighters stayed at Eboracum while most civilians continued to Castle Hill, the fortress-capital of the Brigantes, Britannia's largest tribe, in terms of territory. They and their allies controlled most land immediately south of the Wall. Between the Votadini and men from the town, Dulcitus almost had enough defenders to repel 40,000 fanatics.

Romans had cleared the area around their giant fortress to give the enemy nowhere to hide. Men had been digging new trenches and using that dirt to pile more long berms to slow charges – it looked like waves in the land wherever it was previously flat. If deep enough and high enough, horses could not get past them. The longer it took attackers to reach the walls, the more that defenders would kill. Women and kids sharpened stakes, made arrows with goose feathers, and fashioned spears. Troops combed the region in wagons to collect rocks suitable for ballistae. Dulcitus demolished the town to deny shelter to the enemy, while giving defenders plenty of wood for fires. The 50-acre fortress filled up shockingly fast, even as Dulcitus send the useless south to have fewer bellies to fill. Civilians were turning herds into jerky before they ran out of hay and livestock feed. The town's granary filled up the fort, leaving the enemy nothing but seeds.

A horn blew, so the Prefect climbed the tallest tower to see horsemen on the northern horizon. Someone had to tap his shoulder and point south.

"An army of women are attacking us?" he asked a clueless centurion, who eloquently shrugged.

He reached the gate in time to greet Queen Brenna of the Brigantes. Britons spoke the language differently, the farther they lived from the Romanized south. They also understood less Latin, so Brigantes spoke a dialect as different from Brittonic as Portuguese would be from Spanish. Dulcitus had learned enough to get by because he believed in keeping his neighbors friendly. He had known the queen ever since her coronation, years ago. Today Brenna looked more like an angry warrior than a queen. The distinction between a chief and a king was in kind: the more people they rule, at some point they deserved a more illustrious title. Her people didn't call her a queen and her kids would not necessarily succeed her, but Romans called her queen because her tribe was so great.

It was just weird they let a woman rule them.

The most famous Brigantes was also a queen. When Romans invaded, three centuries ago, the 2<sup>nd</sup> Legion was commanded by Vespasian, the future emperor. That legion later lost to Caratacus, of the Catuvellauni, who led the resistance for almost a decade before Queen Cartimandua of the Brigantes turned him over to the Romans. This pissed off the queen's husband (soon to be ex-husband) so much that he led a revolt against her twice. His second attempt, in 69 (the Year of Four Emperors), drove her out, where she disappears from history. In Rome, Caratacus' speech to the Senate was so good that the emperor let him live. "My stubborn defiance made Rome's glory all the greater" got him a standing ovation—and Romans are particular about who they honor with an ovation. Rome so

impressed the tribal chief that he wailed, "With all this, how can you covet our poor tents?"

"Brenna, how good to you see again." Dulcitus gestured to a few thousand lovely ladies and teenage girls. "Is this your harem?"

The queen was not in the mood. "The Picts love to steal women worth raping. The enemy will not pursue us when they know our best beauties are behind your walls. This also fixes their location. Instead of chasing us, burning our buildings, and stealing our livestock, our men can harass them here."

That shocked the retired veteran. "You're using your beauties as bait?"

"They all volunteered and they all know how to use a bow. I wanted to thank you for warning us. Knowing our women are here means our men will not let the enemy take your fort. Valentinus has a huge army that he cannot feed so far from a supply base. The longer those fools stay here, the less time they have to raid our lands. The more who attack you, the fewer left to attack us. Winter is coming and they lack women to cook their food and warm their beds. Men are easily bored and constantly hungry."

She sounded like she had been married.

"The smart move is to bypass us," the Roman said.

"Some will, but we'll intercept them. We moved all villagers to Castle Hill, freeing the men to fight. The easiest way to defeat a big army is by dividing it into smaller pieces, just as the way to eat a cow is one bite at a time. These ladies want to fight, but cannot ride all day."

"You're gonna keep an eye on us then?" The Prefect liked the sound of that. Knowing Brigantes would not let them lose would boost morale, which is crucial to enduring a siege. "I see now why you rule."

Brenna was not so sentimental. "Your Wall keeps those savages away. I need Roman troops between us and them or we'll never be safe. Having lost a legion, can you hold the fort?"

"A few thousand Votadini doubled our defenders. With your ladies, we can last longer than their food supply."

"It was smart of you to take or burn everything worth eating. They'll be reduced to eating rats and rabbits soon."

"All those herds I sent south, I expect to get back," the Roman warned. He only kept a handful of horses, plus plenty of goats, chickens, and pigs, because the fort didn't grow much grass.

The queen shrugged. "Saxon ships are sacking the shore, so I have many things to worry about."

The undermanned garrison cheered the ladies as they entered the fortress from the south, which must have confused the enormous horde of riders approaching from the north. Valentinus, for one, was not amused. He had posed as a wheat supplier to inspect the place last year and counted on ballistae to crater the thick walls. He took the first forts using hundreds of ladders, but these walls were higher and thicker because it was built before Emperor Hadrian erected his Wall. Valentinus noted how many women manned the ramparts. Eboracum is so big that defending it would be hard, once he killed the legion. He didn't expect several thousand locals to help out. The other leaders would be less likely to listen to him unless he succeeded.

“We can’t take that!” Niall, the Scotti boy, said from his enormous white horse. He was a sailor, not a soldier. Raiding is the opposite of besieging. Everyone in Ireland is either a king or related to one, they have so damn many. The Hiberni king, from southern Ireland, nodded knowingly because Ireland had no cities. Their agricultural economy hardly made anything worth stealing. “You promised me loot! Silver! Women!”

40,000 riders sat their horses in front of the giant castle. The other 40,000 walked because they had not yet stolen enough horses. At that moment, several thousand ladies started singing to them from the battlements, more than a few proudly showing their naked breasts.

“Take that wall and you can enjoy them all,” Valentinus told the petty Irish kings.

“The machines we took from the Wall will take too long to get here,” the buff Pict leader correctly predicted. “I suggest riders raid south while waiting for the infantry and your traitorous Roman artillerymen to breach the barriers. Send for us when ready to storm the castle. We didn’t bring enough food anyways, so you’ll have fewer mouths to feed.”

The other leaders grunted agreement because no sane savage thought taking that huge fortress worth the price they’d pay. Even his older brother, the Attacotti chief, left him with a laugh.

“I promised our warriors bitches and bullion. Brigantes are famously wealthy, so we must beat them before they organize defenses.” A total hottie flashed her boobs from a parapet. “But we’ll be back. I promise, brother.”

His brother was a lying sack of shit. That’s how he became chief. The Attacotti lived along the island’s sterile northwestern shore and on hundreds of islets that barely kept them alive. Picts, Votadini, and Brigantes kept them from settling inland, so the Attacotti welcomed Scotti raiders; together they pushed inland. They interbred, and would later breed with Picts to join their tribes literally. In a few centuries, so many Scotti would marry into powerful Pict families that their culture would exterminate Picts as a people. The fusion of idioms would evolve into Scottish while, in Ireland, Latin-based Christianity would turn (what historians called) Primitive Irish into Old Irish.

The Hiberni usually raided southern Britannia, what would later be called Wales, but joined their northern neighbors to eliminate common enemies. Exterminating the Votadini and Brigantes gave the victors as much land as all of Ireland. The 40,000 riders were from all the tribes—even a few Saxons joined to see how things went. They broke into small groups to cover more territory because one village barely merited more than a few dozen men while the Brigantes territory was huge. What they didn’t know is 15,000 Brigantes riders waited to ambush them piecemeal. The Brigantes women, coin, jewelry, and herds were protected by Castle Hill. Burning empty villages is fun, but not why they came so far at such enormous risk.

The Saxon leader stayed. “Valentinus, you still think you can capture this fortress?”

“I’ll take it or die trying.”

The Saxon shrugged. “You were more confident last year when you proposed this. I’ll learn something no matter how well you do.”

## Chapter 6

### **The Saxon Shore, Britannia, 367**

The strange caravan rode the cobbled roadway like it owned it. Its people sang in a foreign language and dressed just as oddly, with plenty of jewels and colorful fabrics to stand out. In several centuries, natives would call these travelers “Gypsies,” but the Roma people of Northern India wouldn’t reach Britannia for another thousand years. The truth was stranger than the fiction because this family had lived on this island for 300 years. They came as Roman auxiliaries from the Balkans, a place Romans called Dacia, which would one day give the world real bloodthirsty monsters like Vlad Dracula. They settled in the south, married locals, but kept their culture, language, and Roman citizenship.

When one displayed a unique gift, they decided to profit off it by forming a traveling entertainment company—like a circus, but without the expensive animals. The performers did gymnastics, told heroic stories with puppets, juggled, walked on stilts, sold expensive foreign delicacies, tools, and what they called, “impulse buys.” They did not see themselves as conmen or crooks because they provided entertainment. People loved their musical shows, dancers, and singers.

But Sara the Seer is what made them famous.

Her ancestors ran a profitable laundry in Londinium when Queen Boudica razed the city in the year 60. Boudica’s husband ruled his kingdom as an independent ally of Rome and left his kingdom to his daughters. Illegally, as women cannot inherit, according to Roman laws. Rome therefore annexed the kingdom, had Boudica flogged, and her daughters raped because greedy authoritarians are massive dicks. Boudica raised a large army, beat a detachment of Legio IX Hispana, and destroyed Colchester, Verulamium, and Londinium, killing 80,000 Romans and Romano-Britons. Romans beat her with an army a fraction of her size and she killed herself rather than be captured and displayed like a caged bitch.

Once the governor announced the rebuilding of Londinium, Sara’s family collected their resources and purchased a huge corner lot where a tributary flowed into the Thames. Protected from behind by a wall and two rivers, the family controlled access from the city by allowing only one narrow entrance and exit. As her fame grew over the decades, this neighborhood became known as Sara City. As the population grew, they built up. Julius Caesar’s mother owned an entire triangular block in Rome’s Suburba, where apartment buildings stood 10 stories tall. Sara’s family doubled that, with bridges between all nine structures. 10,000 lived there, so it really was a city onto itself. What they made in rent alone left them rich, but they also used human, animal, and vegetative waste from their towers to fertilize the most productive farms in the region.

A precocious toddler, Sara told her daddy to wear boots instead of sandals one day. He didn’t, and stepped ankle deep in horseshit. That was the last time he ever ignored her. Sara was soon telling them of famines and floods, which they turned into buying opportunities. That was how they became Britannia’s biggest bankers.

She'd put her hand on the forehead of prospective borrowers and lend accordingly. Since puberty, she saved herself from all sorts of bad boyfriends, instead scoring a handsome hunk who stayed faithful for 50 years.

The caravan traveled ten months a year, staying at home only during the deepest winter. It sometimes snowed in Londinium, which just felt wrong. With the cold coming, the wagons finally reached Rutupiae, the largest of the nine forts on the Saxon Shore. They not only went from city to city, but from one military base to another because young soldiers had money to spend. Not that Sara needed coin, but she enjoyed seeing their futures as she grew older. It became less a job and more an interesting hobby. As they set up a giant tent for Sara, troops from the fort invaded like puppies at a picnic. Life is boring in the 4th century, so alleviating tedium can be very profitable. Sara had a full audience today. Each paid a denarii just to get in. Getting "seen" would cost much more. Her son Lupo, a barrel-chested warrior in his 40s, took the stage dressed in every color in the spectrum to blind the audience into not seeing too clearly.

"Welcome, friends, for another audience with Sara the Seer. It's been a year since your last confession, so I hope you have new futures for Sara to see. Just a reminder, Sara does not predict the future because the future changes. What you see today can change what you do tomorrow. Whatever is revealed is not preordained; Sara can glimpse your most probable path, but you see whatever she sees, and what you do with that is up to you. You may not see what you want to see because Sara finds only what is most pertinent, which may not be whether your spouse is unfaithful or whether you'll inherit your grandparent's fortune. Sara does not choose what you will see, but unlocks whatever is most emotional. You must be unarmed because some people blame her for their future. The scar on her cheek is from a centurion that literally tried killing the messenger. You pay first and there are no refunds unless Sara draws a complete blank. You are more likely to get bad news as good because bad things happen more often. But forewarned is forearmed. Avoiding bad things and bad people is very good."

Lupo looked down at the soldiers standing in front. "We start, as always, with repeat customers. Sara has been seeing her longest customers for over 50 years and enjoys finding out how the stories resume. Newcomers, please note how many repeat customers we have. Sara's power is unique, as you will see if you have the coin, but works best when you are calm. Relax and open your mind for the best results. Avoid expectations because results usually surprise." Lupo called his first customer, the military surgeon. "*Medici*, it's good to see you again. This is your 10th visit. I believe you first saw your wife here. Please step up and kneel before Sara."

The well-dressed Roman was plainly excited. The stage only went up to his waist, so he hopped up and knelt down. "My wife is pregnant again and I was hoping to finally have a son."

Sara's ancient face smiled at him. "I see what I see, as you well know." She put the palm of her hand on his forehead as they both slowed their breathing to connect. Eyes closed, their minds met and images began to appear. They both saw rows of bleeding bodies and the *medici* yelling at nurses to clean this or suture that. The Viewer turned as civilian men carried in more injured to fill the room.

Some still had arrows in them and all wore uniforms. They heard screams of pain from outside as a battle waged. “What the hell?”

They broke up, Sara snapping her hand back. “Wasn’t that the *primus pilus* (senior centurion)?”

“That’s my infirmary! We’ve been attacked!” The *medici* turned on the audience and saw the man, in the front. “Centurion Cocidius, get your ass up here now!”

Sara turned to her hot teenage granddaughter, Maxima. “Help me up, then help me down.”

Cocidius rushed to the edge of the stage and Sara palmed his face without him paying. They both saw, from the centurion’s point of view, him leading cavalry down to the docks as hairy blond barbarians established a beachhead. They heard him yell, “they got Admiral Nectarides!”

Technically, the title of the commander of the Saxon Shore was *Comes Litori Saxonii* and he controlled naval bases on both sides of the Britton Channel, not just Britannia’s Saxon Shore. But “Admiral” is easier to pronounce.

A flock of arrows turned their cavalry charge into a mess of flesh as Saxons hurried to kill them before they recovered. Cocidius saw himself come in a roll next to the wharf and thrust his sword into an ugly man who had not bathed in years. The centurion felt that Future Him was grinning when they both felt a stab of pain. The Viewer turned to see a younger Saxon pull a dagger from his ribs and curse him for killing his father. The centurion jabbed his short sword into that thin neck before he fell to his death.

Sara broke contact and stepped off the stage. “Soldiers! Show me your heads!” the old lady wailed, dangerously close to full freak out. One at a time she made them see. The first was shot in the back, the second took a throwing ax, the third died sleeping on sentry duty, a fourth drown from all his armor, and the fifth saw thousands of attackers, dropped his spear, and fled into the nearest hills. Sara moved on to the civilians. “They’re sacking the town.”

Every military base sprouted *canabae* (camp followers), which are very vulnerable to attacks.

The mind meld often left new customers dizzy or faint, but the doctor recovered first. “*Primus pilus*, warn your commander. All of you, warn others. I saw thousands of Saxons—this is more than a raid. Flee inland, off roads, into forests or hills. Get out of sight and tell everyone you see to do the same.”

Sara met Lupo’s steady gaze and told him in their ancestral language: “Get our people home as fast as you can. Leave whatever we can do without.” She turned on her granddaughter. “Have your brothers saddle horses to escort me. I must reach Londinium fast to warn the governor.”

100 people traveled with the caravan, so packing up usually took a while. The *medici* sprinted for his horse, but would arrive at the fort too late to save the admiral. The audience dispersed in a panic, screaming “Saxons!” Lupo ran out to yell at his brothers, cousins, sons, and nephews.

Maxima had the Gift, but just a fraction as powerful as her grandmother. “Nana, you just saved a thousand lives.”

The old lady walked like a penguin to the livery. “But thousands more will die.”

“I’m scared, nana.”

“Girl, I shat myself. Literally. Why do you think I’m waddling?”

The 30 mile-long ride took all day. They shouted, "Saxons!" at everyone they saw. The trickle of refugees to the capital became a flood as panicked people packed their products and produce. The road was parallel to the Thames River, with defensive towers where it narrowed. With a palm of her hand, Sara showed the commanders what was coming better than words could convey. They locked themselves in and dragged tarps off their scorpion catapults. Bells rang to alarm fishing villages who sailed upriver to safety.

"Secure the chain!"

Romans controlled the Thames with a series of chains, set in concrete across the river. Saxons would have to take a tower fort on one side to whack one end of the chain off. That'd cost them precious time and warriors. The local teams that Valentinus put in place had not attacked the unsuspecting defenders yet because they were waiting for signs of the Saxon onslaught. Defenders saw their fate and recognized their Brittonic murderers.

In Londinium after sunset, Sara palmed the east gate commander, who was too lazy to get up from his office couch. After seeing himself gutted like a fish, he mobilized his men and sent runners to warn defenders on the city's outer wall. Alarm bells woke the city before it fell asleep. Everyone wanted to know what was happening. One word told them: Saxons. Thousands sailed upriver or rode up the road. Half the city would flee in time, but bandits and opportune thieves would fleece many.

At the *basilica*, Sara screamed, "a Saxon army is coming to Londinium" which got the guards' attention. The governor, a repeat customer, came out and the Seer called him over. "You must see to believe."

Still on her horse, exhausted by the journey, Sara palmed that bald head like a bowling ball and saw the city aflame, gangs raping and looting, deserters killing those they swore to protect, and the governor assassinated. Not just killed; someone hired pros to make sure he dies.

"Saxons sack the city!" he wailed, his eyes still closed but his mind blown wide open.

"Not if you defend it. Put on armor and surround yourself with troops you trust. You now know what the killers look like, so assign a team to track them down. Round up gangs and criminals now before the enemy arrives. Roust them from their beds and bars, then chain them with arms and armor outside the eastern gate so they fight for their lives. Position your warships now and move catapults from around the city to the eastern wall. Hook portable catapults to horses and hide them a mile downriver to surprise Saxons in their sleep. Give them nowhere safe to base their attacks. Move your family and those of your troops to my neighborhood; we will protect them."

Her corner of Londinium would harbor the women and young kids of every man who'd fight the invaders and limit the looting to the eastern half of the capital.

A pleasant Roman actually from Rome, the governor barked orders at his staff, who ran to comply.

"Sara, read me again."

He noticed his voice did not tremble. She put her palm on his forehead and they saw him lead the defense from the eastern wall, repeatedly rallying the rabble wherever the fighting was fiercest. Despite being in his 60s, he slashed Saxons



cresting the wall or breaching the burnt gate. They didn't see the first arrow land, but the second and third stood out in his armor. Still the governor stood his ground, fighting to contain the breach as fires burned around him.

Sara wondered what started the fire, then saw a burning ball fall from the sky to splash the Saxons. Her face lit up like the attackers. *Ballistae* threw glass jars of oil into the mass of men muscling through the eastern gate, into the main street. Hastily erected barriers corralled hundreds of pillagers. Barbarians on fire screamed at their comrades for help, like hairy candles on a ship in a storm. It demoralized and paralyzed the enemy when they needed to break through the inner barriers. Sara saw the enemy leader, yelling himself horse from his mount, as Roman archers from windows filled him with shafts. Rankers looked at the governor in awe as he led the counter-attack, flanking the fuckers screwing his city. The old gentleman charged, screaming like a madman, spearing a giant foreigner in the chest, then slashing at others till his arm tired. The hole he carved filled with furious residents who fucked the foreigners from behind. Cut off from the gate, the sodomized Saxons fell before the murderous mob.

Sara didn't see who killed the governor, but the spearhead burst from his chest like a dragon from an egg. Inspired by his bravado and bravery, residents attacked from three sides to slaughter the Saxons in the city. The governor died, knowing he saved Londinium. Sara would erect a massive statue of his likeness by the eastern gate, with a plaque that immortalized his heroism.

Still on her horse, Sara's voice boomed over the crowd. "Behold! The bravest man in the city stands before you. He will die a hero so some of you may live. Gather your arms and take your place by his side. Saxons are not a monster to be feared, but a beast to be burned. Bring your lamp oil and we'll give the rapists what they deserve. I have seen victory! I have foreseen our glory! To arms, you fat fuckers."

## Chapter 7

### **The Thames River, Britannia, 367**

"That's what a thousand ships looks like," Childeric proudly told his youngest son from the bow of their flagship. In the Channel, Childeric had never seen so many vessels. They bought, built, or borrowed for their great invasion. It looked like a flock of birds in formation. They sailed from a few dozen mainland harbors, each group with specific objectives, as leaders divided the task. The Frank king, Noyon, sold his fleet for a fat prophet and sent his army to mainland port cities to pillage and plunder. "How could we not conquer?"

His son had no doubt, but he was just 10 and would soon drown horribly in a burning river. Ten of King Chlothar's twelve teenage sons led raiding groups. The heir was king in all but name, as his father was old and spent. His Saxon leaders would savage the coast in a coordinated assault. They had studied the shoreline because Valentinus reported the who, what, and where. That Attacotti bastard wanted to rid the island of Romans, and so made a list of targets for his new

foreign friends. Valentinus invested years forming friends to do his dirty work. He left behind agents to continue his work—undermining unpaid troops, underappreciated officials, and disrespected tribes. Valentinus didn't tell the Saxons how to do their job, but presented maps that showed how success could feed success. A landing here netted a town there, bottled up troops here, leaving a city vulnerable there. The entire countryside was a rich virgin waiting to be gang raped. Using every ship they had, 30,000 Saxons would raid Britannia all winter while another 10,000 helped Franks burn ports and loot mainland cities. The Alamanni monopolized the emperor's attention, so they just had to kill local leaders to neutralize an aggressive response.

What could go wrong?

By the time Childeric sailed into the mouth of the Thames, his vanguard already fired the nearby forts. As promised, Valentinus' men hung the admiral's corpse by the tallest tree at the river entrance. The Saxon Shore's poorly paid defenders would be bottled up while raiders ravaged refugees.

Childeric saw a corpse with a plumed helmet and smiled. "It's all downhill from here, son," he said as they sailed upriver.

Locals, paid by Valentinus, were attacking the twin towers at the first bottleneck. The heir flagged his heavy *ballistae* ships towards one tower, telling them to knock it down. Neither fort fired on his ships—a good omen. 20 miles later they sailed past another bottleneck, where Romans built bigger forts. Defenders threw burning rocks and catapulted oak spears, damaging many but not sinking a single ship. Once the fleet passed, one fort fired a harpoon, tied to a chain, across the river, where the other fort secured it to a cemented post set in solid bedrock. Instead of stopping them from going upriver, they stopped Saxons from escaping. Childeric did not see or learn of the chain, but in another ten miles he found another, blocking his advance.

"Valentinus promised us a clear path," he complained to his son. "Well, the harder the fight, the greater the glory."

Saxons beached boats to storm one fort by land while the rest of the fleet bombarded it from the river. The heir himself had a blacksmith on board who worked on the chain from the middle of the Thames. It takes a lot of heat to burn through chain. Childeric impatiently watched a battle he could not command. His men brought ladders for just this purpose, but did not expect the mini-forts to be so heavily manned. It took several hundred lives to finish off the fools in the fort. In the meantime, they put holes in a dozen hulls, making them unable to re-cross the famously stormy Channel.

The Saxon sailed angrily upriver, only to find sailboats flying at him at maximum speed. The ships in front fled to either side as Britons tried plowing into the invaders, lighting piles of dry tinder on the boat, and then jumping overboard with a hand strapped to an empty keg that'd keep them afloat. Behind them, 40 sailboats, each with a new scorpion lashed to its bow, then tried to poke holes in hulls by the waterline. Brits fired catapults from point blank range before ramming iron pikes into wooden hulls. Once floating in the current, the Britons were near impossible to hit. They sacrificed improvised warboats, but damaged dozens of enemy vessels in return.

The Saxons fought their way slowly to Londinium. Even without surprise, Childeric did not expect to see the city wall full of defenders. Barrels of dirt and barriers of boulders blocked the gate. The Londinium Bridge was full of *ballistae* and fire archers. To stop the enemy from taking the road north of the city, horsemen waited on higher ground. If the Saxons had horses, they would have won, but they didn't.

Childeric raised a flag that called for his artillery ships to pound the city gate. They'd try going over the walls, but only as a last resort. The heir cursed Valentinus. He said he'd burn the eastern gate and lure most troops away. The governor, mayor, and city commander should be dead, not showing themselves on the ramparts. Smoke rose from many fires within the city as gangs completed their tasks. Childeric had lusted after the richest city in Britannia all his life because his father had never sacked it. He had claimed the capital as his prize and therefore could not leave without taking it. Using a roof of shields, Saxons burned the gate and removed the obstacles, but at the cost of several thousand Saxons. Childeric led the last thousand into Londinium, riding the only horse they caught.

From the bow of the flagship, his 10 year-old son saw him enter, but didn't see any leave. He looked around and wondered what happened to the unbeatable military force that should have conquered Britannia. Chains blocked the river, forcing them to fight for their freedom. Bitter Britons burned their ships and slaughtered Saxons as they swam for shore. The 10 year-old never imagined dying so young. His older brothers would also die in Britannia, leaving other princes to fight for his grandfather's kingdom. Losing his loved ones would destroy King Chlothar without killing him. The two bastard sons who led the assault on mainland cities also perished. He'd send spies to find out who killed so many of his sons and grandsons and savored the name of the man he planned to slowly kill:

“Magnus Maximus.”

## Chapter 8

### Amiens, Gaul, 367

In 366, the Alamanni crossed the Rhine into Gaul in large numbers to sack towns and lay waste to villages. King Rondo massacred the city of Mainz, using fear to depopulate other cities. The Alamanni beat two Roman armies, captured several standards (the sacred eagles that each legion raised in battle), and killed two Roman generals (Charietto and Severianus). Furious, Emperor Valentinian sent his Master of Horse, Jovinus, who had been a *magister equitum* (cavalry commander) under Emperor Julian and a *magister militum* (military commander) under Emperor Jovian. Jovinus scored several victories along the Meuse River, forcing the invaders out and was awarded the consulate the following year.

In 367, Val crossed the Alps to secure the province and later defeated a Germanic horde at the Battle of Solicinium, where he suffered heavy casualties. Val lost his helmet and standard bearer when scouting before the battle, and

almost lost his life. The emperor fell ill and appointed his 9 year old son Gratian as co-emperor in case he died.

Then things got bad.

In Amiens (modern France), Emperor Valentinian sent for Theo, who entered the royal tent to see General Jovinus standing rigidly at attention. Gratian, an odd boy who followed his father in the field, studied Theo to gauge his usefulness. Val finished scanning a report before looking up at his formidable commander.

“Theo, how much Brittonic do you speak?”

“Several hundred words, sire,” he lied, doubling what he knew in his youth. “My nephew speaks it fluently because his mother was from Britannia. Our family has extensive holdings in the south. My brother Honorius manages those businesses, knows everyone important in Londinium, and also speaks the language.”

Valentinian laid back and looked up. “Do you remember Valentinus, who used his similar name to charm his way into my imperial court? I think he made up a Latin name for that purpose. Valentinian and Valentinus—the V brothers, he called us.”

Warning bells rang in Theo’s head. “Sire, I remember a venomous snake who caused non-stop mischief, trying to make money by ingratiating or alienating members of your court while you risked your life for the empire. I’ve never met anyone more obsessed over petty grievances. His gossip turned powerful friends into deadly enemies for his amusement. Valentinus never met a sick rumor that he could not turn into a gossipy epidemic. He drank so much of your fine wine that I assumed he was trying to bankrupt the empire. Or was secretly a wine merchant. He tried seducing my wife or daughter – they were never sure which. I wanted to strangle him with my bare hands, but you thought exile a more fitting punishment.”

“Wasn’t he from Britannia?”

“Yes, sire. From a poor tribe forced upon the Western Isles called the Attacotti. His father was a chief who kidnapped and raped a Roman woman who excreted the sack of steaming shit we call Valentinus. You told that bastard to stay out of trouble, on pain of death. And to stop calling you his brother. As he left Rome’s gates, he screamed the city’s name backwards three times to curse it.”

The Romans who heard Valentinus had shuddered. The opposite of *Roma* (spelled in Latin) is *amor* (love). In other words, the opposite of Rome is Love. An ancient prophesy said the city would fall when someone repeated that word three times while leaving the gates.

“Do you still want to strangle him?” the emperor asked.

Theo never smiled outside the company of Max’s babies, but now he lit up. “If he’s here, I’ll do it now to watch that fucking smirk die on his fatty face. Is he still as bloated as his endless oratory?”

It was not often the emperor saw always cool Theo heat up. “I’d like to see that, but he is not here. He made friends at court and I needed to know if you were one of them.” Val tapped the report. “Tens of thousands of Franks and Saxons swamped the coast of western Gaul, so I sent Severus, my *Comes Domesticus*, to rally our forces. The size and scale shocked me, however, so I sent Jovinus with two legions to pacify the coast. Those tribes usually fight each other as much as us, but this time they worked together to pillage our ports and burn our boats

rather than just raid our riches. Clever Jovinus suspected something and sought the latest from Britannia.” The emperor suddenly looked older. “The Picts, the Scotti, the Hiberni, the Attacotti, Saxons, and the usual pirates and bandits attacked the Wall, the British coast, and inland cities. The heir to the Saxon throne tried taking Londinium. All but our strongest forts fell. The *Dux Britanniarum* and the *Comes Maritime Tractus* were killed by sneaky bastards who lured them from their strongholds. Our garrisons were already weak because 1) the Cyprian plague, which wiped out a quarter of the empire; 2) Constantius II depleted manpower for his failed invasion of Italy in 340; and 3) Magnentius the Usurper took so many troops from Britannia to try stealing the throne.”

“Dux” would become the word Duke and Comes would evolve into “count.”

Magnentius became de facto emperor when he beat Constans in 350, only for Constantius II to defeat him in 353. Constantius sent a brutal *notarius* named Paulus (nickname: The Chain) to Britannia to purge the place. Paulus terrorized the populace, killing and torturing all but those who voiced their support for Constantius the loudest. His brutality became so extreme that Britannia’s *vicarius*, Flavius Martinus—notably loyal to Constantius—threatened to resign unless Paulus controlled his worst evil impulses. Paulus retaliated by falsely accusing Martinus and his staff of disloyalty until the *vicarius* unsuccessfully attacked the *notarius* with his sword. Having failed, Martinus suicided.

Many things plagued the province: political and religious purges, constant conflict between tribes, universal military corruption, while unpaid troops and escaped slaves turned to robbery to support themselves. The island was under-armed and easily overwhelmed. Valentinus probably spent a year scouting; the more he saw, the bigger his plan grew.

Val sounded tired. “Apparently Wall troops had not been paid in many months because their officers pocketed their salaries by inflating food prices, so some soldiers sliced their superiors and helped the enemy. Local informers, our *miles areani*, also took enemy coin to betray us. Traitors, deserters, mercenaries, outlaws, and infiltrators even attacked Londinium from the inside. All these groups went out of their way to target Romano-British citizens rather than just rob anyone within reach. Tens of thousands of Roman citizens died to weaken our grasp on that island.”

That shocked Theo. “A coordinated attack by several groups who normally hate each other? That’s nothing less than a great conspiracy!”

Indeed, that’s what historians would call it: The Great Conspiracy of 367.

Val stood up and looked Theo down. “They attacked at the beginning of winter because that’s when storms make it hardest to cross the Channel. The Franks and Saxons hit our ports to delay us further, burning or stealing ships. They know I’m stuck here, fighting the Alamanni every year. Spies say Rondo, the Alamanni king, plans to fight me again next year to keep me here. Jovinus must return to the coast to drive off the Franks and Saxons, then stay to rebuild those ports and fleets. Theo, that makes you the best choice to return Britannia to Roman rule.”

The prospect of an independent command thrilled him. “Sire, what troops can you spare?”

“None, but I doubt you can pacify the island with less than four legions, one cavalry and three infantry. Fixing the Wall, much less a capital with 50,000

residents, will not be cheap, so please don't let the ship carrying the bullion sink. I'll send for all the warships that the rest of the empire can spare while building hundreds more. You are to leave at dawn with Jovinus and return my legions as soon as possible. Take your son and nephew because you'll need men you can trust. Fix this, Theo, and fix it fast."

## Chapter 9

### Port Bononia (modern Boulogne, France), January 368

Britannia was only 20 miles from the mainland, but it may as well have been 2000. Franks and Saxons burned so many ships that Theo had to wait for some to sail from his family in Iberia. His cousin was training Max's brother Marc, who preferred sailing to horsemanship. Theo commandeered merchant, freight, and even fishing vessels. He didn't bother to bring anything bulky like *ballistae*, and would even leave his horse behind to get there sooner. He filled ships as fast he got them, which was not fast enough. Time was running out and the commander of his first independent campaign was impatient to prove himself.

Specializing in herring, Bononia, Gaul's largest fishing port, smelled like Gaul's largest fishing port. However, its harbor protected vessels from bad storms and it was close to Britannia. Jovinus reclaimed the port, but would need a year to expel invaders robbing nearby villages of their livestock. The massive raid freaked out everyone along the coast, who no longer felt safe, even in walled cities. Many wanted to move, but to where?

A storm washed over the army as they waited impatiently in port. The heavy rain and wind finally disappeared like a bad dream. The troops drank, fought, and hunted hookers. In a taberna, Max and his cousin Theo grunted angrily as they put their weight behind their arm wrestling contest, with soldiers surrounding them yelling advice. They competed for everything, even women, but Max usually won because he was older, at 21. Now 17, however, Young Theo had turned into a man and even killed his first enemy when they came upon Saxon savages.

"That Damascus sword saved my life," he anxiously told his father afterwards. "The new steel breastplate stopped the tip of his iron blade."

Steel is harder than iron, and Damascus steel would be the best for another 15 centuries, in another timeline.

"Max had the family take out a loan to start a steel factory," dad warned him. "We need to profit from my first independent command or risk losing our ancestral estates. Financiers only lent us so much because I'm in the emperor's favor. If I lose that, we could lose everything."

In the bar, Max slowly forced his cousin's hand to the table, wishing he could whack it hard like he used to. Young Theo cursed, near tears, and Max realized he was about to pop a cork.

"Damn it, cousin," Max said in astonishment to not alienate him. "You almost beat me! I fire a thousand arrows a week to build up strength while you just bang bitches. What's my favorite aunt feeding you?"

Young Theo knew Max was helping him save face, but he didn't buy that bullshit. Max was better at everything, and this burned him deep. Earned arrogance is the worst kind. Theo would never feel whole until others saw him as the better man. Theo wanted to prove himself superior because a man needs respect like a woman needs beauty. Young Theo gave up trying to better his cousin at swordfighting, archery, and hand-to-hand combat, so he focused on tactics, strategy, and leadership. He learned to make friends and influence people. Always careful with his words and impeccable in his appearance, Young Theo knew his day would come.

"Maybe next year, Magnus."

Max hated Theo calling him Magnus because he knew it was a taunt. In his meaner moments, Young Theo would call his cousin Magnus Maximus Optimus, which means Best Maximum Great. Big bullies topped that by naming him Magnus Jupiter Optimus Maximus, after the most powerful god in the Roman pantheon.

At some point, it just becomes absurd.

Romans had three names: a personal one given by parents at birth; a family name which explained status (Julius indicated descent from the Julius Caesar family); and then a cognomen, which was either a physical description given by others or an earned nickname like Horseface Harold or Slutty Sue. After taking England in 1066, William the Bastard became better known as William the Conqueror—though he spent very little time in England.

Magnus Maximus was just too good to pass up. Young Theo traveled with the legions often enough for the name to catch fire. Max had to become good at everything or become known as Mediocre Maximus. A warrior can't get away with sucking if his name is Magnus Maximus. An obsession with excellence becomes more of a coping mechanism than a vanity project.

Though it was that, too.

Max grew up in Theo's home. Little Theo liked to boss his cousin around, even as little kids. Because he was a guest, Max felt obliged to help out. Making Max feel like a servant drove Max to excel at everything. Julius Caesar, his hero, was a soldier, so Max would master that. Caesar was an engineer, so Max hired tutors to teach him math, construction, architecture, and engineering. Caesar was an orator, so Max got good at public speaking. Caesar was a lawyer, so Max looked at law. Rich kids have tutors, not school, so he hired experts in whatever he wanted to learn.

"The more you know, the better prepared you are," his beloved father often told Max. One day Max would mint coins in his likeness with the words, *Pius Filus* (Faithful Son). Someone defeated his father in battle, which unnerved the little boy because his father was his hero. That compelled Max to train harder, longer, and with an intensity that worried his aunt.

Yet, no matter how good he got, his little fucking cousin would rub his nose in the dirt. Making Max muck the stables was just a literal way that Young Theo treated him like shit. Max could not alienate the family paying for his expensive tutors, so he learned to hurt his cousin without injuring him. Cuts and bruises could be explained away while broken bones could not. Max left Young Theo's face alone, but would kick his stomach or put him in a headlock whenever the little

shit went too far. They each pushed boundaries until their relationship reached equilibrium (a very Roman virtue).

Oddly, Young Theo had a brother named Honorius that Max got along great with, and an uncle named Honorius who he loved. Young Theo and Max's brother Marc were more like brothers than cousins, so the animosity was just between Max and Young Theo. Both adored Theo's mother, Flavia, who ruled them like a stern queen. She kept them civil and worried they'd hurt each other when she was gone. Max needed his cousin because he needed his uncle, which kept him from going too far. All three faced a great opportunity to prove themselves while making mad money. This was their moment.

"You're the brains, I'm the muscle," Max said, leaning back in his chair. "Together we make a great team. Family first, cousin. Agreed?"

Max held out his hand and Young Theo, feeling eyes on him, shook it. "Family first."

They heard ladies singing, which turned out not to be ladies. The prostitutes from the brothel across the street entered, the hottest ones in front with their boss. "Gentlemen, we're offering a 2-for-1 special until dusk. Come and get some."

"I don't believe in paying for sex," Max loudly proclaimed, "but my wife insists."

The audience roared happily at the joke. The whores spread out for customers, looking for those looking at them the hardest. None could hold a candle to Fana, the mother of Max's three kids. She was blond and blue-eyed while Max was dark and dangerous. Smart, funny, and beautiful, she adored Max with an intensity that raised his flagpole. The two handsome men in the middle didn't give the ladies a second glance, which pissed off the madam. Max was only attracted to ladies he found special, in some way, while Theo preferred pretty peasants who knew it wouldn't last.

"You boys gay?"

"Yes!" Max said with a laugh. "Married, gay, diseased, and broke."

He even held an empty coin purse upside down since he paid every coin to the bartender so his Heruli could drink for free.

She studied them with ancient eyes. "You two make a great couple."

That was too much for Max, who got up to force a hug and kiss on his cousin, who punched him hard.

"But, Theo, I love you!" Max wailed dramatically.

Theo was about to attack him, but the door burst open and a commanding voice bellowed. General Theodosius had a mouth that could crack like a whip: "The admiral says there's a break in the shitty weather. We have enough ships for two legions, so fill them with the Batavi and the Heruli, but no horses. The two infantry legions can cross later. Legates, I want to sail by noon to reach Britannia before dusk." Then he saw his son. "Are you two fighting again?"

"Dad, Max kissed me! With the same lips that he kisses Caesar." His horse.

"On the forehead," Max yelled defensively. "Like when you used to kiss me goodnight, uncle."

The whoremaster was intrigued. "Yeah, definitely diseased. Girls, leave these three alone."



The general didn't have time for this. "Theo, wash your head. Max, wash your mouth. If either of you fuck up my first independent command, I'll disown you both. Move it!"

Men ran out like they were allergic to ladies. Max knew to not tempt fate. Theodosius called them legates (commander of legions), but the Batavi and the Heruli had their own native leaders, who were not given the title or salary. Theo made his son and nephew legates for the pay, the benefits, and the respect. Legates earned a percent of all loot taken from the enemy. Such was the value of having one's own army. No one else would put a 17 year-old in charge of a legion, but Young Theo was more messenger than commander. Theo needed the legions to do what he needed them to do, and counted on his son and nephew to see to it.

Putting their rivalry aside, the cousins organized their legions to finally begin their new adventure.

## Chapter 10

### Britannia, January 368

Theo landed 8000 horsemen without horses in Richborough, a small port across from Bononia. He returned his cargo and fishing ships to the mainland, but sent his warships up the coast to feast on enemies. His army marched to the nearby fort to spend the night. Those troops loved seeing reinforcements, as they had been besieged for months.

Britannia's southeast coastline is called the Saxon Shore because that's where they raided most, as it was the closest to the mainland. Rome built a series of forts across the Channel in Gaul to prevent this, but weak political leadership, lack of cash, and cowardly commanders spent more time in their castles than challenging raiders. Jovinus replaced those fleet commanders with aggressive types who worked as a team to hunt down intruders. Theo now did the same with the nine forts along the Saxon Shore. Once the admiral was lured to his death, much of the fleet stayed in port. No more. Captains who didn't fight the enemy would be declared traitors and cowards, which usually merited a death sentence. True, the weather was bad, but that meant Saxons must anchor their ships in sheltered harbors and protected coves. With local fisherman as guides, Roman warships would soon find them.

The fort had many civilians, but few horses. Theo took them all, with guides who knew local terrain. Theo's first priority was securing thousands of mounts, so he split what the herd with his legates.

"Son, take Dutch and his Batavi warriors south and rouse every fort. Dutch knows how to fight, but those garrisons will only respond to your High Latin." Val would settle the Batavi in modern Holland-Netherlands and become known as the Dutch. "Kill or round up every raider, thief, traitor, and criminal you catch. Return property to its rightful owners, when possible. Sweep as wide a path as you can and requisition any horse you find. Tell the fort commanders that I require every mount they have, even mules, and order them to put every able man in the field.

Max, do the same north with Naulo and his Heruli, taking as much food as you need and as much ammo as you can carry. Saxons don't expect us until spring, so surprise as many as you can and please don't fight fair. The best time to kill an enemy is when he's not looking. Go until you run out of ammo or too many Saxons get in your way. I'm taking the last 500 from each legion to escort me to Londinium." They ranked their riders, so the 1st Century (100 men) were the best and the last were the worst. Theo took the 500 worst from each legion because he didn't expect Saxons in the interior. "Let's leave after breakfast and enlist as many locals as we can. Sleep well because I don't expect to see you for a month."

Each legion had only 50 horses. Theo kept only 10 for his smaller force, which escorted several thousand civilians from the fort to the capital. Max and his best 50 archers rode the paved road north, starting two hours before dawn. All the nearby homes, ranches, and farms looked empty. Crossing country in the dark is dangerous, but moonlight reflected off the pavement, pointing them in the right direction. Just after sunrise they spotted smoke from cooking fires and managed to catch Saxons taking a morning piss. Max's horse archers rode them down, killing all 22 without loss, and freeing almost 100 young women and little kids, a few hundred horses, dozens of oxen, and maybe a thousand cattle. Max Force ate a Saxon breakfast and sent almost everything and everyone back to base. His next best riders would mount those horses while the rest walked north.

A dirty girl wearing stinky rags marched up to Max and spoke in proper Latin, not the vulgar Latin that most Britons used. "Soldier, what is your name and rank?"

He noted her interest and saw past the rags she wore. "I'm Magnus Maximus, cavalry legate, if I can find enough horses. My uncle is the new military governor of Britannia. What is your name and what can I do for you?"

"Gila. My family moved here from the Po Valley. Saxons slaughtered my entire family. Even my little brother when he cursed them. As a virgin, mother made me change clothes with a servant, then threw me in the pig sty as raiders battered their way into our villa. The Saxons were saving me for their leader to rape. If you arrived a little later, my life would have become a living hell. As soon as I have a bath, I want to thank you in the only way I know how. I also have no source of income. Magnus, if you take care of me, I'll take care of you. I also know this area if you need a guide."

Max preferred long-term mistresses to whores, professional or otherwise, but he had no idea the trouble she'd cause later, with their firstborn.

"Gila, if you don't mind sharing me, I swear I'll support you and any children for as long as I can. As a soldier, I am often gone for long periods. If you wish to repay me, I shall not refuse, but you are not in my debt. I'm just doing my job. However, you can ride with us, if you can keep up, but you can leave at any time for any reason."

"Spoken like a Roman. I accept."

Romans were legalistic by nature and loved contracts. Instead of blindly worshiping their 12 major gods, Romans entered contractually obligating agreements with them. Romans agreed to do certain things as long as the gods did their part, or what was the point?

Gila took them to the biggest ranch in the region, which had an unnatural number of livestock. Far more than the ranch could feed. Pigs eat almost anything but grass, so many homes mixed pigs, chickens, cows and horses. This place, however, had entire herds crushing the lawn.

“Some genius stole more than he could keep,” his friend Pelagius concluded. “Let’s kill them so they won’t worry about having enough food.”

“Take 20 and encircle them,” Max ordered.

As they rode closer into the valley, they saw thousands of young women locked in pens. Young men in chains cut trees to build shelter. The only men over 30 held whips and weapons to supervise their new slaves. Max wanted to be seen to monopolize their attention as his other team snuck around. A sentry blew a bugle. Fighters scrambled together, shouting threats in Saxon until they saw the Roman uniforms. They looked very drunk, hungover, and well-laid. Cooking fires had been roasting pork and beef. Barrels of booze slacked their thirst.

Max took off his helmet so they could see how young he was. “Hello! Can you folks direct me to Londinium? I fear we’ve become lost.”

At least 150 Saxons faced them, armed with whatever was at hand – usually sharp farm tools. A few dozen saddled their horses, but seemed more interested in getting away than a cavalry skirmish. An annoyed man with a white beard and a voice of authority led the fighters forward. He spoke passable Latin.

“Where you come from?”

“Anderida,” Max answered, naming the closest fort on the Saxon Shore so the enemy wouldn’t know a real army showed up. Unlike other forts, it was oval (Romans usually built rectangular) and recently constructed with 15 towers and 25’ tall walls. Uncle Theo had sent a runner to get that garrison out into the countryside to restore order. “We’re hoping you’d sell us something to eat. We have enough coin for a thousand cattle.”

The old man found that hard to believe, but the alternatives were even more incredulous. 30 soldiers kept riding closer to 150 while those on foot fanned out to trap the invaders. Others poked their heads out of doors or windows, saw just 30 enemies, and then went back to sleep, drinking, or fucking.

“Sure, soldier. Come on down and you can pick them out yourself. Need any women? We got plenty.”

“I’ve never had a pretty girl before,” Max lied. “Did I bring enough?” Max threw his coin purse as far as he could. It landed in the grass and a bunch of thieves ran into range. In Latin, he ordered his men, “shoot when I shoot.”

Heruli were the best mounted archers in the empire, with double-curved composite bows that took a year to make. Arrows are important, too: hard wood with metal tips and clean feathers for a straight flight. The outlaws had more bowmen, but Max had better ones. Being mounted made them more mobile, too.

A tall blond was the first to find the purse. He held it up with a yell of victory. That’s when Max killed him. The arrow entered his side because the fool turned to show the old man. He slumped like someone turned him off. Heruli shot the thirty Saxons who came for the coin. Both sides had archers, but the Heruli shot farther, more accurately, and with a higher rate of fire. On horses, they also better dodged incoming arrows. Saxons had more men, so the old guy ordered a charge.

Max let them come, lengthening his line so they didn't get behind him. The attack would have worked on ordinary archers, but not the best in the business. The raiders and rapists reached the same conclusion, but far too late, as the Saxons had put themselves within easy range. The Heruli surged forward to shoot them in the back. The old Saxon found a spear and shield, rallied a few dozen from inside, and made his stand. The mounted archers circled them from a safe distance and shot them until they no longer posed a threat. Some barricaded homes while others ran to the woods, where Pelagius got them. Two surprised a careless Heruli, pulling him from his horse. He died, but the Saxons didn't live much longer.

Max rode to the ladies in the corral. "The emperor sent four legions to secure Britannia. Find keys to unchain your men. I need you to drive the herds to Londinium, where you'll be safe."

With most livestock owners dead, Max was quickly becoming the largest rancher on the island. All he needed was a ranch, ranch hands, and time.

Rather than break into buildings, Max challenged them to one-on-one duels. The Saxons had isolated themselves in a dozen structures. Max burned the buildings that he could not safely take. A dozen teens surrendered and several Saxons were taken alive. As war prisoners, they'd face hard labor for life.

After lunch, Gila bathed and thanked Max twice. They slept there that night, then met up with the rest of the legion on the road north. They now had almost enough mounts. Max left a few dozen men without horses to finish jerking the meat (it takes weeks to do right). They'd then harness oxen to carts, some still packed with stolen stuff, and take them to Londinium. One wagon would follow the Heruli, with food, ammo and weapons, up the coastal road.

## **Chapter 11**

### **Southeast Britannia, February 368**

Gila led Max to the next nearest town, where a thousand Saxons fought Roman warships in a small bay. 3000 Heruli spread out in a line to fuck the bastards from behind. With the fleet monopolizing their attention, the Saxons were easy meat. They had trapped several thousand locals in buildings against the surf to free up manpower. Herds grazed wherever they wanted as no Saxon bothered to contain them. Max finally got to general an army in battle, but was disappointed in that he had few orders to give. The surprised enemy had their backs literally to the sea. Half their force was on vessels, and therefore had to surrender or drown. The thrill of danger was quickly replaced by the butchery of war. As Heruli freed Britons, the odds increased in their favor. Saxons on the sea soon faced archers who out-ranged them. Roman warships surrounded Saxon ships to overwhelm them.

Hardly a battle. Max barely killed two warriors with swords, though he shot dozens in boats. Using an unnaturally tall bow, Max could fire farther than the strongest Saxon. The enemy had conveniently organized their loot in sacks, which

Max totally claimed. The baggage and booty was substantial. He sent it on a ship with Pelagius and the injured. His uncle's staff would count it all and divide it according to rules centuries old. The government got half, then he and his officers, and finally the rankers. All the war prisoners were his alone, as commanding officer, and he planned to work them to death. More Britons walked to the capital with herds and Max's new prisoners. News that the emperor sent four legions energized the populace.

"Londinium may get crowded," Pelagius told Max.

"Good. People are safer in walled cities.

The next month was crazy busy because the enemy was insane. Saxons and criminals, this far south, didn't expect legions until the spring, when the weather improved. And certainly not mounted archers, which didn't yet exist off the steppe, except for Max's precious Heruli. Emperor Valentinian really did send Heruli and Batavians under Theo to restore Britannia, but Batavi were East Germani; Heruli had never been this far west before; they originated in Scandinavia, migrated south after Caesar emptied much of Gaul, adopted the horse, then lived around the Black Sea with East Germani, Slavs, Turks, Persian-speaking nomads like Alans, and groups from the eastern steppe. Ironically, Turkish-speaking nomads were not from modern Turkey; a group called Ottomans started conquering the Anatolia Peninsula in the 13<sup>th</sup> century and absorbed natives until evolving into the current nation. The earliest Romans lumped blond hair and blue-eyed Heruli with Scythians after they sacked Athens a century ago. In another century in another timeline, Emperor Justinian's best general, Belisarius, would use both Huns and Heruli mounted archers to defeat Persians and various Germani in Italy and North Africa. Without mounted archers, Belisarius would not have prevailed. Assimilation would make Heruli disappear from history in the 6<sup>th</sup> century when they lost their kingdom along the middle Danube.

As they recovered more horses, locals tripled Max's force, which helped him cleanse the region 3x faster. Bandits preferred the interior while Saxons liked the shore, so most locals helped them find criminals inland. Max divided his command to sweep as broadly as possible while he cleaned the coast. Every squad had 10-30 local fighters, including many furious women. Saxons, bandits, and troops who turned to crime were often caught with their pants down or weighted down by loot and livestock. Those who surrendered became prisoners. With sea states so rough, not even Saxons risked crossing the Channel with their stolen stuff. Most preferred to die fighting while locals preferred to kill than imprison them.

The Roman fleet told Max that they had driven six Saxon ships ashore at a cove to the north. Max, tireless as always, led a vanguard to scout the terrain that night while the legions followed in the morning. Steep slopes surrounded the cove. Cliffs originally walled it in, but erosion sent dirt from the top down to the bottom. Roman warships blocked the narrow exit. Five Saxon ships broke their keels on underwater boulders and had to be beached before they sank. Well, not really a beach, which has sand, but a rocky shore pounded by wicked waves. A storm over the eastern horizon agitated sea states.

The Saxons spent all day unloading everything of value from those five burning or broken boats while the sixth anchored as close to shore as it dared. Fine linen

is valuable, so piles of it rested on barrels of booze, decorated plates, and bejeweled cups. All coin and gems would be in their pockets. A thousand paces out to sea sat three Roman warships waiting for the seas to calm to get closer to the targets. Romans dipped rocks in lamp oil and then flung them. One crushed a mast, set fire to the sail, and then the rigging. Most of the Saxons swam safely to shore, but getting supplies, cargo, and loot from their ships would be trickier, given the size and strength of the stormy waves. The men looked exhausted. Catapults from the warships could not yet reach the enemy ashore.

But Max could.

The 1st Century hid their horses and crept up silently through trees until within range of the sleeping Saxons. Max moved ahead to silently slice the sole sentry he saw and get a better view of the terrain. Over 1000 fighting men slept, but 10,000 young women and small kids were herded against the boulders, where they could not escape. They shivered in the cold, using body warmth to keep from freezing. Several Saxons tended a bonfire while keeping watch on their captives. For millennia, tribes replenished their numbers by breeding with stolen females who were raped for life. Raising young foreigners as their own also worked. Kidnapping and slavery were a way of life before and after the Romans ruled. Once the Empire fell, over a million Europeans would be enslaved in Northern Africa during the Dark Ages. Victors selling the vanquished was as old as war. Caesar sold 500,000 Celts, though to other Europeans. Rome even defined poverty as the inability to afford a single slave.

Rather than wait for reinforcements, Max went for the easy kill. It was too tempting not to, like coming across coin and not picking it up. The troops knelt in a line around the rim, jamming arrows in the dirt for easy pickup. Their first volleys hit the closest enemies, who presented the easiest targets. They slept side by side, which made missing harder. Before the first arrows landed, the next 100 flew. Practice sped up their reloading to devastating effect. The Heruli wounded several times as many as they killed, but the injured became burdens on their friends.

The Saxons woke to cries of pain and curses of anger. Fingers pointed up the steep slope and they charged without needing a command. Team Max, from their position of height, continued calmly firing. Saxon bowmen shot up the slope, but only a few had the power to send an arrow so high. Heruli naturally targeted them first. The rest had to climb to get within range. Furious fighters clawed their way up the slippery slope, most with shields, but it was a tough climb in the dark. Recent rains turned dirt into mud. Volleys slaughtered hundreds, but many more shafts uselessly suicided into shields. The wounded crawled or limped down as others formed a muddy shield wall up the slope. Four Heruli rolled a boulder down, but the enemy got out of the way in time. Running out of arrows saved the Saxons. Or maybe half of them. Max made it a practice to recover what they could, but exhausting them was inevitable given how many targets they had. No matter how many arrows they carried, they always had more enemies than ammo.

Max obsessed over solving that problem.

“Spread out,” he yelled in Latin. “Don’t let them get behind us.”

That was always the danger. Getting fucked from behind—the infamous Sodomy Maneuver—unnerved those in the front because they didn’t know what was

happening from behind. Fearing what you faced was easier than fearing what you could not see. Max watched his guys extend the line, but clumping where it was easiest to climb.

Invigorated by the end of arrows, the surviving Saxons now climbed more carefully to coordinate an attack. The trick was to breach the line to get behind the Romans. Attacks from multiple directions work better than from one. The Heruli drew swords and hacked at the savages coming up to kill them. Saxons on the slope threw rocks to fight back. One hit Max in the head, ringing his bell. At the peak of the battle, both sides had a hundred men whacking each other; Heruli enjoyed height while Saxons utilized spears. Max and four others formed a mobile reserve, running to wherever the fighting was fiercest. He used up his throwing knives and wished he had javelins or poisoned darts.

“Let’s take their spears!” he told his team.

Five Heruli jumped into a cluster of Saxons, the impacts sending enemies flying. Max wrestled away a spear and they crawled up before the barbarians recovered from their surprise. Handing that spear to a trooper who really needed it, the team sandwiched another Saxon spearmen, cutting him down and stealing his wood. Other Heruli saw his example and dashed down to overwhelm the isolated before retreating to the rim. To counter, Saxons backed down and organized a thicker line, but Max Force now had several spears, which they passed back and forth. If they had brought twice as many arrows, this battle would be over. Max, however, only needed to kill time until the rest of his command showed up.

The enemy had to step on their dead and dying comrades to reach the ambushers around the rim. Max noticed all the arrows just 10 paces down. He walked behind his men, telling them his plan to counter-charge so they could recover hundreds of arrows. The last of the uninjured Saxons attacked up the slippery slope. The Romans tried exhausting them. Max moved to wherever they threatened to breach his line. Several Heruli were pulled down the slope, while a dozen others were injured in the foot or leg. The leather boots and chaps saved many a soldier, though some suffered a broken shin or ankle. The intensity of the fighting exhausted the enemy. Once Max saw their energy fall, he yelled, “charge!” in Heruli.

Over 80 flung themselves at their down-slope rivals, often feet first, using their weight and momentum to send Saxons soaring. Several enemies bounced a few times before hitting rock bottom. Others simply got crushed. The Heruli took advantage of the surprise to stab, impale, or cut their opponents. Those spears worked wonderfully. Few Saxons wear armor when they sleep and most shields had already been hacked to pieces. The human avalanche either squished or flung invaders.

Max chose their leader, a huge hairy dude that others deferred to. When the barbarian raised his warhammer, the legate dove, plunging one sword into his chest while slashing a teenager who looked like the Saxon’s son. Max’s momentum carried him down into several others. He knocked a few down and slashed at the others as they tried getting through his armor. He felt a blade cut his belly and someone was pounding his back. Furious feet kicked him. Jackknifing in panic, the horn on his custom helmet sank into the backbreaker. Max tackled a guy blocking his escape, and together they tumbled down.

That was not fun. He thought a corpse stopped his slide, until it opened its blue eyes and roared at Max. The legate desperately tried killing the corpse, but couldn't get his long swords in because they were so close. His riding boots had no traction in the mud. He finally grabbed an arrow, stuck in the bastard's chest, and used his weight to press it deeper.

The guy who fell with him now tackled him back. The summersaults disoriented Max because an impact turned his helmet. Effectively blind and totally terrified, Max punched someone punching him back. His helmet was too dented, so Max pulled it off and saw his swords, just out of reach. The savage Saxon grinned at the ruined Roman as the battle intensified around them. His opponent must have had multiple injuries because he moved like an octopus. Max feinted a run for his weapons while drawing a dagger. The enemy rushed to block his way, but Max threw his helmet at his face, swatted aside his sword, and plunged his blade up, just past the chin, into his head. The guy fell like a tree stabbed in the bark.

Naked without his swords, he leaped into the mud as he felt a menace run down the hill at him. He rolled over a real corpse and somehow found his feet beneath him, though his left leg didn't work right. A monster of a man had run down the hill too fast and must have slide 20 paces in the mud before smacking an arrow-riddled corpse. Max jumped over the dead dude to bloody the bastard's back with his Damascus blade. It came back red, but Max knew he didn't cut him deep. Indeed, the maniac didn't seem to slow down, though he howled in rage. Max tasted the salty air and knew he'd rather die than let those fuckers continue raping people. He wondered if the Saxons understood the insults he learned to say in West German: "Your mother's a whore and your father's an ox. That makes you an ox-whore."

Anglo-Saxon would become the earliest Old English in a few centuries. North, East, and West German are the three main linguistic branches, which divided over time and geography. At some point the Scandinavians developed their own dialects from North German, that were even harder to understand.

The savage Saxon insulted Max back, which pleased him, though he didn't understand the sick burn. Roars of victory, up the slope, caught their attention. Max saw his troops standing and half-a-hundred foreign fucks coming down in a hurry. Some slowed to slay a few Heruli that other Saxons had pulled down the slope. Most Heruli downslope slid for their lives, three limped out of the way, and a few sought shelter behind the dead.

Max decided to get their attention to save his fallen friends. And because he loved being a distraction. He stepped on the corpse, hacked at the fool who turned his back on Max, and roared a challenge uphill. Half the Saxons coming down veered toward him. The corpse had a shield. Max broke off six arrows then, at the last moment, as a dozen dudes reached his spot halfway down the hill, he threw himself, landed hard on the shield, which partially shattered, and slid for his life. A dead body at the bottom blocked him, sending Max flying. The wounded limped rushed him, but Max came to his feet with a vengeance.

Sword-fighting depends on legs as much as arms. Max met the nearest, parried a blow and punctured a belly. The next guy was better, so Max made him rest his weight on his bad leg, then killed him as he faltered. Two came at him next. Max sidestepped to get away from the slower one to deal death to the faster. Having two



swords against a guy with only one worked well. Their shields had been shot to hell, so Max had only to block a thrust to cut off an enemy's arm. Other injured noticed and picked up a second weapon. With his back to the slope, Max darted in and out, dancing around Saxons who should have waited to surround him. Speed and mobility saved his ass, as he cut them down as fast as they came. A warning in Latin turned his head. All the Saxons on the slope targeted him, so he ran away, leaping from one arrow-filled corpse to another. It's hard to run down a muddy slope, so Max laughed at the time he had. Sunlight lit up the eastern horizon and he saw his century halfway down the hill, finishing off injured enemies.

"Recover arrows!" Max bellowed as archery works better in light.

While Romans are swordsmen, Heruli are archers. The Saxons saw 80 enemies carefully pulling arrows out of bodies and impatiently shaking off the flesh, often with the dying Saxon screaming. Max started doing the same, though he lost his bow. Several Saxons still pursued him, but they were slow and scared.

"You're very pretty," Max said in West German as he scrambled up the slope. "How much do you charge?"

Naulobatus, his brother-in-law, slid down and threw Max a bow. By the time Max notched his first used arrow, the nearest Saxons saw their fate. The surf was as savage as the swells, so good luck swimming to Bononia, Max thought.

"Drop your weapons or die!" was one of the few things Max learned in their language. "Your king will ransom you." Max had no idea if their king would pay for them, but it motivated many to throw down their swords. Except for several teens who had been guarding the girls, all had been injured. "Over there!"

Max marched a few hundred wounded enemies away from several thousand captive Britons and piles of stacked loot, just beyond the surf. They must have been waiting for more ships when the Roman warships surprised them. Once archers surrounded them, Max told the enemy to sit down and shut up. He even threw them medical kits he found in their camp.

Treasure filled the camp from entire Briton towns. Each Saxon carried what he could rather than combine it in crates for later division. Most had satchels, sacks, or backpacks full of bejeweled house wares, silverware, or weapons. They found beautiful heirlooms made from precious metals, mother-of-pearls, and ancient coins of foreign currency. As the first to the bottom, Max set aside a few dozen of the better bags for himself until his pockets bulged with coins and gems. Victors get to look their victims, so the legate went through the pockets of those he slew.

Is robbing robbers still stealing?

"Plunder the bodies, but leave my kills for me." Max walked to the Britons while singing, *The Girls of Rome*, a catchy tune. All the captives were fuckable women, girls, little kids, and bawling babies. Saxons must have murdered many men and plenty of boys. They rarely spared anyone over 30, given the world's short life expectancy.

"Folks, you're free and safe. None of you will be raped or robbed. My name is Magnus Maximus and the rest of my legion will be here soon. Emperor Valentinian sent four legions to secure Britannia. I am sorry you suffered and I cannot imagine your grief. My men will escort you to Londinium, where we will feed and shelter you until you can do it yourself. Give us time to finish off their dying before

wandering too far. Stay away from the enemy. My men get to rob their dead because that's a standard job benefit. If you have personal possessions, you can describe them and my troops will return them to you, if found."

They soon had breakfast cooking on a dozen fires and had just finished feeding the enemy when his legion arrived. The last Saxon ship surrendered. Hands tied and bound together, the Saxons were sailed to the capital, where they'd spend the rest of their lives doing hard labor.

## Chapter 12

### Britannia, Spring 368

Max enjoyed this life.

As legate, Max was quickly getting rich because few owners would reclaim the stolen property. Max renamed the Saxon ship, *Serena*, after a hot widow who was really into him. Wealthy and well educated, she read and spoke Greek as well as Latin and had traveled the empire with her rich father. She had a baby boy, but no income. As a rich absentee parent, Max had no problem raising the baby. Gila arrived with the legion and was not happy she already had a rival for Max's affections.

He tried explaining his motive: "I want to impregnate ladies to seed Britannia with men who will fight invaders when I'm gone. I need to raise my kids to protect what I'm building. You ladies don't need to like each other; just don't give me headaches and you can stay. I'll raise your monthly stipend for every child you give me. You can have boyfriends, as long as the babies you birth look like me. I'll support my bastards, but not someone else's. Treat each other like sisters to share the burden of raising kids in the same home. You'll live in luxury, even if you enjoy outside men, as long as you don't piss off me or my main woman, Fana."

Gila and *Serena* huddled together, reached an agreement, then hugged it out.

Most of the 100,000 Britons killed during the Great Conspiracy were men, while most of the 100,000 that Saxons tried kidnapping were young women, teenage girls, and small kids. That left a huge gender imbalance along the east coast.

Pelagius returned with much needed supplies from Londinium—mostly food and arrows, but also an oven and flour to bake bread. The arrows thrilled Max because Uncle Theo contracted out arrows to a professional company in Rome that made the best that Max had ever seen. They bought specific hardwoods that were both lighter and harder, then used a machine powered by a waterwheel to mass produce them. As long as Theo bought in bulk, they cost little more than those on the general market. Using a mold for the arrowhead allowed the company to fine-tune the shape for the best aerodynamics. Symmetrical arrowheads flew truest. The company made them bigger and smaller until they found the ideal size, shape, and weight. The Heruli therefore enjoyed the world's best arrows. Most armies made their own, which is not the same as getting them for free. Homemade arrows are notoriously inferior—bent shafts, uneven feathers, crooked heads. Up close, that rarely mattered, but Max recruited big archers with big bows to fire longer

arrows much farther. Being lighter, they traveled more; being harder, they penetrated deeper. These arrows were a hand's length longer, so enemy archers could not use them, with their smaller bows, whereas Max's men could re-use enemy arrows. Pelagius wisely took as much as the ammo depot's quartermaster would let him, giving Max's legion plenty to shoot with.

The Serena returned with transports to bring the Britons to the capital. While injured archers guarded the civilians, Max's legion rode north to find other Saxon bases. Most enemy forces had fewer than a thousand warriors, but thousands of young captives. One after another, Max beat each group, imprisoning enemies and freeing Britons. Not hard to do with 4000 troops and twice as many angry, armed Britons. Natives loved their savior, some more literally than others.

As field commander, Max "owned" all prisoners of war that he captured. Even Britons who helped Saxons were war prisoners instead of ordinary criminals to be handed over to the state. Most generals sold them as slaves, as Caesar did four centuries ago, but Max needed thousands of free workers to ranch, mine, and farm. Locals led him to the best soil, richest pastures, and orphaned mines. He mapped them all to retake them later. The legion captured thousands of horses, cattle, sheep, oxen, goats, and pigs. Few owners could document title. Max got the biggest cut, then the government, his officers, and his troops. Most of his men sold Max their share of the livestock cheaply for cold hard cash. Max hired locals to ranch them on dispossessed land, but struggled to find homes for so many beasts. Having freed 50,000 young women, girls, kids, and babies, his name was on everyone's lips as they sought friends and family. Max was turning away beauties while touting his suddenly rich troops. To his uncle's surprise, most widows and orphans ended up in Londinium because Max promised them free food and shelter.

Having run out of large enemy units on the coast, Max divided his legion into squads of ten, with several times as many local horsemen. His 8000 cavalry had 22,000 furious locals helping them seek Saxons. Together they cleansed the countryside. He broke his army into smaller units to cover more ground. Max led the 1st Squad. On their second day they rode into Saxons and local bandits herding livestock and captives towards the coast. They both saw each other at the same time, as the enemy crested a low ridge. Max positioned his squad up a long, gentle slope and cursed as the rest of the enemy came into view.

"Boys, they may have a hundred warriors, but they all can't fight us. Some need to herd the horses while others must guard the captives, who'd otherwise run. Let's keep our distance, shoot their horses, then kill them safely. Look! Most of them don't even have bows! Boys, target the bowmen first."

Few men were good with bows. Swords and spears were so much easier to wield. Max, however, had ten of the world's best bowmen. Max greeted them with a friendly Saxon hello as 40 enemies rode over. Max waited where trees blocked the enemy from getting uphill, a few miles from the incoming herd. The baby-faced legate waved pleasantly at the enemy leader and exhausted his West Germanic language skills:

"Hello! I am Max. Nice to meet you. What is your name? You are very pretty. How much do you charge?"

The Saxon didn't get angry as Max wished. Instead, the cocky guy laughed and answered with something that Max didn't understand. The enemy formed a line, just out of normal arrow range, to block the Heruli from escaping. Mounted archers usually fire in groups because saturating an area is the only way to hit targets at a gallop while bouncing vertically. Max's men, however, were sitting in situ, uphill and upwind, with a lifetime of practice shooting from the saddle.

Something caught Max's eye. His head jerked to stare in horror at something directly behind the enemy – something he practiced in the mirror. This was an old trick that rarely fool anyone, but was a nice way to tell his troops to start shooting. They all had arrows notched, but hid their bows behind their horses. Pulling the bowstring to their ear, the Heruli shot at the nearest enemy bowmen. The invaders thought themselves safe, from this distance, but Heruli used bigger bows, and the 1st Squad had the biggest bowmen using the biggest bows. Their arrows therefore flew farther, faster, and struck with greater force. Being bunched up together, the Saxons didn't have the time or space to avoid the volley. Eight of their archers got hit, though few were immediately fatal. More dire was their inability to contribute. Both sides traded arrows, but Max positioned his Heruli upwind, so his side could strike the enemy, who could not strike back from this distance. Losing their archers made the Saxons very vulnerable to range weapons. Max personally struck the enemy leader off his horse with an arrow to the chest, but their combat veterans knew what to do.

A few dozen charged with swords and spears. Max's squad got off another volley before galloping away. Most were right-handed, so Max moved laterally to maintain distance while lining up another volley. The fastest Saxons and native criminals left behind the slowest, giving the ten Heruli fewer targets. Max and his ten men paused to shoot, then galloped away again, only to turn to fire again. Geographically, the squad wasn't riding directly away, instead curving around to position right-handed archers. Like a ship's broadside, they devastated the rapists and robbers, then ganged up on the last riders, who took several shafts. Finally they could kill the local bandits, who raped, robbed, and ransomed for a living. The chase had spread the other enemies out. Each group was too few, and their shields too small, to protect them from archers firing from multiple directions.

The last 30 bandits formed up for self-defense, but none had bows.

Max read their minds. "They must charge us, absorbing a volley or two, before spearing us. Which might work. I'll try reducing the numbers."

Max rode over, dismounted, left his bow on his horse, and challenged their champion to a duel to the death. His squad stayed a good distance away. Meanwhile, the Briton captives freed each other and melted into the woods, just in case. The Saxons discussed the proposal. A big guy wearing body armor walked to Max, throwing insults like Max understood him. He held his shield like a pro and charged, expecting Max to block the blow. That's because he didn't know Max was ambidextrous. He saw the obvious attack, moved laterally while putting his sword in his left hand. Ducking low, Max cut deep into a calf, crippling him for life. The guy howled in pain, giving Max a moment to thrust into his unprotected back. He'd bleed out, but it'd take all day.

Max waved for the next Saxon. While they hurled insults, the Roman pleasantly said, "Hello. I am Max. Nice to meet you."

This brute held a throwing spear—not a proper javelin—but still something to worry Max. He came running, waiting until he was too close to miss, only for Max's left hand to palm a throwing knife and hurl it into the guy's chest. Few warriors are left-handed and throwing knives are even more rare. Their Iberian steel factory made these before trying to forge swords. The Saxon fell flat in the tall grass. Max ran over to finish him off, retrieve his expensive knife, and score a throwing spear. It was much heavier than a javelin, and therefore had less range, but felt good.

An enemy in his mid-40s carefully limped up. He looked very competent, but injured himself in the raid. The guy studied Max as closely as Max examined him. The warrior worried the legate enough to draw his second sword; he had become unbeatable using two blades. Without even an insult, they danced around each other, feigning attacks before getting into it. Max kept pounding his shield, forcing the enemy to hold it higher. The Saxon had never fought someone ambidextrous with two swords before and it showed on his frantic face as he gave up ground. The Roman tried forcing him down the slope, which would give Max higher ground. The Saxon instead charged, his sword flying desperately. Max parried the blows, then dropped to hack off the toes from his good foot. The burly bastard fell and couldn't get up, though he kept trying. Max kicked him downhill and waved on his next challenger.

The Saxons were not feeling optimistic after losing their best swordsman, so they sent two who looked like brothers. Max threw the spear, but the Saxon caught it on his shield, which was now too heavy to hold up. Max expected this and flanked the guy to finish him off before the other brother could join in. Drawing his second sword, Max cut the first bandit while he tried snapping off the spear in his shield. His companion barely lasted longer. Max's swords were longer, lighter, sharper, and faster. Once Max sliced the bicep, the other Saxons charged and Max ran to his squad.

His archers foresaw this. Resting their arms and shoulders made them nimble again. The problem with bigger bows is they require greater strength, which becomes tiresome. Better than dying, to be sure, but getting to rest was nice. They saturated the enemy area, not caring if they hit man or beast. Max mounted his stolen horse, wishing he had Caesar, and joined the fun. The last six Saxons fled, but the Heruli caught up and shot them down.

The captives ran away, helping themselves to unsaddled horses. Something hit Max's head hard, almost knocking him off his horse. A pebble then smacked his horse's head, almost knocking it over as well. Local slingers on foot had been hiding in dense woods. Forest still covered most of Britain, although the industrial revolution would decimate them. The Heruli could shoot arrows farther than the local thieves could throw pebbles, so they drove them off, killing several. Some got away, hiding in a million trees.

"Anyone hurt?" Max asked, his fingertips bloody from a head wound, despite his helmet.

"I'm pretty pissed," Serena said, holding her arm funny.

"Let's rob the dead, then give enemy weapons to the captives who haven't left yet." Saxons had shackled the dangerous teenage boys. With their saddlebags full

of re-stolen treasure, the Heruli grabbed enemy weapons, rode over, dropped them by the prisoners, and freed them.

“I’m Legate Magnus Maximus,” he told hundreds of captives in Brittonic. “Emperor Valentinian sent four legions to restore security in Britannia, but we could use your help. The enemy’s pockets are full of coin and jewels. You get to rob any enemy you kill.” The Britons liked the sound of that. Max turned to his friends. “The slingers haven’t left yet.”

“They will,” Naulo said confidently. “They’ll follow to kill us in our sleep.”

Max had not thought of that. “Guess we’ll kill them tonight then.”

They rode out into the open to camp with the herds. A dozen slingers found their campfire after midnight and slung logs under blankets, only for hidden bowmen to surprise them in the dark. Some survived until morning.

“You look like the guy who slew my husband and my baby,” Serena told one in Latin. “What kind of monster bashes in baby brains?” The Briton spit at her, but missed. Serena noticed the blood. “We got your lung. It must hurt to breathe.”

She kicked him to hear him howl and the Heruli let her enjoy her therapy. Revenge is impractical, but helps with grief.

Max reached Londinium with just one century while Pelagius took the field. With his newfound wealth, Max sent Gila and Serena to buy up cheap ranchland, farmland, mines, and land along the Thames River. Given the destruction and the number of lives lost, desperate people sold at bargain prices. He hired ranchers and farmers to maximize food production, while buying up all the seafood that fishermen could provide. In Londinium, he’d build warehouses, distribution centers, grocery markets, and restaurants.

Outside the northern walls of the capital lay a sprawling estate that was almost as big as the city. The last survivors of that family desperately needed to sell as the Great Conspiracy shattered their sense of safety. They all wanted to return to Rome, where civilized people were safe. Max cheaply bought them out on credit with his uncle co-signing the loan. Max not only had a place to put his prisoners, but something for them to do: remove trees and bushes, clear the topsoil, and clean the hard bedrock so he could build. After surveying the terrain, he had them pile rock where the future walls of the city would be because Theo planned to give Londinium a proper outer wall. Max not only planned to build, but planned to build big. He sent for Fana, in Iberia, to bring their small kids and manage his affairs. Max was personally invested in the survival of Britannia. In the years to come, he’d buy up all he could, whenever it was cheap.

## **Chapter 13**

### **Londinium, Britannia, Spring 368**

General Theodosius marched overland on a road that ancient Romans paved, catching crooks, horse thieves, and herds of stolen horses which he desperately needed. Locals took detachments to towns, villages, farms, and ranches to help those alive or punish those who killed them. He sent 100 horsemen ahead to block

all five city gates. It reassured him to see the burned out wrecks of Saxon ships and hundreds of local boats rotting on the riverbank. At least locals put up a fight. At 66', the Thames was deep, allowing seagoing vessels depth to anchor at riverside berths. After securing Londinium and paying his respects to the dead hero governor, Theo pacified the area. With recovered horses, his patrols fanned out in ever-greater circles so people knew help had arrived. He sent a century to each nearby city to restore order and reassure citizens. With remarkable speed, the crisis ended.

Saxons burned or broke the eastern wall and took a few blocks of the city, at great cost. Most of the 50,000 residents escaped west, along with another 30,000 who fled to the city for safety. Londinium is only 40 miles from the ocean, but the Thames is 215 miles long, so boats ferried people upriver. Saxons couldn't sail past the catapults on the London Bridge, and wasted a precious month trying to take the city.

The governor (*procurator*) died fighting and the mayor couldn't control the chaos, crime, and crap. The massive raid left anarchy in its wake. With its leaders dead, the local military failed in their mission. Rome left Britannia undermanned for decades, so few had faith the emperor would divert resources here. Valentinus certainly bet his life against it. People debased themselves, giving their worst instincts their best opportunities, resulting in street fighting as vicious as the Saxons. Gangs controlled more of the city than security forces. Looting is easier without walls, so burning became an easy way to smash and grab.

Then Theo showed up and everything changed.

The mere sight of the Roman column settled down citizens. The thousand troops helped local cops regain control, block by block. Looters, liars, and common criminals were sentenced to hard labor, while murderers and traitors were executed. Theo issued a general amnesty to troops who fled, as they were usually unpaid and poorly treated. Every soldier gets an arm tattoo to reduce desertion and an ID tag worn around the neck. This made it easy to find those who abandoned their post.

At the eastern gate, his brother Honorius introduced Theo to the city's political, social, religious, and business leaders, including the Ordo (municipal officials in charge of roads, tax collection, drainage, sewage, games, burials, etc.), the mayor, and Bishop Dalmatius.

"Theo, this is Civilis, the *vicarius* (mayor) of Londinium."

They shook hands while measuring each other. "Civilis, sorry we're late. How bad is the city?"

Oddly, the mayor dressed in a fucking toga. No one wore togas anymore, or fucked in them. They were ancient history, even in Rome, the Eternal City. Instead, Romans wore wool or linen underpants tied at the waist with a long-sleeve tunic (no shirts), with a second tunic or fur cloak and hood for colder weather. Leggings were a hybrid of tights and trousers, but fastened at the ankles with ties. Women spun and weaved wool in the long winter and wore outer garments (tunica, palla, and stola) with diadem, rings, necklaces, bracelets, and brooches. They used goat tallow and breach ash to dye their hair. Makeup consisted of powder and rouge.

“Most of it burned down, general. People killed each other for food or coin. We’ve been sheltering in the rubble. Many residents fled west. I’ve had to buy food using borrowed funds from the bankers, the Roma family. Their corner is all that’s left, other than the basilica, forum, and amphitheater.”

“Why would bankers have food?”

Civilis didn’t want to answer. “Their leader is a witch named Sara the Seer who predicts the future. As a Christian, I’ve wanted her silenced, but her warning saved the city and thousands of lives. She gave the governor time to organize defenses, without which we would have lost the capital. Her family bought out the groceries and arms makers while hiring men they trusted. As our police died, fled, or quit, Sara’s Army saved what they could, and ended up with all the city’s portable wealth.”

Theo was sure he didn’t understand. “A woman knew Saxons planned to attack? Did she turn over whatever spy she tortured?”

The mayor, as a devout Christian, grew clearly uncomfortable. “She foresaw Saxon ships sailing to our docks, barely giving us enough time to position catapults to stop them. Residents see the Romas as heroes. Greedy heroes, but heroes. Even now, they feed the homeless for free.”

Romans selected this site for the city because the Thames River was narrow enough for a bridge, but deep enough for seagoing ships, whereas mosquito-infested marshes lined the coast. It had the only bridge on the river. The city only had three walls, making them vulnerable from the river, where Valentinus told the Saxons to attack. A two-mile wall, sometimes 9’ thick, surrounded Londinium on three sides. Walling off the river had not seemed necessary.

“How did the countryside fare?” Theo asked.

“4 million live in Britannia, mostly in sunken homes with thatched roofs. Villas and villages were defenseless. So many hit us so fast! Saxons targeted everyone who adopted Roman dress, so I’d yell at them from the wall in my toga. That seemed to piss them off, which gave me some satisfaction.”

That explained the toga.

“Civilis, we must rebuild the city, so I need to catalog every carpenter, stonemason, metalworker, architect, and engineer. Just removing all the rubble will take months. The more people help, the faster they’ll have real homes again. I captured a thousand criminals, but could use many more.”

The old man nodded. “Then you should see Sara the Seer. Or, more importantly, she should see you.” Theo didn’t know what to make of that, but had too much on his mind to worry about it. “General, please multiply the city’s size because it has become cramped.”

“Sounds expensive,” Theo remarked.

“Borrow whatever you need from the Romas, but demand low interest rates.”

The general turned to his brother, the businessman. “Honorius, see what you can do while I start rebuilding Londinium with huge barbican drum towers to protect the city’s five gates so this travesty never repeats.”

The next day, Honorius came back excited to his brother’s riverside command tent. “The Romas will lend the empire as much as we need to rebuild Londinium as long as we make it much bigger, better, and stronger. I’m talking about long-term loans at low-interest rates. She says I move my family here and build a



gorgeous villa just upriver to manage hundreds of farms, ranches, and mines. Our cousins will take care of our properties in Iberia. I saw myself hold my first grandson. I haven't been that happy since I lost my virginity."

Theo wasn't having it. "Are you drunk?" Britons drank beer, ale, mead, and wine. Roman wine came in four colors: red, white, black, and yellow. Calda was mulled (warmed) wine while Posca was cheap booze one step removed from vinegar. The Irish wouldn't invent whiskey for another thousand years. Vodka didn't arrive until the 15<sup>th</sup> century, tequila, brandy, and cognac in the 16<sup>th</sup>, and rum in the 17<sup>th</sup>. "You believe a stranger? I should send you home."

Honorius laughed. "Sara showed me. She put her hand on my head and I saw it with crystal clarity. I'm taking the boys when they get here. You should come."

"When our boys return, we'll go together."

Theo worked 100-hour weeks until his son returned with two centuries. "The rest are still sweeping the swamps, marshes, and mountains," he explained. By the time Max rode in with just a century, the general had forgotten all about the witch until Honorius forced him to clear his schedule. Theo needed a break and wanted to see Sara City, the only part of the capital that escaped unharmed.

With a troop of cavalry, the four family members and Pelagius rode the Via Principalis through the market. Burnt or broken shops, stores, and restaurants summarized the destruction. They saw leather, linen, and metalworking shops, with homes in the back; glass and pottery manufacturers, plus wine merchants. Londinium was a cosmopolitan city that sent and received stuff from around the empire: Syrian silk, Samian wares, Anatolian marble, Egyptian emeralds, Iberian wine. They ate all kinds of seafood (mussel, herring, pike, perch, cockle), plus bread in wine, cheese, honey, dried fruit, dates, wheatmeal porridge, and frumentum (corn porridge). Few Romans ate beef, while meat was usually boiled rather than roasted. Mutton (sheep) would remain the cheapest meat until the 19<sup>th</sup> century while oysters were a cheap, working class lunch that some restaurants specialized in.

Most of the rubble had been cleared, but Max envisioned something greater. "Uncle, multiplying the size of the city means you must multiply the size of the defenders. That's an expensive operating cost. The fewer defenders you need, the cheaper to protect the residents, so I found my surveying equipment." Londinium sat on the northern bank of the Thames River, between two tributaries, so water surrounded it on three sides. South of the river was soggy marshland until Max had it drained. "The terrain is such that we could divert the Walbrook tributary, splitting its flow around the city. That'd give the capital a water barrier on all four sides. Well, five, with the north shaped like a roof. The city would be more like a pentagon than a rectangle. Water on all sides simplifies sewer, plumbing, and waste removal. The canal need not be long, wide, or deep to be effective. It'd be a flowing stream rather than a stagnate pond that attracts mosquitoes. A water barrier means the city needs fewer defenders."

"Sounds like a lot of work," Young Theo said with a snort. "We have enough to do."

"We have thousands of prisoners who have little to do until seeding season starts. Uncle, send your surveyors and see if I'm right. You can multiply the size of the city while improving security."

Theo nodded knowingly. “You want me to enclose that huge ranch you got on credit.”

Max had the decency to look sheepish, which is good cover for a wolf. “*Germani* will raid the eastern coast for as long as it’s profitable. If you move people and livestock inland, then Saxons have nothing and no one to steal. Farmers and ranchers barely survive on those tiny plots, which we must defend. The fewer people accessible to raiders, the fewer who will die. Uncle, force coastal people to ports or inland cities, where we can protect them, while maximizing food production wherever it’s hardest for raiders to reach. That’s the only way we can afford to guard this island. It maximizes security at minimum cost.”

Theodosius stopped his horse, forcing everyone else to pause as well. He studied his nephew until he became uncomfortable. “Max, you’re a genius! Every time I fear you’re a fuck up, you come up with something fantastic. Pelagius, your father governed Gaul. What would he say?”

The tribune stiffened at being singled out. Pelagius was easily the best read man in Britannia. His Greek was as flawless as his Latin. Theo continued riding, but moved alongside the tribune. Up ahead, Sara City soared across the skyline like a mountain bluff from a valley bottom.

“Centuries ago, Rome conquered the Italian peninsula because it was the first to urbanize. Cities enjoy economies of scale, concentration of resources, and specialization which results in a broader, deeper, and stronger market. Urban economies are bigger, stronger, faster, more resilient, and more efficient. Companies can sell more stuff while workers enjoy more economic opportunities. Great farmers farm while great architects build. Niches multiply while talent can specialize. A bigger, better economy helped Rome fund bigger, better armies. Armor, weapons, and salaries are expensive. Including slaves, Rome had 2 million residents at its peak. That’s probably the most in the world. The size of Roman cities is not just a result of our growing empire, but a cause.

“Sir, compare an urban economy to a rural, agricultural one. Infrastructure, transportation, healthcare, education, and security are easier to provide to a million people in one location than a million people in a thousand locations. Country folks are poorer, sicker, and less educated because rural life lacks schools, hospitals, and jobs. The only employment on farms is farming, whereas talented workers can find many outlets in a city. Towns need cities for customers, processing, and distribution, but cities don’t need towns except for food and raw materials.

“Take security. Imagine protecting 4 million Britons in a few dozen walled-in coastal or riverside cities versus 10,000 rural villages. Thousands must farm, ranch, and mine, but those should be done with specialized equipment, talent, and economies of scale. Securing a hundred huge farms is easier than a million small ones. You’d literally be saving thousands of lives a year from violence, crime, and malnutrition. Mainland *Germani* won’t raid us if it’s unprofitable.

“Julius Caesar would have died unknown if born in Britannia. Caesar didn’t make Rome; Rome made Caesar. Cities offer opportunities that an agricultural economy can’t. The countryside should focus on food production, natural resource extraction, tourism, and retirement living. Replace villages with villas. Use specialized talent and technological equipment to farm and ranch more efficiently

so most of the population can do something more productive than milking cows or harvesting grain. Urban economies lift people out of poverty because they better utilize resources. The richest countries are the most urbanized while the poorest are the most rural. The fastest way to make everyone richer is urbanization.”

“Urbanize Britannia,” Max summarized, “and raiding it becomes unprofitable. Risking ships across the Channel requires rich rewards. Fortifying the coast while moving everyone inland will bankrupt Saxon pirates.”

“Easier said than done,” Theo concluded.

“The south is safest. We should build out the Thames and park warships at the entrance. Every port should host ships that patrol the coast. We need signal fires and lookout towers for a faster response time to intruders. Smaller, but more numerous cavalry bases to respond to single-ship raids, which are most common. The less land we must guard, the better we can guard it. The more people in the fewer locations, the more that will survive.”

Pelagius pointed to the tall apartment buildings that made up Sara City. “Reducing the cost of living raises the standard of living by giving families and companies more leftover money. The taller we build up, the more value we get from the land, allowing us to charge less rent so working families cannot afford to move elsewhere. Lowering the cost of food, shelter, and transportation will leave people cash to enjoy life—better stuff, vacations, and amusement. The more walkable our cities, the less we need horses. Horses are expensive; not needing them leaves coin for eateries and imported goods. Plus, places don’t smell like shit. Rome is the most densely populated city in the western world, yet also the richest and most powerful. Coincidence, sir?”

“Let’s make Londinium a Rome away from home,” Max argued. “Saxons must sail past 40 miles of defenses just to reach the capital. Let’s turn it into a city of a million residents.”

Young Theo laughed. “I want to see Magnus force a million people from their homes.”

“Jobs, opportunities, and consumer goods will lure people to cities. We should offer free schools, cheap clinics, and maybe a free university to attract the young. Plus, the more people here who speak Latin, the more who will share our values, goals, and priorities.”

Theo sighed. “The emperor wants me and his legions back to fight the Alamanni. Max, your idea would work if we stayed long enough to implement it. However, I can’t see ourselves getting that opportunity. Too bad, though. An ocean is a great way to stop *Germani*. Italy and Iberia will fall after Gaul, so the last Latins might live in Londinium.”

Max kept his hopes up. “All this place needs is leadership.” Indeed. A few million Britons became Romanized over the last three centuries. All Rome had to do was keep foreigners from subjugating them. “An urbanized Britannia would be Rome’s most profitable province. You can sell that to the emperor.”

Tribes from the steppe pushed *Germani* into western Europe, overrunning Celts in their way. *Germani* already dominated Gaul and were invading Italy, Africa, and Iberia. Londinium had a charter from the emperor, making it a proper *municipium*. The *basilica* housed the city government between the forum and the central market. The riders took a road to the procurator’s palace by the Walbrook River,

and down an easily defended corridor. It was like riding into a canyon with stables instead of walls.

A thousand horses faced in, on both sides, so they passed a lot of asses. They ate enriched hay on raised metal mesh floors. Their pee and poop fell onto shallow layers of dirt. Theo paused as two guys dragged a sheet of crappy dirt onto a customized wagon that could hold ten at a time. A second wagon inserted a fresh sheet of dirt. Horse Canyon, as it was called, smelled like shit, but no one lived there, though the offices above the stables rented real cheap. Theo made room for two out-going wagons: one had food waste (eggshells, old produce, chicken bones) while the other collected garbage that would not improve soil. Everyone going in and out used the left side of the road.

Several men guarded the entrance to Sara City. More stood on top with an alarm bell. Theo noticed the tallest buildings outside Sara City had half the height, giving defenders range. No wonder gangs didn't get in.

"Who goes there?" asked a middle-aged man with a crossbow, who recognized those coming in.

"Britannia's military governor," Theo shot back while waving to a column of uniformed cavalry.

"You here to arrest someone?"

"Not unless you give me trouble. I've started executing traitors, murderers, and idiots. If you're smart, you won't piss me off."

"Civilis said we could stay."

Theo got angry. He looked up at the 12 story-tall buildings, each structure as wide as a city block, with open-air playgrounds in the center. Residents could cross bridges between blocks to eat, shop, and take care of business—without ever stepping in the street. That saved a lot of walking up and down stairs.

"How come this neighborhood doesn't smell like horseshit?" he asked because every city in the world smelled like crap.

The guardian of the gate boasted: "Because we don't keep horses here. Everything is within walking distance to not need horses, which are expensive and take a lot of room."

Theo was intrigued. "How come Sara City didn't burn with the rest of Londinium?"

A new guy came out, unarmed and smiling. "Because we built in stone and with an eye towards controlling access. *Ave*, Honorius. Is this the big brother you bragged of?"

"Lupo, meet Flavius Theodosius, the military governor of Britannia. It's his job to expel the fucking foreigners who slaughtered so many civilians. Your mother could help him with that."

"Ma likes to be helpful. You'll need to leave your horses in the stables because we don't like picking up other people's shit. Follow me when you're ready."

Theo noticed the stables were not cheap. They dismounted and walked, feeling puny amid all this towers.

"Can you take me up your lift?" Max asked like a puppy after a treat. He had heard stories.

Lupo laughed. The six men soon stood in a cage that rose very fast. They flew up 12 stories as the counterweight fell. Each man held onto grab rails. Oxen

walking in circles returned the counterweight. Lupo led them along the roof, which thousands of archers could shoot from, if necessary. Rain drained from pipes into huge drums that were pumped onto water tanks on the roof for gravity-fed plumbing.

“Look at that view!” Theodosius marveled at the near-empty city. “Rome should have these.”

Bridges led to neighboring buildings, though the streets were extra wide to accommodate the population density. A hole in the center offered residents lighting. A park and playground, with a fountain and pool, gave kids somewhere safe to play. Lupo pointed out the school, clinic, and police office on the second floor. Stores, markets, and eateries monopolized the first floors.

It all shook Max to his core. “I’ve never seen a cleaner city. All of Londinium should be like this. Imagine 10x the people with 1/10th the horses. Lupo, how do we get down?”

He led them to a corner, which had a pole that took them to ground level. “You’ll want to wear gloves or the friction will burn your hands. First timers often scream like little bitches.”

“Don’t look at me,” Max said defensively. “I’m a big bitch.”

Theo followed Lupo and was heaving when Max landed. Shocking the youngsters, the general gave Lupo a hug.

“Thank you for that. I’ve never felt so young and so old at the same time.”

“I need to slide down with my women,” Max concluded. “I bet that ride puts them in the mood. My kids will grow up the luckiest in the empire.”

The place was packed with people who did not look poor, as if the Romas accepted the higher half of society. Their neighborhood had its own meat market, dedicated stores, eateries, pubs, with a water fountain in the middle of a grassy park—all crowded now because they took so many rich homeless in. Sara City multiplied its population because people had few other places to live. Lupo led them to the southwest corner of the capital. Like all Roman towns, they built Sara City in a grid pattern, with signage to give people directions. Each block was painted a different color, though now most were brown from the smoke, ash, and soot. Londinium needed a lot of paint.

“Lupo, your streets are clean,” Theo noted approvingly. “Your sewers, drains, and drainage trenches are the most robust I’ve ever seen. How do you get rid of your trash?”

“A garbage company comes around. I hear people in Parisi walk ankle-deep in refuse. No wonder they fall like flies to disease. Here we divide trash into soil-friendly and everything else because our urban gardens need rich soil. The Thames powers our grain, bone, and lumber mills; the current turns waterwheels that pump groundwater onto our drinking tanks. We bathe and clean with rainwater, yet drink something cleaner. Human and animal waste fertilize our fields while lime and ash reduce acidity.”

“You have a bone mill?” Theo asked suspiciously.

Lupo did not look like an innocent man. “It crunches bones into powder as a soil additive that we spread on fields before plowing. It’s an ancient custom. Anything that decays helps as well, which is why we recycle food waste. Our groceries donate whatever they don’t sell in time. Our restaurants save whatever is

not eaten. Even with crop rotation, this doubles yields. We Romans like to be efficient.”

“You’re more Roman than you look.”

Lupo laughed. “We’ve been citizens for over 300 years. To blend in, we even changed our last name to Roma.”

“What’s cooking beyond the walls?” Max asked, ever curious, pointing at smoke on the horizon.

Lupo wondered how deep he should explain. “Wheat exhausts a field in just one year without soil additives. Human and animal waste flows onto dirt-covered wagons, which dump them onto a water-powered mixer. We add lightly burnt, combustible trash—ash is another ancient soil additive. Big, bulky garbage items are sent separately to fill walls or foundations. Metal, furniture, and pottery shards survive, but everything else turns either to ash or what we call, micro-waste. We mix mud, manure, and mulch to fertilize soil. This replenishes nutrients that crops suck up. Distant farms take waste on barges. Our biggest farmers pay for our crappy refuse, while removing it for us. Sara City makes a profit on what is a shitty cost for every other city in the world. As this is a collective effort, it lowers municipal operating costs.”

Theo caught on. “Your residents contribute, sort, and recycle because they pay less in local taxes.”

Lupo laughed. “Exactly. Ride to our farms and compare the soil. We have experts who manage the mixtures because too much of one ingredient messes things up. The right mixture turns dirt into super-soil, reducing the need to leave fields fallow. Farmers still rotate crops, because different foods exploit different nutrients, but rarely need to skip seasons. When they do, they plant clover or beans, which enrich nutrients. A farmer with three fields usually leaves one empty, so our farmers are a third more productive because of our reusable waste system.”

“Someone is a genius,” Max said.

“Sara sees things, as you shall see. Population density depends on agricultural intensity. The better we farm, the more people who can live. If given security, we could scale up and turn Londinium into the world’s most populated city, but with the lowest cost per capita.”

Lupo pointed to tall towers full of trees and berry bushes. “Urban gardens provide us with fresh fruits and vegetables. When a store or restaurant runs out, they grab whatever they need for the day. While grains require huge flat lands, fruits and vegetables are better grown vertically to control water, drainage, soil, temperature, and humidity. We can shield them during cold nights or windy storms by simply closing the shutters. The sick, disabled, and the elderly live there for free and stay productive by tending gardens. I only wish we had many more, networked together to better ensure the water supply.”

“Crap,” Theo said softly. “I need to redesign the city. Wish I came here sooner. The architects, engineers, and construction crews I brought from Rome will be pissed I’m changing everything.”

“I’m a civil engineer,” Lupo said, shocking no one. “Send them to me and I’ll explain how we do things in granular detail. I’ve a million ideas. The better we

design New Londinium for efficiency, the cheaper it'll be to operate, which lowers everyone's taxes."

Max saw the possibilities. "Uncle Theo, vertical gardens would give soldiers something to do on the Wall or in forts, while securing their food supply against sieges. All those watchtowers we plan for the east coast could double as gardens. Imagine how much we'd save if soldiers grew half their food. It'd certainly simplify logistics."

Theo nodded approvingly. "We'll make them improve their own soil, too. I hate seeing human waste go to waste."

Lupo continued. "I've designed walled-in fortified villages and villas. You can probably improve them to maximize self-sufficiency. Rome charges its troops for food, so the more they grow, the more money they save. Our meat markets dig deep into bedrock to store steaks within insulated ice boxes layered with fresh ice and a drain. The near-freezing temperatures help meat last longer. Teams float potable water in barrels in high-altitude northern lakes, store them underground once frozen, then bring shiploads here whenever we need ice. We serve flavored crushed ice year-round. General, ice could simplify your logistics by distributing more meat fewer times. Your sentries could survive off smaller herds while withstanding sieges longer."

Theo was feeling better already. The solution to raiders was layers of defenses, but supporting and supplying them sounded expensive. Max would later reduce the cost by getting free farm and ranchland and compensate the government by supplying mini-forts with food they could not grow themselves like flour and beer. Everyone wins and no one loses.

Theo hummed happily through Sara City, totally unprepared for the shit flying to the fan.

## Chapter 14

### **Sara City, Londinium, Spring 368**

From the outside, Sara's home was no nicer than the rest of their neighborhood, but the inside was all gold and marble. Very tasteful. The mosaic floor was the best Theo had ever seen. The backyard garden rivaled anything in Rome.

Lupo lowered expectations because his mother did not like uninvited guests. "I don't know if she can show you the future. Like all women, Sara gets in moods. Without enough rest, she can't clear her head. It's worse since she turned 70. Sara may be napping, but we also have a loan to discuss. General, can you sign for the emperor?"

"I can, if I have reputable witnesses. I have a sealed letter of introduction from the imperial supernumerary (chief accountant)."

That made Lupo happy. "Let's take care of that loan before my mother sees you. How much do you want?"

"As much as you can lend me, for as long as you'll lend me it, if the interest rate is very, very reasonable. The more you lend me, the faster we'll rebuild Britannia."

“As long as not one sesterce is spent off the island.”

4 sesterces equaled 1 denarii. A solidus was a solid gold coin. Bullion was small silver or gold bricks.

“Agreed. Whatever you lend me will be spent in Britannia, for Britannia. All public works. If I want a personal loan, we’ll do that separate.”

“We’ll loan you more if you build in marble. We want to lure rich people to Londinium.”

Theo was liking this guy. “We’ll use the finest materials to make this capital look better than Rome.”

The six men quickly reached an agreement, with Lupo and Honorius doing most of the talking. Pelagius grew up with governance, which is why Theo brought him along. It’d break his heart when Pelagius became a monk after retiring from the Army. An infamous monk who challenged church doctrine, but still a fucking monk. The Pelagian Heresy would divide Christianity because orthodox church leaders taught pre-determinism (sinners are saved by divine grace alone) while Pelagius preached free will and good works to get into Heaven. By denying St. Augustine’s theory of original sin (you’re born bad), Pope Zosimus and the Council of Carthage in 418 declared Pelagius a heretic. Pelagius didn’t think sin could be inherited, that all babies are born innocent; people must do bad things themselves to sin, not inherit sin from Adam and Eve in a strange kind of collective guilt. How can newborns be sinners? He and his views became famous when Pelagius moved to Rome in 380. His fiery speeches entertained the multitudes, as he criticized Augustine of Hippo for treating pagan fatalism as if it were Christian doctrine. Germanus, a bishop of Auxerre, came to Britannia in 429 just to confront supporters of Pelagianism.

Which all started because of Sara the fucking Seer.

Lupo couldn’t stop smiling. “I’ll have the city’s supernumerary prepare the paperwork. With the governor dead, Civilis, as the *vicarius*, is the highest ranking civilian. He’ll need to study this before he signs as a witness because it obligates the provincial government if the imperial one fails to repay.”

The Seer was ready for them in her vision chamber, dressed casually instead of her usual flamboyant work outfit, which she correctly assumed Theo would interpret as a scam. She looked sharp for an old lady. Maxima held her arm to steady her.

“Do I know you?” Max asked Sara, confused. He hated confusion. The only colorful options he liked were white and black. Greys pissed him off. “I saw you and the exotic hottie in dreams. Really weird dreams in which you both love and hate me.”

“I don’t believe we’ve met. You speak Brittonic very well, Roman,” Sara answered in flawless Latin. “Maxima, do you know this man?”

The girl didn’t hit puberty so much as crush it. One day, it seemed, she was just another pretty girl, and the next day she sprouted outstanding breasts and curves that flowed in all the right directions. Lupo basically put her under guard because she was about to pop her virginity like a cork. She radiated sexuality like old men radiate decay. The dark beauty had been staring at Max, another dark beauty, wondering what their kids would look like. If he was rich and wild in bed, he’d be perfect for her. Nana had to squeeze her arm before she snapped out of it.



“This is definitely the first time I’ve ever laid eyes on him,” Maxima carefully said, her eyes locked on his. Max’s cavalry uniform and legate insignia spoke for themselves.

“Maxima? Really?” Theo asked, intrigued. “What a coincidence. Max is my nephew. Max and Maxima Maximus has a great ring to it.”

“Magnus Maximus,” Young Theo added to break the moment.

“Minimum great” was like calling the ugly, “minimally attractive.”

“Boys!” the general warned sternly, his tone an angry growl. Theodosius hated being embarrassed in public. “Sara, my brother thinks you can help me, but I don’t see how.”

“If I put my hand on your forehead, you may see things today that may change your tomorrow. It can last a few moments or all afternoon, depending on how interesting your future becomes. We’re prisoners to the past, but newborns to the future. Let me show you and you’ll see for yourself. I normally charge for this service, but I’m offering it to you for free because I want to make sure our loans will be repaid.”

Theo chuckled at that because he wanted to know what the catch was. “Must I kneel?”

“Let’s sit on this sofa in case this vision lasts a while. I just relieved myself and urge you to do the same.”

Theo studied her to make sure she was serious. “Well, I don’t want to pee myself. I’d never live that down.” Lupo showed him to the toilet and the general came back refreshed. “Max, tell the troops to make themselves comfortable, but to stay nearby. They are not to leave Sara City without me. Son, watch my back. And my coin purse.”

“Yes, uncle.” Max dutifully marched out, but quickly came back to not miss the show.

“Maxima, please massage the commander while we share mulled wine. General, this will help you relax, which will clear the vision. Lay back and put your feet flat on the floor so your energy flows better. We’ll drink from the same glass so you know it’s only lightly drugged.” The hottie winked at Max before digging into Theo’s neck and shoulders. He ooo’d and aaa’d despite his legendary self-control. “Close your eyes and clear your mind.”

Sara held Theo’s forehead and mentally they flew away. Maxima positioned big pillows to hold them in place. They looked like statues frozen in sex positions.

Theo smiled as the video in his head started. He called out the score: “We pacified southern Britannia and we beat their combined army, north of Hadrian’s Wall. The Roman in charge up there has captured Valentinus, who I recognize from the imperial court. Wow, I see myself strangling him to death. After all the grief he caused, that is very satisfying. Of 4 million people living here, that bastard helped kill 100,000.”

“Next year, the Alamanni re-cross the Rhine to plunder Moguntiacum. Valentinian has their leader, Vithicabius, assassinated. The emperor takes legions from across the empire to invade the Rhineland, burning dwellings and food stores before winning the Battle of Solicinium. Val suffered heavy casualties and was almost killed losing his helmet and his standard bearer while scouting. Any more victories like that and we’ll lose the empire.”

“Oh, now I’m sailing my four legions to Rome, where the emperor has me replace Jovinus as commander-in-chief. Jovinus now sees me as a threat to his status, so I doubt this will end well for me. I never dreamed I’d be in charge of the empire’s military. I see my kids. Max, where are you? Oh, I left you in charge of Britannia.

“Son, as *magister equitus*, we beat Alamanni in Gaul with you as a real legate. We attack the Alamanni through Raetia, take many prisoners, and almost catch the traitor, Macrian. Val executes General Hortarius for conspiring with Macrian, but is later forced to make peace with Macrian because the Sarmatians and Quadi invade Illyricum. We’re sent against this massive horde of invaders. I see us in Dalmatia (modern Croatia), winning a bloody battle. Theo, you’re now my Master of Horse and a real general in your own right.

“The fun never ends. Theo, I see us in North Africa, still devastated by war, famine, and neglect. The corrupt governor, Romanus, has failed to protect the province from desert raiders, so the whole area is up in arms. Romanus supports the bastard Firmus against the rightful Berber king, his legitimate brother. Man, what a mess! We need to arrest Romanus, in his own palace, replace those loyal to him without losing our heads, then pacify many tribes across a vast desert. Someone keeps trying to assassinate me. I conquer the tribes using light horsemen. A chieftain surrenders Firmus to us, but strangles himself before I do.

“Crap! Quadi, on the upper Danube, are pissed Val is building forts on their border. Hostilities break out and the emperor has the Quadi King, Gabinius, murdered at a banquet organized to negotiate peace. The Quadi and Sarmatians then cross the Danube to ravage Pannonia Valeria. They defeat two legions sent against them. Theo! Val promotes you! I see you as *Dux Moesiae* defeating the Sarmatians who invaded Moesia! You then become governor! You campaign with the emperor against the Quadi until winter, when the Quadi sue for peace.”

“In the Eastern Roman Empire, I see Val’s brother, Valens, burned alive in 378 after losing an entire army in battle.”

Theo’s voice got cool. “The Quadi envoys insist the war started because the emperor put forts on their land and demand he remove them. I see Valentinian screaming at the envoys until a blood vessel bursts. I’m governing Northern Africa, which still suffers from years of abuse, yet I see the emperor on his deathbed, speaking with his ministers. One recommends elevating me to Protector of his son Gratian, or even co-emperor, because who else can stop the Alamanni, Quadi, and Sarmatians? Instead, influential minister Maximinus, the praetorian prefect of Gaul and friend of Jovinus, advises making the emperor’s 4 year-old son, Valentinian II, co-emperor with Gratian while describing me as a threat to his sons. I see Val order my execution without regret. Decades of loyal service are nothing to him. A dynasty means more to him than even the empire.” Theo has no idea he is crying, but his voice softens to a whisper. “Before I know the emperor is dead, imperial guards come to arrest me. I’m jailed in Carthage, get baptized, then beheaded, though I have done no wrong and have served the empire well.”

When Theo finally wakes, dawn is breaking and his son is talking urgently with Max at the breakfast table. They raged at the injustice all night.

“He’s up,” Maxima says from a distant room. “And needs to poo.”

Young Theo helped his sluggish dad to the bathroom.

Theo felt hungover. “How much did I drink?”

“One sip of mulled wine yesterday around noon,” his son answered. “You spoke well into the night. Lupo said you both needed rest, so you slept together on the sofa, oblivious of each other. I tried to make you comfortable and checked your breathing to make sure you had not died. Dad, I’ve never seen you sleep like that. It’s like you weren’t there.”

Theo had never known such exhaustion. “Did you hear what I said?”

Max looked like he was attending a funeral. Theo gave his father a hug.

“Every excruciating word. I’ve never heard you speak so much. Val calls you his friend, but ordered your death after you saved his ass countless times.”

Theo aged a decade in one night. “The Army keeps choosing generals as emperors because the empire wouldn’t survive without them. Every emperor for the last few centuries has been either a combat commander or the relative of one. When killed, I was probably the most respected general in the empire. With Valentinian dead, my troops probably would have declared me emperor. Who could Gratian send against me? He was no general, though his father tried to make him one. The legions and legates all knew me. The business class would have felt safer with me in charge than that empty toga, Gratian. Val knew I’d have to kill his sons, and probably Valens. It makes sense he’d have me executed, but that does not lessen the pain. How can I serve him, after seeing my head fall off my body? I feel like killing him and taking my chances.”

“Dad, take the day off and sleep on it. Remember, Rome was not destroyed in a day.”

## Chapter 15

### Sara City, Londinium, Summer 368

Work forced Max to wait a month before appearing alone at Sara’s house. He had been out in the field, chasing criminals and foreigners with his Heruli. Lupo called for several fighters before opening the door.

“Sorry, Max. Seeing your uncle’s future took my mother out. She easily aged a year. I’ve never seen a session suck so much out of her. Go away and leave us alone.”

Max drew his sword and Lupo closed his oak door. “This blade is made of the finest Damascus steel. I’ll trade it for a session with Sara.”

It was actually his least favorite sword.

Lupo cursed from inside the large apartment complex. “I’ll see what mood she’s in.” A long while later, the door opened and Max stepped in. He found Sara in her audience chamber. Maxima arranged three plush chairs, each with pillows to push them forward while sitting up. She barely glanced at him, the seductive slayer gone. Max handed his sword to Lupo, who pulled it from the sheath and whipped it around like a maniac.

“I’m not doing this for the sword,” Sara the Seer told Max.

“I know. You need to know my future as much as I do.”

She nodded towards the hot teenager. “Maxima can’t do what I do, but she helps me see farther, deeper, and clearer.”

“My uncle expects me to be gone for a while, so let’s see as much and as far as we can.”

“This is a dangerous thing to attempt. I may not survive it, which is another reason I need Maxima to see what we see—to share the vision with the family. Max, like your uncle, you’ll probably see things you wish you never knew. It’ll haunt and terrify you.”

“What my uncle saw terrifies me already. I cannot find peace until I know more. Honestly? I’ve never been more scared in my life and I just spent a few months chasing Saxons.”

Lupo began to object, but his mother cut him off. “My arthritis is killing me anyway. Seeing the future can secure our family for another century. Men are not the only ones who can face death bravely. Max, the trick in life is to make it worth all the suffering. The good must outweigh the bad or it would be better to never have been born. There is one thing you must promise me, that I wish I made your uncle promise. If you do not swear it on whatever you hold sacred, then I’ll not let you see your future.”

Max gulped. That challenge has only one answer. “Anything, Sara.”

“You and your descendants must promise to defend Britannia before and beyond anything else, including your life and family. If you must choose between the good of Britannia and anything else—fame, glory, power, life, or even your uncle—you must choose Britannia. Swear it on all you hold holy but, before you do, know that I never leave those I envision with. I hear your uncle’s thoughts with a clarity that chills me—that’s never happened before. Right now he’s holding in a fart while that blowhard, Civilis, rambles on in his endless complaints. I connected so hard with my mother that I felt her long after she died of cancer. Mom’s still with me, but we love each other, so the embrace is mutual. If our session is deeper, longer, and even more intense, then a part of me will sear itself onto you and Maxima. I adore Maxima and she me, so my spirit will be a comfort to her.”

Her voice changed and Sara seemed to rise out of that plush chair. “But I don’t like you, Max. You have enough character flaws for a puppet show. You are selfish to a degree that stuns me. I doubt you are capable of love, beyond the infinite depth that you love yourself. You think you cherish your uncle like your cousin does, but you are sadly mistaken. I doubt you have shed a tear for anyone since you lost your parents, which taught you never to love anyone but yourself.” Sara leaned in with a menace that made Max pull back out of fear. “If you fail to put Britannia before yourself, your glory, and your happiness, then I’ll make your life an eternal hell. You’ll never know peace. I’ll become a parasite, sucking the life force from your mind, heart, and soul. If you think your worst ex is a vengeful bitch, then you can only imagine how horrible I’ll be if you fail to keep your vow.”

That was all bullshit, but Max didn’t know different. He was in full freak out. This lady was unlike anyone he had ever known. Not the emperor himself could induce this level of fear. He floated inside his body, disconnected and disturbed, like someone filled his limbs with mud and loathing. Just blinking took an enormous amount of concentration.

Sara calmed herself and flicked her hands to fling off the evil energies. “Lupo, bring our family Bible for Max to swear on. I also want him to swear on his other sword, which is far superior to the one he gave you. Max, do you believe in God?”

“Yes, but I don’t think he interferes in the affairs of men, which means he doesn’t matter. I’ve never known prayer to work. If God does not answer prayers, then he may as well not exist. He certainly does not stop bad things from happening, and that’s his fucking job. Every dead baby proves God doesn’t care. If God is all-powerful, all-knowing, and all-present, then all suffering is his fault. God may be in charge, but he is not in control.”

Lupo laughed. “Magnus must be the world’s worst Christian!”

“Prayers don’t work. God doesn’t matter.” Sara looked at Maxima, who shrugged. “At least he’s honest.”

Max shook himself awake. With one hand on the Bible and the other on his favorite killing sword, he swore an oath: “On my mother, father, and Julius Caesar, I vow to always put Britannia first before anyone and anything, so help me God.”

He fell back in his chair as if a mule kicked him in the forehead. Tension dripped off him like sweat. He could breathe easy, now that he had committed himself. If things turned to shit – as things often did – he could always kill himself. That made him feel better. No one loved him, though Uncle Theo cared a lot. Maybe his brother Marc, who looked up to Max.

“Hit me,” he told Sara.

Maxima slapped his face hard enough to leave finger-shaped pink spots. “Oh, you meant figuratively.”

She did not apologize.

“You’re a dangerous girl, Maxima.”

“Don’t you ever forget it.”

Sara waved her son goodbye. “Children, let us begin.”

Both ladies pressed a palm against Max’s temple and fucked him up for life. He prayed they could not see his soul, which was as dark as his black hair. He locked his own hands on theirs so they could not stop. Like jumping off a bridge or declaring yourself emperor, there was no going back. Like Caesar crossing the Rubicon, Max let the dice decide. The goddess Fate, that finicky bitch, would determine his destiny. Max felt Sara’s probing mind like a doctor digging through flesh for an arrowhead. Maxima lurked, taking mental notes and reserving judgment. Everything else disappeared as he glimpsed the first images of his fucked up future.

Max did not expect to get a bird’s eye view of the fall of the Roman Empire. The river of images drowned him, yet he could not get enough. He sped past important events with his women and children—apparently he marries after all—to see what really matters to him.

Uncle Theo loses his head in 376 and Emperor Gratian’s generals keep losing to barbarians, so Gratian makes Young Theo a provincial governor, who shows his father’s magic touch. In two years, Young Theo defeats all *Germani* in his province. When Goths burn Emperor Valens alive in 378 after the disastrous Battle of Adrianople with two-third of his army (40,000 slaughtered), Gratian puts Theo in

command of the Eastern military. Valens had no successor, so this sets Theo up for the throne if he can fix the many problems plaguing the Eastern Empire.

Theo brilliantly turns enemies into allies through treaties and special treatment. For example, when Athanaric, king of the Visigoths, dies, Theo honors him with a beautiful funeral that impresses other *Germani* leaders. Theo skillfully recruits every Visigoth chief to his side or has them ambushed. Next he uses misinformation to lure the invading Ostrogoths into crossing a hazardous river, where Theo surprises them. The massacre was marvelous. Many groups that previously fought the Empire now fought for it, a remarkable feat by a remarkable man.

Too bad he'd breed clueless, indulgent imbeciles that'd bring down a thousand year-old empire.

Gratian sees the inevitable and appoints Theo emperor in 379. Once he replaces important people with loyal leaders, Theo declares himself, Magnus Theodosius (Theodosius the Great).

Max took that like a kick to the balls. Theo wins after all, just like he boasted as kids.

On Sara's sofa, the trio surfed the images, taking comfort in each other's presence. Max saw himself in future Londinium as he heard the news. He and his cousin both knew Uncle Theo was a better man than either would ever be, and that's when it hit him like a javelin: Theo called himself Magnus Theodosius because so many people referred to Max as Magnus Maximus. But only one of them was an emperor, so the world knew which was the bigger, better man. Theo wasn't putting his beloved father down, but his vain, arrogant cousin. Theo knew what effect this would have, and relished it like an insatiable slut. The gauntlet was thrown, making war inevitable. Max dismisses images of his kids, growing up fast, and focuses on himself.

Max now saw himself in 381 as an older man defeating a combined army of Picts, Scotti, and Saxons—the sons of those he killed a dozen years before. Then his army declares him emperor. They yell, "*salve, imperator!*" and "*vir gloriosus*" (glorious man). That was easily the happiest moment of his life, rather than the birth of his boys. His daddy would have been proud and envious. Looking at it later, he could not believe how stupid he was. Max saw himself strip troops from across Britannia to invade Gaul. He met Emperor Gratian in battle near Parisi, beat him badly, and watched his son Andry hunt Gratian down and kill him. In return for good behavior, Valentinian II (still a child) and Theo recognize Magnus Maximus as Emperor of Gaul, Iberia, and Britannia.

Max is no longer an usurper or pretender. The empire now had an unprecedented three official emperors. After a few years, that's not good enough to fill his ego, so Max crosses the Alps into Italy and threatens Milan. Val II flees to Theo in Thessalonica, who agrees to marry Val's sister, Galla, and restore Val as Emperor in the West to both legitimize his own rule and for the opportunity to deploy the entire resources of both East and West against Cousin Max. Theo had no sons from the second marriage, so his idiot boys from his Gallic wife become emperor after him, in both the Eastern and Western Roman Empires, and tear it down until barbarians take over.

Max rules four years as Roman Emperor of Britannia, Iberia, and Gaul, Val II is emperor of Italy and Illyricum (the Balkans), and Theo reigns in the East, content to leave well enough alone. Then, desperate to become the next Caesar, Max invades Italy, only for Theo to beat him like a cur at the Battle of the Save in modern Croatia. Max led the combined power of Britannia, Gaul, Iberia, and Italy, while Theo had 40,000 Gothic Foederati and almost as many Huns and Alani. While Max remained inexplicably immobile by the Save River, Theo marched boldly through Illyricum with his main army while his Frankish general, Arbogast, rode up the Danube into Gaul in a pincer movement. By staying near the river while the enemy positioned itself, Max let himself be trapped. Theo breached the riverbank, so Max's brother Marcellinus counter-attacked in a battle that lasted all day. Marc dies like a man, but still loses.

This fixed Max's position for Arbogast to arrive with the Huns and Alani, mounted archers who used stirrups to stand and shoot while galloping. In 1066, William the Conqueror would beat King Harold at the Battle of Hastings using stirrups. Archers on horses with stirrups enjoy a more stable shooting platform than bouncing on a saddle. Accuracy basically doubled. His army routed, Max flees to Aquilia, a fortress on the Alps, where Theo besieges him. The garrison hands over Max in chains, like a slave rather than an emperor. Max watches his cousin drag his brother's corpse before him.

"I always liked Cousin Marc," Theo said sincerely. Max was on his knees, still shackled like an animal. "Marc was the big brother that you should have been. He died in battle at Poetovio and your son Andry lost a fight at Siscia. It saddens me that they took up arms against family. Max, I could have helped you keep Britannia, Iberia, and Gaul! Why Max? I need to know."

On Sara's sofa, Max wanted to know himself. He watched that fool say, "Like Julius Caesar, I cannot be happy being second best. I needed to know I am a greater man than you."

Theo lost all pity for him. "But neither of us is Julius Caesar. That man did everything better than anyone. I know I'm not that good, and I became emperor within three years of another emperor murdering my father. You are not better than me. My father was better than either of us. You did not need to battle me to know that."

Max had imploded upon losing to Theo. He had never lost before and assumed he'd never lose, but his mind fogged when he learned Theo was marching against him. Doubt paralyzed him when normally he was bold. Second-guessing gave way to third and fourth-guessing. All his weaknesses rose to overshadow the strengths that inspired others. His commanders, and especially his Germanic allies, no longer had confidence in their general. Max had hoped to defeat Valentinian II, take Italy, and have time to organize his new territories. Theo had been prepared because he knew nothing could satisfy Max's insatiable lust for glory. All those enemies that Theo turned into allies had saved his life and his empire.

Theo gestured and Arbogast rode up, dragging Max's oldest legitimate son, Flavius Victor, in the snowy dirt. It was freezing cold, but Victor was nude, terrified, and pleading with his eyes to the father who promised victory to Victor.

"I'm sorry I failed you, father," Victor said, his voice shaking and his back bleeding from being dragged for miles.

Theo scoffed. “Cousin, you didn’t fail him; Max failed you. He had it all, but needed more. Nothing would ever be enough for Magnus Maximus. I knew that when we played together as kids. As Seneca put it, if you are not satisfied with your lot in life, then, though you possess the world, you will yet be miserable. General Arbogast, I’d rather not spill family blood. Will you please take care of this sad business?”

A large man, Arbogast dismounted, stood over the naked boy in a man’s body and knelt on his chest to choke him.

Theo sighed. “Max, if there’s anything you want to tell your son, now’s the time.”

“I’m a fraud.” Max in Sara City watched future Max blurt out, the honesty killing him.

Cousin Theo disagreed. “No, you have real ability. You were much more popular, as emperor, than me or Val. Your lust for glory, however, fatally blinds you. You should have married your kids to mine, but patience was never your thing. Max, you always had an eye for weakness, except in yourself. I can’t imagine what you saw in the mirror, but it wasn’t what I saw, and I knew you better than anyone.”

Max watched future Max watch Arbogast strangle his crying son until his limbs went limp and fell softly in the snow. Victor had peed himself—Max could smell it from Sara’s sofa.

Theo found killing cousins cruel. “Max, the Senate will pass a decree of *Damnatio memoriae* against you to erase your name from history. You’ll be remembered as a pretender or usurper, not a legitimate emperor. Oh, have you met Alaric the Goth?” A big, burly barbarian walked up, smiling like a cat eyeing a rat. “His archers tore you a new asshole while I monopolized your attention. He has never beheaded an emperor before. I hope he doesn’t make it a habit. Max, you have any last words before Alaric tests your Damascus sword on your neck?”

“Theo, I always knew you were better than me. That’s why I treated you like shit.”

“Thanks, Max. I’ve waited a long time to hear that. For what it’s worth, my dad and I thought so, too. Just in case, I brought twice as many troops as you had. Dad often said, if Max ever pulls his head out of his ass, he could rule the world. I was worried you planned some epic tactic that I’d never see coming. I couldn’t believe you’d sit on your ass while I surrounded you. Alaric thinks you’re an idiot. If he sees the next emperor as an idiot, then the Roman Empire is screwed.”

The next Western emperor was Theo’s son Honorius, who was indeed an epic idiot who screwed the empire. Honorius did more to undermine the Roman Empire than Alaric, who sacked Rome.

Max begged for his life like a little bitch. “Cousin, please don’t kill me. Family first.”

Theo couldn’t believe it. “I recognized you as a third emperor, hoping that’d satiate you. All you had to do was be content with Britannia, Iberia, and Gaul. You planned to kill me and mine, so I must kill you and yours.”

From above, Max saw the sword come down and chop off his head, which rolled into his devoted son. The two looked at each other with dead eyes.

In Sara City, Max babbled incoherently throughout the surreal scene.



## Chapter 16

### Sara City, Londinium, Summer 368

Max must have mentally blinked because next he saw his first child (with Fana), Andragathius, now an adult, hear the news, put on his armor, and walk into the ocean, crying his father's name. His sorrow drowned him. This stunned Max because no one had ever loved him that much. Andry was now 6 and all a father could hope for in a son. Man, Max needed to bring his kids from Iberia to hug them to death. Eugenius was 4 and Elia should be walking by now. Motherhood had somehow made his secret wife, Fana, even more beautiful.

In Londinium, Max saw future Theo in Rome celebrating a triumph over him for quickly ending a potentially devastating civil war. Theo appoints his sons Arcadius as co-emperor in the East and later Honorius in the West. Arbogast, as military commander in the West, dominates volatile Val, even murdering his friend Harmonius in the emperor's presence. Val fires Arbogast, who rips up the order in front of his troops, saying Theo hired him, not Val. They both write to Theo, ruling from Constantinople, but the issue resolves itself when Arbogast hangs the 21 year-old emperor in his bathroom and declares it a surprising suicide.

This conveniently ends the Valentinian dynasty and opens a vacancy on the Western throne. Theo elevates his 8 year-old son, Honorius, his second son from his first wife, Aelia Flaccilla, as emperor of the West. Theo defeats Arbogast, who wants the throne, at the Battle of Frigidus River, at the cost of 20,000 Goths under Alaric, and becomes the last emperor to rule both East and West. Honorius becomes emperor in 393, but his father Theo dies in 395, leaving a mental midget in charge of millions.

Theo appoints a Romanized Vandal general, Stilicho, as commander in the West, whose daughter Maria marries Honorius. Stilicho fights constant *Germani* invasions into Gaul, Italy, and Iberia, plus a series of usurpers. Gildo, the Comes Africa and *Magister militae*, revolts in 397. Stilicho partners with Gildo's brother Mascezel to extinguish the revolt and restore the provinces. In 401, Alaric the Goth enters Italy, forcing Honorius to move the capital to Ravenna, an isolated city. Ravenna's natural defenses are so great that it stays the capital until the end of the Western Roman Empire in 476, but no one can rule from there because it's too isolated. Rome became powerful because its location is centrally located in the peninsula. By 402, Alaric gets as far as Luguria. Stilicho returns from Africa in time to beat Alaric at Pollentia and again at Verona. Stilicho stops an invasion by Radagaisus in 406, but only after the invaders lay waste to much of Northern Italy.

Also in 406, an enormous barbarian horde of Ostrogoths, Vandals, Alans, and Quadi cross the frozen Rhine River to devastate Gaul. Franks, Alamanni, and Burgundians follow to settle permanently west of the Rhine. *Germani* tribes now control virtually all of western Europe for the first time. The Celts that Caesar beat four centuries ago have lost their homeland forever.

The few soldiers left in Britannia support three usurpers: Marcus in 406, Gratian in 407, and then Constantine III. All three lose. Instead of killing *Germani*,

they fight Roman forces. The infighting weakens the empire. These usurpers deplete Britannia of manpower, who are helpless against Picts, Scotti, Hiberni, Franks, Jutes, Angles, and Saxons. Foreign settlers force Britons to move west, into mountains and marshlands, where their language develops into Welsh and Cornish.

Stilicho marries his second daughter Thermantia to Honorius after the first one dies in 407. Despite two wives, Honorius fails to beget children. Stilicho prevents another invasion of Goths by forcing the senate to pay Alaric 4000 pounds of gold. Honorius is at Bononia in 408 when he learns of his brother's death and the planned elevation of his brother's son, Theo II, to Emperor of the East. Stilicho persuades Honorius not to go to Constantinople because it's too dangerous and goes in his place to set up the new court. Upon his return, Stilicho drives invading Alans, Suebi, and Vandals from Italy; they instead invade Iberia in 409. A counselor to Honorius named Olympius convinces Honorius that his father-in-law wants to replace him, causing the emperor to execute Stilicho and his son Eucherius in 408. Theo's idiot son rewards priceless service with stupid slaughter. Stilicho drove off several *Germani* armies from Italy and was rewarded with execution. Showing his character, Stilicho didn't fight the men that Honorius sent to kill him; instead, he showed them his neck to make it easier for them. Ironically, Stilicho had hired Huns to protect him. They saw Romans digging their own grave and sent word back home. Atilla would invade Italy after conquering Eastern Europe.

In inexplicable madness, Olympius persuades Honorius to murder tens of thousands of wives and children of Goth soldiers serving Roman armies. Not Goths attacking Rome, but the innocent families of Goths protecting Rome. 30,000 furious Goth troops defect to Alaric, who marches on Rome. After a short siege, Max sees the Eternal City buy peace at an enormous price, handing over all their gold and silver. In childish fury, Honorius disavows the peace agreement, so an exasperated Alaric forces the Senate to elect a new emperor. Theo II, the Emperor in the East, sends his uncle 6000 troops, but Alaric ambushes them. Rather than give peace a chance, Honorius stops grain shipments to Rome to starve the Goths out and declares Alaric the eternal enemy of Rome.

Theo the Great turned Alaric from foe to friend, only for his son Honorius to turn that friend into an enemy. Alaric sacked the city in 410, for the first time in 800 years. The Sack of Rome shocks the western world, but it's nothing compared to the next time barbarians plunder the Eternal City.

Emperor Honorius likes to feed chickens. His favorite he calls Roma (Rome). When told of Rome's destruction (Alaric's sack of the city), Theo's son wails, "but I just fed her!" Like a madman, Honorius runs out of the palace, screaming, "Roma! Roma!" Not the city. The chicken. He gave two shits about the Eternal City, perhaps because he instigated the famine that wiped out its residents and practically begged Alaric to pillage the place.

When Constantius, a friend of Stilicho, became *Magister militum* in 410, he has Olympius clubbed to death.

In 409, Max sees his bastard son Gerontius rebel against his own master, the usurper Constantine III. Gerontius grandly declares his son (Max's grandson), Maximus Tyrannus as emperor in 410. "Tyrannus" means usurper, so that's what

history later named him. Gerontius beats Constantine's army and kills his son, Constans, at Vienna while trapping Constantine himself in Arelas. While besieged, much of Constantine's troops defect to Jovinus, the son of former military commander Jovinus. Now a Roman senator, Jovinus Junior declares himself emperor in 411 at Mainz with the support of Gundahar, king of the Burgundians, and Goar, king of the Alans. He lasts just two years, minting coins showing him wearing the imperial diadem.

It took a while, but Jovinus gets his revenge for Theo the Elder out-classing him.

Honorius sends his best general, Constantius, to Gaul. Gerontius' troops desert him for the imperial general. In 411, Constantius beats Gerontius at Arles in Gaul, forcing Gerontius to commit suicide. His son Maximus starts another rebellion in Iberia in 419, but is defeated by the Comes Asterius, brought to Rome, and then publicly executed in 422. To Max, seeing his severed head on a spike is like looking into a mirror. The legate leans in, pulling Sara along by force of personality, obsessed with seeing it all.

After defeating a relief force under Edobichus, Constantius persuades the besieged Constantine III to surrender, promising safe retirement, then beheads him. Constantius spends the rest of his life fighting barbarians. Visigoths under Ataulf leave Italy with Galla, the half-sister of Honorius, as captive. Ataulf kills Sarus, a general supporting Jovinus Junior. Jovinus the Usurper is captured in Valentia and executed by the *praetorian prefect* in Gaul. The head of Jovinus and his brother are sent to Carthage where they join the heads of four other recent usurpers because the Roman Empire has been reduced to this. Constantius campaigns against the Visigoths in Iberia in 416 and gains control of most of Iberia by 420. Honorius weds his sister Galla to Constantius in 417 and makes him co-emperor in 421, but Constantius dies after just 7 months in 423, at age 38. Looking through time, Max suspects Honorius had Constantius poisoned. However, the son of Constantius, under the name Val III, becomes emperor with his mother, Galla, as regent. His 30 year reign would see the dismantlement of the Western Empire because shit only falls down.

Val III is the son, grandson, great-grandson, cousin, and nephew twice over of Roman Emperors. Max now better appreciates how marrying his kids into powerful families can help its survival. Galla and Val III flee her half-brother Honorius, who desires her; if not sexually, then to hold her in his complete power because something is seriously wrong with a guy who lusts after his own half-sister. As Cicero once joked, incest is a game the whole family can play. Max is appalled and elated that Theo's son wants to fuck his own half-sister. Val III thus grows up in Constantinople, ruled by his cousin Theo II, who betroths him to his daughter Licinia. They'd marry when Val turns 18. After Honorius dies in 423, 6 year-old Val III becomes sole emperor, only for another usurper, this one named Joannes, to take over Rome. Joannes is captured at Ravenna, his hands cut off, and then paraded on a donkey in the Hippodrome as a mob insults him before his decapitation.

Max can't get enough. He watches while absorbing all he can, without a second thought for Sara's health draining.

Galla tries stabilizing the western provinces. Her generals beat the Visigoths in 426, 427, and 430, plus the Franks along the Rhine in 428 and 432. But she could not dislodge the Visigoths from Gaul, while Vandals in Iberia cross the Med to invade northwestern Africa. Losing these provinces costs the empire too much, bankrupting it.

Then things get worse.

Three generals fight for supremacy under Val III, Theo's weakling grandson. In 427, Felix accuses Bonifacius of treason, who then beats the army sent to arrest him. The third guy, Aetius, replaces Felix in 429 before having him killed in 430. Galla reconciles with Bonifacius so he'll stop the Vandal king Gaiseric, who then crushes Bonifacius and takes eastern North Africa in 431. Gaiseric's son is betrothed to the Visigoth king's daughter, uniting two powerful tribes. Galla, worried about Aetius after he has Felix killed, gives his army to Bonifacius. The two fight and Bonifacius wins, but suffers a mortal wound. As the last man standing, Aetius runs ironically to the Huns in 434 to force Rome to reinstate him. They'll later regret their choice. In Gaul, Goths win in 437 and 438, but Rome is victorious in 439 when Aetius beats the Franks and Burgundians, then quells a revolt by the Bagaudae.

By 440, Vandal fleets take Sardinia and Corsica, then raid and ravage Sicily. Huns cross the Danube into northern Italy and the Suebi take almost all of Iberia. Val names Attila the Hun his *Magister militum* for the Balkans so he does not invade Italy, but his sister Honoria offers Attila half of the western empire if he rescues her from a marriage her brother is forcing her into. Rescuing a princess is all the excuse he needs.

Attila invades the Gallic provinces in 451. Aetius, who got re-instated with Hun help, brilliantly organizes a coalition of his recent enemies (Visigoths and Burgundians) to repulse Attila at the Battle of Chalons. In 452, Attila invades Italy, where he meets the Pope on his way to ravage Rome. With a plague killing his troops, and the Eastern Emperor attacking his homeland, Attila leaves Italy. After a lover kills Attila in 453, his sons quarrel for power, then get trounced by *Germani*, ending forever the Hun threat to Europe, who go on to conquer northern India and Persia instead.

Pulled back into Britannia, Max sees one of his daughters marry Ennodius, a proconsul of Africa. Their descendants include Petronius Maximus, emperor for 77 days, another brief emperor in 472, Anicius Olybrius, and the Bishop of Pavia, St. Magnus Felix Ennodius. Another daughter marries Vortigern, a Briton warlord who fights Picts and Scotti. Their son, Vortimer, dies heroically in battle. But Max also sees 72,000 young Briton women ferried across the Channel. A storm kills most, but survivors must endure a lifetime of rape from their *Germani* captors. Britannia lies defenseless as savages slaughter and enslave.

"I was sent to Britannia to protect the island," Max whispers to himself, "and instead I pave the way for a foreign takeover. Like in Europe, Celts will never rule themselves."

With those threats over, Senator Petronius Maximus convinces Val III to personally kill General Aetius in 454, even though Val's youngest daughter, Placidia, has married the son of Aetius. Val leaps from his throne to strike the

unarmed general in the head. A counselor then famously says, “your left hand just cut off your right.”

Petronius Maximus then has two Scythian bodyguards murder Val III on the Campus Martius in Rome to avenge Val raping his wife Lucina. In other words, Max’s great-grandson murders Theo’s great-grandson. The next day, Petronius declares himself emperor, but reigns for just 11 weeks before a Roman mob stones him to death for many, many good reasons. A few days later, Vandals brutally sack Rome for two weeks.

In Londinium, Max mumbles in disbelief, “Theo and I both breed fools and fuckups!”

While Theo the Great was indeed great, his sons and grandsons were all terrible emperors whose inept leadership, character defects, and personal flaws directly led to the end of the Roman Empire. The Eastern Roman Empire switches to Greek and becomes the Byzantine Empire for another millennium, until a metalworker in Transylvania sells the world’s biggest cannon to the sultan besieging Constantinople.

Max assumes the ride is over, but the images continue. Clenching his fists, Mad Max drains Sara of her last lifeforce.

Visigoths help put the next guy in charge, but Roman general Majorian deposes him after just a few months because the new emperor encouraged Visigoths to invade Iberia. Controlling just Italy and a few spots in Gaul and Dalmatia, Emperor Majorian wars against Rome’s enemies for three years, defeating Vandals, Visigoths, Goths, Burgundians, and the Suebic Kingdom in Iberia. However, a Romanized *Germani* general, Ricimer, kills Majorian because the Senate didn’t like his reforms.

The remaining emperors were just puppets for barbarians who fought for supremacy, until another *Germani* named Odoacer deposes the last western emperor in 476. Odoacer, an east *Germani*, was himself beaten by the Ostrogoth king, Theoderic the Great, who then conquers most of Italy. In 493, Theoderic invites Odoacer to a banquet to reconcile and instead kills him with his own hands. He’d later form a Gothic superstate called the Ostrogothic Kingdom that stretched from the Atlantic to the Danube River.

Causing so much unnecessary misery plunges Max into oblivion. Neither alive nor dead, he wills himself to not exist, like a Buddhist, then fails at that, as well. The fraud and failure flails forever. Desperate to change the scenery, Max pushed beyond Europe to see what was happening in the rest of the world. He soared over the horizon, pulling Maxima after him, with Sara little more than a faint heartbeat. Sensing he had little time, he flew fast, the images coming faster than he could comprehend. Eager to distract himself, Max soaked up the future until he ran out of time.

## Chapter 17

**Sara City, Londinium, Summer 368**

Max became dimly aware of someone kicking him, but welcomed the pain until the person tired. Others kick him later, but the smile on his face freaked them out. A warm stimulate is poured down his throat, the drug worming its way into his brain. Max tries to drown, but mistakenly swallows. Finally, a voice he trusts whispers to his spirit (Romans didn't believe in souls until Christianity).

"Magnus, wake up! Your son Andry needs you!" Max adored the cute tyrant. If Max loved anyone, he loved Andry. Max recognized the soothing voice of Pelagius before recognizing his face. Max's eyes were open, but it seemed to take forever for his mind to turn on. His friend sighed in defeat. "Maxima, I think he needs more bitch-slapping."

Max had told Pelagius where he'd be, so his friend visited daily, only to see three people sleeping soundly. Well, one was very dead, while nothing could wake up the others. The locals let him in because they did not want to be blamed for a high-ranking Roman lying comatose in their neighborhood. The teenage hottie who once looked at Max with so much lust now saw him with absolute disgust. Maxima sat on his chest, her legs stretched on either side of his head, giving him a great view of her red panties—until she smacked his face hard with her right hand, then her left.

Though off-brand, Max tried something new—he apologized. "I'm sorry for everything. I'm a fuckup like my father and my descendants." That was not good enough, so the girl continued hitting him hard, twisting her upper body to give the blows greater force. "Yes!" the fool yelled, welcoming the punishment and hoping it'd last forever. "Break my nose, then turn and tweak it. Please hurt me more! I need pain! Please punish me for my sins!"

Maxima enjoyed hurting him almost as much as Max welcomed the pain. Pelagius traded startled looks with Lupo and other family leaders. Max was rock hard, which Maxima didn't know until she leaned back into it. Heart palpitating from the workout, she planned to kick his face, but instead turned to see what the fuck was poking her back. The unhappy virgin gasped at the spear in her face, pulled it loose from its trousers, and gobbled it down. Her ooo-ing and aah-ing warned the audience that she was not stopping. Backing up, she pulled her undies aside and slowly sat on Max's penis. Her grunts and groans got louder as she bounced up and down, her eyes closed but her mouth wailing like a Banshee. They climaxed together and she collapsed on him, resting her cheek on his chest as if fucking in front of family is fine.

"I'll confess," Pelagius said in the stunned silence. "I didn't see that coming."

The sex woke Max up. He stared in horror at the hottie, her long black hair thrown over his fantastic face. "No! Don't let me fail up. I deserve punishment! Flay me alive. Castrate me. Kill me slowly. I deserve worse than anything you fools can think of."

The traumatized fool screamed loudly because he clearly heard Sara the Seer whispering words that echoed inside his head. She despised him more than usual for draining her of her lifeforce. Max would become an even busier workaholic to avoid listening to her. He'd often have musicians play while he worked or slept to drown her out, while humming to himself. Magnus Maximus wasn't crazy; he just had a disembodied voice berating him whenever he slacked off or enjoyed himself, which drove him crazy.

Pelagius had enough. “Damn it, Max! Your uncle is asking for you and I can’t keep making excuses. We’re at war and need every fighter. Stop sniveling like a coward and die in battle like a good Roman.”

“Battle? Oh, fuck yeah!” Max roughly threw her off and paid no heed as she landed with a thud. His penis slid out of her contentedly. “North! We need to hunt the enemy. Pelagius, help me up.”

“Tuck your monster in and I’ll give you a hand.”

Lupo got in the way, pointing a Damascus sword at Max. “You drained my mother like a dried fruit.”

Max looked at the lady on the nearby seat, but saw only a toy doll the size of a dwarf. Then he recognized the pink sapphire necklace and stepped back horrified, almost impaling himself on Lupo’s blade. Sara had indeed dried out, as if someone sucked the life essence from her, then continued sucking. Skin clung to fragile bones, all meat melted.

“No!” Max screamed at what was left of Sara the Seer. “I need another vision! I’m a changed man. My destiny must change as well.”

“You’re a selfish asshole who killed my mama,” Lupo said. “And let Germani conquer Britannia, one settler at a time. You directly caused the collapse of the Western Empire. Petty kingdoms consume Britannia for the next thousand years. You broke the Pax Romana (Roman peace) and let millions of innocents die before their time. You can’t die yet; you must pay with your life to change the future.”

Pelagius swallowed vomit bubbling up his throat. He knew bullshit when he heard it, but Lupo’s words rang true. The faces of the people around them did not doubt this. Pelagius wasn’t there when Maxima told her family what she had seen. The hostility they felt towards Max now made more sense.

“Magnus, if your uncle does not see you soon, he’ll tear this place down. Lupo, help me throw him on a horse. You can kill him later if Picts or Scotti or Attacotti or Hiberni or Saxons don’t get him first. I doubt you’ll ever see this fool again.”

Pelagius obviously could not foresee the future. Someone handed Max a watersack and he drank it like he had just crossed a desert. Another gave Pelagius several more.

“I’m not thirsty.”

“It’s all for him, idiot. He’ll be sick unless he hydrates fast. Max slept one day longer than Maxima, who had done this before. He’ll be dizzy, too, and have trouble sleeping. Return him here if he has vivid hallucinations. Or get him drunk until this shit passes.”

“But we’re going to war!” Pelagius wanted to scream.

Max felt better once they got outside and felt the sun. Without stirrups, mounting a horse was hard, so people used stepstools or, in this case, chiseled rocks to give kids, the sick, and the elderly height to make it easier.

“Stirrups!” Max mumbled.

“What are stirrups?” Pelagius asked since only Huns had them outside China.

They rode out of the city and into the fort next door. Near the command tent, Max roared, “Uncle Theo!” The general stepped out, alarmed. “Sir, I need a day off. I’m exhausted.”

Theo assumed Max would push himself harder than anyone, but was still surprised by his appearance. “Take three. We’re going north when the infantry legions arrive and I need you rested. Tribune, take care of his duties.”

Instead of his own tent, Max rode to the blacksmiths and slowly explained what he wanted. The craftsmen listened, then asked him to repeat himself. This time Pelagius barked an order to make 10,000 metal triangles, as fast as possible, to be tied with leather to saddles to make it easier to get on horseback. That’s when they lit up and started loudly throwing ideas at each other. By the time Max left, they had piled long lines of rebar to be twisted into triangles as a ring that holds the foot by a strap. Max would soon have the first stirrups in Europe. Next he ambushed the engineers – every legion had a unit. Max drew them a double-curved bow (used by Huns) and ordered them to make him one.

“They use them on the Central Asian steppe. Something about the shape makes them fling arrows farther. I want to test one to see for myself.”

As if the carpenters didn’t have enough to do, rebuilding the capital. “You want a bow that’s almost as tall as you?” the chief carpenter asked in disbelief. “It can’t be made from just wood.”

Max tried to remember. “It’s a composite bow with large siyahs and string bridges. It has a bamboo core, horn on the belly, and sinew in the back, bound with animal glue.”

They laughed at their legate. “Show us one and maybe we can duplicate it.”

Max wouldn’t let this end. “I will.”

## Chapter 18

### **Londinium, Britannia, Summer 368**

“Please support me for once,” Max begged Cousin Theo, who eyed him suspiciously as he modified the saddle. “Pelagius, tell Theo it’s no trick.”

“Commander, it makes riding easier and more comfortable. We’d like to add stirrups to all our saddles, but need to convince you before bothering your father. Try it and see for yourself.”

Theo looked at the metal triangle, then shrugged, put his left foot in it, and pulled himself onto his horse. “Hot damn! That’s so much easier. When sick, injured, or hungover, this will be great!” Then he saw Max’s happiness and frowned. “I can’t believe you thought of this.”

Max moved to damage control. “Actually, I heard the Huns use it. Imagine shooting arrows while standing rather than bouncing at high speed. This could mean the difference between victory and death. Not just ours, but your father’s. We don’t know how many warriors the enemy coalition has, but they’ll probably outnumber us 3 to 1. Cousin, we need every advantage we can get. Ride about and decide honestly.”

Theo raced around the fort, loving his feet pressing against something rather than hang loose in the air. It helped him turned sharper and lean forward, giving him greater control. The effect was transformational. When he passed his tent,



Max handed him a bow and a quiver. Theo rushed to the practice field and shot bullseyes at a gallop.

He came back convinced. “We need this bad. I’ll get dad.”

Theo, however, ordered them into his command center. He still looked like he suffered from three too many benders. The general closed the door and opened fire:

“Max, I hear you killed Sara.”

Max felt like a bug about to be swatted. “Sara died giving me a long reading. Uncle, your death kills our careers. Theo retires to his home in Iberia while I try holding the fort here. The emperors and their successors cannot general their way out of an outhouse. The Rhine River freezes in the winter of 406; a million *Germani* cross to overwhelm Gaul, then Italy, Iberia, northern Africa, and even here. A guy named Constantine III takes every fighter from Britannia to slow them down; they all die and our island is defenseless against waves of Angles and Saxons. Suebi conquer our homeland (Gallacia in Iberia), slaughter our family, and then take control of the western half of the Iberian Peninsula. Sir, I saw them kill our women and children.

“Alaric the Goth sacks Rome in 410 and Vandals sack it worse in 455, after conquering Carthage in 439. The Western Empire ends and the eastern one shrinks into a Greek city-state. A plague fills Constantinople with unburied dead and kills 50 million over the next few hundred years. Fleas feeding on rats riding grain ships take the plague across the empire. Trade stops, food prices soar, and millions starve. Every ship and city needs cats that no one feeds so they’re forced to hunt rats. Without rats, outbreaks stay local, limited, and temporary rather than massive, deadly epidemics.

“Sir, I know I squeezed Sara too hard, but we needed to know how pandemics kill millions. Smallpox, chickenpox, measles, tuberculosis, and influenza are spread by face-to-face contact with someone infected—coughs, sneezing, and bodily fluids. We need masks, either hemp, canvas, or linen, over the mouth and nose, to stop the spread, while washing everything the sick contaminate: clothes, bed sheets, furniture, doorknobs, etc. In outbreaks, everyone should wear gloves that are washed daily. Mosquitoes spread malaria, yellow fever, and other killers by sucking blood from the infected and regurgitating that infected blood into others. To combat outbreaks, people must cover their skin to avoid bites, generate smoke, which mosquitoes hate, adopt windows and screens so buildings don’t let mosquitoes in, refine oils that repel insects, sleep under nets, and minimize stagnate water, where the fuckers breed. Or move to where it’s cold. Disease can contaminate food and water sources, like corpses in wells, and some people get infected from working with livestock. Villages should stop sleeping with cows and pigs in their homes. We must drain swamps, marshes, and bogs, where mosquitoes flourish, and order our doctors to search the world for whatever reduces fevers. There must be a leaf, flower, or bark that fights fever.” Max turned to his cousin. “Someone should probably write all that down.”

Theo sat down, suddenly ancient. “What else did you see?”

“After the Roman Empire ends, the Italian peninsula is ruled by foreigners or petty tyrants for over a dozen centuries before united under native rule. Superstition replaces knowledge and a Dark Age rules Europe for a millennia.

Roman culture fades, almost everyone is illiterate, and few Europeans bathe for over a thousand years because they consider it unhealthy.” Max looked at them. Cleanliness obsessed proper Romans. “Yeah, I still find that hard to believe. On the plus side, the Chinese invent ships with double hulls, watertight compartments, mechanical bilge pumps, and rust-proof nails. We should build bigger ships that are more seaworthy and keep them safe in harbors that limit wind and waves.”

“Prove to us that you’re not full of shit again,” his uncle demanded.

Max held up a triangle tied to a leather strap. “I saw Huns hang these from their saddles so they could shoot at a gallop while standing over their horses. The effectiveness is killer.”

“Well, that proves everything,” Young Theo scoffed. “Magnus, how high do you rise in rank?”

Max wondered if his cousin would let his father die if it meant he’d become the eastern emperor. His dynasty only lasts two generations, but he put several descendants on the throne.

“I beat the Picts, Scotti, and Saxons; my legions declare me emperor, and I invade Gaul. I beat Emperor Gratian, only to lose to the Eastern Emperor. I’m executed, Marc dies in battle, my son Victor is strangled in front of me, and Andry commits suicide. By stripping Britannia of troops, I leave it defenseless against Angles, Saxons, and Franks, who start seven kingdoms and change the language. The collapse of the Roman Empire impoverishes everyone and leaves Europe in anarchy, making millions miserable.” Max met their eyes so they’d see the truth. The traumatic experience was etched on his face like ancient plaster flaking off. “I’d rather kill myself than let that happen.”

“How do I keep my head?” Uncle Theo asked, keeping his priorities straight.

Max put on his can-do face. “Next year you took your four legions to Rome as if the problem was fixed. The same groups simply attack Britons again, but you’re not here to help. Those we save this year are killed when we abandon them next year. All this is futile unless we stay.”

“I tell Val to fuck off?” Uncle Theo asked with a grin, the temptation appealing in a suicidal manner.

“Buy us as much time as you can. Tell the emperor that keeping Britannia requires defeating the groups attacking it: Saxons, Picts, Scotti, Hiberni, and Attacotti.”

Young Theo had a better answer. “Next year, ask for another year to wallop the Attacotti. After that, say we need to punish the Picts. Every year something comes up that forces you to stay until Val’s brain pops. When push comes to shove, we offer to pay the legions from local revenue while training locals, without calling them legions. Dad, you only become a threat if you’re defeating invasions around the empire. Stay here and let legates forget you.”

“Val wants his legions back,” dad countered.

“Use them as long as you can.”

Max thought of something else. “What we need are more Romans, Romanized allies, and Latin speakers. Ask Val to give them free transportation here to replace the 100,000 who died. The more Latin-speakers in Britannia, the more people to protect the island. Britannia lost her three legions. Tell the emperor you need to

keep these four legions until you can replace the three slaughtered here. The more Celts he sends, the faster Val can get his legions back.”

Young Theo hit his cousin. “What’s your real reason?”

“Tribes from the steppe push *Germani* into Gaul. You don’t need Sara the Seer to see that. We need to lure Romanized Celts here before *Germani* kill them there. If we improve the place, even those in Italy will come here for safety. Let’s make Londinium a New Rome in all but name to lure educated professionals: craftsmen, stonemasons, metalworkers, businessmen, etc. The more who come, the more lives we save. Uncle Theo, finesse Emperor Valentinian. The more Celts he sends here, the fewer he has to protect in Gaul.”

The Theos made eye contact.

“It kills me to say it,” Young Theo declared, “but Magnus is right. However, I’d rather not spend the rest of my life in Britannia.”

Max jumped on his toes. “You can save Iberia! The Pyrenees Mountains blocks most of the peninsula. Just fortify the coastal plains on the east and west coasts and you can save every Celt in Iberia! Britannia needs a navy anyways. It’ll be twice as useful protecting Iberia!”

“That’ll take a lifetime,” Uncle Theo remarked.

“What better way for a Christian to spend his life than saving others? I’ll rule here and Cousin Theo will rule Iberia. We’ll urbanize so a bigger economy funds security. Rome may fall, but the Roman Empire could live on. Cousin, we’ll come to each other’s aid and never hurt each other. Family first! Agreed?”

Theo got into his nephew’s face: “You saying you never want to be emperor?”

Max had the perfect answer: “By definition, an emperor rules conquered people. I only want to govern Britannia—and maybe Pictland. Being a king would be cool, but I promise I’ll never call myself an emperor if my cousin promises as well.”

The 17 year-old got caught up in the moment, thrilled to save his beloved father. “Let’s swear it, then, on our family Bible.”

“Plus on our favorite Damascus swords. We live or die together like family should. Later we’ll get Uncle Honorius, our siblings. and cousins to swear as well. Agreed?”

The three swore holy oaths that changed European history.

As soon as they got stirrups, Max and his Heruli practiced horse archery with a vengeance. Standing in stirrups gave them more control, which helped them ride harder and turn faster while still shooting. Accuracy basically doubled. Riders could press their knees against their mount to direct it while using both hands to fire arrows. Max made a composite bow, then engineers, artists, and craftsmen helped him improve it, but each took many hours to make. The British longbow, as it became known, was about 5 feet long and the shape propelled arrows 60% better; together, those improvements roughly doubled its range, speed, and impact strength. Making enough became a problem, but training became an obsession because Max required all his mounted archers to requalify. Most were Heruli, but warriors from many tribes had practiced and competed to earn the extra pay and benefits. Heruli still dominated, but the division, as Max now called the group, had Romans, Italians, North African, Arabs, Jews, Slavs, Batavi, a few Greeks, and various nomads from steppe. Naulobatus, who Max called king of the Heruli since Huns conquered the rest, had to work very hard to make sure he remained one of

their best shots. 30,000 great bowmen tried, but only the best 10,000 qualified for the new unit. Theo was unhappy he had to buy 10,000 custom saddles modified for sniping at a gallop. They'd still fire saturation volleys from a distance, but punching through armor just got easier. Best yet, like Huns, they could strike enemies beyond range of counter-fire.

Cousin Theo tried training the Batavi legions that he led, but those East Germani didn't grow up hunting with a bow from horseback. They rode to work, then dismounted to kill with spear and sword like other *Germani*, except they wore Roman body armor and trained to maneuver. Led by Dutch, the Batavi were formidable and excelled at swimming, but didn't have mounted archery in their DNA.

Quivers only carry about 30 arrows. That lasts just a few minutes, while battles can go on all day. Max therefore perfected quiver sacks that extended from the new saddles to both protect the horses and carry the most arrows. The final design handled 1000 arrows – an unheard of amount. The Heruli Division looked ridiculous, with white linen bags that doubled a horse's width. The mounts looked fat, bloated, and unnatural. Against archers, armored riders are most vulnerable in their limbs. Max gave them steel chainmail sleeves within linen to protect their arms and legs, but the bulging quiver sacks also protected legs by covering them. Enemy arrows would puncture those sacks, but not pierce horseflesh. A chainmail chest guard reduced a horse's vulnerability to the front, while more sacks protected his ass. Ironically, as those sacks emptied, enemy arrows could finally reach the horse, but hopefully the battle will have been won by then.

At night, Max remembered vividly how Hun horsemen galloped in Sara's Vision, bracing their legs while shooting. Though they had iron arrowtips, he had steel, which was lighter, harder, and sharper. His machine-made shafts were better, as were his feathered fletches. His Heruli Division needed longer arrows to match the bigger bow, but locals were happy to make them using steel tips from Iberia. It'd take a year before Max could properly equip them all, but his best 100 mounted archers were geared up when Theo gave the word to march against enemies in the north. To distinguish this elite unit from common centuries, Max called this century the 1st Platoon. Once he equipped ten platoons (1000 men), he'd call it a battalion, while ten battalions would become a division. But now he just had a little over 100,000 long arrows and just over 100 double-curved composite bows.

Still, how much damage could he do with just 100 shooters?

## Chapter 19

### **Eboracum, Britannia, Summer 368**

The first infantry legion arrived in early spring with their heavy weapons. Theo sent it with his son to relieve the riverside city of Eboracum, which Valentinus had been besieging for several months with *ballistae* stolen from the Wall.

From the bow of the lead ship, Young Theo saw thousands of bodies rotting outside one corner of the castle where Valentinus concentrated his *ballistae*.

Attackers tumbled those walls, but defenders added inner barriers and arrow towers to massacre the men trying to get in. The foreigners (Saxons, Scotti, and Hiberni) left because the cost of storming the fortress was too much. Horseless Picts and Attacotti had nothing better to do. Defenders taunted their attackers by fucking on the ramparts—thousands of nude couples doing it by day so the enemy could see. Afterwards, they'd party to music, feasting, and dancing by the battlements.

"I hate fucking Romans," Valentinus told anyone who'd listen, which dwindled as the winter wore on. "I mean, I fucking hate Romans."

The mass orgies were fucking brilliant because the besiegers had few women. Valentinus expected to seize the entire town, which instead disappeared. The plan that Valentinus spent years on didn't survive first contact with the enemy. His allies were pissed. The horniest men left soonest. Enduring the depth of winter without proper shelter made others quit.

Commander Dulcitus spent the winter preparing vertical gardens and slow-cooking jerky because the fort didn't have enough grass or hay to feed the horses, sheep, and cattle. Pigs and chickens survived longer, as people ate a lot of river fish. By late winter, defenders would eat their meat, grains, fruits, and vegetables on the walls to taunt the besiegers. Dulcitus even moved stone cooking pits where they were most visible so the hungry foreigners could smell roasted pork, beef, or poultry. His next genius idea was hauling an oven on top to the tallest tower – the smell of fresh bread drove the enemy crazy. Once the Saxon fleet fled, local fishermen sailed in to sell fish to the fort by the boatload, but never to the besiegers.

The enemy took the entire Wall, but did not profit from it. Dismantling all that mortared stone was just too much work, so they burned what they could. They rode to raid Brigantes, who had forced villagers into their stronghold, Castle Hill. Burning huts is fun, but raiders had been dreaming of beef and bitches for two years. Brigantes hold the most land of any tribe on the island, so hitting all those villages spread the enemy out, making it easier for large groups of Brigantes to ambush them. The foreigners captured several thousand young women and kids, but lost several thousand warriors, making this an unprofitable campaign.

The sight of Roman ships coming upriver ended the siege, so Young Theo's legion diverted north to the port city of Din Eidyn, which Picts had also besieged, but without *ballistae*. Neither side expected a Roman legion to show up, and it saved the lives of 30,000 starving Votadini. Roman soldiers double as construction workers, so they set about improving defenses and mounting catapults, which drove the enemy farther away.

Hadrian's Wall stretches east-west. To both north and south, Hadrian dug trenches and raised long mounds to prevent horsemen from riding up. It also fatally slowed those on foot, who often needed ladders to get down berms and get up ditches while defenders showered them with missiles. All that before they reached a 15' tall stone wall. Roman towers had layers, with each floor or story filled with archers. Towers were often round to protrude past the outer wall to shoot those trying to climb up. The better the barrier, the fewer men needed to defend it.

Din Eidyn needed Roman fortifications, while Young Theo liked to build.

The fleet delivered the second legion, a month later, to Din Eidyn, which sits within a large bay-like estuary somehow called the Firth of Forth. The Picts and Attacotti who gave up on Eboracum wanted to take Din Eidyn, which was north of the Wall, with less formidable defenses. If they had started sooner, or moved their stolen *ballistae* faster over unpaved roads, they would have succeeded in sacking the city. Valentinus' spies told him that legions were securing the south, but he expected them to need many months to defeat so many Saxons.

Retreating forces knew who to blame: a Roman commander hilariously named Magnus Maximus. Valentinus put that name at the top of his Shit List.

The emperor had sent for more warships that swept the Channel clean of enemies. He (well, Jovinus) even burned Saxon ports, wharves, and shipyards. Many Saxons in Britannia were technically just off the coast, loading, organizing, or guarding their loot. They either sank or were forced to wreck themselves on the shore, where Max's men could kill them and repossess all that plunder. Freeing kidnapped girls and kids was a great morale booster for the legion. Legions had rules on division of spoils, but every ranker got rich off Saxon treasure.

Valentinus lost the war but, with a large army at his back, did not yet know it. Max, in Londinium, however, saw it all too clearly, as he struggled to perfect his third prototype bow. The two cavalry legions, broken into roving centuries, were scattered across central Britannia (the Midlands) after Theo spent months securing the South. As Max rode up the coastal highway, he sent messengers to bring his other horsemen to Eboracum.

Historically, every legion, broken down into centuries, needed wagons to carry artillery, tents, poles, blankets, pots, pans, picks, shovels, etc. But the North didn't have paved roads. Those ended at the Wall. Engineers instead learned how many horses were needed to carry all that stuff in modified saddlebags, satchels, and horse-drawn carts. Excluding spare horses, each rider had three mounts. Max recruited several thousand local warriors, so his 15,000 riders brought over 50,000 horses, which helped them travel faster than Uncle Theo's infantry.

One of the Brigante women went out of her way to befriend Gila and Serena, who introduced the hot teen to Max before he left Londinium.

"Magnus, this is Varina, the daughter of Dulcitus, the hero who saved Eboracum. She speaks Votadini and Brigantes; she'd like to help."

Max liked what he saw: beauty, strength, and ambition. "What can I do for you?"

"I want you to make my dad the commander of the Wall. I don't want a husband, but I'd love to be the mother of your children if you give me an apartment for every child I give you."

Max's ladies and kids lived in the luxury villa that he had repainted and replastered so it'd look like new. It'd take another year before the new outer city wall went up around it. Max didn't want his kids to grow up poor, and so gave apartments for the mothers to rent out in case something happened to him. Fana had three in Iberia, which she'd sell once he built his huge apartment complexes in northern Londinium. Gila and Serena were already pregnant, Fana probably pregnant, the way he ravished her upon her arrival, so he had room for another mother.

“I’ll draw up the paperwork,” Max told Varina, who clearly looked forward to losing her virginity “if this won’t anger your father.”

The teen laughed. “Dad will be thrilled I have Roman children, a home of my own, and financial security. Mom won’t be happy because she enjoys controlling me like a servant. To be free of her will be a breath of fresh air.”

Max looked both victorious and defeated. “If my ladies have no objection, then saddle up and don’t fall behind. I must ride fast to get there before the second legion.”

As Team Max traveled north, each unit practiced riding in formation while firing as the horse threw them in the air. It took practice to grab another arrow during the down cycle, but the result was a faster rate of fire. With a million new extra-long arrows, they were well armed and looking forward to killing the fucks who massacred so many. Enjoying the biggest bow in Britannia, Max spent hours a day pulling the string to build up strength and to burn off stress. Sara’s Vision had unnerved him, so anything that distracted him helped.

By the time Max and his riders reached Eboracum, Dulcitus had burned or buried the dead and was rebuilding the crumpled corner of his castle. Theo’s ships transported the heavy stuff so Max could travel lighter. Having only brought enough food to get him there, his Heruli and Briton escorts stocked up again. Varina and her brother found their father looking suspiciously happy. They explained her new living arrangement and Dulcitus told them to expect a sibling soon because he got busy during the boring siege.

Varina introduced her main men: “Dad, this is Max, the legate in charge of the Roman cavalry and the father of my first baby. Max, my dad will also father a baby soon, but not with my mother, so he is in no position to give me any shit.”

“I hear you’re a hero,” Dulcitus told Max.

“Funny, that’s what I hear about you. We heroes should stick together like brothers. Can you give me the cheap tour? I’m told you’re retired, but somehow in charge.”

“The other officers died,” Dulcitus explained, leading Max inside the massive fortification. “I did what I could since there was no one else. If you’re going to Din Eidyn, I’d like to tag along. My father-in-law is chief of the Votadini, and he owes me for food and ammo that I sent him.”

“Of course. The Wall needs its debts repaid. Some Brigantes lady named Brenna insists on going, too. Is she really a queen? I fear she could beat me in arm wrestling.”

Max loved showing off his big biceps almost as much as Varina.

Dulcitus laughed. “She’s a tough one. Getting along with her and my father-in-law is key to securing the Wall. I tried to marry my son to her really hot daughter, who chose me instead. Crazy, right? Most of the Wall men died, deserted, or mutinied. Replacing them will be hard unless we get better at preventing tribunes from pocketing their salaries.”

Tribunes were rich kids of privileged backgrounds sent from Rome to keep an eye on the legions. While rankers signed up for 20 years, tribunes climbed political steps to more powerful positions, and therefore could fleece their troops with impunity.

“How many men does the Wall need?” Max asked. “And where should we get them?”

“Several thousand, but they must be motivated because Wall duty is dull. I’d hire Brigantes, half male and half female, and let them have kids to give them something personal to protect. Brigantes need the Wall to keep out northern raiders. Their warriors will take the job seriously because failure means the death of their loved ones. Every warrior fears public shame, so the whole tribe will count on them to keep them safe. How soon will you leave?”

Max laughed as they walked into the palace. “As soon as my best 1000 Heruli bathe and get their clothes laundered. Can you assign someone to help them out? I’ll send my units in by centuries.”

“I’ll take care of it. A few thousand Brigantes and Votadini girls got pregnant during the siege and few plan to marry the fathers. I don’t know who will support the kids.”

Max didn’t like deciding things that he knew nothing about. “Dulcitus, I’m leaving you in charge of the Wall and this region until my uncle finds someone better. I’m also back-dating your command to the day of your retirement. How long ago was that?”

“Nine months.”

Max slapped his shoulder. “Did you know the Dux Britanniarum makes 15,000 denarii a year? 20X what a ranker earns. Will you accept bullion? You’re gonna set us back 12,000 denarii, so it may take several years to pay you.”

That shocked the veteran literally in his tracks. “I’m now Dux Britanniarum? Shouldn’t you find a governor for that?”

“I’m told you speak the Votadini and Brigantes versions of Brittonic, and even some *Picti*. Everyone says you saved thousands of lives and stopped Valentinus from going south. We also need a man who rises to the challenge. You know the job, the locals, and the Wall, so you’re the logical choice unless my uncle or the emperor decide different. Duke Dulcitus is even a fantastic name. Congratulations, you rich bastard—you get to stay here!”

Max was loving the echo as they toured the spa chamber where the last Duke got a blowjob. The acoustics were incredible.

“My wife married me to live in Londinium, so that’s where I sent her and Varina for safety. Varina says my wife likes the capital too much to leave.”

“12,000 denarii would make a nice deposit on the new villas my uncle Honorius plans to build upriver of Londinium. The capital is just one day away by ship. Visit or replace her, as you wish, but keep the south safe.”

The new Duke looked old, though he was just 38. “Before you make it final, you should know Queen Brenna may not like me when she finds out I impregnated her daughter. That girl ravaged me, day and night, for the entire siege. Losing her daddy made her like older men. She called me her hero; who can resist that?”

Though Brenna was queen, her kids were not princes.

“Get your girl and let’s visit the queen to see how she’d like having a Duke for her son-in-law. Will you marry the girl?”

“If my wife gets a villa, she’ll applaud the loudest when we divorce. I’d love to marry her before the baby is born. As a bastard, I’d rather have legitimate children.”



Max climbed the steps to the tallest tower. “If the ladies are on board, then I’ll sign a chit with our supernumerary for your back salary. He guards our gold like it’s his. Your new ex-wife can cash the check in the Roma Bank in Londinium. The view from here is excellent, but why does this tower have an oven?”

Remarkably, Europe would not get the number “0” until the 12th fucking century (via Hindu-Arabian numbers). No wonder Arabians had famous mathematicians while Romans did not. Romans used letters instead of numbers, which made arithmetic hard.

That night Brenna found them finishing dinner. Max saw her first, drew his sword, and theatrically got in her way.

“Magnus, I need a word with Dulcitus.”

“You mean, Duke Dulcitus, the commander of the Wall? Have you heard he now earns 15,000 denarii a year and gets to run things around here? His wife will divorce him to marry a villa in Londinium. I hope my daughters marry rich heroes like Duke Dulcitus. Even his name is magical. Imagine the leverage you’ll have as his mother-in-law.”

That caught her off guard. “Dulcitus, you’ll marry my daughter?”

“Oh, yes. Before the baby’s born.”

Max sheathed his sword. “Queen Brenna,” he said loudly, as a thousand people filled the food court. “We need 5,000 heroes on the Wall—half female—and another 5000 mounted male archers to replace the legion we lost. The wall warriors will earn 500 denarii a year and the cavalry get 750, plus food and shelter. Do you know anyone interested in lifetime employment with a pension? But if Picts breach the barrier, their pay gets docked, and maybe their jobs.”

“Magnus, you’re extremely obnoxious. You don’t get to make these decisions.”

At 21, Max thought few ladies over 40 were fuckable, but Brenna had something extra. “I get to help my uncle make these decisions. I served the emperor for several years, so I’m trusted. I can make this happen, but I need your support. Your tribe benefits the most from the Wall preventing Picts, Scotti, and Attacotti from raiding south, while Rome benefits from a buffer state that keeps the bad men away. My uncle can give you maximum autonomy as long as you protect the south. A marriage between a Brigantes princess and the Wall Commander will help cement our partnership. I’m impregnating his daughter, so the wheel keeps spinning. To sweeten the deal, I’ll build you hilltop watchtowers and cavalry forts along the eastern coast for those 5000 mounted archers. I’ll pay them to protect you.”

That mollified her. The problem with an agricultural economy is the lack of cash coin. You can only get so far with trading in kind. Regular employment of thousands of Brigantes would make the local economy boom.

“What about all the bastards being born over the next few months? Over 1000 are from Brigantes mothers. Who will feed and shelter them?”

Boredom is killer in long sieges, but defenders had an unusual amount of young horny ladies with nothing better to do. Most mothers enjoyed multiple lovers, while most men do not want to raise someone else’s kids. The bastards would be famously called Eboracum Babies. Max broke this conundrum like a loaf of bread because he had a lot of future sins to make up for. Supporting mothers and kids

seemed like a great way to spend his new fortune. It might even alleviate his punishing guilt. Expecting to die soon was a great way to live.

“I bought the northern part of the expanded capital, where I’m building what I call, Maxville. They can live in my Londinium apartments, with free public schools so kids learn to read, write, and speak Latin. Language skills will open opportunities, which will benefit the entire tribe. They’ll befriend Votadini mothers and bastards, so the tribes north and south of the Wall become friends instead of just neighbors. Peace makes everyone richer except Picts. In return, I want all the farmland and ranchland your tribe is not exploiting to maximize food production.” Without raiders, prime soil and pastures were far more valuable. “I’ll probably hire thousands of your people, if they’re into long-term employment with a pension. I’ll even build them fortress homes with defensive walls.”

“That’s quite an investment.” The queen crossed her arms like every mother about to drop the hammer on a delinquent child. “Magnus, how can you afford such generosity?”

“I recently became very rich. Plus, my uncle needs your help capturing the Attacotti. Valentinus organized The Great Conspiracy, so his tribe must pay for the misery he caused.”

The west coast of Pictland had hundreds of islands and peninsulas where the Attacotti eked out a meager existence. They welcomed the Scotti, from northern Ireland, who brought stuff that the Attacotti and Picts could not get otherwise. Capturing everyone on that coast would require hundreds of boats and thousands of fighters over many months. Theo needed Votadini and Brigantes to prevent them off from escaping inland, while defending themselves against Picts. This campaign would take enormous time and resources.

“Attacotti stole hundreds of Brigantes and Votadini. I assume you want them back.”

“What about the Picts?” the queen demanded. “Those fuckers stole thousands of Brigantes.”

“Uncle Theo would love to help you and the Votadini get rid of them, once and for all. Let’s fight our common enemies together. Brigantes should intermarry more with Votadini. Duke, you should host weekend dances at the most convenient fort so singles can safely meet. My family grows grapes in Iberia; I’ll sell barrels of our best wine at your dance parties. Maybe open a motel for those seeking to shack up. I’ll be farming Votadini land and need outlets to sell crops.”

The queen looked aghast, but liked having her strongest neighbor on friendlier terms.

Max saw securing the island as a challenge. Wise leaders multiply friends and divide enemies—that’s how Cousin Theo beat him at the Save River in Sara’s Vision. If Max had joined forces with Emperor Theo, they could have prevented the collapse of the Roman Empire.

Brenna lit up like a candle. Picts and Attacotti cost Brigantes lives and livestock. Ridding herself of these parasites would be wonderful, and would cost half as much with Votadini help. The queen looked ready to burst into tears. Instead she jumped up like a kid who just won candy playing Hand.

“I’m gonna be a grandma!”

Max just earned the loyalty of leaders who ruled a vast area and commanded thousands of fighters. Not too shabby for a 21 year-old.

“A rich, unnaturally attractive grandma,” Max said with a seductive smile.

## Chapter 20

### Northern Britannia (Scotland), Fall 368

The eastern border between Votadini land and Pictland looks like a giant stabbed the coast with a sword. Several rivers washed away a narrow sliver of land to form the Firth of Forth estuary. The most important of those rivers was the River Forth, which extended a few hundred miles inland. This created a hard-to-cross barrier that divided Votadini territory from Pictland. Scotland (land of the Scotti) would not exist until the 9th century, after Scotti dissolved Pict culture.

Fort Stirling stood on a tall crag (a rocky hill), surrounded on three sides by steep cliffs, and overlooked the Sterling Bridge Fort, the easiest way across the River Forth. Romans still held out, forcing Picts to ride several hundred miles out of their way to reach Din Eidyn. Roman General Agricola had fortified Sterling three centuries ago and made it easy to resupply by boat. William Wallace would later win a great victory at Sterling Bridge in the Scottish Wars of Independence before losing his head and limbs (he was quartered). Din Eidyn sat a few hundred miles to the southeast from Sterling Bridge, almost on a peninsula. This made the city a long ride for Picts to raid. The Attacotti, on the west coast, were even farther away. Stirling’s natural harbor enjoyed a Roman naval base to defend the port from enemy ships. The Irish stuck to raiding the western coast and even the Saxon fleet didn’t bother to raid here, waiting instead for Valentinus to take the bridge and fort by land.

General Theo led the second infantry division. His ship docked at Din Eidyn, whereas his other ships stayed out of sight on their way to the Sterling Bridge Fort. His son showed dad how he made it harder for Valentinus to breach the city’s defenses. Satisfied, the older Theo sailed his ship up the River Forth and landed his troops at the fort which controlled Sterling Bridge. Then the fleet transported the first legion upriver from Din Eidyn to cut off enemy retreat. Votadini horsemen, based on the coast, had harassed enemies trying to besiege the capital. The Votadini chief, Patarn Redcoat, now led 5000 south, around the enemy army, to link up with Max’s force of 20,000 horsemen, including 10,000 Britons and Brigantes. The enemy coalition still had a larger force, but most were on foot.

Max joked with Pelagius, “I think those 25,000 riders are following me.”

The 1st Battalion wore local clothes over their armor to blend in. Without helmets hidden, they passed for Brigantes. As he marched southeast, along the river, General Theodosius was surprised to see 25,000 riders when he expected 10,000 Heruli. He didn’t even know if they were friend or foe, though they were not blue. Max finally threw aside his tunic to reveal steel armor as he got within hailing distance.

“*Ave*, Uncle Theo. This is Duke Dulcitus, who everyone says saved thousands of lives. He did so well against the invasion that we promoted him to commander of the wall. He is related by marriage to the leaders of both the Votadini and the Brigantes, plus speaks their gibberish. If I overstepped my authority, then his ex-wife owes us 12,000 denarii that I paid him for back salary.”

His uncle was neither amused nor surprised. “Dux Britanniarum, ride with me and tell me about the last year.”

Those two veterans had tons to talk about.

Max smiled at Young Theo. “Cousin, your Batavi miss their legate. How many enemies did you leave us?”

“Just 40,000 Irish, Picts, and Attacotti. A few Saxons stayed as witnesses. They started breaking camp when we arrived, so some should be heading our way.”

Without boats, the enemy was stuck on the wrong side of the estuary. The river was too cold, fast, and deep to swim. Though north of Hadrian’s Wall, they were south of the River Forth, in Votadini land. They had to get past Theo’s army to return to Pictland. The smart, bored, or impatient were the first to abandon the siege of Din Eidyn; the rest would learn too late.

“I want to trap them against the river,” the general told the Dux. “If Irish, Picts, and Attacotti escape, we’ll have to do this all over again. Dulcitus, how far away is the Forth?”

“A few dozen miles. They’ll retreat along it until the river narrows past the Stirling Bridge, then escape into Pictland with their captives.”

With the sun setting, General Theo looked at his slow infantry and hated splitting his force in case he suddenly came upon an army. “We must not let them get away. I’ll go directly north to cut them off. Max, take your expensive horsemen and slow them down with those fancy bows and long arrows. Buy us time to catch up with the full army. If they prove their value, I’ll pay for another 9,900 saddles, quiver sacks, and millions of long arrows.”

Max called his 1st Platoon and snatched all packhorses with long arrows, in case the 1000 arrows that each rider brought (101,000) was not enough. Each rider had a supply horse and a remount. They enjoyed the best armor, ammo, bows, and horses. Under Max, they got rich with recovered loot, so they eagerly followed their golden boy, not knowing he was suicidal. Max wanted to die gloriously in battle, fighting worthy enemies, rather than live with what Sara showed him in her Vision. He left Naulo, his second-in-command, with his other horsemen because he didn’t want that good man to die badly.

“Borrow trouble for yourself,” his dad once advised him, “but don’t lend it to others.”

Smiling he yelled at his platoon, “stay out of formation, you disciplined bastards! And try to look ugly to pass for locals.”

The 101 men cantered most of the night until they spotted the River Forth in the distance an hour before dawn. Starlight showed clusters of picketed horses along the dirt road that paralleled the river. Hundreds of wagons and carts filled the ancient trail. The enemy seemed oblivious.

“They don’t know a Roman army is near!” Max roar-whispered to his men. “Let’s fuck’em while they sleep.”

Over the last week, enemy warriors felt more like depressed refugees as they walked home by the River Forth. They spent nine months starving out Din Eidyn, only for local fishermen to feed the Votadini capital. The coalition stormed the walls and broke through twice, only to be beaten like rabid dogs. Just the Picts came to conquer; the rest only wanted the most wealth at the least cost. Breaching a fortified city was too costly a task, so most looted farming villages across the rich estuary. Peasants famously have little coin, which frustrated the invaders. Over the last month, those who raided south of the Wall came back with horror stories and empty saddlebags. Most had to abandon their captives to escape two Roman legions and two allied units. But going home empty handed would deem them failures. Their families and villages would ridicule them. Elders would laugh versions of, I Told You So. Those who stayed knew that Din Eidyn was at the edge of starvation. All that wealth could soon be theirs if the coalition held out just a little longer. Saxons were the first to abandon the siege because their fleet warned them of the latest developments, which they didn't share with their allies. Too many Roman warships now swarmed the Channel. The two Irish tribes had the farthest to travel, and so left the soonest to seed their fields by springtime. The Picts and Attacotti, however, lived on the island, and knew they had committed their tribes to total war. They therefore stayed too long. Starting with such shocking success made retreat all the more bitter.

As the day would prove, horsemen with spears and swords were no match for mounted archers, which is how Huns would soon drive off or incorporate every group on the western steppe, culminating with Atilla headquartering his empire from the Hungarian Plain. Huns were already past the Caspian, and would reach Europe in the 370s. Europe had 1000 years to train horse archers, but learned the wrong lesson at Plataea.

The platoon rode at an easy canter and surprised ambushers rising from their blankets. Votadini captives were all female or kids that Max told to flee south. These Irish, Picts, and Attacotti just wanted to go home to their families, unhappy with the simple villages they plundered. The Scotti and Hiberni anchored their ships on Attacotti islands, then walked or rode here to enrich themselves by killing strangers, taking their valuables, and kidnapping their fuckable women. Small kids would be raised as their own, unless they resisted or had a bad attitude—from, like, seeing their dad killed and their mom and sisters raped. Raiding is not called robbing because it inevitable involves lots of bloodshed. Like Apache warriors surprising Mexican farmers, armed ambushers generally get the better of unarmed innocents working fields. The Heruli once made a living off raiding to get the cash to buy what they couldn't make or steal, but they had also been raided, and so felt no sympathy for this fucks. Armed with something innovative, the Heruli shot them up and chased down those who fled into the riverbank's tall reeds. The platoon galloped up to minimize reaction time, then slowed to a canter to envelop the enemy without stopping. At 500 arrows a minute, they rarely needed more than a moment to beat them badly.

Though the raiders captured many horses, they used most to carry valuables, so Max ordered his team to shoot the horses that they couldn't easily capture; they'd soon feed his uncle's army. Each camp had only 30-90 fighters, retreating a day late and a dollar short. The platoon rarely stopped to let the enemy shoot

back, instead moving on to the next group, down the road. For several miles Max surprised the sleepy, though a few wary men faced them armed and standing. Not that it did them much good. Few camps had more than a handful of good bowmen; against 101 great shooters enjoying greater mobility, it was shooting fish in a barrel. Spearmen and swordsmen were just harmless targets who cursed and cried when crippled. The raiders carried as much loot as they could, and therefore didn't wear armor. The platoon aimed for center-of-mass, clipping strangers who tried dodging or ducking.

The tide turned as the sun rose. Now they faced woken men starting breakfast or saddling horses. Their riders escorted wagons, anchoring groups into fixed positions. Raiders would not abandon the valuables they stole. Even the kidnapped carried heavy loads, mostly food, water, and common household items. Livestock were valuable and self-portable, but would soon feed Uncle Theo's hungry army. Because the platoon swarmed them from all sides, they had nowhere to hide and not enough horses to escape on. Smarter enemies dumped supply sacks to mount the nearest horse and ride east towards their main force, still besieging the Votadini capital. Max swept the compacted road by the southern riverbank. Enemy warriors were usually too late to see the danger. Most had Votadini carrying loot and pulling carts while their horses dragged wagons. They traveled in small groups, expecting an uneventful trip home. Because the platoon had just 100 men attacking thousands, some groups didn't recognize them as hostiles until the shooting started. Heruli on a hilltop looked back at thousands of enemies they shot in the last two hours. Many still moved, wounded and bleeding. Thousands of captives ran from the river, towards Theo.

"I keep forgetting they are not an army," Max said with a laugh after clearing a few more miles of enemies and liberating thousands of peasants. A big group of horsemen on the horizon looked more formidable. A rider apparently alerted someone to the danger. "The Duke taught me some choice phrases. Once they charge, we'll circle that hill and shoot them as they chase us. Remember to look terrified, stupid, and hysterical."

A few thousand of the more aggressive enemies galloped into view, with many more behind them. Picts stood out with their blue tattoos. Max introduced himself as Magnus Maximus, loudly cursed them, then bailed when they charged. The Attacotti dialect, like *Germani* languages, had too many consonants and not enough vowels. Latin languages—later called the Romance Languages—sounded so much sweeter. The hill was a mile away, so the fast out-distanced the slow. The 1st all had great horses from Iberia, so they could have traveled as a disciplined unit, but instead spread out and screamed a lot to seem scared and disorganized. The fastest enemies nearly caught up, only to find the platoon in a skirmish line around the sharpest bend, almost circling the hill. The raiders rode into this trap like a stream of water off a cliff, never realizing their fate until too late. Max, with the 1st Squad, positioned himself to not let any escape to warn the rest. They kept coming comically. Cheap kills don't usually get this economical. Some enemy bowmen fired back, but were lucky to hit anyone before getting knocked from their horse. The platoon shot the first with impunity, then rode past them to shoot the next group, and so on, until they came around the hill to see more riders galloping near.

“Let’s rest up, then hunt them down,” Max proposed, though the enemy greatly outnumbered him.

In front of the hill, the platoon poured water into helmets for their horses, which must have struck the enemy as absurd. Once they got close, Max lured them away from the river, into the wind and pausing to turn whenever it was strongest. The platoon saturated the enemy, hitting horse and horseman with equal frequency. After whittling the hunters down to 300, Max let them charge. As expected, their line extended so Picts would flank their left and Scotti their right. Few had bows and fewer could shoot for shit at a gallop, so Team Max cut them down, including all horses within range. One superb mounted archer on a great horse could shoot dozens of spearmen without unduly endangering himself. A few slingers caused the platoon their only injuries, though nothing fatal because they wore armor and helmets.

“Stirrups are awesome!” Max said as he surveyed the trail run. “Let’s see if they fall for that again!”

They did. Max thought he was suicidal, but these desperate raiders, having worked several months, killing, raping, and robbing, just wanted to get home with their valuables. They wanted to escape, not fight. By noon, though, no one traveled west down the ancient compacted trail. Still hungry, the platoon found foot archers on high ground amid rough terrain and several thousand stunned men creating anti-horse barriers. Max had to study their line to identify a weak spot. If they rode around, horsemen would get behind them and Max wanted to die, not get fucked in the rear. Finally he led them in a charge. Enemy archers, standing behind wagons, trees, or other cover, readied themselves. The platoon loosed a volley at maximum range, then paused when raiders fired back. Those arrows fell short, so Team Max galloped closer to saturate the area with the densest clusters of men before fleeing out of range. That worked so well that the huge Pict in charge ordered everyone back or under cover, while bringing up more bowmen.

Max was so bummed. “I think we ran out of free kills. Let’s recover spent arrows in case we need them tomorrow. Once out of sight, we’ll surprise them again, probably from behind.”

Just 101 riders had cleared a dozen miles without serious injury. While Saxons use iron arrowtips, these primitive islanders did not, so counter-fire did little damage. Ireland mined pig iron, but it was very expensive. Picts and Attacotti didn’t really have towns, much less the ability to smelt. When Theo’s army arrived, they’d follow this trail. The vanguard would need to pull thousands of corpses aside for wagons to get through.

The platoon split into nine squads to loot bodies faster, with Max and the 1st Squad spreading out and keeping a lookout from hilltops. Most corpses, carts, and wagons had little worth taking. Even their arrows were too short, so the team had to break or burn them, after freeing livestock from wagons. The afternoon was so pleasant that these badasses got nervous. It took far longer to finish off the wounded, torch wagons, and go through pockets than it did to slaughter so many strangers.

As the sun set, the platoon commander asked the obvious: “Magnus, how come they’re not coming after us?”

He called them together to summarize the situation. “Men, if you were them, what would you do about us?”

The enemy couldn’t run, hide, or fortify because they were far from home with winter coming.

“They must fight us or get past us,” Max concluded. “Right now they’re making shields. Not formal ones, but anything that can stop our arrows. I bet they’re putting all of their archers into one group to go after us or to hold us at a safe distance, which is why we needed extra ammo. Starlight give them enough illumination to travel at night, but only along the trail. Darkness reduces our effectiveness.”

A smart soldier spoke up: “They’ll form an armored caravan and dare us to attack tonight.”

“Yep. If they knew Theo was coming with four legions and lots of angry allies, they’d chance crossing the river. If the riverbank had more trees, or bigger trees, they’d still take that over continuing to lose to us, but they’d have to leave their captives, livestock, horses, and bigger loot behind. It’s hard to admit you wasted a year, killing innocents for nothing. Your family back home still starves if you come back alive, but empty handed. We’re just 100 riders, so they just need to take their stuff across the nearest ford. By leaving tonight, they might make it by tomorrow unless we snipe their draft animals. We saw a lot of wagons; they should have been taking them apart to use the planks as shields, but instead they piled stuff high.”

“How are we gonna hit ’em, Magnus?”

“From behind, past midnight, after a long nap. Most of their archers and slingers will be up front on horses, and they might use captives as human shields to prevent us from firing saturation volleys. We’ll split into two teams to ride at maximum distance on either side of the trail. After threats, target their draft animals because Theo asked us to slow them down. They now have scouts on their best horses, so let’s pretend to camp on that mound before disappearing after dark.”

After dinner on the hill, eating the enemy’s food, they rode an hour after dark in a wide circle south, then east to get behind the enemy. In the dark, Pict scouts couldn’t track them. They slept in a wooden glen until midnight, then rode to work. As expected, the invaders tied captives to a long line of wagons. Raiders carried shields and many had bows. Huge herds followed the caravan until Heruli drove them off and shot their wranglers. Max let half the platoon draw off defenders, south of the trail. The platoon commander rode slow to be thorough until their bowmen and slingers chased him south. Then Max led 50 men between the swerving river and the straight trail; he had to ride fast to avoid getting swarmed. They prioritized bowmen, then horses, and finally oxen pulling wagons. At a canter, they couldn’t shoot them all, but 250 arrows a minute for almost an hour spilled a lot of blood. Spearmen on foot ran out to impale them, and some succeeded, but none lasted long. Spear tips, even hardened by fire, couldn’t puncture chainmail sandwiched in thick leather. They thought it was just one layer of leather because they couldn’t see the chainmail. Still, the spearmen wounded several arms and legs, but they would have been better off with warclubs, hammers, or axes. Max still got swarmed three times, but were able to



shoot their way out. Half the enemy held up makeshift shields and the other half spears, but the Heruli just rode into them at a gallop, knocking them down for others to shoot them. Team Max lost four horses and suffered his first death, when a slinger got a pebble in a throat, but left a long trail of misery behind them.

Spearmen, riding their worst horses, had been stationed on the other side of the crowded caravan. They waited to charge when Max reached the front. Against the river, the Heruli had little room and some clever wagon teams were driving off the trail to block their retreat. Given the darkness, Max couldn't see how many horsemen he faced, but guessed several thousand. He opted to "clear his tail" by shooting those wagon teams coming off the trail and anyone likely to block the gap that this created. The horsemen charged, but they couldn't all fit within just a few hundred meters of space between the caravan and the river. Half of Team Max continued shooting defenders of the gap while the rest shot charging horses. The mounts tumbled and stumbled, throwing riders or crushing them in uncontrolled falls. At 30 miles an hour, some mounts took many meters to stop, like a boulder coming down a hill. Once they shot enough, Max had a convenient barrier to stop the charge. Facing riders within easy range, Team Max fucked them up until they retreated. Shouts warned him to come quick, so Max's 25 raced through the gap in the caravan before it closed. He lost two more men and many more minor wounds, but didn't know it yet.

The enemy riders had backed off to regroup. They probably felt like they brought a knife to a gunfight. Fighting mounted archers with spears and swords was ridiculous.

Rounding the front, Heruli shot men pulling bodies to clear the trail. They had hundreds of shieldmen for protection, but Team Max just galloped over them, swinging swords, only to turn and fire from a safe distance as Picts scrambled to get up. Ironically, that left even more bodies to block wagons. With their good bowmen still chasing the platoon commander, Team Max made the most of their opportunity. Sniping from maximum distance, they put arrows in riders, bowmen on foot, and animals pulling wagons. Defenders occasionally charged on foot, behind a shield wall, but the Heruli just opened the distance to target easier prey farther down the caravan. It wasn't until Max heard the thunder of many hooves coming that he blew his bugle and led half of his platoon down the caravan, shooting as carefully as they could.

Unlimited ammo was awesome!

Once a large mass of riders caught up, Max lured them south. He blew his bugle and his 47 shooters turned around in a skirmish line. As their pursuers rode over a rise in the land, highlighting themselves, they took over 200 arrows a minute until they backed off. Max then called another meeting.

"Squad 5, I want you to harass the caravan as we lead their riders away. Everyone seriously wounded needs to hide until the enemy is gone, then make your way to Theo. Everyone lightly wounded needs to decide whether to join them or stay in the fight. At first light, we'll bandage our wounds and take stock of our position. Theo should be here today, so let's kill time and enemies safely."

"Magnus, Theo headed straight north, to the enemy's next ford, while we rode 20 clicks east. He may not arrive until tomorrow or the next day."

The legate cursed. "Crap. I had not thought of that. Well, our job just got harder, but it hasn't changed." Max started this attack with his best 50 men. With the wounded riding west and the 9 survivors of Squad 5 moving to intercept the caravan, he was down to 30. "Let's find the other half of the platoon."

They rode through the night warily because they headed for the loudest screaming. The platoon commander would spend the night sending saturation volleys into the densest mass of men, while avoiding enemies reaching them. It was a deadly game of tag. Horses are easier targets, so Max found hundreds of warriors walking or limping to the caravan. They couldn't find the rest of the platoon until daylight, so they hunted the horseless while avoiding several thousand riders.

Max found what was left of his platoon that morning. The platoon commander lost half his force. Most were just wounded, usually in the arm, and so hid until Theo arrived or rode west during the night. Max found himself commanding just 50 men against several thousand very stubborn enemies.

"I swear we shot a few thousand last night," the commander protested as their enemies united into one very large group.

"They stole herds from the Votadini, and that's how many horses are left," Max said with a sad sigh. "Their best fighters are riding against us while the rest move the caravan west. I suppose if we told them of Theo's army, they'd have less reason to chase us. We obviously have done enough. Our legions will reach the nearest ford before the enemy, so we accomplished our mission. I say we play it safe. If they insist on chasing us, we'll lure them southeast, away from escape. The smarter ones will choose home over hunting us, leaving us fewer enemies and more opportunities. But I'm open to better ideas."

None felt like abandoning the field, after so much success. They would not have done half as much without stirrups and better bows. The ability to snipe bowmen without accidentally hitting captives was lifesaving, something they could not do without stirrups. But the enemy broke into hundreds of small groups; most had shields and many carried bows or slings. It was a game of cat and mouse, if the mouse was a wolf. In chasing Max to the southeast, several thousand Picts raced away from Pictland to their deaths. The fools should have been racing for the river, not away. The deeper that Picts rode into enemy territory, the less likely they'd escape. To egg them on, Max wore his red helmet with long feathers and yelled insults. He kept announcing himself, as if they forgot who they faced.

"I am Magnus Maximus!"

As a famously vain man, Max yelled that with just the right amount of dickishness.

The half-platoon retreated, but while looking like they were trying to breach the enemy line. Picts were the most aggressive, but when some groups charged, Max intercepted to get off several volleys before other enemies could get behind him. When nearly trapped, he'd flee fast, then let the fastest fighters catch up when he enjoyed higher ground and wind at his back. Max tried keeping his distance because his shooters enjoyed farther range; given their ammo supply, saturation volleys worked best because most riders couldn't avoid 50 arrows over a wide area. The Heruli would pause to shoot over their shoulders, as the Parthians did to Marcus Crassus in 54 BCE. Enemy shields soaked up arrows, but then split

apart, leaving them vulnerable. The Heruli chewed jerky because Picts didn't give them time to cook a hot meal. Hour after hour, they were driven farther from the caravan, going southeast, away from the ford into Pictland. A peninsula jutted into the Atlantic, but it became increasingly swampy, marshy, hilly, or forested. Max needed wide open flat land or the risk of getting trapped increased. The longest day of their lives ended with a whimper. They had wounded or killed a few thousand riders, while losing only eight of their own, plus a dozen wounded who escaped southwest. All survivors had been hit many times, but suffered more bruises than cuts because their weak, rocky arrowheads couldn't punch through light armor. The platoon lost dozens of champion horses to arrows, but each brought a backup, plus packhorses. It shocked Max how many arrows they spent keeping the enemy at bay. Some enemy shields had dozens of arrows stuck in them.

Max's jokes about unlimited ammo now bit him in the ass.

At sunset, reinforcements found them, led by Naulo. Max was pissed his brother-in-law came because who would take care of Nana and his kids if Naulo died? Members of the 2nd Platoon had borrowed bows and saddles from injured members of the 1st who had returned seriously wounded. The lightly wounded who recovered also came back, while the 5th Squad met up, after being driven from the caravan. That brought the platoon up to 70 shooters. This engagement would have been a cakewalk if Max had 1000 mounted archers with saddles, bows, and stirrups. Naulo also brought him much needed information.

"Magnus, the legions are marching slower than usual. Young Theo found Pictland's central holding station for the thousands of people they kidnapped. Leaders had promised to split captives evenly—every warrior would get something. Or, rather, someone. Young Theo crossed Stirling Bridge to alert his father, who sent his horsemen into Pictland to recover captured Britons. His infantry dug in around the Bridge and the next nearest ford to prevent the enemy from crossing. General Theo didn't send you a messenger because he was leading the other Heruli to the refugee center in Pictland. Few Romans had ever led armies into Pictland and he wanted to add his name to the history books."

Max summed that up. "My uncle forgot about me. Typical. He's gonna get chewed out when I tell his wife. I don't know about you, but my arms and shoulders hurt. I've got an idea, since we've accomplished our mission, but don't beat me up if you don't like it: let's try surviving the night, maybe get some sleep, and then run away in the morning. Any objections?"

A vast army can afford a war of attrition, while a small professional army prefers what generals call "conservation of force." 100,000 Mongols would conquer a quarter of humanity because their generals minimized their own loss of life. Hordes from the grassy steppe of Central Asia preferred short horses that could trot 100 miles a day for weeks because that place is so damn big. Traveling fast is a necessity. In several centuries, Europe's warrior class would choose huge horses to support 100 pounds of armor, similar to plow horses that can pull a lot of weight, but cannot move fast or far. They can, however, crash through heavy infantry like a stampeding elephant. Even the slowest horse is faster than the fastest man on foot. Max picked horses in between to meet his needs. His grandfathers both raised such horses and fed them well: apples, oats, barley, and

enhanced hay. Horses survive off grass no better than man can live off salads. Both need extra nutrients from a diverse diet for the energy that war requires. Oats and apples are not a miracle cure, however. Instead, each well-fed generation bred better mounts. Max counted on these advantages to keep his men alive, while he sought a glorious death to avoid his fucked-up future.

Team Max, now reinforced, got aggressive with their last hour of light. They galloped close to fire volleys, then tried to maintain an ideal distance while enemy groups swarmed him from all sides. The platoon ended up shooting their way out as crazy Picts somehow raced to block their exit. Max lost two more men and lots of patience. He wanted to kill them all, and feared even that wouldn't stop Sara the Seer from whispering in his head. The platoon circled around to surprise the enemy from behind, then rode half the night to get away. Sadly, the countryside turned hillier, with more trees and bushes. The ability to see in all directions let them survive the previous day. Tomorrow wouldn't be so easy.

"You're a royal fuckup!" Sara hissed as he tried to sleep in the woods.

## Chapter 21

### Northern Britannia, Fall 368

With the enemy seemingly committed, Max led them due south all day to avoid getting trapped in the estuary. Soft muddy earth is a poor surface for cavalry. Sadly, a tall, steep ridge stood in their way. Max felt obligated to act as their rearguard because he got the Heruli into this mess. He was down to 70 men, and all suffered several minor wounds. Picts tortured enemies for fun and pleasure, and some Heruli got caught. Max could still hear their screams.

Alone, a thousand paces behind his men, Max attracted the bold, brave, and stupid while his remaining men carefully walked their horses up the rocky ridge. With dwindling arrows, Max shot only when confident of a hit, switching throbbing shoulders as necessary. To avoid shields, he often targeted enemy horses. No Pict had ever encountered a bow that fired so far. His birch wood shafts were longer and flew straighter than homemade arrows. Max stocked up whenever a Heruli went down, keeping his arrow sacks full on his main horse.

Enemy archers came at him in several groups at a time. Max lost his packhorse and his remount. Armor mostly protected him while arrow sacks covered Caesar's upper half. Five arrows stuck out of his leather and one from a chainmail joint, which looked worse than it was. He hurt and bled, but not enough to stop. As long as his arms worked, he would work. Picts didn't want the Heruli to ride up the ridge and so rushed to intercept them. Max shot fast while forcing them back. Some would try cutting him off from his platoon, but Naulo would lead a squad to extract him. He'd rush into range, then flee when he got within their range, which was profitable, but exhausting. Max loved making them waste arrows that he could re-use. More power and accuracy meant he could safely take on a dozen guys if he kept riding fast. Picts would have killed him a hundred times if they had stirrups and better bows.

As his men crested the broken ridgeline, Max saw their exhaustion. A nap would not cover it. He needed them to rest for as long as possible before disappearing after nightfall.

A dozen groups crawled up the slope to get him. Archery is a rare skill, so the otherwise useless held up shields for bowmen to fight behind. The steep slope advantaged infantry while limiting horsemen. Those without bows or shields kept a safe distance because they knew they were basically useless. Max intercepted the closest archers. Pressing his luck, he slid down the slope, startling 30 enemies who wanted to wait for more men. Picts approached to fire back, but Max danced around their arrows, whereas they were too bunched together to avoid his. He didn't need to fatally wound someone to kill him; their injuries burdened their comrades. Hundreds of warriors helped thousands of wounded ride to the river.

After mauling this group, Max intercepted the next closest, which had tried cutting him off without getting within arrow range of the Romans on the ridgeline. These warriors were fewer, but more aggressive. Running on a slope is exhausting, but Max needed mobility to beat the bastards. He advanced or fled depending on the need, but kept firing because Caesar carries more ammo. Having decimated this group, another challenged him, halfway up the ridge. His powerful arrows split shields and knocked men downhill like they had been drop-kicked.

Magnus Maximus was defying an army. A few thousand Picts and Attacotti yelled insults from below to taunt him. The Heruli countered by singing, Girls of Rome. Max rested Caesar, who was almost heaving, and gave him some water. He remounted when the enemy decided upon a plan. About 300 swarmed him from three sides. A dozen Heruli came down on foot to cover him.

"This will be fun," Max told himself, filling his quivers in case he lost his ride. He had studied the slope and spotted places where he could best fight from. "I'm totally not gonna die here."

Not until that moment did Max realize death is so much easier than life. The trauma of Sara's Vision haunted him like an angry ex. Death seemed like a sweet release from his moral burdens.

After stretching his arms and back in ways that looked ridiculous, Max rode diagonally down to strike those with the easiest climb. He threw dozens of shafts into them before they retreated. The middle group had intended for those on either side to climb first, but one flanking team was now too far away. Max crossed back to fire into the middle group as they struggled up the slope. Switching shoulders, he kept a steady rate of fire as he gave up ground. It shocked him when he ran out of arrows in his front pouches. He had to dismount to move the back sacks up front. Seeing their chance, the enemy rushed him. His backup ammo were recovered, which were less useful than new machine-manufactured ones. Deep in concentration, he focused as if his life depended on it. The sun seemed to stop in mid-air; Max looked up so often it seemed to reverse course across the heavens. Night seemed weeks away.

By now the enemy was halfway up the ridge and Max's sure-footed horse was losing his shit literally. Max slipped as he dismounted, his boot sliding on shitty grass. His weight pulled Caesar off balance, which knocked Max down more. He held onto the reins and Caesar tried backing up the hill, but ran out of gas. Picts charged, since Max was not shooting at them. Indeed, he was praying he didn't

slide down the slope into their eager arms. Enemy archers got within range and struck Caesar with three arrows. The horse made a terrible noise that Max would never forget, but Caesar still didn't give up on his friend. Max got his feet under him to scramble up, rocky arrowheads bouncing off his hidden back plate and ringing his helmet.

Caesar fell with five arrows in him, looking at Max like, *et tu, Brute?* Scrambling past his horse, Max got back to shooting, using his best friend for cover. Crying hard, Max apologized to Caesar, who looked down at him literally and metaphorically. With his lower body under the horse's head, the enemy had to hit his arms because solid metal protected the rest of his upper body. Later he'd find his arms covered in bruises. No trees grew this high on the ridge and barely any vegetation, so both sides had clear shots, though it's easier to shoot down than up. The Heruli on the ridge riddled the enemy with arrows as they crawled within range.

Shields let the enemy get close. Max would shoot the edge of the shields to make them off-balance, for the next arrow to strike true. They soon got so close that his powerful bow punched shields like hammers. Those struck in the chest flew off the mountain, often wailing on the long way down. Some bounced several times before hitting rock bottom. Pebbles from slingers now cratered his armor, rang his helmet, and rattled his nerves. The slope crawled literally with enemies desperate to kill him, despite 70 Heruli sniping from the ridgeline.

Max almost emptied the back sacks. Once Picts got within spitting distance, he grabbed the last of his ammo and ran uphill, where his friends could help him. Climbing just a little faster than the enemy, he found an indentation in the land, with an outcrop of rock in front, and made his last stand. He bellowed, "Magnus Maximus!" as if those would be his last words. His shoulders were as numb as his conscience. A group rushed him, so he drew both steel swords and charged into them, which sent two flying off the slope and pushing three more down. The sun had finally set, but the western horizon looked blood-red instead of yellow-orange. Max didn't see it, but most of his men were pouring arrows at his enemies. The Heruli had climbed down on foot to take cover in gaps in the rocky slope. If this section of the slope was any steeper, it'd be a cliff.

Max dodged a spear and sliced across a man's face. Another slung a pebble at his head. Max ducked, but still felt its power. He nicked a leg, then kicked that stinking warrior into two other Attacotti. Parrying a sword, he thrust deep into an unprotected chest, twirled to avoid another swordsman, then chopped off an arm. That guy became a barrier, blocking several Picts, which gave Max time to attack a few Irish to his right. Most men are right-handed, so he forced them to fight on their weak side.

His back to the ridge, Max slowly climbed up in a fighting retreat. A maniacal Pict hacked off the front of his boot, with most of his big toe, but Max plunged a blade down his mouth in retaliation. An unseen blow made his right arm limp; he barely had time to sheath the sword before dropping his priceless weapon. That encouraged the enemy. The legate now just climbed as he men screamed his name. Putting away his second sword, Max drew two throwing knives to stab the soil for traction. His feet slipped, but his hands held firm. At some point the enemy

retreated in fury, but Max didn't look down until he crested the ridge and saw his platoon in the fading starlight.

"You're suicidal," Naulo said. "Destroying the Roman Empire has made you lose your mind."

Rumors of Sara's Vision had spread like camp gossip, but Max gave Naulo the straight scoop.

"Nope," Max whispered, out of breath. "We're gonna save the empire, right here in Britannia. Let's see how far we can move tonight." His men cheered that. "Picts will chase us tonight, but that ridge blocks their view of my uncle's army. They're screwed and don't even know it. Boys, all we gotta do is stay alive to win. How hard can that be with all this open space?"

None answered.

## Chapter 22

### Pictland, Northern Britannia, Fall 368

General Theo followed his son, his Heruli, and his Batavi across the Stirling Bridge into Pictland with the rest of his riders. Surprise depended upon speed, so they hurried the hell up and, several hours later, caught the enemy unprepared. They scattered, but Votadini and Brigante warriors hunted them down as if they got paid per head. Theo ended up liberating several thousand Votadini and Brigante women and children, plus huge herds of cattle, sheep, goats, and pigs. Though accommodations were primitive, they spent the night at the enemy camp, which had enough lean-to's for all. In the morning, the Theos rode south with half of their horsemen. His allies continued hunting enemies and, in total war, anyone they found was an enemy. The highlands led to the lowlands and then the Forth River Valley.

Once back across the bridge, three wounded Heruli rode up to the general.

"Sir, Magnus took everyone on. He lured several thousand enemies southeast to give you more time and fewer enemies. He requests help and thought he'd get it a few days ago."

In the morning, General Theo led his cavalry east at best possible speed, leaving his infantry to catch up. He led the main force along the trail, stunned by the number of bodies.

"Magnus got to play the hero again," Young Theo said scornfully. "That's his favorite role."

"As long as he survives so I can kick his ass," dad added. "Son, take the Heruli and lengthen our skirmish line so the enemy doesn't ride around us. Picts will run rather than battle us. Help your cousin if you'd rather keep him alive."

Theodosius had noticed the animosity between his son and Max had changed since Sara's Vision.

The general kept his core cavalry along the river road. His infantry would later search the riverbank, crags, and thorny brambles to find hidden enemies. Attacotti could pass for Votadini from a distance. Stuck with his troops, Theo asked

Dulcitus to manage the battlefield since he enjoyed more influence with allied leaders. The new Dux rode ahead at night with warriors from the Wall while Theo oversaw a proper fortified camp. The Votadini capital said 40,000 had besieged them, so Theo had expected a pitched battle. Only now did he realize the 1st Platoon annihilated most of the enemy for him. The next day displayed a one-sided slaughter. Theo wished he left boatmen this far upriver to catch Picts swimming across. The current swept most for miles and only the strongest swimmers survived. They found dead and dying, mostly by the River Forth. Romans treated the injured, but prisoners would spend the rest of their miserable lives working to pay back the enormous debt they owed Britannia. Enemy corpses they threw in the water while allied dead they threw across horses so loved ones could reclaim them. The number of dead confused Theo.

“Who did this?” he asked injured enemies.

“Magnus Maximus,” they answered in dread. “We couldn’t catch him because he shoots arrows from the saddle.”

“One hundred riders shot several thousand?” the military governor of Britannia asked in disbelief.

“No. He shot many more to the south. We lost our best warriors to him. The man’s a monster.”

Young Theo would soon verify that when he returned. The carnage was incredible.

Dulcitus found his father-in-law ironically besieging the enemy army, or what was left of it, against a bulge in the riverbank. Chief Redcoat, as Romans remembered him, had hunted his besiegers when they left his city. Avenging those who wronged his tribe felt therapeutic. After several terrifying months, the Votadini wanted to hurt those who hurt them, and his Brigante neighbors were only happy to help.

Several thousand Pict, Irish, and Attacotti had formed up behind archers and slingers on a riverside outcrop of hard rock that bent the river, which made it relatively slow, wide, and shallow. Someone smart determined the best way across the Forth, and even hammered into bedrock a long rope that good swimmers tied to a tree on the other riverbank. A line of men held that rope as they swam across. Some lost their grip, and probably their lives. Votadini in boats from their capital anchored nearby to shoot them, with more boats sailing up to contest the crossing. Horses could not survive the fast current, so Picts had to abandon them to the enemy. Not just the thousands of mounts they stole, but those they brought, which must have hurt. Picts and Attacotti who went home a week ago got away with all their loot. Everyone else lost everything.

Dulcitus saw British boats floating from the Sterling Bridge. “Cut the rope!” he yelled.

Those men lashed their boats together, then charged the rope across the river. After a brief clash, they hacked at it until it broke, sending a hundred Picts downriver. The good guys cheered while boxing in hated enemies south of the river. Picts knew they were screwed. Only a thousand Attacotti remained, and they could foresee their fate as clearly as Sara the Seer. Out-numbered, with their backs to the water, they’d be shot from a distance, then overwhelmed by superior numbers. A thousand who had already crossed saw the inevitable and began



walking away, not even as a unit. Each wandered to their own home, head slung low in defeat. Votadini and Brigantes riders had collected another thousand prisoners, who they paraded before those trapped against the river. Bound hand and foot, those prisoners could not escape. The tribesmen would torture them slowly before overwhelming the trapped enemy. In retaliation, the trapped Picts displayed their own hostage—mostly teenage girls who had been repeatedly gang-raped.

Dulcitus heard his name, but couldn't see who called him until a giant blue Pict waved his arms from the enemy camp to get his attention. His booming voice silenced both sides. The new Duke rode through allied lines into no man's land. The Pict didn't look like he wanted to surrender. He yelled at his men to lower their bows so the Roman could get closer.

"I am Dulcitus. What is your name?"

That almost exhausted his Pict, except for insults.

"I am Oengus."

He kicked an unarmed Attacotti who stood up and translated. "We want to trade captives, life for life. We have 784 Votadini and Brigantes girls. You must let 784 of us cross the river and safely go home. We have taken many other captives, but it may take a week to bring them here."

Brenna and Patarn Redcoat rode up behind Dulcitus so he'd take the first arrow. "Agreed. We'll send boats. No tricks or treachery. As your men get across, you release that many captives."

Tensions fell as prospects of battle faded. Survival thrilled the enemy, but even Votadini and Brigantes looked forward to ransoming their loved ones. Just one boat would take too long, so the good guys gave up dozens to finish this before dark. Tribal leaders positioned themselves to track people, leaving the rest little to do. Dulcitus suggested barricading the enemy so they didn't escape that night. Thousands of tribesmen dug a ditch and used that earth to pile a berm. The arrival of Theo and his cavalry proved anti-climactic. Theo expected an epic battle, but apparently Max robbed him of that. Once updated, the cavalry camped around the enemy. Seeing a Roman general, the big blue Pict bellowed something, then kicked an Attacotti who was slow in translating.

"Dulcitus, why weren't you with the legion we slaughtered it?"

The Roman popped a cork upon seeing Valentinus. "I remember you! You wanted to sell us wheat. Valentinus?" The Attacotti didn't answer, but the Pict laughed and knocked Valentinus down. "I retired a week before the attack. I was supposed to take my family to Londinium, but my replacement was a lazy idiot."

The Pict nodded at hearing the translation. "We would have taken Eboracum if you had died with the legion."

Dulcitus did not disagree. Any military unit needs leadership. Decapitating Britannia's leadership was a smart first move. If the emperor was slower in responding, or took longer to learn of it, coalition forces could have killed or enslaved a million Romanized Britons.

"Valentinus, how did you convince so many people to fight together?"

The Attacotti shrugged. "Persuasion is my weapon." The Pict said Magnus quite clearly and kicked Valentinus when he was down. "A Roman called Magnus slew the better half of our army. Oengus wants to know if he is here."

“No. I haven’t seen him in a week.”

Theo was just glad Max might be alive.

The Pict leader was furious. “I hope Magnus dies. If not, I would like to kill him in one-on-one combat.”

The Duke laughed at that. “Magnus would beat you like he has slain a thousand Saxons.”

Oengus took the insult like a man and growled a warning. “I’d like to meet this man or see his corpse,” the giant Pict said through Valentinus, “but I must first force proud Picts to surrender their captives to ransom our warriors. I’ll be back in a week. Will you give me safe passage?”

“Yes, Oengus, as long as you bring over a hundred Votadini and Brigantes hostages.”

Theo was not happy to lose so many enemies. Brenna and Redcoat, however, would tolerate nothing less than the return of their people. The joyous reunions brought the two tearful tribes together. Patarn’s red coat would become one of the 13 Treasures of Britannia, said to fit any brave man perfectly. His son, Edern, continued to rule what would become the province of Valentia (Votadini land). His grandson, Cunedda, would start the Kingdom of Gwynedd, a Roman client-state.

## Chapter 23

### **Votadini Land, Northern Britannia, Fall 368**

Beyond the ridge, Team Max got a good night’s sleep in the woods while hundreds of enemies climbed over the ridgeline to fight in the morning. The Heruli slept in and enjoyed a hot breakfast after giving their horses a nosebag filled with parched oats. Max expected another long day and didn’t want his guys hungry. Every member of a squad carried something different—tents, blankets, tin cups, a hand mill, etc. With a ground oven, each baked a loaf of flat bread for each platoon member. They carried aloe for a binding salve or a poultice, but had nothing for fever or pain. Though loaded with ration packs, they didn’t have enough ammo. A vast forest stood between them and the coast. Mounted archers don’t fight well in the woods, but they didn’t have enough arrows to continue the battle. Today they’d have to fight with swords like Batavi, which didn’t leave them confident. The obvious solution was to get away, since they accomplished their mission.

Max addressed them before they went to work. “I wish we brought a local guide. Find somewhere to hide our seriously wounded. Maybe that rain cloud will cover our escape. I wonder if any enemy would challenge me. Almost all of these rustic bumpkins are hunters, herders, and farmers, rather than trained warriors. Half of them are armed with quarterstaves, staves, and pitchforks. Even raiding doesn’t prepare them for real warfare. Meanwhile, some of you should find a way through the trees to the coast while I kill some time.”

Enemy archers wielded shepherd’s bows used to protect livestock from wolves. Many Irish had double-headed Syrian lances while Attacotti favored the pickax. Everyone else had cheap spears, cudgels, and bludgeons because they couldn’t

afford metal weapons. Even their grass-fed horses were no match for Max's Iberian beauties, trained for war since they were colts.

A squad left to find an escape and another helped their injured find hiding places in the densest woods.

Max's red plumed helmet made him stand out. From a hilltop he screamed his name and pounded his chest without his bow. Every Pict wanted to kill him, but only a few thought they had the skill. The platoon kept a distance to reassure the enemy without tempting them. A giant rode up and got down. He pounded his chest and yelled his name. The other Picts went wild. Max guessed he was pretty famous. With sword and shield he attacked the Roman, who was more interested in buying time than killing quickly. The enemy gathered at the base of the 100' hill. They all had a good view and the fight looked fierce until Max hacked enough of the shield to render their champion vulnerable. Max clipped and cut the Pict, going for muscles, but strangely took his time finishing him off. As the champion bled in a helpless heap, another fighter climbed the hill and bellowed his name.

"Magnus!" Max roared back, his troops cheering.

That second fight took almost as long because Max had less energy. The third Pict tried a spear and almost dug Max a new asshole. Instead he fucked up his lower back before Max twirled to remove his left leg below the knee. Max walked like a penguin after that unholy blow. His ears rang, his arms hurt, and his left leg didn't feel right. So much of his body had been banged blue that he could almost pass for Pict. An Irish ginger hollered until a fourth champion marched up with a curved blade that looked like a scythe (for cutting wheat). Max took him slow because the last few days had exhausted him. As champions fell, others took their place. Max killed several more in one-on-one combat before they started coming two at a time. He invested an hour, fighting for his life, before the platoon commander returned after noon as the rain started.

"You ready to go now, fearsome leader?"

"Fuck, yeah," Max answered, his chest heaving. He was not strong enough to lift his spirits. "I've doubled in age since last week. Fire volleys so I can run into the trees, then lead the men to safety. They want me, not all of you. I'll hide in a hole until they give up. Come back soon with reinforcements. Pelagius should be searching for us by now."

Naulo heard his resignation. "I'll tell my sister to find a replacement, if you let them kill you. I like your kids more than mine; maybe I'll swap them so they don't disappoint me like most children."

Naulo's arm rose, then fell, and almost 60 arrows flew into the audience. Max slid down the slope to his horse, thanking Sara for the stirrups because otherwise no way could he have swung his leg up and over without his friend pushing his sorry ass. He had no idea how many volleys were fired, but his men were twisting cartoonishly to launch those suckers (using their shoulders more because their biceps had tightened like a vise). Naulo led the way. A thousand angry enemies followed. Lightly wounded Heruli had positioned themselves to guide the rest. They needed enough space between trees for each guy, holding several horses, to squeeze through fast.

While the Heruli headed southwest, Max rode in the opposite direction, yelling his name. Fighting one man was easier than many, so he attracted the lion's share

of the hunters. Those who chased the Heruli got ambushed by Naulo's rearguard. Max did the same, shooting from cover, then riding deeper into the forest. That worked twice before they formed a shield wall, which slowed them down. The desperate legate took what he needed most from his horse and stumble-ran through dense bushes and up a steep slope that horses could not climb. He slipped in the mud and almost slid back down the slope. Raindrops hit his helmet like a leaky faucet. Audibility, like visibility, turned to shit, but at least Max wore a steel helmet. Picts had no protection. At the hilltop, he wiped mud on his tunic, blew his horn, and bellowed his name. Shouts echoed it and an army of shadows gave chase.

Max hoped his Heruli escaped to die another day. They deserved better while he deserved worse, but men didn't get what they deserved, he had noticed. The world is cruel and life is not fair.

People in those days walked everywhere, but Max was born impatient, so he often ran to improve his endurance. Even as a kid, so he could be a better warrior than his father. Once he started dueling, he realized the farther he could jog, the longer he lasted in hand-to-hand combat. That training saved his life as a hundred killers sought him out under the dark canopy. Marching away from his century, Max blew his horn to keep them coming. Seeking the densest forest, where horses were a detriment, he gnawed at his meat like a dog a bone. Once he found a high spot in an arroyo, he sat down and rested. He heard his first enemies coming, so he threw a stone to bring them into his ambush. He couldn't see well, but the arroyo walls narrowed. Once shadows filled it, Max launched several arrows and laughed when the enemy screamed.

"Rapists deserve to die screaming," he told them.

More came in and tried spreading out. Max only expended an arrow when he had high confidence in a strike. Sensing the enemy flanking him, he jogged away and dropped his big-ass feathery helmet. Crouching behind bushes, he listened for footsteps, then swung blindly. Slicing someone, he lunged up to attack another. His two swords flew into arms and upper bodies until he lost momentum. Turning, he ran away, laughing. Once out of sight, he curved around to attack their flanking team. He burst among them, surprise on both sides. Their weapons banged his armor while his swords sliced into flesh. He'd disappear in the trees, only to re-appear to ambush the fastest warrior chasing him. It went on for so long that he lost track of time and, possibly, his mind. In the Zone, Max dueled to the death as the sun slowly set. Every noise indicated an enemy. He had brought a few hundred arrows and somehow used them all.

Jogging in the rainy, dark forest was odd because Max had no sense of direction. At some point, he became more interested in escaping than in killing enemies. His breathing sounded loud over the raindrops, so he hummed nursery rhymes that his mommy sung to him in another lifetime. Max thought he was winning with a big beast burst out of nowhere, tackling him with a fierce curse. Max lost his shit, but later found most of it. He shifted his weight in one direction, to get the brute off of him; the fool overcompensated, enabling the legate to shift him off in the other direction. A blade between the ribs did the trick. This Scotti stunk to high heaven, but Max doubted he was Christian. No soon was he up than he was down again. A hard blow cut open his scalp and another left his right arm

numb, but his left sword sliced deep into flesh. A big bastard tackled him and was punching his face when Max put a knife into his heart. Another angry asshole kicked Max as he rolled that dead weight off. Swords clashed, then struck home, but Max wore armor and the dying guy did not. Running for his life from almost 100 angry enemies, Max sought out shadows like a vampire. And bushes, the thornier the better. He would have climbed a tree if he had the upper body strength. The enemy had flooded this place, which would explain all the damn water. He apologized to the goddess Fate to escape his destiny.

At some point, the sun didn't fall so much as disappear from the dark angry storm clouds. The wind became nosier than the raindrops and the cursing. Max thought he was kicking ass in his blind retreat until something sharp pierced his double leather chaps. Damn if he didn't see a dagger in his thigh. His breastplate earned many scratches and dents that day, but he couldn't afford to lose a leg. He twirled like a dancer and cut into a hard head who howled. Cursing himself, Max limp ran. His fingers felt for the small med kit around his waist. Ducking behind bushes, he wiped the wound clean and bandaged it. It soon soaked up water. He didn't have anything for the pain except his mind-numbing misery.

Having heard Picts talk, he learned a few dozen words. Getting up to get away, he literally bumped into more enemies. Max cursed in Pict and asked them something that he assumed was, "where did he go?" The closest guy peered closer through the rain, so Max let loose with both swords. His left arm didn't feel right, but worked well enough. He sidestepped to reduce weight bearing on his limpy left leg. Movement was key to surviving in the dark. Picts thrust and chopped and charged, but Max was both a buzz saw and a buzz kill. He didn't cut them all, much less kill them, but enough bled badly to give him a minute to flee. Downhill, this time, dragging his bum leg behind him like a heavy ax.

Max couldn't keep this up. He just didn't have the energy. Lifting his arms, much less his spirits, proved impossible until he heard the unmistakable whisper of a river that suddenly doubled its volume. He didn't know when he lost his bow, but finally realized he should shrug off his two empty quivers. Threatening voices behind him warned that someone saw him. He crashed through thickets and stumbled over stones to the river. A towering figure rose before him, laughing at his condition. Max palmed his last throwing knife, pounded his chest, and roared his name. As the enemy did the same, Max threw that knife underhanded into his leg. It wouldn't kill him, but it'd slow him down. Limp-sprinting around the cursing menace, Max could hear the current better than see it.

The seasonal stream was either not as close as it sounded or his imagination was better than it used to be. Either way, he had to pick up the pace before Picts caught him. Like chasing women, escaping was easier downhill. Just when he got his hopes up, an arrow bounced off his chest, followed by a charging animal that tackled Max. They bounced off trees and rocks, down the slope, until Max found that Pict dagger and thrust it into the guy's throat. His bulging, disbelieving eyes would totally not haunt Max.

"Magnus," the Attacotti said grimly.

"Magnus," Max confirmed, watching life ebb out of him. Too exhausted to get up, he caught his breath and maybe another lease on life. He could see the creek now. Propping himself on an elbow, he wondered how he'd crawl thirty more feet.

Then a rock hit his head. Other stones smacked his body, but that first one gave him rainbow vision. Sheathing his precious swords, he rolled away from the Attacotti slingers, downhill into the water, hard pebbles still whacking him like hail. Or Hell. On the way, Max grabbed a chunk of driftwood. The water was only four feet deep, but moving fast. In the current, Max clung to the wood, bouncing up and down in the water, and breathed when the stream let him. The furious warriors chased him. Max closed his eyes and melted into an exhausted dream-like state of endless panic.

At least he finally got a break from Sara's swearing.

## Chapter 24

### Votadini Land, Northern Britannia, Fall 368

On the right end of his father's skirmish line, Young Theo wondered where all the enemies went. He spread his soldiers out so Picts couldn't escape, but the only ones he saw were dead or dying. Hundreds of horses, but no riders. Picts measure wealth in terms of livestock—they wouldn't just leave them. No one robbed the dead, either, so his troops plumped their pockets.

That's how they found their first dead Heruli, with a look of surprise.

"Legate Theo," his senior centurion said. "I know this man. Gracco, from our legion. Very good archer." The spear in his side explained the cause of death, but heavy boots had pounded his head in. "After his death, they took a lot of time to desecrate his body."

"Magnus," someone said. Others echoed it. "Only Magnus makes men so mad."

Theo couldn't argue with that. "Let's find our missing century."

As the day bled on, they found more wounded Picts, Irish, and Attacotti. Vengeful Votadini and Brigantes operated separately and similarly. After seeing so many slaughtered villages, they had run out of mercy. They stabbed the dead to make sure they were not pretending, while finishing off the injured. The number of dead and the amount of arrows shocked Theo. The battle took place over dozens of square miles. Tracks led to a ridgeline. From there, Theo whistled in wonder at the field of bodies. No one bothered to bury them. Strange, since Picts hate abandoning their dead. Whoever survived rode away, leaving a few thousand corpses to scavengers.

Theo nailed it: "I think Max used up those 100,000 arrows."

Dying Picts confirmed it. "Magnus," several said by way of explanation, a tone of awe irritating Theo, who was a better general than warrior. The Romans climbed over the ridge and saw another battlefield on the other side. Blue bodies littered the landscape. Hundreds of horses hung out. The legion loved it because those thieves carried coin. A dozen champions who died on a hilltop suggested Max dueled them.

The sight stunned Dutch, the Batavi leader: "100 men did all this? They must have shot several thousand enemies."

After lunch, Theo broke his legion into centuries and sent them after Max. No one doubted that forest was full of bad guys. Theo stayed with the 2nd Century to intercept Picts trying to return home. A day later, Theo found most of the missing century, but not Max. They had exhausted their arrows, their food, and their wits. The 1st Century had been following enemies who were chasing Max, who apparently fled to the coast.

Theo took the 1st Batavi Century to the River Forth while the others looked for a few more days. It surprised him to see a thousand Picts on the southern riverbank, large berms surrounding them. Several thousand tribesmen had camped around them, like this was normal. Theo updated his dad, whose troops were building the Votadini capital better barriers and bigger walls. Towers for archers and catapults would soon stand on every hill and corner. Drainage ditches would prevent flooding while people would pee and poo in latrines.

Day after day, Pict and Attacotti leaders brought captives—not just from the past year, but from years before. Theo reluctantly let the enemy go, trading life for life. The last few hundred Picts had to draw lots because they ran out of captives to trade. Those who held the short straws got hard duty for life. In all, Theo had several thousand war prisoners and thrice as many criminals to rebuild Britannia. Through other interpreters, Theo made it clear that Valentinus would not be ransomed, but not even his own brother, the Attacotti chief, wanted him spared. The Pict leader went out of his way to hurt Valentinus.

“What will you do with our remaining men?” Oengus asked Theo.

“Work them. If Picts go past the Wall again, I’ll come after you.”

Valentinus laughed. “The emperor needs you and your legions against the Alamanni. You don’t have time or troops to go north.”

Theo and Oengus measured each other. “If Picts raid Britons, it will cost you.”

Valentinus translated, but Theo could tell that neither believed it.

“By then, our boys will have become men,” Oengus stated confidently as the last of his ransomed men filled the final boat. It was time for him to go. He nodded to his brothers, who grabbed Valentinus by the arms and tied his hands behind his back. “Pepin, I promised you’d pay with your life if your predictions were overly confident.”

He pushed the Attacotti weasel into Theo, who knocked him down, knelt on his chest, and literally choked the shit out of him. It felt good, seeing that worm die screaming, though the stench was tremendous.

“Valentinus, remember when you flirted with my wife and daughter in Rome? I wasn’t there, but my wife gave me enough details. I plan to send your head to your ex-brother, Emperor Valentinian. I even have preserving liquids and a container from Egypt.”

The Picts saw Theo with new respect as he drew his Damascus sword and chopped off that head with one stroke. The blue bastards studied the blade with envy. Roman archers coughed to remind the Picts of their presence. As the pair of parties parted, people called out a small sailboat coming upriver.

“Who’s the lady from the lake?” Theo asked for them all.

“Hey, it’s Nimu,” Chief Redcoat said, stunned.

The stunning beauty sailed to shore to show her catch of the day: a nearly naked Roman, covered in cuts, burns, and bruises. “We found him floating off the

coast. He's been singing, Girls of Rome, in his sleep, called me his aunt, and demanded I kiss him to make him all better. He won't let go of the special sword that looks dipped in water. I think he calls it, Excalibur, but he mumbles a lot from fever."

Votadini carried him up the riverbank. The men sighed as the gorgeous lady waved goodbye and disappeared downriver.

"Oh my God!" Despite his age, General Theo ran over. His nephew smelled minty from disinfectant applied to his numerous injuries. Theo's heart leapt when he saw Max's heart rise. "He's alive!"

The big Pict was not pleased. "Magnus?" Since his return, he spoke with every surviving Pict who battled this man. Oengus thought for sure it must be bullshit: riding circles around Picts, dueling them all day, killing thousands. As he was not armed, the Romans let him get a good look at a bad man. The number of wounds said it all.

"Magnus Maximus," the giant man said, seeing his nemesis for the first time. "This island is not big enough for the both of us."

Theo saw doubt, and maybe even fear in the Pict. "Whenever you wish to duel him in a fair fight, come to London. I'll bet everything I have on Magnus Maximus." The general turned to bellow at his army. "*Medici!* I need a *medici!*"

The Picts took their boat across and marched north. But they'd be back.

Oengus needed to test himself against Magnus Maximus.

## Historical Note

After another decisive victory over Picts and Scotti (Irish) in 381, Roman troops in Britannia proclaimed the real Magnus Maximus their emperor. Like Constantine the Great before him, Magnus took troops from Britannia to successfully invade Gaul in 383, where he defeated and killed Gratian, the Western Roman Emperor, near Paris, after five days of skirmishing. Desperate to avoid another civil war, Bishop Ambrose of Milan negotiated a deal whereby Magnus Maximus became the only third co-emperor in Roman history (three emperors ruling together instead of just two). He was declared Augustus (emperor) over Iberia, Gaul, and Britannia. If content with that, the Roman Empire might not have collapsed and Europe might have avoided the Dark Ages. Instead, Magnus invaded Italy in 387 and was beaten by his cousin Theo, the Eastern Roman emperor, who he grew up with. Theo's sons became the worst emperors in centuries and were most responsible for weakening the Roman Empire. Instead, Magnus could have changed history by becoming the first king of Britain rather than just another Roman usurper. Rome survived 1000 years before German strongmen put Roman puppets on the throne in the 450s, but what if Magnus Maximus never started another civil war that bankrupted the empire? Accordingly, I've change history by having Magnus build up Britain instead of invading Italy. Where would we be now if Europe had avoided the Dark Ages? Find out with the Magnus Maximus Saga.



