

R.G.J.  
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THE  
BITTER  
ROAD

A HISTORICAL FICTION NOVEL

THE  
BITTER  
ROAD

## ALSO BY THE AUTHOR

The Lost Legend

The Last Quest

The Rule of St Benedict

Augustine of Canterbury

THE  
BITTER  
ROAD

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## LAST QUEST

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To my Companions,  
sharing the journey.

## PRAISE FOR THE BITTER ROAD

**A superb read. Historical fiction, when done well as in this case, can help bring history to life.**

A superb read. Historical fiction, when done well as in this case, can help bring history to life. These books are a perfect example of this. As we study world history in the classroom we all too often focus on the key dates, major figures. Missing out on the finer detail of 'life' as lived at the time. The author clearly has a deep interest in this early Christian period (which is clear in his book on St. Augustine, titled "Augustine of Canterbury: Leadership, Mission and Legacy"). With this background it is easy for the author to transport the reader into the unique lives of the various characters in the books. I really enjoyed this series and it has also brought a period of our history to life for me.

When is the next book?? – Amazon Customer

...

### **A Detailed, Enthralling and Persuasive Account of The Journey to Britannia**

This second novel in the trilogy brought depth to the main characters and provided a clear understanding of the challenges that faced Augustinus as he and his colleagues travelled through Northern Europe to Britannia. This is no 'dry' piece of historical fiction as the author has clearly investigated the route that was taken and as a consequence provides the reader with detailed information on the barriers and potential dangers that these brave missionaries would have faced during their journey. It was especially interesting to read and learn more of the politics of the time including the fractured nature of the Christian church and the weakening of the power of the Church of Rome as they all prepared for what they believed was 'The End of Days'.

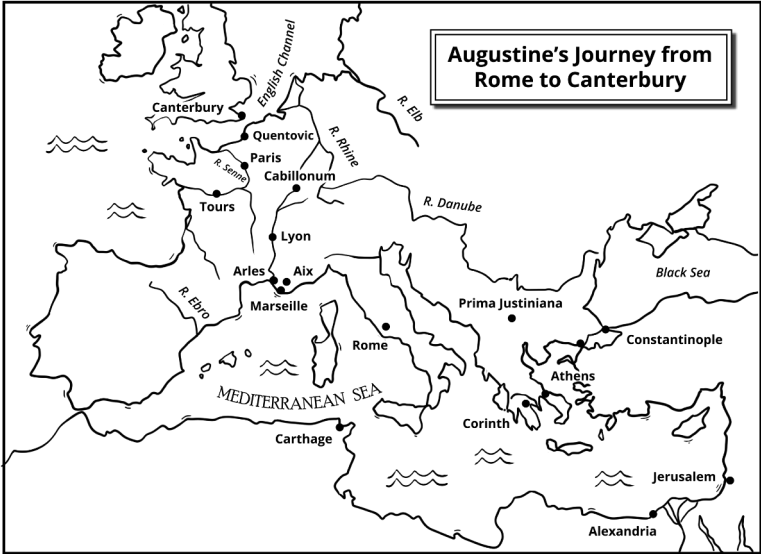
– Barry Brooks

## A story behind the history that draws you in.

I found this book informative and compelling. It filled in more gaps in my knowledge of this period of history (6th Century) and of the background to the spreading of Christianity to England via the south. St Augustine became a flesh and blood presence and the challenges of his personal route to his final role was revealed in absorbing details. The events are witnessed through the eyes of three pivotal fictional characters who are engaging and credible. The road from Rome to the south east coast of England is 'bitter' because fraught with risk and danger as well as the physical discomfort and weariness of travel and the periods of time involved. The author describes the journey in accurate detail and the extent of his research is apparent on every page, which adds depth and credibility to the narrative. I look forward to reading the third and final book in this illuminating trilogy. – Amazon Customer



**Augustine's Journey from Rome to Canterbury**





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# P R E F A C E

596-7 AD in the Kingdoms of Francia, the Legend continues as strife and conflict multiply in Rome.

Pope Gregorius launches an unprecedented mission across sea and land to the far-distant Saxon Kingdom of Cantia.

Desperate to find his sister Tola, Alric is also torn between returning to his Saxon homeland and remaining in Rome with his beloved Paulina. An even greater physical and emotional struggle lies ahead across unfamiliar, hostile terrain through the very heart of a freezing-cold winter.

Their unexpected and yearlong journey takes Alric and Cadmon, Augustinus their Prior and his forty companions through warring Kingdoms of the Franks on their harsh and bitter road.

Every mile brings the Saxons closer to their home as they press ever deeper into the bitter heart of the Kingdoms of the Franks.



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## I

PORTA SAN PAOLO,  
ROME*May, AD 596*

“READY, ALRIC?” PRIOR Augustinus turned to me as I stood waiting alongside our cart. I nodded, but my thoughts were elsewhere, returning again and again to the crossroads of joy and despair, anticipation and regret. My anxiety centred on a secret I was leaving behind in the nunnery of San Quattro Coronati—beautiful Paulina, the love of my life, now bereft and alone.

“All clear! Safe to proceed!”

I looked up at the watchman standing high on a parapet above the city gate, the sun glinting on his spear as he observed our approach. He turned briefly, looking beyond the wall at the open countryside and deserted road to the west. On this early morning in late May, the trees stood sharply outlined against a clear blue sky.

The temperature was rapidly rising as the first in our single file of eight carts trundled across the open square to the gateway of Porta San Paolo. Cadmon, my lifelong friend, led the way with his cavalry troop of five riders, and moments later we passed through an arched passageway into dazzling sunshine.

After seven tumultuous years in Rome I had become a postulant in the Monastery of San Andreas, now approaching my seventeenth



birthday. The monastery had given me much that I was grateful for—the friendship of the monks, learning another language, reading and scribing. But the prospect of returning home to the distant Kingdom of Cantia, to Sandwic Haven, to my family and the King and Queen I much admired, filled me with nervous anticipation.

Glancing back, Prior Augustinus counted the remainder of our party of a score of men, eight carts and mules throwing up clouds of dust on the road. Augustinus turned and strode resolutely ahead with staff in hand, a figure taller than anyone else in our expedition party. His dark tonsured hair ringed his shaved crown, his face was a light brown hue from a life in the sun, and his lips moulded in a permanent half-smile beneath his pronounced Roman nose. Brother Petrus, my tutor ever since I had come to the Holy City, walked alongside us, his eyes ever alert.

Out on the open road there would be little protection from Langobard warriors sniffing for spoil. Ahead lay swathes of desolate farmland and homesteads burned to the ground. The landscape was as barren and empty as the first time I had seen it seven years earlier. Wild grasses swallowed the last remaining stalks of wheat and maize on this once-fertile farmland. A hawk hovered above us, marking its prey, and a pervasive sense of menace drifted on the breeze.

Cadmon—my closest friend since birth—waited for us alongside the road. His lightly bearded face was calm and watchful, his magnificent dark-grey warhorse Belisarius, snorting impatiently, scraping at the dirt. The squadron was a comforting presence with the soft clinking of their weapons and lamellar armour accompanying the last of our carts.

Some seven years earlier Cadmon and I had gazed at this same basilica from the deck of a merchant slaver hauled up the River Tiber by a team of oxen. Much had changed for us since the time we arrived for sale in Rome's slave market. Now Cadmon rode as a

cavalry officer, and I walked as a free man and postulant monk. Beneath our feet, the cobbled road to Ostia had received scant attention for more than a century. In no time my feet ached, ankles swelling from the hard, uneven surface of the road, but they were no longer the feet of a slave; they were feet free to go where I wished.

After an hour on the road we came to the Basilica San Paulo on the Tiber, the white columns shimmering in the morning heat.

“Let the mules loose for a while,” Augustinus called out. “There’s grazing here and water down by the river. It’s a good moment to see how your carts and mules are doing before we press on to Ostia. Anyone who wants to join us at the shrine of San Paulus is welcome!”

Cadmon added, “And if you have anything in your cart that you could use as a weapon, bring it out now, and place it below your cover sheet for quick access.”

Graciosus our senior layman in the expedition raised his eyebrows beneath his Phrygian cap, a twinge of concern crossing his sunburned face.

“Are we expecting trouble?”

“No, the Langobards don’t usually rise from bed this early. But let’s be prepared.”

Our small group of half a dozen monks accompanied Augustinus through the portico and up a short flight of stairs to heavy bronze doors that led into this enormous Basilica. Augustinus paused.

“Let’s think for a moment why we have stopped here. We’ve come to pray at the shrine of our great Apostle to the Gentiles. We’ve just taken our first steps in our long walk as he did. Come.”

A dazzling spectacle met our eyes as we entered the basilica. The ceiling and its massive supporting columns glittered in beaten gold.

The mosaic floor shone beneath our feet as we walked the long distance down the nave. At the shrine a semi-circle of stairs led down to the altar below. We filed slowly past, extending a hand into the small, circular aperture. The bones of the saint felt cold to the touch, and my hand did not linger long. The Abbot of San Paolo joined us as we sat in silence close by the shrine, praying our prayers and thinking our thoughts, increasingly aware of the expectations that the Pope's mission had placed on us.

As we left the Basilica, Cadmon was deep in conversation with his cavalry troop. He broke away as we approached, and the two of us walked slowly down to the river. I looked upstream recalling the day we had arrived in Rome, and I wondered aloud; "Would we have felt less fearful for our future had we known that seven years later we would be returning home?"

"No," Cadmon replied, and I laughed out loud for the first time in a week. As he swung into his saddle Cadmon cautioned, "Let's not make light of the demands that this journey will place on us, Alric." He paused. "These last years have been hard, but they are merely a dress rehearsal for what lies ahead. Back in our early days, after Felix stole us from the Haven, we fretted all the time over our survival. Now our concern is to reach home before the Apocalypse!"

## II

# OSTIA

*May, AD 596*

FOR SEVERAL HOURS we journeyed hard towards Rome's ancient port. Sand dunes and the occasional tree and tufts of dry grass dotted the landscape, but there was no sign of human habitation or any Langobard warriors.

Cadmon's leadership of his men was exemplary, their cavalry support first-rate. There was no idle conversation, only brief exchanges and hand signals so that their eyes were looking where they should—everywhere. By late afternoon we came to the outskirts of the town as Ostia's cathedral came into view. Chickens clucked and scattered out the way, as we rattled into the courtyard of Cardinal Bishop Domenico's residence.

Augustinus threw back the hood of his brown habit and gathered us all together with a sigh of relief and a smile.

"My brothers, this is our last resting place on the shores of our homeland, and already your feet are swollen! It is a bitter road that stretches before us, hard and long before we reach our journey's end. Each of us must weigh again the cost of making this journey, so that we can go forward together resolved in heart and mind, rather than have painful regrets later. Now, I shall make this offer to you only this once. Tomorrow morning will be the last opportunity for anyone who is having second thoughts to return to San Andreas, under the

protection of our magnificent cavalry as they return to their barracks. Whatever you decide, I praise the courage of all of you!”

Augustinus, tired and footsore like the rest of us, gingerly made his way to the door of the Bishop’s residence. Before he could raise his hand to knock, an aged doorkeeper emerged.

“Greetings! We’ve come from San Andreas Monastery on the Pope’s business. I trust the Bishop is expecting us?”

The doorkeeper bowed. “Bishop Domenico is preparing for evening prayers in the basilica, sir. Will you be joining him?”

“Our monks and I will gladly join the Bishop! But if you could take care of my lay brothers’ needs, that would be a great kindness!”

We hurried over to the Basilica, the bell ringing as we crossed the courtyard. Cardinal Domenico sat with his Deacon and his small congregation, gathered together from the town. He rose with a broad smile as we entered. His arms were open wide in welcome, genuinely pleased to see us. I recognised the Cardinal from six years earlier, when he had consecrated Abba Gregorius as Bishop of Rome. Domenico was an imposing figure, tall like Augustinus, his face swarthy above a bull neck that disappeared into his cassock. Domenico’s dark hair was short-cropped, flecked with grey and tonsured, as were most Roman clergy.

The Cardinal Bishop beamed. “You have arrived on San Aurea’s remembrance day! That is a good sign! Come, sit with us, we will talk afterwards.” He took his seat, his swarthy face still smiling with pleasure. We sat in the stall opposite, and evening prayers began.

\*

The evening meal of fresh fish, olives, and vegetables was washed down with diluted white wine. Domenico turned to Augustinus; “I seldom have the time or opportunity to make the

journey to Rome now, my dear brother. What news of the Holy City?”

Augustinus mentioned recent events and touched on tensions between some of the clergy and the Pope.

Domenico sighed. “I have heard something of this. It’s a fool’s game. They want to seize power for personal, or perhaps factional gain, less concerned to support the Church in Rome, and more concerned to restore the old pagan Imperial State. Darkness lies right in the heart of Rome!”

Cadmon added, “Well, I have recently returned from Constantinople. The imperial city has sunk so low it is little more than a gilded cesspit. Can Rome be far behind? The Emperor’s advisers seem to regard losing the Holy City to the Langobard King as a price worth paying.”

“And yet,” Domenico countered, “perhaps your departure comes just in time! The Langobard King may soon arrive demanding even greater extortion! But let’s be realistic. There is no one else like His Holiness who can hold Rome together, no one who might follow him to the apostolic throne!”

In a more cheerful tone, Domenico put down his fork and said, “So! Tell me about your mission to the ends of the earth! Has this been in the planning for some time? No word of it reached me before your letter a few days ago.”

Augustinus shook his head. “This has been on His Holiness’s heart for several years, ever since Alric and Cadmon came to us on a slave ship. But he took his final decision only two weeks ago.”

Domenico rolled his eyes to the heavens and threw up his hands in disbelief as Augustinus continued. “And we’ve been putting the expedition together ever since. As you can see, we are here at last.”

Augustinus turned to Cadmon and me. “Both Cadmon and Alric are from the Kingdom of Cantia—in the southeast part of ancient Britannia. So, we have experts to guide us once we make

landfall on Saxon soil.”

Domenico asked, “And the purpose of your quest is?”

“King Ethelbert and Queen Bertha have long asked for a mission to their kingdom. As far as I know, we are the first to respond sympathetically to their request.”

Domenico dabbed his lips with his napkin. “And how can I be of service to you?” he said briskly. “Do you need a ship?”

“Yes, we do. As you know, Cardinal, the Langobards hold almost all the territory from Rome up to the Alps, so the road north on the Via Aurelia is closed to us.”

Domenico nodded. “So, I shall take you to the port tomorrow, and see what we can find.” He smiled. “Now, you must be exhausted after your journey!”

Augustinus interrupted, “Before we turn in—this evening, we commemorated San Aurea, and this is her basilica. Is there anything in Aurea’s life and story that we might draw on for our journey ahead?”

Our host pushed back his chair and spread his hands in a gesture that said, “Certainly!”

Domenico cleared his throat. “Aurea lived in Rome around the first part of the third century, when the empire was still very much a pagan enterprise. She came from a noble family. Her name, as you know, means ‘golden’, and so she was in spirit also. She was exiled here in Ostia for her faith. She lived on an estate owned by her parents, outside of the city walls, not far from here in fact; and sought-out local Christians from the town—mainly through Quiriacus, the local bishop at the time.

“Because her movements were so severely restricted, townspeople came to her villa for prayer and worship. Through her prayers, a prisoner was miraculously set free, and nearly twenty soldiers from the local barracks embraced the Faith. And every one

of them was put to death! Aurea's own end came when she prayed for the son of a local shoemaker who had died—and he came back to life! For this, the Governor arrested Aurea's friends, and executed them too. Then he tortured Aurea to force her to renounce her faith and make a sacrifice to the Roman gods. She refused. They took her to the shore at low tide and bound her neck to a stone. When the tide came in, they let her drown.”

A shocked silence fell as Bishop Domenico finished his story. He ended, “They buried her here; this was part of her estate. And her burial place was turned into a shrine with a small oratory.” The Bishop paused. “That may not be the encouragement that you hoped for in Aurea's story! But I pray for you, Augustinus, that your expedition to pagan Cantia will be more welcoming than our ancestors were to Aurea!”

He added, “You know that San Monica, San Augustinus's mother, died of fever here in Ostia as they waited for a ship? That was two hundred years ago. And you, Augustinus, now bear her son's name! This might not be a coincidence. I pray that your namesake will intercede to bring you safely to your destination!”

Tired as I was, I lay tossing and turning into the night reflecting on Aurea's story, both inspiring and terrifying at the same time. Could I ever reach such a high bar? I thought of my sister Tola, sold into slavery nearly seven years earlier. She could be anywhere now. How could I return home without her? Then my thoughts turned to Paulina at San Quattro Coronati, and I began composing a letter to her in my mind.

“My dearest Paulina, it seems unnecessary to write that I miss you terribly, but I'll say it anyway! A real ache in my heart, a great hole in my life! I feel every step that takes me further away from you



on our long journey through the kingdoms of Francia...”

\*

After breakfast our cavalry squad said their farewells and returned to Rome, leaving Cadmon as the sole protector on our journey. None of our companions had taken up the offer to return with them to Rome.

Domenico, Augustinus, our monks as well as Cadmon and I, walked briskly through Porta Romana, Ostia’s gateway into the town. The brutal evidence of previous battles five decades earlier was still visible everywhere. Further along the main street we came to a semi-circular theatre on the Via Decumanus Maximus, and gazed in amazement at the curved wall at the rear of the theatre, facing on to the street and now bricked up and heavily fortified behind high walls and narrow windows.

Domenico gestured to Cadmon. “Your horse is called Belisarius, yes? It is a good name! General Belisarius defended this town against King Totila. When Totila arrived here, the last inhabitants of the city had already retreated into this theatre. They turned it into a little fortress, as you can see.”

Further on we came to a quay, near to the grain warehouses. A sixty-foot, seventy-five-ton ship from Sicilia lay tied up alongside, its cargo marked for Rome. Domenico recognised the skipper and strode over to the stern of the vessel.

“Russo! Greetings, my friend! How fares it with you?” The Bishop’s round face beneath his purple skullcap split into one of his signature smiles.

“Excellent, thank you, Bishop! Your business is not so good? You bring some monks and a soldier just to watch a ship unloading?”

Domenico laughed.

“No, not to watch! My brothers here want to sail to Occitan Canas. Can we talk?”

With unloading completed, Russo joined us on the quay. A lengthy conversation ensued as Russo took account of the volume and weight that he had available in the hold of his ship. When he had finished his calculations and given Augustinus the cost, we drew aside with the Bishop to confer. By my estimate—I kept the purse—the cost for our journey was more than we had money to pay. We would not reach the Frankish coast, let alone make our way through Francia and arrive in the far distant Saxon kingdom of Cantia!

Augustinus summed up our situation.

“Either we leave the carts behind, which would deal a near-fatal blow to the resources of our mission; or I return to Rome, and wait for an audience with the Pope for more money. But the ship will sail before I can return.”

“And ships don’t come by all that often these days,” Domenico added to our growing pile of disappointment.

Cadmon broke in, “Leaving our tools behind is simply not an alternative! Neither Alric nor I have seen anything like their quality in the Kingdom of Cantia! They are irreplaceable! Why take fifteen skilled craftsmen to Cantia if they have no tools to work with when we arrive?”

We stood downcast on the quay, trying to think of a better alternative.

I stepped away from our group and stood alone for a while, looking at the distant horizon of the sparkling sea, vanishing as surely as my own prospects of ever reaching home.



### III

# MARE NOSTRUM OUR SEA

*May, AD 596*

#### I FELT CRUSHED.

The cry of a gull swooping over the mast of Russo's ship sent a shiver down my spine, and my heart was heavy at the prospect of turning back at the first hurdle, abandoning our mission altogether. I yearned to be with my family again. But then what? Return to fishing for a living? In our Cantwara world, the status into which someone was born was also the place where a person remained—except for a woman with the good fortune to marry well, but even that was rare.

These last few years my life's passion had begun to take shape around my ability to read, and skills to scribe; and also—a sudden and new thought presented itself as I stood on the quay—teaching others to do the same. There was much good to share, but set against brute force, ignorance and stagnation. A surge of determination swept through me; the mission must go on.

I returned to our group as Augustinus looked up, breaking his silence with a sigh, his voice sombre and words measured.

“I have come to a decision, my brothers,” he began, but before our Prior could speak further, Bishop Domenico interrupted.

“Forgive me, Prior, but if I may speak!”

All heads turned to the Bishop. Domenico glanced at each of us, his expression impossible to read.

“I wish to say that neither of your two options seems acceptable. You cannot delay your departure any further, especially as a suitable vessel lies here at anchor now, at your command. Who knows how long it will be before another ship such as this comes by?”

Domenico gestured towards Russo’s merchant vessel, slowly bobbing against the quay.

”Nor, as Cadmon has warned, can you seriously contemplate leaving behind the very means to bring practical skills and invaluable tools to win the confidence of the people of Cantia! No, the prospect of any further delay is simply unthinkable!”

After a dramatic pause, Domenico declared, “I will pay for your journey!”

The look of surprise on everyone’s face was a moment to remember. Before Augustinus could protest, Domenico continued.

“And you, my dear Prior, shall write me a promissory note that I can take to His Holiness for reimbursement! I’m sure he will completely understand your very difficult position; particularly as he is already indebted to me—you may remember, I was the Cardinal Bishop who made him Pope!”

\*

We left our mules and Cadmon’s second horse with Bishop Domenico. “As a surety, of course!” Domenico said, and at last, we had something to laugh about. With Russo’s vessel firmly secured alongside the quay, a gangplank allowed a team of dockers to load our cargo, comprising carts and precious tools, and merchandise for

a few other travellers sailing to Elba and Massilia.

Cato our carpenter, with Cornelius and also Numerius, nicknamed the Hammer, worked energetically to create a ramp for Cadmon's charger to cross into the hold of the ship. This took some careful preparation, requiring the installation of a temporary stall made of planks, iron rings, and staples, together with a canvas sling. After two days the work was completed and Russo loaded our precious cargo, everyone helping to carefully lower our carts and contents into the hold.

Shortly after daybreak on the third day, in calm waters Bishop Domenico accompanied us to the ship to bid us farewell.

Taking Augustinus aside he confided, "One of the passengers is a friend of mine, a Jewish merchant by the name of Jacob. He lives nearby the synagogue, along the seashore. Keep an eye open for him, will you? The Jews are not always welcome on sea voyages—or most other places, for that matter."

The skipper with his crew of five released the ship from the moorings and unfurled the large square sail to catch the breeze, drawing us steadily away from Ostia.

Bishop Domenico waved to us for a long while, then turned and walked briskly back to his residence—and to his two eternal companions, Monica and Aurea.

\*

After some time watching the shoreline slip by we became accustomed to the motion of the ship, and conversation gradually picked up amongst small groups of passengers dotted around the deck. Augustinus made his way aft to the skipper's raised platform with its two steering paddles, one on either side of the vessel.

"Russo, how long do you expect our journey to Elba will take?"

The skipper seldom looked directly at any of us while he was steering, his eyes constantly roaming the sea to where fish leapt from the water and gulls swooped down, and the coastline slipped steadily away.

“It depends on the weather,” Russo answered; “and the wind. Both are good today. If they hold, about three days to Elba, a short while in the port, and maybe four days to Canas. We sail day and night using the sun and the stars—and the wind is favouring us at the moment.” Russo paused then added, “This ship has a deep keel, shaped like a wine glass, and that helps us sail more swiftly. But I must warn you. If the ocean turns against us, we may have to shelter in a port somewhere until the storm passes, because high seas will swamp the ship!”

Augustinus nodded.

Russo went on, “Unfortunately, all the coastline you see here is in the hands of the Langobards. Who knows how they would respond to the sudden arrival of a fully-laden ship from Ostia!”

On our first night at sea, after an evening meal and night prayer, we lay down to rest. Russo’s brother shared the steering while his family slept in a space below a raised deck at the rear of the ship. Merchants and travellers alike mostly slept on deck; a few spread blankets over their precious cargoes and slept down in the hold.

With night upon us, the ship ploughed on.

All seemed at peace with the world—except for me.

\*

The ship sailed steadily on, dipping in the shallow swells, swaying slightly from side to side with changes in the wind; planks and sail ropes creaking in a low murmur through the night watch. I lay on my back; eyes open wide, arms cushioning my head as I

gazed at the rising moon, it's silver light like a pathway on the dark sea. I stared at the stars, a vast canopy of the night sky and a place of awe and wonder. But my thoughts were a jumble of hope and anxiety as Rome fell further behind, and the deep unknown drew us steadily into its embrace.

I drifted off for a while then opened my eyes. Cadmon lay on his side, watching me.

"I see you are still awake. What is it that troubles you, my friend?"

We weren't worried about being overheard, even though people lay all around us. We spoke quietly in our own Saxon tongue; I was quite certain no one else on the ship would understand it.

I sighed and rolled over to face Cadmon.

"I find myself plagued with guilt for leaving Paulina."

Cadmon grunted sympathetically, and I continued.

"Her future lies bound up with marriage and settling down, and raising children together. But I'm committed to finding Tola, and returning her to our home in the Haven, which means remaining on this mission with Augustinus, if ever we want to see home again!"

I paused long enough for another heavy sigh.

"I also want to remain a scribe, but I'm not sure that taking life vows is the way forward for me. But if I don't, I will surely return to become a fisherman at the Haven again, and throw away the very occupation that I find I'm so drawn to! And if I do take vows, I would become a monk and cast aside any future with Paulina."

Cadmon opened his mouth to speak, but I raised a finger.

"Hear me out. Last, but not least—you and I began our journey together, and I also passionately believe, with all my heart, that you and I must finish it together!"

I stopped speaking as tears welled up. Cadmon reached across



and squeezed my arm in affirmation and friendship.

“Thank you for your words, my brother; you have proved yourself loyal and true through good and bad, thick and thin. I too share that sentiment.”

Cadmon lay back, and for a while, silence fell between us.

“But you would be wise to stop torturing yourself with these thoughts, Alric—these so-called ‘choices’ over which you really have no control. Our lives are not always ours to direct, at least until we arrive back home. Then we will have choices to make, actions to carry through. For now, our task is to do everything in our power to bring our Prior, and all our companions, safely to the shores of Cantia.”

I rolled onto my back again, watching the stars.

After a while, Cadmon returned to our conversation.

”But I cannot envisage either of us ever returning to Rome again—and there is no way you could bring Paulina over to Cantia, or even send a message to her. If your letter did travel as far as Rome, she wouldn’t be able to read it. So someone else in the convent would need to do so. That would open a hornet’s nest of questions about your relationship. The Mother Superior would probably refuse to let her depart, and your letter would be sent to whoever is the new Abbot at San Andreas. You can imagine what would follow if your name was mentioned—all your worst nightmares would come to pass!”

I knew that Cadmon was right.

All the same, my heart would not let matters rest.

\*

Come the new day, we said and sang our daily prayers morning,

noon and night, according to our monastic rule. Everyone on board listened, mostly with silent attention. No one objects to prayers on a ship; they provide a barrier to accidents, shelter against inclement weather and scavengers from the sea—or drowning.

I stretched my legs and walked half the length of the ship towards the prow where Jacob sat on the deck, his eyes shaded beneath his wide-brimmed straw hat, gazing at me with curiosity as I approached. His garb was unusual. He wore several outer layers of clothing despite the sunshine, and also a dark cloak and a worn leather bag tucked securely beneath his arm. His complexion was deeply bronzed by the Ostian sunshine, his straggly beard partially hiding the lower half of his face.

It seemed better to begin a conversation with a stranger by saying something we can both agree on, so I started with the fine weather and the smooth Tyrrhenian Sea slipping beneath the keel. Soon, our conversation moved on to the town we had left behind. We both agreed that Domenico, Cardinal Bishop of Ostia, was indeed a first-rate person.

Jacob said, “The Bishop is a very kind man. When my wife died,” there was a slight catch in his voice, “he was very solicitous of me, you understand. The Bishop also attended her funeral.”

“Yes, he’s been more than generous to us too,” I said, thinking of the large sum he paid to Russo for our voyage.

Jacob began to warm to me as we continued talking together.

He said, “I will be open with you, my young friend; there are not many Christians who would come, as you have, and sit and speak with a Jew. But Ostia is a different place; there, we live and let live. There have always been different religions in Ostia, from emperor worship to pagan gods of all kinds. What people do behind closed doors does not impinge on our concerns. Ostia has been through the wars these last fifty years; we have learned to look out for one another, and also to mind our own business!”

I asked Jacob where he was aiming to go.

“I am travelling around the Frankish kingdoms.”

“And your business, Jacob?”

He shrugged dismissively. “I am a merchant; a little bit here, a little bit there. Do you know that we Jews cannot own land? So we build a house, a shop and of course a synagogue—all on someone else’s land!” His laugh was hollow.

“Who owns the land that your temple in Ostia stands on?”

Jacob laughed. “Why, the Church does, of course! We are Bishop Dominico’s tenants; he is our landlord!”

Seeing my confusion, he said, “Yes, you can see we are also good friends! But, we Jews no longer enjoy the right to citizenship as we once did in the days before Emperor Constantine; so we seek other professions - chiefly merchants, or physicians, or sailors, or tax-gatherers, or moneylenders—to rich and poor.”

“And you?” I pressed, “What’s yours?”

“Mine? I am mostly a merchant in fine goods, like silks, jewellery and so forth. And sometimes, I am also a money-lender.”

Jacob paused, changing the subject. “Your Pope, it seems, has little time for Judaism. He sees it as a depraved and faithless superstition. He has also offered benefits for those who convert from Judaism to the Christian faith—a remission of some taxes—and he has offered support to any Jew who converts to Christianity. Anyone can have slaves, but Jews cannot own Christian slaves! We must give them their freedom.”

A bell rang to gather for morning prayers and our conversation was cut short.

I stood up, still mulling this over. “Thank you for our

conversation, Jacob! Let's talk again."

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Augustinus made his way slowly along the length of the ship, talking to our fellow passengers. Some of our companions had climbed down into the hold, reordering and cleaning the contents of their carts. Others, with leisure made possible on the sea journey, pulled out five knucklebones, a game that was once Emperor Augustus's favourite. I watched for a while and then sat down to play. In no time, an hour or two had flitted away. Augustinus came by and stood watching for a while.

"I remember playing this in my youth!" he exclaimed, bright-eyed as a child, and knelt down to join the game. Throwing all the dice on to a board, he flipped first one into the air, catching it on the back of his broad hand while simultaneously repeating this for each of the remaining four, until all five small knucklebone cubes rested on his hand in a row, their numbers I, II, III, IV, and V facing upwards. A whistle of disbelief and loud groans filled the air as Augustinus swept up his winnings, a handful of small bronze coins, and tipped them into his pocket.

"I'm sure you'll want these to go to a worthy cause! I'll let you know which I choose. Now, no more gambling! Just use tokens. Let's not lead young Alric astray!"

Our lay brothers were deeply impressed and congratulated Augustinus on his skill before drifting away, until only Gracious and I were left. He was a man I did not know very well at all. I stood up as he packed away the game and asked him, "Are you glad you're on this journey, Graciusus?"

He glanced up at me briefly from beneath his Phrygian cap, always planted firmly on his head, deciding whether to converse or brush me aside as merely another of those monks who doesn't do

manual labour. He stood up, short, stocky and strong, in his late twenties and wearing his rough farming clothes. Graciosus said nothing as he picked at something on his sleeveless sheepskin jerkin. Both Cadmon and I had attended the funeral of his wife two years earlier in our packed monastery church, and we had given him our condolences afterwards. Perhaps that had meant something to him.

Graciosus made up his mind, looking me in the eye.

“I’ll be open with you, Alric. I’m glad to be going anywhere right now, ever since Livy died.” I held his gaze for a few moments then he looked away at the sea.

“We had no children. You know her parents also lived on our monastery estate, but she wasn’t close to them—nor was I. Perhaps I was too blunt sometimes. Now, without a wife, I can’t find a way to fit in again. The local girls are either too young or much older, with children. Since we lost the monastery estates outside Rome, my responsibilities at San Andreas have diminished. I’ve tried hard to find a good position with the two farms in Rome, but there’s less and less future for me there, and I’ve found my life becoming smaller and emptier. I want to make more of my life, experience new things, see new places. The Prior’s offer to join this expedition was a godsend for me.”

Graciosus pressed my shoulder.

“So, Alric, here I am!”

We continued talking, and I told him about my own background.

“I didn’t know you were a fisherman, Alric!” he exclaimed. “That’s a good, practical skill! So, even some monks work with their hands!”

Graciosus probed for anything I could tell him about farming back in our Kingdom. I told him what I remembered, what pigs and goats we kept, my uncle, ploughing the land with his oxen, what the ploughs looked like, and who helped with the gathering-in of the

harvest.

“I’m looking forward to this already, Alric! You must teach me some of your language so I can speak to your farmers!”

I did, and from that day our friendship began to grow.

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I felt I knew Graciosus a lot better after our discussion, but as I thought of our companions on this venture I was left wondering, how can such a disparate group as ours—even from the same monastery—defend ourselves as Cadmon’s cavalry unit had done on our way to Ostia?

I put my question to Cadmon while he rubbed down Belisarius in the stall, switching to Saxon for a private conversation on our crowded ship. He paused for a few moments.

“It’s all about training, Alric. The army selects its cavalry for skills, ability, and attitude. Then we train for certain situations that arise, or for particular outcomes that we want. All this comes from hours and hours working with one’s horse and squad. When I wasn’t sleeping or eating, I worked with Belisarius in the barracks, or rode outside the city walls with my troop.”

Cadmon patted Belisarius’s neck.

“Are you familiar with the writings of Vegetius, Alric? Probably not! He wrote a book on Roman military warfare for Emperor Gratian, a long time ago. I had the leisure to read it while I was in Constantinople this last year. I not only read his book, I ate his book, savoured every line, chewed over every word, digesting it slowly until it was all part of me. Vegetius said, ‘We find that the Romans owed the conquest of the world to no other cause than continual military training, exact observance of discipline in their camps, and unwearied cultivation of the other arts of war.’ That

sums it up, Alric—unceasing practice and attention to detail. I think our Prior has done well in selecting his men for their skills, but I’m less confident about their attitude, or how we keep their building and agricultural skills sharp while we are constantly on the move.”

I understood well enough what Cadmon meant; one or two of our companions chosen for the mission also gave me some concern.

Cadmon continued.

“Then there’s also the particular situation, or better call it, the goal. As I understand our venture on this journey, it’s about setting up a monastery as a means to convert our people in Cantia from Woden to Christ. But the strategy can’t be simply that you wait for our grateful Cantwara to beat a path to the monastery door!”

“Well, that’s what people do in our monastery in Rome!” I retorted.

“That’s Rome; but as for our own pagan Cantwara people, no one will come! If the monks are going to lead this mission, they will need to go out into the countryside, to places like the Haven—“

“And Ratteburg, where you hail from,” I interrupted defensively.

“And Ratteburg fort, yes, and the Isle of Tanet too, and everywhere there are farming and fishing communities. I don’t know whether Augustinus has thought this through yet, but his message—and yours—must somehow be received as life giving and life-changing. There’s too much fear and submission to the old gods; it has to be different.”

“It’s probably not the primary concern on our Prior’s mind at the moment,” I said lamely. “We haven’t gone through Francia yet.”

“What is the noble purpose they would give their lives for, Alric? Remember the parable? ‘The hired hand cares nothing for the sheep. When the wolf comes, he runs away.’ What is the noble

purpose of this mission? Or have we only hired hands, here for a day, and tomorrow return home?"

I shot back, "The noble purpose, surely, is to initiate the Kingdom of God in the Last Days!"

"Then those who make this journey, with all its risks, need to know that—or else their sacrifices, in the end, will all have been in vain."

Cadmon paused to order his thoughts.

"The Pope's immediate aim is to respond to a request from the royal household of Cantia to send a mission; but I've said before, his true reason is to initiate the End of this Age. The Pope has a noble purpose, but I'm not so sure that all of our companions understand—or share it. You remember that saying, 'Without a vision, the people perish?' The first time I heard that in the oratory at San Andreas, I felt, 'Yes, that's it! That's a message for me!' I also have a vision, to return home and reclaim what is rightfully mine." Cadmon did not elaborate.

I mused, "Perhaps we grow into an understanding of our purpose. Think about it, Cadmon. When we were captured and slaved for Felix, we could never have envisaged one day we would be here, as free men with all the skills we have now, and on our way home again!"

"That may be true for us, Alric, but what about your sister? We have no idea what has befallen Tola, or what the purpose might have been for her capture by that slaver Felix."

I found myself staring at the sparkling azure sea but also oblivious to it, my thoughts flitting around like a bird pecking for grain—Paulina left behind in a convent in Rome, my family, my sister and our journey ahead.

I found a place to myself, leaning back against the planking, and attempted to write, then scraped the wax smooth and began again, until finally my thoughts and memories started to flow, and I began to write the words that you are reading now.



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On our fourth day out from Ostia as we neared the limits of the Tyrrhenian Sea, the Island of Elba loomed out of the morning haze. A mountain range crouched over Elba, providing shelter for the town and the harbour.

As we were less than six miles from the coastal town of Piombino on the mainland of Italia, occupied by the Langobards, Russo chose an approach from the west so there would be no clear view of our ship as seen from the mainland.

We sailed into the haven of Portoferraio, known locally on Elba as the 'Lighthouse Port'. The harbour master stood waiting on the quay to meet our ship. Russo greeted him in the island dialect, and the two men stood talking together for some minutes. Our skipper settled the harbour fee and returned to the ship.

"Anyone wanting to go ashore to buy food? Stay in sight of the ship, and return at once when you hear the horn blow, because we'll be preparing to sail. We won't be here long!" But on that score, Russo was mistaken.

Most of us disembarked onto the quay to stretch our legs and wander around the merchants' stalls. Russo now became translator, merchant and moneychanger as passengers bought and bartered supplies for the onward journey.

After only a few hours ashore we brought our supplies onboard—wild boar meat, fresh anchovies, honey, dried fruit and spices. Russo's family-cum-crew also bought some of the sailors' favourites in bread and sweets—almond cantuccini, pane ferettato, and chestnuts.

Clouds that had begun to build throughout the day now gathered dark over the brooding mountains above the port. By

early afternoon, with everyone back on board, rain began to sweep down from the crags, and the mouth of the harbour disappeared in the mist.

“Well,” said Russo, “if we are trapped in here on account of the weather, we can be sure no one will get in either!” The rains persisted into the evening, and our skipper decided the best course of action was to leave at first light.

After an anxious and damp night, Russo cast off, turning the ship towards the open sea. A wave of relief swept through the vessel as our mainsail caught the wind. We came out from the shelter of the mountain brooding over the bay, the ship surging strongly forward. Beyond the harbour we turned northwest, into the open arms of the beckoning sea.



## IV

# ISLE HONORATUS

*June, AD 596*

FOUR DAYS AFTER leaving Elba, in the afternoon of the last day in May, we came in sight of the islands that comprise the Lerinus group, close by the shores of what was once called Roman Provincia. Russo steered a course that took us to the west of both major islands, where long white beaches lay fringed with lush green vegetation in the midst of an aquamarine sea. We glimpsed a few monastery buildings on the shore of the southern-most island; and to the north, many miles beyond the shore of Canas we had our first sight of the snow-capped Alps of Burgundia, rising high above verdant foothills.

The recent weather had served us well and a calm sea and warm breeze ushered us towards the Canas shore. As we drew closer to the jetty one of the crew threw a heavy object into the water from the prow. I looked down at a length of rope disappearing beneath the waves, and asked him what this was for.

“It’s a lead sounding-weight—every ship has one. We can tell how deep the water is as we come closer to the shore. It also scoops up a sample of the seabed to help us keep to a course, and gives a warning when we approach to land—even when terra firma is still out of view.”

Shading my eyes, I noticed several small hovels above a winding

path, leading up to a battered former Roman outpost on the brow of the hill. This old fort overlooked the fishing village of Canas, taking its name after reeds fringing the bay.

Russo called down to Augustinus as the ship made its last few adjustments at the landing. “This region has suffered much these past fifty years from attacks by the Langobards—and also the Saxons, and the wars between two of their own Frankish kings! The aqueducts and irrigation works are in ruins. People have left the towns and moved into fortified villages on the hilltops—like this one.” Russo pointed to the hill above. “These fishermen only just manage to eke out a living here; they will be very glad to see you!”

As we secured the ship to the jetty many from the village hurried down to help unload our cargo. Cadmon, who had spent the last week in his leather jerkin and woollen leggings, now transformed himself back into a cavalryman. Putting on his mail, he led Belisarius onto the quay.

Russo was on familiar ground as he dealt with the village headman and elders, negotiating a price for accommodating our party. He paid in Merovingian tremisses, and I reimbursed him with Roman solidii.

We said our farewells to Jacob who stayed on board, sailing on with Russo to the port of Forum Julia further down the coast. This saddened me, as I had enjoyed Jacob’s company and his thoughtful, probing questions; but there was business for him to attend to, and I wished him well, hoping one day to meet again.

Russo cast off, easing his ship away from the jetty into open waters, and in a short while the vessel disappeared from view beyond the bay.

Augustinus called us all together.

“Deo volente, I’ll be sailing across to the monastery on the island of San Honoratus with our monks to deliver a letter for Abbot Stephen from His Holiness. I’m aiming to return in no more than three days.”

He turned to Graciosus.

“While we are gone, it’s in your hands to procure mules for our onward journey—and three horses also.” Graciosus nodded, and we knelt in the soft white sand circling the bay, giving thanks for our safe passage on the journey from Ostia. With our meagre baggage in hand, we trudged down to the shore where a boatman stood by to ferry us to the island.

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Our small party to San Honoratus comprised of Augustinus and Petrus, Rufinian, John, Martinus, and also me, as bursar and scribe. It was now mid-afternoon the waters calm and clear as we sailed past the island of San Marguerita where the remains of another Roman fort stood prominent on the southwestern corner, its landing-place on the western flank sad and forlorn. In less than an hour, we entered a small, sheltered cove, and disembarked on to the stone jetty.

Augustinus surveyed the path for a few moments before leading our party towards the southern shore. It felt good to stretch my legs again as we walking through paradise. Crickets scraped away in the undergrowth and the heady fragrance of eucalyptus filled our nostrils. Jasmine plants grew in profusion here. Away from the landing, blue skies rose above a tree-lined avenue and swifts flew over the olive groves.

We passed two large vineyards where a fresh crop of grapes had begun to emerge, and a dozen or more monks, their backs bent, moved slowly between the rows. Continuing on the path, we came at last to a splendid, studded door at the entrance to the Abbey of San Honoratus.

The door was open. An elderly monk, his face partially obscured by the hood of his habit, shuffled forward, a staff in his bony hand.

“Deo Gratia!” he cried in a traditional greeting, “thank God you’ve come!” He surveyed us briefly through opaque, rheumy eyes beneath a thick pair of eyebrows, his sharp beaked-nose twitching as though scenting, rather than seeing, our presence. His dim eyes slowly focused on the six of us standing before him.

“Let me wash your hands and feet after your journey, brothers, and might it please you to partake of a cup of refreshing water?”

I thought his Latin seemed a little archaic as he shuffled back a little, beckoning us to follow. “Pray enter, good brothers! From whence have you come?”

“From Rome, brother, on a mission from His Holiness the Pope,” Augustinus announced.

The gatekeeper—Brother Faustus was his name—called out to his young assistant, “Valdemar! Go quickly and fetch the Abbot! We have guests from Rome. Hurry now, boy!”

Brother Faustus led us down a corridor to a table placed in the shade, beside the entrance to the Oratory. Valdemar raised an earthenware jug filled with cool water sharpened with slices of lemon, and filled a tumbler for each of us. We stood in wonder at this calm oasis of tranquillity, refreshing to our spirits.

A bell began to toll as Prior Hilarius appeared in the oratory doorway.

“Deo Gracia, brothers! Abbot Stephanus begs you to join us for prayers!” We followed the Prior into the Chapel’s whitewashed interior and took our places as a procession of monks filed in from the vestry.

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After prayers, we sat at a marble table in the refectory with Abbot Stephanus, and his young and serious-minded Prior.

Stephanus asked a question we would hear again and again on our journey.

“We are delighted to offer you hospitality, Prior—particularly as no one has visited from the Holy City for a long time now. What is it that brings you all the way from Rome?” The abbot smiled encouragingly, glancing up at Augustinus, his eyebrows raised. Stephanus seemed every inch the perfect abbot; a high forehead, regular features, a trimmed beard, his dark hair just beginning to turn grey.

“We travel with a commission from His Holiness the Pope. His charge is that we bring the gospel to those who live in darkness in the Kingdom of Cantia—a place from which Alric comes,” nodding towards me. “In former times it was part of the Province of Britannia. And my hope is that we will arrive there in time to celebrate the Feast of Epiphany.”

Epiphany was seven months away. I calculated that was about the same time of the year Cadmon, Tola and I were seized as slaves by Felix. I shivered.

“Good, good,” the Abbot nodded, “the feast of the Revelation of Christ to the Gentiles! Most appropriate!” he beamed. “And when do you hope to return to Rome again?”

Augustinus paused. “His Holiness has made no plans for our return. My only answer to your question is, ‘when our mission is fulfilled’.”

Our companions, John, Rufinian, Martinus and Petrus glanced at each another. This was the first time they had heard it expressed so bluntly, but if our mission heralded the End Times as the Pope expected, it mattered little where we were when that moment came. All the same, I fervently hoped it would be when I was back home again with my family at the Haven.

Augustinus explained our reasons for coming to San Honoratus instead of travelling directly to the busy port of Massilia.



“The good reputation of your monastery is well known to His Holiness, and he requests that we bring you greetings and encouragement! But also, we come because you might be best placed to advise us for our onward journey.”

“I understand,” Stephanus nodded. “Whatever assistance we are able to give you, we will; be assured of that.”

The Abbot hesitated a moment before asking, “One thing that puzzles me Prior, if you will permit me to say so, is that His Holiness has not chosen to send a Bishop, nor an Abbot but his Prior to undertake such a difficult and delicate mission?” He paused, glancing sideways at Augustinus sitting beside him, gauging his response. “He must think very highly of you indeed!”

“The Pope is not one to be questioned for his motives,” Augustinus replied, perhaps a little more defensively than intended. “But as I understand it, he needs someone to open the way for the mission, and then possibly follow up with a bishop who will be able to baptise, ordain, and consecrate.”

“But not one of the Frankish Bishops?” This was a perceptive question, and Augustinus sat silent before responding.

“King Ethelbert and Queen Bertha of Cantia—she is also a Merovingian, as you may know—wrote to the Frankish Bishops who are closest to Ethelbert’s Kingdom, asking for their support; but no one responded. A copy of this letter found its way to His Holiness. He feels that this is the right moment and most appropriate way to respond to their request. And so here we are!”

As the conversation continued I glanced briefly around the refectory, noticing Faustus sitting near the door, as we would expect of the Guest Master. He sat bent over his plate, a permanent scowl fixed on his face. All the monks—there were some thirty present—wore black scapulars covering the front and back of their pristine white habits. I felt like a poor relation at the table in my rough, undyed and unbleached brown woollen garb; and the wine, only

slightly watered-down, soon made me drowsy.

I dragged my attention back to the conversation. Augustinus was telling how, when Gregorius was Abbot, he always invited a dozen of the poorest in the city to his dining table. Abbot Stephanus shook his head in admiration as Augustinus ended, "And to this day, he still feeds the poor of Rome!"

The Abbot wiped his lips on his napkin, rang a small bell on the table, and everyone rose for the prayer of dismissal.

"It is almost time for Night Prayer. Afterwards, our Prior will show you to your rooms, and in the morning, after breakfast," he touched Augustinus's arm, "we shall have a long walk together." He added, "Our Prior will find some of our brothers to speak with your monks. I am sure the exchanges will be of great value!"

High up in the Chapel tower a bell began to toll for Night Prayer.

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Without a doubt, that was the most comfortable night's sleep I had ever enjoyed. Breakfast, taken in silence, offered an ample choice of bread, cheeses, cuts of cold meat, apples and fresh, cool water. Later, while Augustinus and Stephanus set off around the island, Prior Hilarius led me to the Scriptorium, a long narrow studio attached to the abbey's south wall. A small lizard scampered into the eaves as the Prior opened the door. Light streamed through the south-facing windows, overlooking a magnificent view of the beach and the turquoise waters of the Ligurian Sea.

Hilarius introduced me to the scribes and illuminators setting out their parchment, pens, brushes, inks and paints for the morning's labours. At some desks manuscripts lay partially completed; at others, parchments were spread out, illuminated in

bright primary colours. The blending of Roman and barbarian traditions was clear to see, and well suited to the ornamental style of the Frankish tribes. The gold work was perfect.

“ I haven’t seen the like of these before!” I exclaimed. “They remind me of the painted shields of warriors and belt-buckles worn in my own kingdom. They don’t look anything like the illuminations we use for the Gospels in the Lateran Scriptorium in Rome.”

Hilarius nodded. “Truth be told, we create very few Gospel books here now. The demand is for sacramentaries, treatises in theology, and hagiographies of the lives of local saints. That is what our Merovingian masters and their Bishops want; something adorned with barbarian motifs from their own culture.”

We continued down the room looking at the manuscripts, adorned with animal motifs of birds and fish, their initial letters all based on animal forms.

“See how they blend the traditions?” the Prior pointed to a few manuscripts waiting for their final colouring. “The orders we have had for these kinds of manuscripts already exceed the value of our wine exports for the whole of this year! But ...” His voice trailed off.

“There’s a problem?” I prompted politely.

Prior Hilarius steered me towards the far wall of the Scriptorium. I looked out the window again at another view of paradise, the blue sky and still bluer water, gentle waves lapping the golden sands of the shore, gulls calling overhead, sparrows pecking away beneath the pines. Part of the shoreline looked as though some gigantic beast had scraped huge, deep gouges with its claws, marring the face of the rocks. Could there be a worm in this paradise?

Hilarius’s face was a study of conflicting emotions. He replied in a low voice, “The abbey is divided on this matter. The

traditionalists prefer the iconic images of apostles and saints and want us to refuse these lucrative new contracts, even if that means less income. But Abbot Stephanus and his supporters want to push ahead with these changes. These manuscripts you've seen will bring in much more revenue, as the classical tradition of icons of the saints-of-old is in decline. The hope is to increase the size of the monastery, secure its future, and compete with Abbot Columbanus's Irish monastery at Luxueil. Our Abbot is putting a lot of hope on these new-style manuscripts, so we need to be careful and decide wisely. You may be sure, it is no small matter for us to refuse the requests of a Merovingian King—or Queen."

"Queen?"

"Yes, Queen Brunhild. Since the death of her son, she is now regent. These are the images that she prefers."

"And what do you want?" I asked.

Hilarius hesitated. "I want to see a united Abbey. I think both sides will want to put this to a vote, those who want to remain as we have always been, and those who want to change with the prevailing wind."

While the Prior was still speaking the door was suddenly thrown open and Stephanus entered the Scriptorium with Augustinus. The Abbot gestured towards the manuscripts. "Now this you must see! Our pride and joy!"

They had taken only a few paces into the room when another voice, sounding as sharp and cold as breaking ice, called out from the doorway.

"So, you would corrupt our guests also with these barbarous images of infamy!"

The Scriptorium fell silent in shock as Brother Faustus stepped over the threshold, staff in hand, pointing an accusing finger at the half-finished manuscripts in the room.

“Enough of this, Faustus!” the Abbot snapped angrily, his light olive complexion turning dark with anger.

“I shall not be silenced!” Faustus shouted back, holding up the nearest manuscript for Augustinus to see. “Look! Just look! See all these barbarian images? Where are the images of Christ? The Apostles; the Blessed Virgin? The Evangelists? There are none! What do we see? Barbarian images! Words and letters that look like trees! A fish, consuming a swan!” He picked up another manuscript. “A stork, eating its own neck! An eagle, carrying off a lamb! Hunting dogs snarling at each other! What have these to do with the Gospel, or the teachings of the Faith? The Sacramentary? Nothing!”

“Faustus!” The Abbot’s voice rose in anger. The Gatekeeper glared around the room, throwing the manuscript onto a desk.

“I have warned you!” He snarled, shaking his staff at the Abbot, and stormed out.

In shock, I stood rooted to the spot.

Abbot Stephanus made an effort to smooth over what had taken place. “I must apologise for his behaviour, Augustinus, but his passion for the past has unhinged his aged mind concerning the future! Come! Let us withdraw to my study and continue our conversation there.”

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We took the midday meal in silence, a sombre mood hanging over the Abbot’s table. Word of Faustus’s outburst in the Scriptorium had circulated around the whole Abbey. I could tell by the frequent glances directed towards Faustus who, the previous night, had not been noticed by anyone.

We took our leave soon after. Abbot Stephanus and his Prior

accompanied us to our boat. Before we embarked, the Abbot presented Augustinus with a large trunk, brought down to the landing earlier in the day.

“Please give my most sincere greetings to His Holiness, and also this small donation for the poor in Rome.” Stephanus unlocked the lid, and we peered in. The trunk was full to the brim with cutlery, goblets and plate, all of it sparkling silver.

“My dear Abbot,” Augustinus stammered, “what a remarkably generous gift! I shall make sure that His Holiness receives these as soon as possible!”

“We are glad to play our part in such a desperately needed ministry to the poor,” the Abbot said with a dismissive wave of his hand.

He added, “Now, I have sent our Brother Adriano ahead to Canas, to serve as your companion and guide until you reach the port of Frejus.”

He raised a cautionary finger and added, “Be alert for brigands as you travel on the Via Aurelia. Roman armies once marched this coastal road on their way to Arelate and beyond to Iberia. It is said you can still hear them at night, the tramp of their feet, sometimes the clash of arms, or the hoof beats of a postal emissary hastening to deliver a message to Constantine!”

My spine tingled, the scene that Stephanus had painted vivid before my eyes. Then, with the Abbot’s final prayer and farewell, the boat drew away from the shore. Stephanus stood watching until we cleared the anchorage wall. He waved one last time and turned away, following the path back to the monastery, deep in animated conversation with his Prior.

Our return to Canas began in silence, aware that the first word of our visit to the monastery should come from our Prior. As the island slipped further away behind us, Augustinus finally spoke.

“The abbey is not the haven of peace and tranquility that we had first supposed, my brothers! It seems that Abbot Stephanus finds himself caught between a rock and a hard place. On the one hand, he speaks of the independence of the abbey from interference by bishops and also from their Merovingian rulers. But on the other, he needs the income that only the wealth of these Frankish kingdoms can provide—in payment for prayer books and the like, embellished with those strange animals and bird-like creatures, rather than icons of Christ, and the Apostles and Church Fathers. But the more this new line of business grows, the more dependent the Abbey will be on their Frankish rulers!”

We nodded in agreement.

Brother Petrus my Tutor added, “They may boast of their superlative education, and I’m sure that is true, but I gather that none of the Merovingians has sent their princes here recently to be educated, and neither do noblemen or wealthy magnates.”

“Then, where do they send them?” Augustinus asked.

“They prefer to hire tutors who educate their sons and heirs in their own palaces.”

Martinus broke his silence. “Perhaps their princes and kings gain the whole world, so to speak, but in exchange, they lose their soul?”

Augustinus nodded. “It does not look attractive for the future of the monastery. And they have yet to face a challenge against the Abbot!”

In the silence that followed, I looked back at the island one last time. How different it all now seemed! In my mind’s eye, I saw the fantastical winged beasts painted in those sought-after sacramentaries, swooping down on the vineyards, screeching as

they ripped up vines and gorged themselves on ripening grapes, juices running red like blood down their hideous dragon-jaws. I made the Sign of the Cross, and turned to the white beaches of Canas drawing steadily nearer.

The remainder of our companions turned out to meet us as we landed, relief showing on their faces as we came ashore. Greetings over, Cato our builder said, “The locals tell us that we might expect a ship in a day or two. Will we take it, perhaps?”

Augustinus considered for a moment. “No, Cato. Alric has done his sums, and we don’t have sufficient to pay for another journey by ship. From here on, we travel by road. Besides, the Abbot has given us our Brother Adriano as our guide!” He turned to the young monk, who had come over from the island the previous evening to ensure we had sufficient mules for our onward journey overland.

Adriano said reassuringly, “All is prepared! We have the mules you need for the journey. And I have settled up with the locals for their payment—Abbot Stephanus offers that to you as a gift!”

Augustinus thanked him sincerely, and we loaded the Abbot’s trunk of silver plate on to one of the carts.

As we set off, I asked Augustinus privately, “And what happens if we run out of solidii?”

Our Prior gave me one of his enigmatic smiles.

“Why then, Alric, the Lord will provide!”





V

# FREJUS FORUM JULII

*June, AD 596*

“THE WHEEL’S BROKEN!”

Augustinus turned to look back. Everything came to a standstill. Our blacksmith Numerius the Hammer came up to examine the damage. Appius and Decimus stood looking forlornly at one of their wheels as everyone crowded around. The news wasn’t good, but at least the view of the sea to our left was magnificent on this late afternoon, with only wisps of cloud on the horizon and a welcome breeze. Numerius knelt for a closer look, his massive shoulders hunched forward as he inspected the wheel.

Augustinus frowned. “What do you think, Numerius? Can you repair it?”

The blacksmith dusted-off his enormous hands and stood up, shaking his head. His deep voice rumbled, “I can repair it, Prior, but not on the road. We’ll put on a spare wheel now, and look for a forge on the way.” He wagged his finger accusingly at Appius and Decimus. “And if you break the other wheel, you carry the cart yourselves the rest of the way!”

Everyone started talking at once.

Augustinus cut in, “Enough now! There may be a resting-place and a mansio further on.”

Brother Adriano, our guide, spoke up, pointing ahead on the road.

“There’s a mansio a few miles up, a resting-place with a smithy too. We can put up our tents there for the night.”

Augustinus nodded. “Very well! Let’s not waste any time then.”

We returned to our carts and with the wheel replaced, continued on the ancient Aurelian Way.

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We came to Portus Agathonis, a natural harbour once occupied by a Roman garrison.

“The local Greek settlers gave it the name Agay, a ‘favourable place’, with shelter for a port,” Adriano said. An ancient volcano on the massif high above us swept down to the sea. A few villas were visible on the steep hillside, mostly hidden amongst mountain rocks and great red cliffs.

“It’s one of the finest harbours on this coast,” Adriano added; and so it was, with more than half a dozen small coves tucked away around this protective bay.

As the sun began to dip in the late afternoon, a large mansio loomed ahead, a centuries-old hostelry with its peeling red and white walls, surrounded by trees enclosing spacious grounds. With the sound of a hammer ringing out on metal drifting across the field, Numerius carried the broken wheel over to the smithy’s forge. The remainder of us drew the carts into a circle and released the mules to graze. Quintus took charge of the evening meal while everyone else raised the tents.

Adriano pointed to a mountain in the distance.

“San Honoratus once lived up there, in caves with his followers. That was before he settled on our island, and his monks named it after him when he died.”

“There are no cave-dwelling anchorites in Rome, Adriano! Only catacombs in the stone beneath the earth, so this is a novelty to me.”

Quintus lit the fire, striking a piece of hardened metal against a bar of flint. The sparks ignited a ball of dry wool sprinkled with a few drops of oil and packed with straw on a bed of dry sticks. Quintus did well, and with Theodore assisting, cooked our staple food of smoked sausage with bacon, garlic, lentils, and also some flatbread for the next day’s journey.

By nightfall on our first day away from Canas, the camp was crowded with travellers, carts and beasts of burden. Fires were lit all around the field and the smell of cooking drifted across the campsite. A minstrel struck up a ballad or two, passing around the camp with his purse open for coins.

As we prepared to turn in for the night, Quintus touched my sleeve.

“It would be good to catch some fish for smoking, Alric—they are very good food for the march!”

I glanced at Theodore, our youngest companion from Rome. “I haven’t done this for years! We’ll go down to the stream first thing tomorrow.”

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With the fish caught and cooked, Quintus divided our supplies of dried figs and marinated beef, a day’s supply of water for each of us, a ration of smoked cheese, hard biscuits, flatbread and nuts, muttering under his breath, “This should see the Hammer through for the day.” We loaded the carts, harnessed the mules and rejoined the Via Aurelia, the sun already beginning to burn our backs.

By late afternoon we came in sight of the former Roman port of Forum Julii, with the name abbreviated by the townsfolk to Frejus.

After a long summer hour we came to the port, bristling with masts poking above the harbour walls. Turning onto a wide avenue, Adriano led us to our destination for the night, the Basilica of San Leontius at one end of a partially enclosed piazza.

Bishop Epiphanius greeted us warmly, his somewhat youthful face full of smiles as he embraced each of us in turn.

“You are all most welcome here! I hope you are not too tired from your journey today, because I have invited Count Rusticius to dine with us tonight!”

Adriano had spoken of the Count on our way to Frejus. His villa lay a short distance out of Frejus on the road we would be taking to Aquae Sextiae, the Six Fountains, a few days further on. The Count was said to be a man of noble birth in the Roman tradition, and a wealthy magnate to boot. Rusticius had also been one of the confidants of King Charibert II, the late King of Burgundy and Austrasia, who had died the previous year.

Adriano finished his story. “The Count is a Burgundian, and his townhouse is as large as this whole cathedral compound! His fortified villa in the country is said to have an abundance of horses and armour, and retainers who do his bidding, not to mention large numbers of peasant farmers tending his lands.”

With such an intriguing introduction, I looked forward very much to meeting him.

The Count arrived in time for evening prayers with an escort of six mounted soldiers. During the meal that followed the Bishop, his Canons and Augustinus sat together with Count Rusticius. From where I sat, a little distance away with our monks and lay brothers, he looked an impressive and formidable man, tall and trim, handsome with a ready smile and a gaze that took in everything. He was in his fifties perhaps and wore a full-length white garment beneath his red cloak.

There was much humour around the table, then about half way

though the meal I noticed their voices becoming lower and more confidential, and I assumed that important issues had come up for discussion. At the end of the meal, the Count rose and turned to everyone in the dining hall, raising his hand, and with a kind smile bade us all goodnight. Bishop Epiphanius accompanied him to the courtyard. The gates of the compound were opened and, with his escort, he galloped swiftly into the night.

As we prepared for bed, Augustinus gathered everyone in our party to give thanks for our respective parts in the success of the day and added, "The Bishop has also very kindly invited us to stay another night, so that on the morrow we can prepare for our onward journey to Aquae Sextiae. Have a good night's rest."

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On the morning of our departure, we left after an early breakfast. All the repairs to wheels, carts and straps were now done, the mules tended and food for the day's journey divided between us. Bishop Epiphanius promised to forward the trunk of silver goblets and cutlery from Frejus to Pope Gregorius in Rome, and the gift was carried down to the harbour. With our onward journey blessed by the Bishop, the gates opened and Cadmon led the way.

To our surprise, waiting outside the gate were the six mounted horsemen from the night before. Their Captain, Sidonius, introduced himself saying, "The Count has assigned us to accompany you on your journey to the town of Lou Muei, so that no harm befalls you on the way."

Sidonius, like his mounted companions, was bearded, armoured and weather-beaten from a life spent long in the saddle. He inspected Cadmon and Belisarius carefully and approvingly, finding both man and horse fully armoured, composed, alert and prepared for whatever may come. The two men rode together for a few miles, exchanging

information and experiences, laughing together, developing a good relationship on the way.

The Via Aurelia took us away from the sea, the road rising steeply into the mountains. Captain Sidonius pointed to a villa below, built on the hillside and surrounded by a large complex of buildings.

“People come from many countries all around the Mare Nostrum to work here, even from Egypt. That is why the Count is a wealthy magnate and not a poor farmer!”

Count Rusticius’s countryside villa was magnificent, the house modelled partially on a traditional Roman villa. Detailed and elegantly carved porticoes surrounded the house. A large central hall, similar in scale to Raculf back home in Cantia but displaying superior craftsmanship, rested beneath a terracotta-tiled roof. To my surprise, a private monastery and chapel occupied one of the walled enclosures on the estate.

Stables and workshops spread over an even larger area, surrounding a low wall enclosing the villa. Other buildings, more humble in appearance, housed a large number of families working at trades, including jewellery and weapons, weaving, and embroidering silk and gold thread. Farm buildings, paddocks, cowsheds, sheepfolds, barns and serfs’ hovels completed the picture. This was the beginning of a village that had the skills for several industries from ironwork and tile making to carpentry and farming.

Cadmon was intrigued. “Make a note of this, Graciosus!” Augustinus called out as we passed by the villa. “Perhaps we should also be aiming for something like that when we reach Cantia!”

We weren’t the only travellers on the road. Ahead of us on horseback among the travellers rode the strangely familiar figure of a man making steady progress up the hill.

“Jacob!” Cadmon exclaimed.

The two men stopped on the road and Augustinus, Petrus and I caught up. Jacob looked pleased to see us, clearly happy to be reunited with our companions from Ostia. As we continued uphill, we talked briefly about our time at Isle Honoratus.

“So what brings you here, Jacob? More business?”

He sighed, “Ah, yes, but less profitable than I had hoped. Still, I am now on my way to Aquae Sextiae, so business may improve there.”

“And so are we!” Augustinus said as he caught up with us. “Come, let us travel together; we have a fine team of cavalymen to protect us for much of the way. You couldn’t be safer!”

I shivered; something in my bones suggested otherwise.





## VI

CASTRUM CANETO  
FORT CANETO OF THE  
MOORS*June, AD 596*

PASSING THROUGH the village of Lou Muei in the late afternoon, we pitched camp at a mansio just beyond the outskirts and set about gathering firewood for the evening meal. Without warning a party men, women and children I mistook to be wandering travellers burst into the field on the far western end, shouting, wailing and obviously in great distress. Augustinus, Cadmon and Captain Sidonius rode swiftly across to learn the reason for this disturbance.

I caught up on foot a short while later.

Cadmon explained, “These people have come from a hamlet called Castrum Caneto, a hilltop fort-cum-village a few miles from here. They’re expecting an attack there from brigands tomorrow evening. They say these men are led by a renegade they call Macello, a former knight of Count Rusticius who now pursues his own twisted path. He operates from an abandoned mansio further along on the Via Aurelia, harassing all passing traffic on it and ruthlessly holding the surrounding countryside to ransom. But now Macello has decided to make this old fort of Castrum Caneto his own stronghold, and he’s sending some of his henchmen to

intimidate the villagers. They have been given until tomorrow night to vacate the fort.”

Men, old and young, women and children arrived in greater numbers from Castrum Caneto, some on foot others on mules, but all of them terrified. Augustinus called a meeting with the Castrum town elder, Captain Sidonius and Cadmon to decide the best course of action.

Sidonius summed up our bleak situation.

“We have only a few options here. First, we press on along the road and hope Macello shows no interest in us; although with all the equipment you are carrying in your carts, my friends, I cannot imagine he would let you pass unmolested!”

We all agreed.

“Or, we could turn back, so you could take a ship from Frejus.”

Augustinus shook his head.

“We don’t have the funds for that, Captain; and returning to Frejus would delay us considerably. Are there other options?”

The Captain looked at the Castrum town elder.

“If Macello does take the old fort by tomorrow night, I think it will be impossible to dislodge him, and everyone from the hamlet will be left homeless, and their livelihood gone.”

The town elder nodded vigorously. “What you say is true. Can you not defend us from this thief and murderer?”

Captain Sidonius weighed up the situation. “The Count’s men number about twenty renegades. My own opinion is that we cannot pass-up this opportunity to take on Macello, not only for the sake of your people from Caneto, but also because he is a thorn in Count Rusticius’s side. He has evaded us for the past few years; here we have the perfect chance to break up his renegade bandits. If we turn up this opportunity, it would be cowardice.” His tone was grim as he added, “And I don’t ever want that word attached to my name.”

Augustinus summed-up, saying, “If we face Macello and his bandits, Captain, we will have half a dozen of your men and Cadmon, as against twenty or more of the Count’s. But there’s also safety in numbers, and we’ll guard the hilltop more effectively with all of our own companions with us. Besides, if I leave all our party behind, they will be completely vulnerable to Macello’s men in this open field, along with all the townsfolk who’ve come from Caneto. But if we occupy the hill fort by, say, tomorrow afternoon, the townsfolk will have a better chance of returning to their homes again.”

Augustinus looked at the faces of our companions.

“Why say you, my brothers?”

We nodded agreement.

Cadmon glanced at the evening sky. “Nightfall is almost upon us, so it’s too late to set off now. I suggest we strike camp at first light tomorrow to reach Castrum Caneto around midday. These mercenaries might not be expecting any resistance, so we may also have the advantage of surprise on our side.”

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AFTER an anxious night we broke camp and left Lou Muei before sunrise. The town elder waved us a dispirited goodbye, not looking hopeful that we would carry the day against superior numbers. By early afternoon, tall evergreens cast shadows across a winding road, rising steeply uphill to the old Roman fort.

Cadmon and Sidonius rode together, the squad of five mounted soldiers following slowly and purposefully up the steep Via Aurelia to a sturdy wooden gate, leading into a small forum. On the north side, half a dozen houses overlooked the square. A small church occupied the eastern end. The priest’s house lay between the church and the south wall, leaving an alleyway leading to a high, rear gate.

To the west, a large mansio overlooked the deserted forum with a water pump a few yards from the door, while the south side opened out to a breathtaking view, stretching for miles across the valley towards the distant sea.

Sidonius and his troop came to a halt and carefully dismounted. Our companions followed behind, drawing the mules and carts into a circle in the centre of the small forum.

Stroking his beard thoughtfully as he looked around, Captain Sidonius mused, “Well, for a mansio, there’s not much hospitality on offer here! Check the houses. See if you can find anybody.”

Cadmon, Sidonius and the troopers entered each of the dwellings. Jacob and I cautiously approached the mansio, glancing up warily at the windows for any sign of life, but there was none. Jacob broke his silence. “It’s so quiet, it’s unnerving! There’s not a dog or cat to be seen!”

After half an hour the troopers returned. Lucius, second in command, reported, “The houses and the church are all empty, Captain. There’s not a soul here.”

Jacob nodded. “From what I saw in the mansio, they left in a great hurry—food still on the table.”

Cadmon said, “The alms box in the church is smashed open. Not something the locals would do.”

We stood in an eerie silence, except for the wind in the trees, and tried to take everything in. Augustinus turned to Sidonius.

“The journey has taken the best part of the day. Let’s set up camp while we still have some light, and get a fire going for some hot food. We’ll save some for breakfast tomorrow. Now, what we need is a foraging party for some wood. Quintus, can you organise this?”

Augustinus walked over to the low stonewall, taking-in the magnificent view, and motioned to Cadmon and Sidonius to join him.

“What do you think?” he said in a low voice. “How vulnerable are we to an attack here?”

Sidonius said, “Less vulnerable than if we had stayed in the valley, but that’s not saying much. We must prepare for an assault tonight. We’ll bar the gates, sleep on the open ground and rotate a night watch.”

Cadmon nodded. “We also need to station lookouts at the windows, overlooking the road to the forum. There’s not going to be much sleep for anyone tonight.”

Sidonius’s gaze swept over the forum again. “There’s farmland around here. They must keep tools and hoes and things somewhere close by that mansio.” He called to Lucius. “Look around the back for anything we can use as weapons. We’ll need everything we can find.”

As flames rose from the kindling, I said, “Won’t the fire alert Macello’s men that there’s someone on the hill?”

Sidonius nodded. “Yes; but it’s better we face them here where we can see them, and have the advantage of possession, than face them in an ambush on the open road.”

We watched sparks from the fire flying into the night sky. The stars had appeared, but there was little light beyond the circle of our fire. Nearby within the ring of our carts, the smell of our mules was strong and pungent.

We ate supper in grim silence. A guard was always posted at each of the two gates, front and rear, and at least one of us manned the windows overlooking both approaches to the gates. The watch rotated every hour so that no one would fall asleep. As the tension grew, we selected our weapons from the motley collection of farm implements brought out from the back of the mansio. I would be useless at close combat, so I took a hefty, long-handled pitchfork. We filled buckets of water from a creaking pump in the forum, in the event that Macello’s men started fires once they reached the top of the hill.

Two of our companions sat on the open south wall of the forum, looking into the darkness for any sight or sound of movement. With

the gates shut and barred, two soldiers and four of our own number were assigned at each station. Four more lookouts peered out of the windows. The remainder of our companions warmed their hands by the fire. We fed the mules and kept them in harness, drawing-in a tight circle at the centre of the forum, with Jacob, Theodore and me stationed inside.

Augustinus moved from station to station throughout the night, taking no rest. I returned from a stint as lookout and sat down near the fire. My head sank on to my chest and I began to doze as our vigil wore on under the twinkling stars. Down in the valley, an owl hooted. A fox appeared, eyes bright in the dying embers of the fire, before slipping back over the wall. The moon rose in the early hours of the morning, throwing a cold light into the forum and washing over the carts and mules. An owl hooted again, this time to the east. A short while later another from the west.

“Stand by!” Cadmon hissed. “Those are signals, not owls!”

Then a low whistle came from the doorway of the mansio facing into the square.

“They’re coming!” Augustinus hissed, and in a few moments, a loud banging reverberated against the high wooden gate in the alley, alongside the high-walled mansio. The forum sprang into life as we lit torches laid out near the fire and turned anxiously towards the main gate.

Augustinus shouted, “Keep your eyes on what’s coming from below! Alric, get back into the ring! NOW! Take care of Jacob and Theodore!”

The watchman on the south wall swept his blazing torch back and forth, peering down, looking for anyone climbing up from the track below.

I turned, looking towards the gate where Cadmon was speaking urgently to Sidonius. He nodded and signalled for Lucius to follow while the remaining men mounted their restless horses. Cadmon

pulled a bow from his saddle and snatched a handful of arrows from his pouch. Lucius did the same, dashing after Cadmon into the mansio, swiftly climbing the stairs to the topmost floor.

Throwing open the shutters, Cadmon had a clear view in the moonlight of the assault on the gate below. Aiming carefully, he released three arrows in rapid succession into the assailants attempting to storm the gate then gave way to Lucius to do the same. Howls of pain sounded as the black riders collapsed on the ground, and Lucius let loose more arrows. Cadmon returned to the window, bending his bow again and again. The dozen or so men at the gate were now in a state of confusion, those front-most turning to make their escape from the rain of arrows against the press of their comrades trying to reach the gate. Cadmon and Lucius withdrew and raced down the stairs into the forum.

“They’re in disarray, Sidonius!” Cadmon shouted. “Open the gates and lead the charge!” In a moment the cavalry, already in the saddle, formed a semicircle a few yards inside the gate.

“Open!” Sidonius commanded.

At that precise moment Cadmon also knew he had made a disastrous miscalculation. The outlaws beyond the rear gate numbered far less than twenty riders, but there had been only half as many outside the main gate. Macello was not among them. Where were the rest? As the bar was cast away and the gate thrown open, Sidonius, his spear pointing at the attackers, gave a loud cry and sprang forward on his horse.

I stood up in the circle of our mules and carts, desperately pointing towards the alley as I screamed to Cadmon; “The rear gate, Cadmon! The rear gate!”

Some of our companions guarding the rear entry were already retreating panic-stricken, skirting our last refuge, the ring of carts. Cadmon grabbed Lucius’s sleeve, swinging Belisarius in an arc to his left as Macello thundered past the church, bursting out of the alleyway, sword in his hand, eyes fixed on the small group of our lay



brothers fleeing ahead of him into the forum.

Inside our refuge Jacob, Theodore and I possessed between us only one pitchfork, a spade, and a cleaver. Jacob rose to his feet, babbling prayers from the Torah. If you are going to die, I thought, better to do it with a prayer on your lips; but my eyes were now wide with fear. I realised in that moment that if Macello's bandits broke into our circle, the remainder of our companions would already lie butchered all around us.

VII

SHRINE OF MARIA  
MAGDALENA  
VILLA LATA

*June, AD 596*

MACELLO HAD NO chance to change direction as he thundered into the forum. With a sword grasped in his right hand, the shield in his left offered no protection as Cadmon's lance drove straight through the knight's mailed torso, throwing Macello several yards away from his saddle. His three mounted companions, bringing up the rear, turned and fled back into the alley, now with Lucius galloping hard behind, running them down before they reached the rear gate.

It was all over, except for two men still climbing up the south wall. Numerius's giant hammer came down as the first one reached the stone parapet, and with a scream fell backwards into the abyss. The second attacker saw the situation was hopeless and released his hold, following his companion into the dense, dark vegetation below.

Next to me, Jacob sobbed in relief. Beyond the main gate, Sidonius and his soldiers overtook the remaining attackers. A few had managed to escape into the undergrowth in the dark; the rest lay unmoving upon the flat stones of the Via Aurelia in the alleyway below the main gate.

Quintus our cook threw more wood on the fire, and we counted our number.

The Captain cried out loud as they returned to the forum, “Deo Gratia, not one of you was lost! Well done!” Grasping Cadmon’s hand, he said, “Well, my brother, now I know exactly what the Roman cavalry can do!”

Nearby, Brother John our physician bent down, attending to one of the few surviving wounded amongst the brigands. Sidonius challenged him. “Why do you help him? He would have killed us!”

Brother John looked up. “My oath as a physician tells me to treat both friend and foe, whoever has need. Who knows, today’s foe may be tomorrow’s friend.”

Sidonius snorted and turned away.

“Alright everyone, you did well tonight; you can tell this to your grandchildren one day!”

The ninth day of June was a day for burying bodies.

They were interred in a single grave, below Castrum Caneto’s western wall. Macello was buried with his men, his corpse headless, providing brutal but tangible evidence for Count Rusticius that the task had been completed.

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The following morning we regretfully said our farewells to the Captain and his brave men. Sidonius patted a sack containing Macello’s head, hanging from the saddle.

“Well, this is one of the merry men who will not trouble us any more! Go well, my friends, I hope we shall meet again someday!”

Augustinus smiled as he clasped Captain Sidonius’s hand. “When you pass by Lou Muei, tell these people they can come

home. All clear! Safe to proceed!”

Turning their horses to the east, Sidonius and his cavalry galloped away in a cloud of dust back along the Via Aurelia, with the one survivor of the battle tied on his horse, and I wondered how long he would remain alive.

With sufficient food prepared for two more days on the road, we set off early to cover the next sixty miles of the Via Aurelia to reach Aquae Sextiae.

After a mercifully uneventful journey, we arrived at what was once an estate on a Roman farmhouse, the Villa Lata, a small hamlet with an oratory dedicated to a former bishop of Trier, San Maximin. Warily we set up camp in a field, adjacent to an oratory that was supported by a small community of nuns, and dedicated to the Shrine of the Biblical Maria Magdalena.

As the sun began its descent in the late afternoon, we trudged over a field to the oratory, where the Abbess welcomed our small group of monks to evening prayer. Afterwards, when the candles were extinguished and all the nuns had left, the Abbess said to Augustinus, “There is a remarkable story that I wish to tell you if you have the time?”

Although we were bone tired, Augustinus said, “We do, Abbess! Please, say on!”

We sat together in the chancel, the Abbess deep in thought for a while, her face calm and composed beneath her black headdress. She gathered her thoughts to speak.

“This story began more than a hundred and twenty years ago,” she said, “after King Childeric rode by this oratory, and asked for water to slake his thirst. He had been anointed as the first King of the Merovingian Franks by then. Tradition has it that the King was deeply moved by the story of Maria Magdalena. It is said that Childeric identified himself with her because he too had been sent into exile. As you know, she was never fully adopted into the story

of our Catholic Church.” She glanced at Augustinus. ”She became branded as the ‘sinner’, the ‘fallen woman.’ She was not fully acknowledged or granted her rightful apostolic place as the first person to see our Risen Lord. So, once an outcast himself, King Childeric resolved to adopt her story into his royal line; and it is said that he championed the building of monasteries in all the territories under his subjection.”

Augustinus nodded encouragingly as he began to realise this account was something worthy of serious attention.

“Why did he build monasteries and not churches, Abbess?”

“Oh, that is simple! The Bishops ruled the churches, and the Pope ruled the Bishops. But here, the Abbots rule the monasteries, and the Kings rule the Abbots!”

I thought of the monastery at Honoratus we had left only a few days earlier. Could this be true even now, that the Kings ultimately rule the monasteries? From what the gatekeeper at San Honoratus had said, that might well be so.

The Abbess lowered her voice in a confidential whisper.

“Now, our Merovingian rulers build their monasteries with the aim to corrupt the Church and weaken it from within; but not only that. Our Merovingian masters also issue charters, granting the monasteries complete exemption from any episcopal intervention. In this way, they become independent of our Mother Church.”

Augustinus was now fully engaged; deeply concerned to understand what lay before us, as we progressed deeper into the Kingdoms of Francia.

“So, it becomes the case that he who pays the piper calls the tune, Abbess? And in this case, the piper is the King.”

The Abbess nodded. “And it is said that when Childeric’s son Clovis ascended the Merovingian throne as successor, he struck a bargain with the Catholic Bishops—but he always remained a pagan himself!”

I thought, so this left the Frankish Kingdom with a pagan King, namely Childeric, who was not subject to, but had bargained with, the former Gallic bishops more than a century ago!

“Our Catholic faith has had almost no effect on these Merovingians!” the Abbess blurted out in frustration. “They freely use assassination to achieve their ends—including patricide and fratricide, not to mention torture, mutilation and treachery—and as your raised eyebrows suggest, adultery and incest too.”

The Abbess ended with a warning.

“I have shared this with you freely, Prior. I beg that you treat it with great discretion! We live in the Kingdom of the Franks. But I believe you have an honest and true face that one can trust. If I am mistaken, I may find myself following the example of our Lord to an early grave!”

Augustinus responded, “What you have said, Abbess, is of crucial importance! May I have your permission at least to inform His Holiness of these matters? I have no doubt he will find what you have shared with us of inestimable importance in his future dealings with the Frankish rulers!”

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Underway again, with a journey of some twenty-five miles lying ahead of us, Augustinus called me to write a summary of our meeting with the Abbess that he could send to Pope Gregorius.

I sat in the cart with a wax tablet on my knees and stylus in hand with Augustinus deep in thought walking alongside. Cadmon couldn’t resist a jibe as he trotted by. “Anything for the easy life, Alric! Or perhaps you still have those blisters on your feet?”

“You must tell me about your saddle-sores sometime, Cadmon! But just at the moment, I’m writing a letter to our Pope.” Cadmon

laughed and trotted ahead up the road, his gaze ceaselessly sweeping the Via Aurelia and broad countryside around us.

I turned back to my wax tablet and wrote as Augustinus dictated, finishing with a valediction. I looked up at Augustinus. “I’ll write this out on parchment once we reach Aquae Sextiae; but what about Maria Magdalena? Wasn’t King Childeric at least supportive of her role as we have it in the Gospels?”

I thought Augustinus was about to burst.

“No, Alric! King Childeric never positioned himself on her side. He used the account of her in the Scriptures purely for his advantage, portraying her as a victim of prejudice through the many stories that circulate about her, holding them up to be historical proof of injustice. No, Childeric’s life flew in the face of human decency as well as the sanctity that the Church upholds. He was the cause of his own misfortune, Alric.”

“What then of the common belief that Maria Magdalena was a prostitute, a penitent sinner, an outcast? Childeric’s argument rests on it!”

Brother Petrus came alongside. I noticed that his cheeks, usually clean-shaven in Rome, now grew a light beard. Petrus listened for a few minutes, then joined in our conversation.

“It must be said, Alric, that none of the Early Church theologians—like Origen, and Augustinus the Bishop of Hippo Regis in Africa—none of them identified Maria Magdalena with the prostitutes and sinners of the Gospel of San Lucas, or any other sinner in the scriptures for that matter. We are all sinners, begging forgiveness. Pope Gregorius, when he delivered his homily on Job—and I heard this from him with my own ears—was anxious to reassure converts that their sins would be forgiven, and so he used an allegory to make his case. He had no intention of dragging her name through the mud! On the contrary, his regard for her was so profound that he exhorted the faithful to imitate her, and later

manuscripts even place in her hands the holy grail of ‘the cup of life’. It is perverse to think of Maria Magdalena as others have portrayed her. Yet sadly, they will be all too keen to discredit her for their own ends by their attitude towards women in the Church.”

We walked on in silence for a while before Augustinus added, “Much of what Childeric believed and did stemmed from his long-standing resentment against the Catholic Church for his unrepentant way of life. Compelled by his malign purposes, he made a spurious identification between the tribulations of Maria Magdalena and his own trials, attempting to undermine the Faith in ways that would benefit himself. Let’s remain alert to these allegations and practices as our journey unfolds, and discover whether what we have heard from the Abbess is merely a fantasy—or a deeper, more sinister issue.”





## VIII

AQUAE SEXTIAE  
SIX SPRINGS,  
AIX-EN-PROVENCE*June AD 596*

OUR JOURNEY FROM Villa Lata to Aquae Sextiae passed without incident, and by late afternoon the city wall loomed ahead of us. We entered through a stone gateway under the eye of the night watch, the heavy doors slamming shut behind as we followed a street winding its way towards the Cathedral. Soon a large open square, surrounded by dwellings on three sides, appeared on our left.

Jacob drew his horse to a halt. "My friends," he said, "this is my journey's end. I cannot thank you enough for all your kindness and protection on our way! Heaven only knows what would have happened had you not come across me at Frejus!"

Augustinus responded, "It has been a pleasure and an honour to have you with us, Jacob! I sincerely hope that our paths will cross again!" As Jacob turned to lead his horse away, he took a sealed document from his purse and gave it to Augustinus.

"In the unlikely event that you ever need support from my brother Samuel in Massilia, this may give you some assistance on your way. Just ask after his name near the port, and the locals will direct you to him!"

Jacob bowed, sweeping his broad hat in a farewell to our companions, saying, "Good night to you all, and may the God of Abraham, Isaac and Jacob go with you!"

To our chorus of farewells, he turned away into the square.

\*

The main gate into the cathedral compound was half-open on our arrival. Augustinus explained as we entered the courtyard, "Most of the basilicas in Provincia and Francia are Augustinian, so there are no monks here, only Canons. They live separately in their quarters around the cloister. Some of us might be billeted with the Canons, and others with members of the congregation in their homes around the town."

After supper Bishop Protasius, Prior Augustinus and Patrician Arigius, owner of much of the land between Aquae Sextiae and Arelate to the west, met in a reception room where candles illuminated fine tapestries and murals adorning the walls. At Augustinus's request and with the Bishop's permission, I sat a few feet behind Augustinus to record the meeting and produce any correspondence that might arise.

With the usual pleasantries over, Arigius leaned forward, his arms folded and resting on the polished wooden table, his hands expressive as he spoke. He was no longer a young man, nearly bald, a lined face with a high forehead and penetrating gaze. His air of authority and demeanour of trustworthiness were unmistakable.

"Let me understand this clearly, if I may, Augustinus." He spoke politely and to the point in a rich and articulate voice. "His Holiness has given you the task of leading a mission to the Kingdom of Cantia. Correct?"

Augustinus nodded. "That is so."

“And you have brought with you twenty men, some of whom are monks and some lay brothers from your monastery, to assist you in this mission?”

Augustinus nodded again.

“Yes, both to assist in making this journey, and to play their part in building a monastery and a basilica in Cantia. But most of all, to bring the good news of salvation to the pagan Saxon people in what His Holiness believes are the End Times. For this reason, the matter is urgent.”

Arigius smiled. “This is a noble purpose indeed! And what support has His Holiness given you to make this journey from Rome to the shores of old Britannia?”

“We have funds for the journey, but they are limited.”

“And has His Holiness furnished you with letters of introduction, perhaps? Or specific requests under his seal for support, financial or otherwise?”

Augustinus shook his head. “The answer to both your questions is ‘no’.”

Arigius glanced meaningfully at Protasius.

The Bishop spoke in a sincere tone, solicitous and supportive.

“Then you are indeed fortunate to have made as much progress as you have, Augustinus! Now, while I am in no doubt as to your identity, your mission or your motives, I must warn you that once you travel further on your journey, you will be regarded as a stranger. And you will find an increasing reluctance among benefactors on the way to give you the support—the considerable support, if I may say—that you will most certainly need. I am thinking of boats, barges, mules, protection, money, a ship to cross over to Cantia...” Bishop Protasius lifted up his hands in a gesture that said, ‘and much, much more!’

Arigius agreed with a nod. “I must also mention that there is

more to this than merely finding support from Bishops and monasteries on the way. You could be passing through three Merovingian Kingdoms! One under the young and recently crowned Theudebert II of Austrasia—whose grandmother, as you may know, is the formidable dowager Queen Brunhild. Another is the twelve-year-old Chlothar of Neustria, and his equally formidable mother, Queen Fredegund. And here, we are in the Kingdom of ten-year-old Theuderic of Burgundia. So you see, my dear Augustinus, without letters to these kings and the Dowager Queen Brunhild and bishops and others on the way for their support and protection, your progress from here onwards will be extremely difficult indeed! And their support will only be elicited through a personal letter from His Holiness himself.”

Arigius, having presented his argument in the manner of the judge and magistrate that he was, leaned back, spreading his hands in a patrician gesture that suggested, ‘I rest my case’.

Bishop Protasius added, “What we are saying is that you have little option but to return to Rome—and request His Holiness to furnish you with the letters you will need for the remainder of your journey.”

Augustinus sat back with a groan. “It would destroy the morale of those here in my charge if I took them back to Rome. And frankly, the cost of doing so is prohibitive, particularly as all that we need are the letters.”

A moment of silence followed as all three reflected on the alternatives and implications.

At last, Protasius broke in, “Look, you can leave your monks and lay brothers here with me until you return with the letters that you need from His Holiness. And take your soldier fellow with you for protection. He seems a very capable young man, from all accounts. Give this some thought, Augustinus. I’m sure this would be best for everyone.”

I put down my stylus. This was a turn of events I had not expected. What if the Pope refused, and ordered all of us back to Rome? And not least, could we afford the cost of the return journey to Ostia?

\*

After first prayers and a meal the following morning, Augustinus walked down the stairs to the courtyard of the Bishop's palace. Our lay brothers were already assembled and waiting after their first night with the good townsfolk of Aquae Sextiae. As a postulant, I had passed the night in the quarters of one of the Canons of the Cathedral, as had all our monks, including Cadmon.

I sensed at once the mood amongst our lay companions was strange and restive, even anxious, as we arrived at an unusually animated gaggle of conversation. Silence fell as Augustinus greeted everyone. Graciosus immediately signalled his wish to speak.

“Prior, some of us have heard disturbing reports from our hosts last night, concerning the Saxon Kingdom we are going to. They are adamant that the Saxons are barbarians, fierce and warlike and an unbelieving nation of people—and we won't understand their language! We beg of you to ask His Holiness to release us from this mission!”

Cadmon broke in with growing anger,

“You are talking about people like me and Alric, Graciosus! Certainly, there are Saxon warriors in Cantia, as there are everywhere, but the King and Queen of Cantia have invited us under their own protection!”

Several voices were raised in response, but Augustinus broke in.

“Enough, enough! Last night, I had a conversation with both Bishop Protasius and Patrician Arigius. We have considered

carefully the options open to us to continue our journey. It is clear that I must return to Rome, and request from His Holiness letters of introduction that I can give to Bishops and Kings and Magistrates, asking for safe passage through this land of the Franks.”

A loud murmur of disappointment went up, but Augustinus continued.

“You have my promise that I shall raise your concerns with His Holiness, and what he decides, we shall do. But I must now return to Rome in all haste if we are to arrive in the Kingdom of Cantia before winter sets in. Meanwhile, you will all remain here under the authority and protection of the Bishop who will find productive work for each of you, as we know what the devil does with idle hands! But besides all that, I need you to keep your skills in good repair, otherwise we will be of no use to man nor beast.”

Augustinus concluded, “I shall depart for Massilia this very morning. Cadmon will accompany me for safety on the way, as you won’t need protecting here in Aquae.”

Augustinus ended on a more sombre note.

“I cannot say exactly how long it will be before we return; it may be some weeks, or even a month or more, so I have an important note of caution for everyone billeted with the townspeople of Aquae Sextiae. Be respectful of their families, and scrupulous in your relationships—with the womenfolk particularly. See that you are not in any way tempted by the devil, but remain blameless in all your behaviour and dealings at all times. If any report of inappropriate behaviour reaches Bishop Protasius, I will certainly be informed on my return, and there may well be consequences. If the magistrates bring formal charges against anyone on account of his behaviour, we shall not be able to delay our onward journey for anyone awaiting a trial, or its outcome. We are on urgent business for the Pope, and we must press on for the sake of his mission. I feel sure that you will strive to the utmost to live as the Church expects, as guests of good and generous people

in a foreign land. May the comfort of Christ and the strength of the Spirit be with you!”

I immediately rushed to plead with Augustinus.

“Abba, you must take me with you! I can scribe the documents that you need,” I begged.

Cadmon added his voice to the plea.

“We will travel more safely with three of us.”

Augustinus considered my plea.

“Yes, you may come, Alric!”

\*

I paid only scant attention to the passing scenery as we made haste on horseback along the road to Massilia, but sufficient to note the patchwork of small fields and ripening crops where men and women, backs bent low, tended vines on sloping hillsides. Above us the sun blazed down from a clear sky, and on the hillsides pines, cypresses, oaks and sycamores stood as tall sentinels, saluting our small party as we galloped by.

I lost all sense of time as I clung desperately to my horse’s neck. At last, Cadmon raised his arm and pointed down the hill before us, and our first glimpse of the ancient Greek city of Massilia come into view—brown, undulating hills covered by a sprawling patchwork of streets.

Beyond the wall of the harbour lay the long, sparkling blue-green waters of Mare Nostrum. Still further, beyond the far horizon, Rome lay besieged; and within it’s walls stood our Pope, once more holding our fate in his hands.





# IX

## RETURN TO ROME

*July, AD 596*

THE DOORKNOCKER ECHOED in the hallway of the Convent of San Victor. After a while we could hear footsteps drawing closer, a bolt was drawn back and the heavy oak door creaked open. A young nun stood in the doorway, dressed in a white habit, black scapula and a headscarf.

“Deo Gratia!” she said in a pleasant voice, “How may we help you?”

Augustinus responded, “Deo Gratia, sister! I am Prior Augustinus from San Andreas Abbey in Rome, returning with my two companions.” Gesturing towards the Abbey of San Victor next door, he explained, “The Prior at the Abbey has suggested we might stable our three horses here while we return to the Holy City. Unfortunately, the Abbey stables are fully occupied.”

“Come in, please,” she said, opening the door for us, and we entered a lobby covered with black and white floor tiles and a curving flight of stairs. Everything looked well kept and well ordered.

Augustinus explained, “We are staying the night at the Abbey, and in the morning hope to find a ship that will take us to Rome.”

“And for how long do you expect to be away?” she asked.

“That’s hard to say, precisely, sister. Perhaps three weeks? At

most, a month I'd say."

She smiled. "I shall ask the Abbess if that will be possible."

She closed the heavy wooden door. "Can you wait here, please? I shan't be long." She turned and walked towards an inner door opening into a corridor. Cadmon nudged me and winked, speaking in our Saxon tongue so Augustinus would not overhear. "She's quite a beauty, don't you think, Alric? What a shame she's a nun!"

"Come on, Cadmon!" I shot back, "Try to keep your dirty mind on..."

I didn't manage to finish the sentence. Out of the corner of my eye, I noticed the nun had reached the door and stopped. I thought that someone might be coming towards her down the passage from the other side, perhaps the Abbess; but the nun turned around, staring at us searchingly.

We noticed, and stared back.

Then, peering intently at our faces, she walked hesitantly back towards us, her eyes searching for something half-remembered, something long lost. Then, to my complete surprise, she spoke in our Saxon tongue.

"Alric? Is it you?"

For seven long years, I had not heard another person speak our mother tongue except Cadmon. Now, a thousand images began to flash through my mind—a little child laughing and playing; a frightful moment of horror as raiders seized us three young children, dragged away from the shores of our homeland; a little girl wrapped in a shawl beside me on a ship at sea carried away to a foreign shore; and worst of all, the image of her separated from me, crying and begging as she was dragged away to a slave market to an unknown fate.

"Tola?" I whispered, as something began welling-up in my chest, my throat, my eyes.

“Alic! I’m Tola! Your sister!” she cried, flinging herself into my arms. I embraced her slim shoulders, utterly stunned, completely overwhelmed.

“Tola!” I said, my voice thick and uncertain, already beginning to choke as I searched her face. She wept on my shoulder and we both sobbed out loud, clinging to one another like driftwood on the open sea, and I lifted her off her feet, twirling her around.

“Cadmon!” she said, as I put her down, and gave him a sisterly hug and a smile.

“Tola, I feared you were dead!” My words tumbled out still not fully believing this was my own sister. “I hardly recognise you! You ... you’re so tall!” I blurted out.

We heard the sound of footsteps hurrying down the corridor, and the Abbess entered the lobby.

“Tola! What’s the matter here?” she demanded, seeing two monks and a soldier standing in the lobby.

“Abbess,” she said. “This is my brother Alic! I never thought we would ever see each other again!”

Augustinus handled the introductions, explaining who we were, and why we had come. Abbess Respecta was amazed as Augustinus told her of what had taken place during these last years. The Abbess was also deeply impressed that Augustinus was Prior of Pope Gregorius’s former monastery in Rome.

She said, “Tola has often spoken of you, Alic, and how she came to be here! But given that the chance of ever finding each other was so slim ...” Abbess Respecta broke off, saying, “Tola has become a marvellous postulant! We are looking forward to her entering our order here!” An expression of shock appeared on Tola’s face, and she was about to interject when Augustinus broke in.

“Our need, Abbess, is to find a place to stable our horses for

some weeks while we were away in Rome.”

“There is no problem with stabling your horses!” she assured us. “This had been a dual monastery for nearly two centuries, and the Abbess always exercises authority over both monasteries! We will look after them while you are gone, won’t we, my dear?”

Tola pleaded, “Please! I beg of you, can I accompany you to Rome? I cannot find and lose my brother again on the same day! No one could devise a fate as cruel as that! Please, I beg of you!”

Augustinus wasn’t overly keen to begin with, nor the Abbess, but we heaped up reasons and argument after argument. At last, Augustinus promised, “I will vouch for her on our journey, and in Rome, she can stay in the convent of the Quattro Coronati.”

I winced as Paulina slipped into the forefront of my mind. Augustinus went on, “And the convent is close to both the Lateran Palace and San Andreas monastery.”

The Abbess was reluctantly persuaded against her better judgment, but as Tola was too young to profess her life vows in the convent, Abbess Respecta finally acquiesced.

A bell tolled for the evening office, and we promised to return the following day.

\*

The next morning Augustinus rose early with two crucial tasks in hand. The first was to track down Jacob’s brother Samuel; the second, to find a ship that would take the four of us to Ostia.

We found Samuel after much asking of passers-by in one of the narrow back streets leading down to the harbour. Samuel stood cautiously on the doorstep of his house, and broke the seal on Jacob’s letter, looking at us with deep suspicion. When he had read it, he said briskly, “Yes, that’s all in order. And there is a ship that

finishes loading today. A grain ship for Rome.” He pointed in the direction of the harbour.

“I shall accompany you to meet the captain, and settle payment for you. And if I may add, Prior, this is not a loan. My brother Jacob is giving this as a gift of thanks to you!”

Taking our few possessions, the four of us found a spot on the crowded vessel below the wheelhouse and waited to depart. At last, we now had time to share what had come to pass these last seven years.

Tola’s words came tumbling out, switching from Latin to Saxon and back again, so that Augustinus could keep up with her tale.

“After Felix sold me in that dreadful place, I was taken from Bordele to Turones, as a handmaiden for an old lady. As it turns out, the old lady was Queen Ingoberga!”

“What?” I said. “A Queen! That’s impressive! Who is she?”

“She’s dead now. She was from a royal family in Burgundia—her father was King Godogisel, and she married King Charibert I of Neustria. If you want to remember what he looked like, Alric, just look at your gold coin!”

“I no longer have it,” I said sadly, “Felix took it from me, remember? But I haven’t forgotten the image of Charibert’s long hair and prominent, bearded chin.”

Tola continued, “Well, King Charibert and Queen Ingoberga had a daughter, their first child. Can you guess what name they gave her?”

“That’s ridiculous, Tola! There are hundreds of girls’ names!”

“You, Alric, of all people, should know what her name is!”

My mind was a blank.

Cadmon gestured to speak.

“Don’t tell him! Let my lazy oaf of a brother work it out for himself!”

“On my oath!” I cried out, sitting upright in surprise, “Bertha! You mean Queen Ingoberga’s daughter is Queen Bertha?” Amazed and open-mouthed, I shook my head.

“She is indeed! And when Ingoberga found out I knew of her daughter, and how she had seen you Alric, on the day you were born, and all about your gold coin, she was over the moon! Then she wanted to know everything, and I told her my whole story. She genuinely wanted to know!”

By now the ship had slipped her moorings and losing sight of the monastery, we passed a lighthouse before turning towards the harbour mouth.

Tola continued, “Then King Charibert divorced his first wife Ingoberga and sent her away to Turones with their daughter, Princess Bertha. Bertha stayed in Turones until she was old enough to marry Prince Ethelbert. This was two years before I was born, and I was only eight years old when I was taken to Turones—and my mistress was nearly seventy.”

“And she treated you well?”

“Yes; she knew she could trust me—and she was very kind.” A wistful expression passed over Tola’s face.

Augustinus broke in, “If everything was going so well in Turones, how did you come to be in the nunnery at Massilia?”

“Well, it’s complicated,” Tola replied. We all laughed. Augustinus shook his head, “Everything about this is complicated!”

“Well, Queen Ingoberga believed there was a plot to do away with her. Particularly she feared Bertelfede, because of an old feud between Bertelfede’s mother and my mistress.”

“Wait! Wait!” I said. “Bertelfede?”

Tola started again. “This is what happened. Queen Ingoberga’s husband, King Charibert of your gold coin, was a cruel and unfaithful man—he was the only king in Francia to have been

excommunicated from the Catholic Church! The Bishops wouldn't allow him to be buried in Parisius, even though he was a King. But he also had concubines. One was called Marcoverfa, and she had a daughter by him called Clothilde, who was exiled to Poitiers in the nunnery of St Croix."

Tola paused to see if we were still following her story. We nodded and she went on, "There was also another concubine, Merofleda. She also had a daughter by the King—Berteflede, who was also exiled to the nunnery in Turones. Before I came, she had asked if she could be a handmaid to Ingoberga, but the Queen did not trust Berteflede's motives—she said Berteflede would poison her, rather than help her! So instead, Queen Ingoberga sent her Courtier to find a young girl she could use in her service. She wanted a Saxon girl—well, anyone except a Frank, to be truthful. Someone she could train up for herself, and whose loyalty she could rely on. That is what her Courtier did, and that's how I came to be at the fort in Turones. So I became her chambermaid."

"Well," I mused, "that was extremely fortunate for you, Tola; another mistress could have been very different. But you still haven't said why you left Turones to come to Massilia."

"Because Queen Ingoberga very kindly wrote a letter asking Bishop Gregorius of Turones, once Ingoberga had passed away, that he would send me to the nunnery of San Victor in Massilia. She knew my life would be threatened had I stayed. Otherwise, I would have been sent to the same convent as Berteflede. Then Agilulf, the Bishop's Deacon, went on a pilgrimage to Rome. He took me with him as far as Massilia, and carried a letter from the Bishop of Turones to the Abbess at San Victor in Massilia, asking her to take me in."

Tola took a moment to collect her thoughts.



“Deacon Agilulf also carried another letter with him that was intended for the Pope in Rome.”

Augustinus, his eyes brightening in anticipation, said “Ah! A letter for the Pope! Go on, Tola; go on!”

“Yes, Deacon Agilulf told me he carried a letter from our Queen Bertha that she had sent to her mother, Queen Ingoberga in Turones. And that letter came on Felix’s ship—the same ship that carried the three of us away from the Haven!”

I sat open-mouthed at this revelation. So did Cadmon.

“How do you know this?” he demanded.

“Because when Felix sold me at Bordele, he also gave a letter to Queen Ingoberga’s courtier, and eventually Queen Ingoberga read it out to me!”

Cadmon let out his breath, fitting the pieces together. “So Queen Bertha must have written her letter on the very day that Alric, his father Galen and I, returned with them from Raculf to the Haven! When Felix came to seize us the next morning, he already had Queen Bertha’s letter with him!”

Tola nodded. “That is true. Ingoberga gave the letter to the Bishop of Turones, asking him to send a mission to the heathen amongst our Cantwara people.” Augustinus leaned forward, hovering like a hawk over its prey. “Go on, go on, Tola!” he urged.

“Well, my mistress said that Queen Bertha had already asked Queen Fredegund of Neustria to send a Bishop, but she didn’t seem interested. There wasn’t much that my mistress could do, except pass on this letter from Bertha to the Bishop of Turones, to see if he could send some missionaries to Cantia.”

“And did he?” Augustinus asked.

“No. He wasn’t well in his last few years. After Queen Ingoberga died he gave the letter to Deacon Agilulf. When the Deacon set sail for Rome, he took Queen Bertha’s letter with him.”

“That was six years’ ago,” said Augustinus. I looked up and caught our Prior’s eye. For a brief moment I was back scribing in the Lateran Palace, at the moment the Pope held up that same letter, and proclaimed a mission to the Cantawara people.

Augustinus settled back against the wheelhouse with a sigh.

“What a twist of fate this has been! Our need to return to Rome to ask His Holiness for letters of introduction to Bishops and Kings brought us to Massilia! Then our need to stable the horses at your Abbey led us to your door; and then you, Tola, were there at precisely the right moment to answer our knock at the door! Surely, this is not a coincidence. Surely, this is the hand of Providence at work!”



X

# PAPAL LETTERS

## ROME

*August, AD 596*

OUR RETURN TO Ostia took Bishop Domenico completely by surprise.

“I did not expect I would ever see you again! I am overjoyed that you have found your sister, Alric!”

Over dinner, Augustinus explained all that had befallen us since we last saw him, and ended with the reasons for our unexpected return.

Domenico responded, “Well, one can understand your lay brothers’ concerns; although as you say, their anxieties are misplaced. But your return to Rome is a good thing, as it is not easy to change the Pope’s mind once he has come to a decision!”

Our conversation turned to recent events, but there was little fresh news. “King Agilulf of the Langobards has still not returned for his second payment from the Pope to keep his warriors out of Rome! However,” Domenico said, “there does appear to have been some sort of crackdown on the dissidents and malcontents in Rome since you were last here. But I expect San Andreas might have more news for you on your return.”

“Which means our return first thing tomorrow,” Augustinus

responded. "So, we are indebted to you for the loan of your horses, and we hope and fervently pray to see you again in a week or so!"

\*

The four of us left Ostia in the morning and reached San Andreas Monastery on horseback without incident. Entering by the monastery side gate Cadmon stabled the horses while Tola, Augustinus and I climbed the marble stairs to the shady courtyard on this hot and sweaty day. I turned to look back once more at the Palatine Hill across the shallow valley, drinking-in the sight of umbrella trees shading the ruins of old imperial palaces.

Augustinus put a hand on my shoulder, "Alric, in the morning, take Tola to San Quattro Coronati, and speak to the Abbess. She'll remember you, and the vast amount of bread flour you took to the convent! But I'll give you a letter all the same, asking her to take Tola under her wing until we leave in a week or two. But tonight," he said to Tola, "we'll find a family here in the Abbey grounds to take you in."

Later, as I walked my sister over to one of the families nearby Tola said, "I hope I can continue to learn more about herbs. There is such a great need, Alric!"

"Our herbalist will give you all the help you need for a basic garden. I'll introduce you in the morning." We stopped at one of the dwellings behind the monastery.

"My concern, Tola, is that we wait so long for the Pope to write the letters, we find ourselves arriving home in the dead of winter! Still, the most important thing is that whatever we do, we do it together!" I hugged Tola.

"I feel protected at last!" she said, and that meant so much to me that tears ran down my cheeks. "It took me a while to feel that way when I first came to Massilia. But here with you, the Prior and Cadmon, I've never felt safer than I do now."

\*

Next morning, Augustinus dictated two letters; one to the Abbess at San Quattro Coronati, the other to Pope Gregorius, requesting a meeting at his earliest convenience. Augustinus also handed over the letter he had dictated to me after we left the shrine of Maria Magdalena.

Carrying her few possessions, I set off with Tola to the nunnery of San Quattro Coronati, following my familiar path that ran through the orchard behind the convent. My stomach was in knots. Seeing Paulina again would throw all my emotions into turmoil, and I knew I must confide in Tola before we reached the monastery. There was no time for prevarication.

I paused at the gate into the orchard, and blurted out to Tola the story of my feelings for Paulina, and how dreadfully torn I found myself between her and my calling to be a monk.

When I finished, Tola squeezed me with a sisterly hug and pecked my cheek with a kiss. "I'll talk to her, Alric! Don't worry!" she whispered reassuringly. We entered the orchard, coming out into open ground between the trees and the kitchen.

To my surprise, Paulina wasn't working in the orchard, and the kitchen door was shut. Panic-stricken thoughts ran through my mind. Had she left? Was she ill? I turned to Tola, "This isn't the main entrance to the Convent. Come! We need to go round to the main door."

Passing through a high-walled courtyard, we came to the impressive main entrance, and I pulled on the rope. A bell tinkled deep inside. The door opened after a while and we explained our business, gave the nun our Prior's letter, and waited while she sought out the Abbess.

"The Abbess will be delighted to have you stay here during your time in Rome! Please follow me." I handed Tola her meagre

possessions and said, "I'll return for you around this time tomorrow. It will be good to introduce you to our herbalist, Brother Anselm. I think you'll want to spend some time with him."

We hugged farewell, and I returned by way of the orchard. Paulina was still nowhere to be seen. Turning onto the street leading to the Lateran Palace, I made my way to the Pope's quarters, opposite the great stained-glass windows of the Basilica, and handed over Augustinus's letter, seeking an audience for him at the Pope's earliest convenience.

\*

Several days went by, and I had still not seen Paulina. Then, early one morning on my way to fetch Tola, when as yet there was no one about, I entered the orchard and saw a figure working among the trees. I stopped. Paulina turned.

Even in my memories, she was not as beautiful as this! I felt as I had the first time I saw her; dusky cheeks, full lips, hair pulled back from her beautifully curving neck, eyes dark as midnight in the most beautiful face I had ever seen.

"Alic," she said, and in two steps we were in each other's arms, hugging and kissing away salty tears. "How I have missed you! Longed for you!"

I kissed her neck again, her cheek her cherubic lips.

"I know you must leave Rome, and I may never see you again! But I shall always hold your memory, even to the end of time!"

We hugged again, finding words of endearment I had never spoken or heard before.

The chapel bell began to toll.

“You cannot stay!” she whispered; “the others will be out soon! I love you, Alric!” She kissed me, slipping from my arms, and disappeared among the trees.

I felt like a man under a spell as I waited for Tola at the door into the courtyard, all my emotions in a jumble. How could I leave her now? After a while Tola slipped out, squeezed my hand, and we walked back through the orchard.

“I saw her this morning,” I managed to say.

“And?” Tola pressed, her voice excited.

“And she’s stunning, Tola! How can I leave?”

“How can you stay, is the question, Alric! Make your peace with Paulina; we don’t know when we’ll be leaving here. See her again, and say your goodbyes.”

“Easy for you to say!” I muttered as we left the orchard and made our way back to San Andreas.

\*

Two weeks had already turned into three when I found myself seated once again with my friend, Alexius the scribe, in the Papal Archives. The meeting room beyond the veiled doorway was familiar to me—here Pope Gregorius had proclaimed his mission to the Kingdom of Cantia, and I found myself excited to be back again.

“Alexius,” I asked, “Can you cast your mind back to last year, when I scribed with you for the Pope’s meeting? Have you ever seen the letter that His Holiness was referring to when he told us King Ethelbert and Queen Bertha had requested a mission to Cantia?”

Alexius frowned a moment, then shook his head. “It certainly never found its way into the Papal Archives.”



It seemed that no one in Rome had seen the letter, other than the Pontiff himself, although we now had confirmation from Tola that it existed. My thoughts were interrupted as the door to the meeting room opened and Augustinus entered with Prior Laurentius. They spoke for a few minutes before the Pope entered the room. Laurentius slipped away, closing the door.

I observed discretely through the curtain. Pope Gregorius seemed even more tired than I had remembered, but his mind was as sharp as ever.

“I rejoice to see that you have returned in good health, Augustinus!” he exclaimed. “How have you accomplished the mission so soon? Is everyone well?”

“Yes, Your Holiness, everyone is well, and furthermore I bring some unexpected good news! Alric’s sister, Tola, has been found! And we have brought her with us to Rome!”

“Thanks be to God!” Gregorius exclaimed.

Augustinus briefly described the events that had led us to Tola in Massilia, and added, “What is more, she was handmaid to Queen Ingoberga, the mother of Bertha, Ethelbert’s Queen!”

The Pope was delighted to hear it. The two discussed this turn of events for a few moments, then the Pope returned to the matter in hand.

“I have received your letter, Augustinus, but alas have not had time to read it. Here, read it to me!”

Augustinus opened the scroll and began to read.

“Your Holiness,

I write concerning a recent conversation with the Abbess of the Shrine of Maria Magdalena, in the hamlet of San Maximin, which is a day’s journey from the city of Aquae Sextiae.

I write in confidence concerning sensitive matters within the

Frankish Church and the rulers of the Frankish kingdoms, in the hope that this letter may be of some value to you in your future dealings with their monarchs, monks and ecclesiastics.

At the Shrine of San Maria Magdalena, the Abbess told us of a scheme devised by King Childeric of the Franks a century ago, to make the Catholic Church subject to their secular rulers. I know that you hold this same concern over the practice of simony, spawned by their greed for the spoils of wealthy cathedrals, and also the corruption of the Catholic Faith.

Recently, the rulers of these Merovingian kingdoms have established new monastic houses that are neither answerable to their local Bishop, nor Your Holiness for matters concerning the Church, but to the King alone. It transpires that, in many monastic houses, those appointed to rule over their monks or sisters receive their appointments for payment, as the Frankish kings and queens only appoint wealthy aristocrats whom they favour.

These abbots and abbesses are said to spend their days hunting and carousing, negligent of the purpose and careless of the affairs of their monasteries, bringing the noble purpose of these houses to ruin. The monks themselves descend into despair, or debauchery. Some are said to be far more adept at archery and swordsmanship than at their pastoral office.”

Augustinus finished reading and looked inquiringly at the Pope. Gregorius fixed his gaze on a spot on the floor for a few moments and sighed.

“You have reinforced my view that the Frankish Kings are themselves the root of simony in Francia, and have undermined the integrity of the Office of Bishop. Your insight that the monastic houses are also corrupted to do the bidding of the Kings—yes, I can see how a deliberate attempt to undermine the Catholic Faith might be underway amongst the powerful. I suspected this when the late King Childebert requested I grant the pallium to the bishop of Arelate, elevating him to a Metropolitan.”

Gregorius paced back and forth deep in thought, then turned to Augustinus.

“So, now tell me dear brother, how has our mission progressed?”

Augustinus gave a summary of events, beginning with Ostia and finishing at Aquae Sextiae. He concluded by saying, “However, the one clear message I have received from everyone we met on the way—which is also the principal reason for my return—is that without letters of introduction from you, Your Holiness, neither the Bishops nor the Frankish rulers, nor any of the powerful magnates, will regard our expedition as worthy of their support. So, I have returned to ask you for letters of introduction and support to those Bishops and monarchs that we are to meet on our way.”

Gregorius turned towards the curtain and called out, “Alexius! There are some letters I must compose!” Alexius stepped out, wax tablets and stylus in hand. Augustinus quickly added, “There are also two additional matters that I must raise, Your Holiness! In this, both Patrician Arigius of Provincia and Bishop Protasius of Aquae Sextiae share a common mind—namely that a Bishop must be chosen to lead a Papal mission such as this, chosen personally by the Pope. May I request that you appoint a suitable Bishop to lead the expedition? And if you so wish, it will be a privilege to give him all my support in achieving your aims.”

There was a moment of silence as the Pope reflected on this proposal.

“I accept what you say, my son. There is much merit in having a Bishop—and one from Rome—to lead this venture.”

I could sense, rather than hear, Augustinus’s relief. But who was there to choose from? Bishop Domenico sprang to mind, but was he young enough and fit enough for what we now knew would be a very demanding journey? As this thought crossed my mind, the Pope made up his.

“My wish, Augustinus, is that you be consecrated as Bishop—and what is more, at the hands of the Bishop of Arelate himself! His See once held the ancient oversight of Roman Britannia. That would be practical and symbolic—and timely!”

I could see through the curtain just how far Augustinus’s jaw had dropped. It was unusual to see him taken by surprise.

“Your Holiness,” he stammered, “Is your mind set on this?” But Gregorius waved the matter aside. After a moment of stunned silence, Augustinus recovered enough to say, “There is also the other matter I alluded to that may influence your decision.”

“Oh? Say on.”

Augustinus spoke of the events in Aqua Sextiae on our first morning there, when the lay brothers had returned from their hosts in the city with the news of how barbaric the Cantawara people were believed to be.

“Our lay brothers requested permission to return home, as they are not soldiers and cannot truly defend themselves. However, both Alric and Cadmon are adamant that they have nothing to fear from the Saxons, especially as King Ethelbert and his Queen have requested that you provide a mission to Cantia, and with that surely comes the guarantee of their safety.”

Gregorius nodded. “Very well! Then I also appoint you immediately as Abbot of those awaiting your return in Aix-en-Provence. Your word is now their law. And to replace you as Prior,” he paused for only the briefest moment, “I shall send Laurentius with you!”

The door into the chamber was not fully closed, as I had assumed. Prior Laurentius burst into the room from his vantage point outside the door.

“Your Holiness,” he blurted out, “surely that honour should go to someone already on the expedition? My role here is, I hope you will agree, most vital to the smooth running of this community at

this most difficult time!”

“Thank you for your loyalty, dear Laurentius, but my decision stands! I appoint you to the position of Prior, to work with and under Augustinus as your Abbot, who has supreme authority over the whole mission. And he is soon to be consecrated as a Bishop—in the Cathedral at Arelate!”

In the stunned silence that followed, Pope Gregorius added, “I shall also send Presbyter Candidus to accompany you to Francia, Augustinus, and have him take charge of the small patrimony of our Church in Provincia. If the brigands are as notorious as you suggest, he will certainly need all the protection you can afford him!”

As Gregorius walked Augustinus to the door, he offered these last words.

“You must be clear about the purpose and outcome of our mission, my son! It is much greater than the conversion of King Ethelbert and his pagan people. Remember, the true purpose is the promised End of the Age! You must be prepared for miracles, healing the sick, raising the dead and feeding the thousands! The time is at hand for you and your companions to turn to good works and spiritual contemplation in these Last Days!”

\*

With the Pope’s words still ringing in my ears, I returned to San Andreas and entered by the side gate into the monastery, then opened the door of Agapito’s Library. So far, no one had replaced Brother Petrus as Tutor since we left Rome. My footsteps echoed on the mosaic floor. Brother Petrus’s study felt empty and forlorn.

The monastery had a new Prior I did not know, and there was no Abbot. San Andreas had begun to feel as neglected as the rest of

Rome—once proud, but now run down. I began to search the shelves for books that Petrus had asked me to bring on our return to Aquae Sextiae. A musty smell pervaded the library, and grime had accumulated on the mosaic floor. What would Brother Petrus think if he returned? Angrily I seized a broom and vigorously swept out Petrus's study, then the lobby, and finally the whole the library. I sat down at the table I had always used for study, my head in my hands.

I knew there was little prospect I would see Paulina again. The Pope still wasn't well, Rome remained in crisis, and as the days dragged on, the chances of us three Saxons arriving home before winter were shrinking by the hour as we waited for the Pope's letters that would take us swiftly through Francia.

My thoughts turned also to Tola and I wondered, would we ever have found her if we had not returned to Rome as we did? With that thought came a sense of finality. I pulled myself together, picked up Brother Petrus's books, firmly shut the library door and walked determinedly through the garden to find my sister.

Tola was in deep conversation with Brother Anselm over matters to do with herbs. She had taken a keen interest in herbal remedies while at the convent in Massilia. I arrived as Anselm said encouragingly, "Plant your herbs, Tola; and watch them heal!"

Anselm greeted me warmly. He said, "Alric, you remember our discussion about the Pope's health, just before you left on the expedition?" I had wondered whether His Holiness's ill health might be connected to persistent opposition from his Clergy, or whether the Archdeacon who had lost his position as the Pope's personal Secretary in the Lateran was in any way implicated in a plot to poison the Pope. I nodded, grateful Anselm had not simply dismissed my concern.

He said, "You remember that we ruled out both hemlock and belladonna—because both are poisonous and hallucinogenic, and cause blindness. I also visited the wine merchant's premises that you mentioned. I observed them diluting the Pope's cognidium with

water from the nearby stream, and I followed it to the source at the top of the hill, in the garden of Sallust. Sadly, it now lies neglected and completely overgrown.”

Anselm paused a moment, then added, “However, I can confirm that the Pope’s poor health is not attributed to his doctors! Nor to a plot by some disgruntled priests! Rather, it is a combination of ignorance and carelessness!”

I looked at him in surprise.

“The Pope’s cognidium, that he frequently sips as you reported to me Alric, was poisoned by the local wine merchants!”

I stood open-mouthed in shock. “What possible motive would they have in poisoning the Pope? He is their major client!”

“No, Alric, nothing as sinister as that! The merchants mixed the cognidium with groundwater from that stream that you and Cadmon once crossed over. The stream is the source of the problem. It is polluted with arsenic deposits!!”

“I would never have thought of that! Had I known...” I began.

“No matter, Alric. You know nothing of herbs or poisons!” He gave me a kindly smile. “I informed the Pope’s physicians. They have visited the merchants, and confronted them with their lethal practices! They have since found a source of fresh, clean spring water, and this they now use. His Holiness also wrote me a note of thanks. I give it to you.” He removed the letter from his pocket. I read it and handed it back.

“No, it is yours to keep!” he said. “You made the connection. The merchants have sworn to use only fresh water from a clean spring, and his physicians will hold them to account. But whether this will make a significant difference to his health is hard to say. Keep him in your prayers.”

Hot, sticky days stretched into weeks following our return to Rome, and I had not managed to see Paulina again. The convent's need for food supplies from San Andreas had diminished as other sources came available, and I had no valid excuse to creep about the orchard at Quattro Coronati—except to escort Tola to San Andreas every morning, and return her to the convent later in the day. I shared my frustration with Tola as we walked back to the convent late one afternoon.

“Don't fret, Alric!” Tola soothed, taking my arm. “We have spoken much about you, and Paulina knows your situation! She is deeply enamoured of you—as if you didn't know!”

I groaned. “But we don't have much longer before we leave again! The letters from His Holiness will be ready soon, and Augustinus will not want to stay a moment longer.”

We said goodbye, and I noticed that Tola did not need to stand on her toes to give me a peck on my cheek.

I said, “You're nearly as tall as I am!”

“I soon will be! Be careful!” she teased.

I returned to San Andreas, my face warmed by the fiery red sun dipping westwards, pointing me towards an elusive and far distant home.





# XI

## NOCTURNE

*August, AD 596*

AFTER BREAKFAST IN the Refectory Abbot Augustinus rose to his feet and announced, “My brothers, we shall be departing for Provincia after prayers tomorrow morning, but this time with the addition of Presbyter Candidus and Prior Laurentius, whom the Pope has generously released from his service to join us on our journey!”

A murmur of surprise, disappointment and good wishes arose from the monks.

“And, my brothers, I thank you for your support in prayer as we take up our mission once more!”

I returned to San Quattro Coronati to escort Tola back to San Andreas. She had come almost every day for practical instruction with Brother Anselm for growing, storing and using herbs.

“We leave early tomorrow,” I said to Tola. “And still I haven’t seen Paulina again!”

\*

During the hours of darkness that night, sleep deserted me entirely. Wrapping my cloak around me, I roused the night watch

snoring with his head on his chest, and slipped out through the side gate into the darkness. Even if I couldn't see Paulina, at least I would be near to her one last time. The air was pleasantly warm, the sky clear and the stars bright. In the orchard, I leaned against a tree where we had often met. I breathed in, savouring every scent.

The sound of a twig snapping woke me from my reverie. I turned to look, and then I saw her. Paulina was standing some distance away. I hardly dared to breathe in case the vision disappeared and I broke the spell. She came towards me, and reached out her hand. In a moment we were clinging to each other, kissing and sobbing, my words inadequate to declare the love I felt in my heart.

Standing beneath a tree, my cloak slipped from my shoulders and we sank to the ground as words I had memorised long ago from the Song of Solomon began to swim into my head.

*As an apple tree among the trees of the wood,*

*So are you, my beloved.*

*Refresh me with apples,*

*For I am faint with love.*

*How beautiful you are, my love,*

*How very beautiful!*

*Your lips are like a crimson thread,*

*Your mouth lovely,*

*Your cheeks like the halves of a pomegranate*

*Behind your veil.*

The sweetness of love and the agony of parting—if only time could have stopped and that night last forever! But we said our goodbyes, Paulina urging me to leave with her blessing before we could be discovered.

Walking away from her, I looked back with regret and felt I had

left a vital part of myself forever with Paulina.

I made my way back in the pale light of the moon and knocked softly on the iron door in the alleyway. A small inspection aperture slid open and Cadmon's face appeared.

"You on night duty?" I said as he let me in.

Cadmon nodded. "I thought you might have a few raised eyebrows if you showed up out of nowhere in the dead of night smelling of perfume, as you do! So I swapped with Tomas on the gate, using the pretext I couldn't sleep—which happens to be true, by the way—and packed him off home to his wife."

I muttered my thanks, and the two of us sat together for a long while around the dying embers of the watchman's fire, our thoughts too private to share, even in a whisper.

Before daybreak the bell began to toll for Matins. Cadmon set off to bring Tola back from San Quattro Coronati, and I slipped away to join the monks as they shuffled softly across the mosaic floor of the sleeping quarters into the Church.

The Venite began, "O come let us sing to the Lord..."

The sad, bittersweet day of our departure had finally dawned.

\*

Two days later we retraced our steps to the Ostian quay in search of a ship to carry us to Massilia. While Augustinus spoke with Domenico, Tola steered me out of earshot to talk in private about Paulina. She could read my downcast face better than anyone.

"It's not the end of the world, Alric! Paulina understands that you won't be returning, and you two in all likelihood will never enjoy a life together." I listened disconsolately, flipping small stones into the Tiber estuary.

“Is that meant to be good news?” I asked bitterly.

“She loves the work and security that Quattro Coronati offers her, and of course she grew up as a farm girl. But I suppose, because she is very much of marriageable age, she needs a man she can rely on; and that, frankly Alric, is not you!”

I nodded glumly, continuing the slow business of filling the estuary with pebbles.

Tola added, “Paulina could have any man she chooses! She is very beautiful, and knows how to attract men! She’ll give anyone she marries all the passion, the gratitude, and the commitment she possesses. All the same, I think she fears being alone, unwanted and unloved.”

“That’s ridiculous!” I said, throwing another pebble far out into the water.

“I know, Alric, but that’s how she thinks! I believe it won’t be long before she finds the right man.”

“Of course, the right man is not me!” I said in a petulant and disappointed voice.

“Well, it’s your choice. Do you want to leave behind all you have gained here, and become a fisherman again? And where would you fish? I wouldn’t eat anything you caught in that stinking Tiber!”

I managed a laugh.

“Stop fretting, Alric! Start thinking about what lies ahead of us. Home! A new start!”

I nodded. “I know you’re right, but ...”

“Alric!” Abbot Augustinus called out, ending our conversation.

I scrambled to my feet.

“Yes Abba! I’m coming!”

\*

Nearly two weeks passed before we secured a passage to Massilia on a crowded merchant trader, returning home after a long voyage around Mare Nostrum. A few days while Augustinus, Laurentius and Candidus were out of earshot and deep in earnest discussion, Cadmon beckoned Tola and me to join him.

Tola sat, legs drawn up beneath her nun's habit, arms folded around her knees, her long black tresses blowing freely across her face in the breeze. She seemed to have grown both in stature and self-confidence since we discovered her in Massilia. She was also striking, something that Cadmon could hardly have ignored.

Cadmon said, "We came perilously close to abandoning the expedition, with our lay brothers in *Aquae Sextiae* wanting to return home! We could easily have ended up staying in Rome forever, if the Pope had decided to end this mission and with it, our own quest back home."

Tola listened attentively. I nodded, and Cadmon continued.

"But we're not out of trouble yet. Just look at Laurentius!"

We looked.

Abba Augustinus and Laurentius stood further down the deck, engaged in an animated conversation. We had already begun to notice that Laurentius was mostly aloof when we were all together, and animated, angry-looking, when he spoke with Augustinus alone.

Cadmon continued, "I think he's furious he's been assigned to this mission, and even more furious that it's Augustinus not him who'll be made a Bishop! He pecks away like a hen and questions everything Augustinus says. You don't have to guess how that's going to play out once we are back home in Cantia! We need to keep

our own immediate goal very clearly in the forefront of our minds.”

“And that goal is?”

“We all desire to return home again, agreed? But one thing’s clear. We’ll never make it back if we attempted this on our own. We have to stay with Augustinus to have even a chance of making it across Francia. That’s also what I promised him—giving every support we can to our new Abbot so that we all arrive safely in Cantia. That also means we keep up the morale of the monks and our lay brothers. Alric and I have both seen how easily their confidence slips away! But it matters little to me what Augustinus does once we land in Cantia. When we are back home again, I have other fish I need to fry.”

This was the first time that Tola had seen how strongly Cadmon felt about returning home, and she nodded.

“Yes, it’s much the same for me.”

\*

“Cheer up, Alric!”

We were four days into our return journey on the ship, with too much time to reflect on recent events. Tola sat down beside me, her bag of herbs ready for their daily drops of water.

“Thinking about Paulina again?”

I dragged myself back to the present and smiled. “Among other things, yes.”

“Still hoping you’ll marry her someday?”

I sighed and shook my head. “I truly don’t know. And with each mile it seems less likely to me. But what about you?” I said, turning the tables. “I’ve been thinking, had we never left the Haven, you’d probably be married-off by now! You’re fifteen years old;

many girls marry by fourteen, even younger! You want that, don't you?"

Tola laughed. "Well, I can't think of anyone I'd want to be married to! The life of a farmer's wife frankly doesn't sound too exciting after what we've been through!"

"What about a warrior? Like Cadmon?" I asked, my comment as incendiary as throwing a burning stick into a pile of very dry kindling.

Tola's face flushed a pink hue. I'd seen her like that when she was angry, and felt I must have upset her.

"Don't be ridiculous, Alric!" she snapped.

"Why not?" I said, playing the matchmaker. "He's the son of an Earl! He's an outstanding warrior, and he's also my closest friend."

"You've given three reasons against this right there, Alric!" she snapped. "Earls don't marry churls—they marry women of their own station! And why would I want to be married to a warrior? I'd be a widow in no time, and probably with five children hanging onto my skirts! And as for Cadmon being a friend, I think he's your friend when it suits him!"

It was true, I reflected, that Cadmon took his opportunities where he could, without always committing himself to someone in return, as a string of women from Rome to Constantinople could probably testify. All the same, Cadmon was different with male friends.

I attempted to bolster my case. "He's mature, he's good looking, and Earl Sighart is on very good terms with Pa."

"If he's good looking and a warrior, then you can be sure he's a womanizer! A girl in every port, they say. I don't doubt his bravery, Alric, but I also wonder why he always needs to prove himself and be courageous."



“That’s because he is courageous,” I said, and told Tola how Cadmon had single-handedly confronted four mounted Lombard warriors and emerged victorious without a scratch; and also his bravery earlier in Francia, killing Macello the renegade Knight as he attempted to seize the hill on Castro Caneto.

Tola was dismissive.

“I think he’s afraid of being weak. He needs to be in control all the time. He’s arrogant too! And I can see that he has a ruthless streak in him!”

“Perhaps you don’t know what he went through when he was growing up! His older brother Derian hated him; he took delight in beating Cadmon and bullying him; made his life a misery! Why do you think he came over to stay with us whenever Earl Sighart was away? He was beaten so badly he feared for his life! It wasn’t the happy home you think it was, and Derian was very underhand in the ways he went about it.”

Tola sat back, pursed her lips and closed her eyes.

After a few moments silence between us, I said, “So, my dear sister, what about you? I think I can see what’s important to you. You’re compassionate and have a desire to help others to protect them from harm. I can see that, which is why the herbs and ointments are so important to you. But—“

“But what?”

“Perhaps it becomes too important to you? You need to look to yourself too, Tola; and not only to the needs of others!”

## XII

RETURN TO AQUAE  
SEXTIAE*August, AD 596*

“WHERE TO NOW?” Laurentius demanded as we disembarked on the quay at Massilia. His nose wrinkled as perspiring slaves ran to and fro along the quay, burdened with heavy cargo, and a patrician expression of distaste appeared on the Prior’s lips.

Augustinus said patiently, “First, Laurentius, back to the convent to collect our horses, and deliver His Holiness’s first letter to Bishop Serinus of Massilia.”

An hour later, as we left the monastery, Augustinus thanked the Abbess for her care of our horses. Augustinus procured three more and we rode to the Cathedral on the north side of the harbour.

As we dismounted in the square, Augustinus confided, “I feel some trepidation in giving the Pope’s letter to Serinus. He has a reputation for entering churches and seizing their icons—fanatically set against any image of Christ in a basilica, as he regards them as idolatrous. The Pope’s letter rebukes the Bishop for the violence of his actions. But I feel somewhat compromised, as I carry an icon in my baggage to take to Cantial!”

However, our new Abbot was spared the embarrassment—Bishop Serinus was away, and we had no leisure to await his return.

We left the letter with one of the Canons at the Cathedral of San Maria and rode swiftly on towards Aquae Sextiae where our monks and lay brothers anxiously awaited our return.

\*

By afternoon, with Cadmon on Belisarius leading the way, our horses clattered through the archway into the courtyard of the Bishop's Palace. An ostler took our horses to the stables while we stretched our weary bones, climbed the stairs and entered a spacious lobby. A steward came to greet us with a warm welcome, a towel and bowl of water to wash our hands, and led us to a reception room. Chairs were placed in a circle on an attractive mosaic floor, and tall windows flooded the room with afternoon light. The steward brought a flagon, tumblers and fruit, placing them on a side table before serving.

Bishop Protasius bustled into the room, hands outstretched as he greeted Augustinus, and then turned to welcome the remainder of our party.

"It has been nearly two and a half months since I last saw you! But there are also a few new faces, I see!" Protasius extended his hands in welcome to Prior Laurentius, Presbyter Candidus and Tola.

Augustinus said a few words of introduction for each one.

"You have also brought a nun with you this time, Augustinus?" Protasius said, with a twinkle in his eye.

Our Abbot smiled.

"This is Tola, Alric's sister, who was lost but now is found! She too accompanies us on our way to her homeland."

The Bishop sent word to our monks who had remained behind, and Petrus, Ruffian and John joined us in the reception room for a joyful reunion.

Protasius took his seat.

“How was your journey to Rome? Did you find what you needed?”

Augustinus briefly outlined events in Rome over the last few months and finished, “So now our journey continues. I also have a letter for you from His Holiness, and another for Patrician Arigius—in fact for almost every Bishop on our route through Francia! And not least, for Queen Brunhild and her two grandsons.”

“Excellent, excellent! Now, you will be glad to know your lay brothers are well, and indeed admirable! They are out and about working with my men where they are best needed. They’ll be back by this evening.”

“This is His Holiness’s letter to you,” Augustinus said, taking a sealed scroll from his leather pouch. Protasius opened the letter. He looked up as he finished reading.

“This is stern stuff indeed! I shall read aloud the most important piece for us all to hear. ”

Protasius began, “Tell our brother and fellow Bishop Virgilius of Arelate to hand over the payments which his predecessor gathered over many years, and that Virgilius has retained in his own hands, even though they were gathered exclusively for the benefit of the poor. And if perhaps he should want to excuse himself in any way, then you, Protasius—as you know the real truth of the matter since you acted as steward of the patrimony at that time—are to explain to him how the matter stands, and urge him not to hold on to the property that rightly belongs to Sancti Petro and his poor!”

Protasius sat back in his seat, shaking his head.

Augustinus said, “Candidus will accompany us to Arelate for this very purpose—to ensure that monies gathered for the poor from the Papal Estates are used exclusively for the relief of the poor. But there’s another matter also, which may be contentious.”

Augustinus paused, gathering his thoughts.

“The Pope requests Bishop Virgilius to consecrate me as Bishop when we reach Arelate. And given that His Holiness has bestowed upon Virgilius the prized gift of the pallium, which I bring with me, he can scarcely refuse.”

Augustinus had explained to me, after his meeting with the Pope, that a pallium is a narrow band of wool about three fingers wide, worn around the neck and shoulder beneath liturgical vestments. Abba explained, “The Pope only awards one to Bishops whom he has chosen to elevate to the rank of Archbishop; but I had yet to see one.”

Protasius clapped his hands. “Congratulations, Augustinus! Your new appointment is a very satisfactory outcome!” I could not help but notice that Laurentius winced at these words.

“Leave this with me, my brother,” Protasius said. “I’ll do everything necessary to ensure that Candidus receives all the revenues due, and also that Virgilius consecrates you as His Holiness commands. I shall also accompany you to Arelate!”

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By evening, news of our return had begun to spread. Cadmon and I mingled in the palace courtyard as members of our expedition gathered around the stairs to greet us, and hear what Augustinus had to say.

Smiling warmly at our companions he began, “It is very good to be back with you after so long a time away, and we have returned to you with all haste. I thank you, Bishop,” he turned to Protasius “for the excellent care you have lavished upon our expedition party these many weeks that we have been away.” The Bishop bowed, and Augustinus introduced Laurentius and Presbyter Candidus to our

lay brothers.

“First, I can report to you that I have met with each of your families. Everyone is well!” A sigh of relief arose from our companions. “And I bring their greetings and news, and also some gifts from home. I will speak with each of you personally in a little while, but needless to say, they are all proud of you and your courage, in the trials and battles you have faced on our way here to Aquae Sextiae. They hope to see you again—once the mission is accomplished.”

There was a low groan of disappointment as they realised their expectations of an early return to Rome would not be met.

“But, for the moment, I need to speak to you about my conversation with His Holiness, and the future of this mission.” A hush now fell on the group, all of us straining to hear every word.

“His Holiness is in no doubt that we must and shall complete this mission, and urges that we do not take fright at the rumours we have heard. The Saxon people to whose aid we are summoned have a desperate need of the message of the Heavenly Kingdom, and we have the privilege of being the ones to bring it to them. Here is the letter that His Holiness has addressed to each one of us here today.” Augustinus held up the manuscript and turned to Laurentius. “Prior Laurentius will read out the Pope’s letter addressed to everyone who is part of our expedition.”

Laurentius ascended the steps and opened the manuscript. Clearing his throat, he read aloud to a silent and expectant audience.

“Gregorius, servant of the servants of God, to the servants of our Lord Jesus Christ.

“Since it had been better not to begin what is good than to turn back from it when begun, you must, most beloved sons, fulfil the good work that with the help of the Lord you have begun. Let neither the toil of the journey nor the tongues of evil-speaking men deter you; but without delay, and with all fervour, go on under

God's guidance with what you have commenced, knowing that great toil is followed by the glory of an eternal reward.

“Obey humbly, in all things, Augustinus who is returning to you. We also appoint him your Abbot, knowing that whatever may be fulfilled in you through his admonition will in all ways profit your souls. May Almighty God protect you with His grace, and grant me to see the fruit of your labours in the eternal country, so that, even though I cannot labour with you, I may be found together with you in the joy of the reward. This is what I desire of you. God keep you safe, most beloved sons.”

In the silence that followed, as each one of us reflected on the Pope's words, Laurentius returned the letter to Augustinus.

Cadmon unexpectedly signalled that he wanted to address the members of our expedition. Augustinus nodded, and Cadmon stood to speak in a clear, bold voice.

“Brothers, I speak to you as a soldier of the Imperial Calvary, responsible for your safety on our journey to my homeland. You have already faced great challenges in this Kingdom, and with great courage you have faced hardship and danger—when you withstood the assault of Macello the Knight and his bandits on the hilltop of Castrum Caneto. When we returned to Rome, your families were proud to hear of your courage!”

A murmur of approval rose from the lay brothers who had not thought of themselves as having any courage, only paralysing fear.

“And when we do finally arrive in the Kingdom of Cantia, yes, you will find warriors, but not lawless, brutal savage hoards, as you have heard some of the townsfolk tell! Instead, you will find them good, hard-working people, just like you, and to whom you bring skills and implements that will change their lives for the better, and forever. They will be as grateful as they will be hospitable and generous to you! Queen Bertha is both a Frank and a Catholic, who has earnestly prayed for years for you to come and share your good

news and your skills. The journey that lies ahead will no doubt have its difficulties and challenges, of that we may be sure. But look now to your courage! Never for a moment doubt that you have been chosen to fulfil a truly noble mission!”

Our companions cheered and threw caps into the air as they heard these stirring words lift their spirits. When the cheering died down, it was a time for sharing more good news.

Augustinus spoke again. “You all know how Cadmon and Alric came to us seven years ago; mere children, snatched from the bosom of their families, taken by slavers a long, long way from home. Alric was not only taken into slavery but has been cruelly separated from his sister for all these years. Well,” he turned and extended a hand towards Tola, as she came to stand by him on the stairs, “I am delighted to say that what was lost has now been found! We discovered Tola in the nunnery of San Victor in Massilia on the day that we left here to return to Rome! Tola will accompany us on the long journey home, and we will show her, at all times, the respect that is fully her due!”

\*

We left mid-morning together with Bishop Protasius, two of his cathedral canons, and half a dozen of his retainers. Our departure prompted me to think of Jacob. I asked the bishop, “What news of Jacob, Bishop?” Protasius paused a moment next to his horse, ready to swing into the saddle. “Jacob left a few weeks ago. I believe he too is headed for Arelate.”

Protasius turned his horse about in the courtyard and said before we set off, “We will continue on the Via Aurelia through six small hamlets before we reach Arelate. Allowing for the pace of the carts and mules, we can expect no more than a week for our journey.”



The road took us through dry rolling country where the Alpes, a low range of mountains that could boast snow even late into the spring, come into view. Protasius estimated the distance of these hamlets at about sixty miles from first to last, noticeably shorter than our journey from Canas to Aquae Sextiae.

“We are a large party,” the Bishop observed, “and in this district, I don’t expect we will have trouble with bandits, so we should have a safe journey. However, it is very reassuring to have Cadmon with us!”

This time I found that I was less wearied by the walking. Each mile brought us closer to home, and each day I arose early, impatient to resume our journey. Our lay brothers had perfected the arrangements with their carts, involving a rigorous inspection every evening and immediate repairs as needed. Through repeated practise, it usually took only minutes to change a broken wheel and continue our journey.

During the day we shared the road with other travellers coming from the west—fast-riding messengers on horseback, merchants with their wares, travellers visiting families in distant places, farmers walking to a village, but hardly ever any soldiers. Every evening I accompanied Tola, our sister of mercy, while she visited the footsore and the bleeding, her herbal potions ever at hand. When time allowed, I joined different carts to teach more Saxon words and phrases that would be useful on arrival in Cantia.

I noticed, however that Laurentius, although he was Prior, did not do the rounds, and kept a patrician aloofness from our lay brothers doing all the hard work. At night we seldom camped alone. Other groups arrived around dusk, some overtaking us on the road, others coming from the west, all of us sharing information about the road ahead.

For much of our journey, Alpine limestone hills in the north

rose to their full height and olives grew in abundance on these hot, arid slopes. Villa Salone was particularly striking, perched on the brow of a hill, and once the administrative centre in the days of empire. The villa overlooked lands many miles to the south, well positioned on an ancient salt route from the shores of Mare Nostrum to the Gallic interior.

Ahead of us, a broad plain swept towards the banks of a wide and unpredictable river, the Rodonos, ushering us to the Cathedral on which many of our hopes now rested in this ancient city of Arelate.

More than anything we had faced so far, the Bishop of Arelate's response to the Pope's letter would be the making, or the breaking, of our quest to come home.



# XIII

## ARELATE ARLES

*September, AD 596*

BEFORE WE REACHED Arelate Bishop Protasius sent Rusticius, one of his Canons, ahead to prepare for our arrival, then drew alongside our mule and cart at the front of the line.

“Our destination draws near, Augustinus,” Protasius declared. “This seems a good time for us to consider how we approach Archbishop Virgilius. There is little doubt in my mind that the course of your mission will hinge on how he responds. Come, join me for some quiet conversation.”

I watched the two men ride away, leaving me anxiously wondering how matters might turn out in Arelate. If the Archbishop refused to follow the Pope’s request, the consequences for the whole mission would be severe. None of us was more desperate to reach the shores of Cantia than Cadmon, Tola and me.

\*

Later, as an opportunity arose, Augustinus shared some of their conversation with me to write a record as part of the journal of our travels.

“You may already know, Alric, that King Childebert lived only four more years after taking the throne of the Kingdom of Burgundia. Yet in this short space of time, Bishop Virgilius has somehow managed to secure a remarkable prize for himself—a pallium from His Holiness the Pope. But here’s a strange thing—the request for such an honour for Virgilius should have come from at the recommendation of his fellow bishops, not from the King.”

“That’s new to me. But why would Bishop Vergilius want a pallium so much that he goes to such great lengths to secure it for himself?”

Abba Augustinus smiled. “Its original purpose was not a public sign of ecclesiastical office, but recognition of a priest’s unquestionable and humble virtue. That, frankly, seems highly questionable!”

I was surprised by our Abbot’s accusation, but there was more to follow.

“Bishop Protasius believes that the money for the bribe came from the Papal Estates, under Virgilius’s stewardship. The funds should have gone to the relief of the poor. In other words, it seems that the Archbishop stole from the Pope to bribe the King!”

\*

We entered Arelate through the city’s impressive North Gate, Bishop Protasius taking the lead as our procession wound through the streets to the Bishop’s Palace. Crowds made way for us as we skirted an ancient, looming amphitheatre, at one time serving as a protective fort, now crammed with dwellings rising high within its walls and a guard stood at the entrance gate. We pressed on through narrow streets and trundled across open squares crowded with people going about their business: artisans, markets, buyers and sellers, slowing our progress to a crawl.

Tola drank in everything, gripping my arm.

She drew alongside on her horse. “Look at this, Alric! I’ve never seen the like before!” I glanced over to the stalls and nodded, but my mind was at least half-occupied with Augustinus’s upcoming meeting with Bishop Virgilius.

A short distance further we came to Arelate’s derelict theatre, and followed a street that brought us to an archway leading into the courtyard of the Bishop’s Palace.

Archbishop Virgilius came out to welcome us all, his thinning grey hair visible beneath a purple skullcap, forehead permanently creased and eyelids half-closed when he smiled. After introductions and a short address of welcome, Virgilius led Augustinus and Protasius into his private chambers. I was not invited to join them, but Augustinus gave me a full account after the meeting.

Their conversation began with greetings from both Pope Gregorius and Abbot Stephanus, of the island of Honoratus, where Virgilius had once ruled as Abbot of the island community.

“It is a most stunningly beautiful island and very well-kept monastery,” Augustinus reflected, remembering his time there at the outset of our long journey to Aquae Sextiae. “Such a creative community! And very robust regarding ways forward for the community!” Augustinus said diplomatically.

“Excellent! I was sad to leave, but when one is called to higher things...” Virgilius shrugged with open hands in a gesture that said, “What could I do, except answer such a call?”

“Quite so, Bishop! Quite so!” Protasius responded, suppressing a smile. Augustinus told of our ocean passage from Massilia and praised the goodwill gift from Jacob’s brother Samuel, who had paid for our return journey to Rome.

Virgilius seemed less comfortable with Augustinus extolling the generosity of a Jew, but he managed a dismissive shrug, unwilling to engage with this any further. Augustinus presented Virgilius with

the Pope's gift—his much longed-for pallium.

“His Holiness instructs that the pallium is to be worn beneath your garments, Bishop—against the skin preferably—a reminder to you as the humble recipient!”

Augustinus said nothing of how Virgilius had come to be a recipient of the pallium from the Pope. Thanking Augustinus profusely, he returned the simple white woollen scarf to its box and sat down, pausing a moment with his elbows on the polished table, his fingers forming the shape of a steeple. Behind him, expensive red curtains partially obscured the windows. A few busts carved from dark red marble were dotted almost randomly around the room, all of them Roman faces that Augustinus did not recognise.

“Now, Augustinus, I have received word from Patrician Arigius that you are here on the Pope's business, but he has said no more, so I have no clear idea what that business might be. Could you perhaps...?”

Augustinus took his cue, and took a letter from his pouch.

“His Holiness has written a letter to you which, when you have read its contents, we may perhaps fruitfully discuss?”

Augustinus and Protasius glanced at each other but neither spoke while their host read the letter. His hand was trembling slightly as he reached the end. Our host looked up with a puzzled frown.

“I am no clearer what support His Holiness has asked you to request of me?”

“Well there are two kinds, Your Grace. One is practical financial support for our onward journey, such as barges for our upriver journey on the Rodanus, ideally as far as Cabillonum.”

Bishop Virgilius raised his hands in a gesture of despair and surprise.

“I am not sure we have the resources for such a large and

somewhat unexpected venture, Augustinus! I shall have to raise this with my steward. But please go on, what is the second?”

Augustinus said, “I had the pleasure of a conversation with Patrician Arigius when we arrived in Aquae Sextiae.”

Virgilius sat up a little, sensing that Augustinus might know something that they both knew but neither admitted.

“I should mention we have with us Presbyter Candidus, from Rome. You remember him from his visit here last year? He travels with us under our protection while he visits the estates that comprise the Papal Patrimony in Provincia. The Pope is most anxious that all the revenues raised are used for the poor and needy in these parts. Also, there are two Saxon boys in Provincia who are not connected with our present mission. His Holiness wishes to have them educated in Massilia, perhaps to join this mission at a later date, he has not decided. There are several Papal farms close to Arelate, are there not? Candidus will of course need to audit the revenues, farm by farm, and reconcile them with the accounts that you hold for the Patrimony.”

Augustinus held Virgilius’s gaze. The Archbishop squirmed in discomfort, caught between a desire to withhold resources on the one hand, and a need to escape the humiliation of being exposed as a bribe-giver and thief over the business of purchasing his status as Archbishop on the other. He sat unmoving, his face brooding as he weighed up his options.

Virgilius looked up.

“And what is your second request, Abbot Augustinus?”

Augustinus took a breath and said, “His Holiness believes that King Ethelbert and Queen Bertha of the Kingdom of Cantia would be surprised and disappointed at the arrival of a mere Abbot, as Queen Bertha’s own chaplain is a Bishop—Bishop Letardus of Neustria. In his wisdom, His Holiness requests that you consecrate me as Bishop, here in Arelate.”



Virgilius was taken completely by surprise. Augustinus pressed on.

“The Pope did briefly consider a consecration in Rome, but on balance, thought it more appropriate to have the ceremony held here, with all the symbolism of connecting the Holy See and Arelate with the ancient Province of Britannia once again.”

Virgilius showed all the signs of one caught between strong and unexpected crosswinds. He searched around for an escape before laying out what troubled him most. His voice trembling, the Archbishop asked, “But what of the approval of Queen Brunhild, who now acts as Regent? And besides, in terms of seniority, the Bishop of Lyon is the senior Bishop in Francia, not me!”

Augustinus played his final hand.

“Ah, but His Holiness is on excellent terms with the Queen, who is a staunch Catholic. The Head of the Holy Catholic Church doesn’t have to ask permission of anyone for something that lies within his power alone. Do you not agree?”

The Archbishop stood up abruptly

“My brothers, I now have some other business I must urgently attend to. I shall make some inquiries into this matter of the Pope’s Patrimony, and we shall speak again soon.” He scooped up the pallium.

“Meanwhile, be my guests, and we’ll make every endeavour to ensure you are all well rested for the onward journey.”

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Cadmon rapped on the door of our shared room and entered, perching on the only chair in the room.

“Well, Alric, how did the meeting with Bishop Vergilius turn

out?”

“I’ve only just finished writing Augustinus’s account; we spent more than an hour on it. Augustinus won’t know for another day or two whether Vergilius will stump up the money for our journey to Cabillonum. But most critical of all, is he willing to consecrate Augustinus as a bishop?”

“That sounds a little bit encouraging, Alric. But enough of your scribbling. Come, let’s go down to the quay and view the boats for our onward journey.”

I finished writing and put away my stylus and wax tablets. As this might be our only opportunity to explore the town, I also sought out Tola. She was resting in her room after a tiring journey, and eventually I discovered her room across the courtyard, near to the servants’ quarters.

“Yes, I’m coming, Alric. There are a few things I want to purchase,” she called out.

With Cadmon striding in the lead, we made our way across the ancient and dilapidated forum close by the Cathedral and into the main square, heaving with merchants and buyers. At the far end of the square I saw the remains of a Roman temple, its once proud columns now merely stumps with the roofs completely collapsed. Pressing through the throng down a street to the defunct Roman baths, we came to the crowded quay. Sea-going ships from Massilia lay moored upriver as far as the wooden bridge. Above and below the bridge, barges were moored end on end as far as the eye could see. Merchants with their slaves loaded and unloaded wares, mostly earmarked for local markets in Arelate. Beyond the bridge and facing upriver, several barges were making ready for their journey.

We returned to the large market on the square. Tola held out her hand.

“Do you have any coins in your purse, Alric?”

“Yes, but none of it’s mine; we’ll have to ask permission from

Augustinus when we return.”

Cadmon produced a few coins from his jacket. “Here, take these Tola; from my garrison days in Rome!”

Tola smiled, turned and headed into the crowd, searching through the stalls. Cadmon’s gaze followed Tola, his eyes narrowed and lips pursed. I sensed there might be something more at work than mere curiosity.

“Come!” I said, jogging his elbow, “Or we’ll never find her in this crowd.”

A few hours later we entered the basilica for the Evening Office, joining the Archbishop and his Canons in the Quire. As we prayed I wondered, Virgilius has been offered a way out, but will he take it?

The answer came sooner than I had expected. That evening Virgilius spoke again with Augustinus.

“I can assure you that you will have sufficient resources to arrive at Cabillonum.” Augustinus began to thank him, but Virgilius interrupted, “And your consecration, Augustinus, is arranged to take place this Sunday.”

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At the end of the ceremony our newly consecrated Bishop took his seat to enthusiastic applause, his shepherd’s staff in his hand and Roman mitre on his head.

Archbishop Virgilius rose to his feet and motioned for silence.

“Today,” he proclaimed, “is a momentous day in the history of our Catholic Church in Francia! Augustinus, most beloved monk and former Prior of Pope Gregorius’s monastery in Rome, and now Abbot of this community on the Pope’s mission to the Kingdom of Cantia, has this day been consecrated Bishop here in our Cathedral.

He not only unites us in a closer bond of fellowship with Pope Gregorius, but also reaffirms our ancient bond of fraternity between Arelate, the Frankish Church and the ancient Province of Roman Britannia. We pray that our fellowship may always be remembered and celebrated, down all the ages!”

I breathed a great sigh of relief—it was done, another obstacle removed. Now a Bishop, Augustinus would be able to open doors for the Papal mission, and considerably enhance his credibility with fellow Bishops, Kings and Queens throughout Francia. Pope Gregorius had made a shrewd decision. Augustinus was now both publicly recognised and canonically authorised as Bishop, leaving our lay brothers more settled, and Laurentius less aggressive—at least for the moment.

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We loaded all our possessions on to a barge and bade farewell to Protasius and Virgilius, standing on the quayside.

“Thank you once again for your support, Archbishop! You know that His Holiness firmly believes we are living in the Last Days, and that our mission to pagan Cantia is a sign that the gates of the heavenly Kingdom will be speedily thrown open. I beg you to be a standard-bearer, vigilant for your soul, that you may wrest the souls of many from the enemy. And within your jurisdiction, His Holiness begs that you forbid untutored, unworthy and opportunistic laymen from entering Holy Orders, so that charlatans do not lead the weak astray. Farewell, and pray for us!”



## XIV

THE RODONOS  
RIVER RHÔNE*September, AD 596*

THE MOORING ROPES slipped from their rings, a whip cracked and the horses strained forward, pulling our barge slowly upstream against the flow of the river. Religious symbols covered the vessel with a large painted cross for protection against hazards on the journey. The Rodonos was the main trade route between Mare Nostrum and central Francia. Now it was our turn to join the stream of humanity that had passed this way for untold centuries. Slowly our heavily laden, seventy-five-foot barge drew away from the quay into the flow of the river in the direction of distant Lugdunum.

Girardus our guide stood in the stern. One foot rested on the rail of the boat, a wide-brimmed hat shaded his swarthy, bearded face, and his eyes roved over the river as he talked with Augustinus.

“Navigation is sometimes difficult because the river has fierce currents; but also, the shallows can trap a fully-loaded barge. We’ve missed spring, and the early summer floods when the ice melts in the Alps, but now the danger for us is drought. If all goes well, we should reach Lugdunum in three weeks, but with ten cataracts waiting ahead for us, and with all these boats on the river, the journey could take a month.”

Girardus said he expected that, from sunrise to sunset, we could average fifteen miles a day against the current. The Rodonos served as a trade route for merchandise, and navigating the river meant paying tolls for our carts and their contents, assessed on each section of the waterway. Our guide opened his purse at each toll as cataracts compelled us to change barges and walk to the next level, while gangs of stevedores hauled our carts and cargo up to our next waiting vessel.

Our companions and carts occupied one entire barge, roped together in a line of six barges, drawn by more than fifty horses. A canopy ran the length of the barge, giving protection to anyone needing rest from the sun or shelter from the rain.

At dusk on our first day, Augustinus asked, "What are the usual sleeping arrangements, Girardus? Do we stay on the boat? In a field perhaps?"

"Both. You'll see the inns and night shelters along the riverbank. Some are linked to local churches; they welcome travellers for an overnight stay. Some hamlets have also sprung up over the years. They also have rooms for an overnight stay."

Augustinus mulled this over.

"Some of us can camp in fields near the footpath, where we can keep an eye on the mules and horses. We'll need a watch on the barge to guard the carts too."

Nights grew a little colder the further upstream our journey took us, and countless stars gazed down from the black dome of the sky. A chill wind blew from the Alpes, and after a few nights we heard the howl of wolves for the first time. We sat up, at once wide-awake. Girardus, wrapping his cloak closer about him and snatching up his staff, called out, "Wolves are moving down from the snow peaks to the river."

"But it's not winter," Laurentius pointed out.

Girardus stood peering into the dark. "No, but it isn't warm,

either. The wolves have arrived early, and that tells us this coming winter will be a severe one.”

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As the days went by, the sun rose later and later from behind high alpine peaks, climbing sluggishly into a dull sky, and somehow deepening my sense of unease. During the day, with our carts tightly packed on the barge, our sturdy mules trotted alongside, tied together in a single line. We walked with them on the riverbank for much of each day, while Cadmon on horseback patrolled the towpath, scouting out what lay ahead, and at intervals reporting back to Augustinus.

I took the opportunity to bring our journal of the mission up to date, and I went over my notes with our Bishop when we were out of earshot on the barge. Eventually, I ventured, “So, a good outcome with the Archbishop?”

“More than I had expected, Alric. But ridding the Church of the disease of simony will take very strong medication, perhaps even surgery! Let’s pray that Virgilius keeps taking the medicine. But I’m very glad they have Bishop Protasius in the Gallic Church.”

“Perhaps Queen Brunhild is carrying on where King Childebert left off,” I suggested.

Augustinus shook his head. “I think mother and son were in this together from the start, Alric. Simony must bring a considerable amount of revenue to their coffers. It’s strange; the royals never seem to have enough, even with their enormous tax revenues and extensive farmlands. I expect we shall know what the true situation is soon enough. But now, read back to me what I said on my first meeting with Virgilius, would you?”



\*

The days passed more swiftly than I had expected. I glanced up from scribing and took in the changes of the landscape as scenes of open pasture and dense woodland slipped by. Valleys appeared between mountains and open country, green with vegetation and yellow with ripened crops.

Tola became a familiar figure on the towpath, extending her herbal ministrations to all six barges as we travelled. After her rounds one afternoon she came to sit with me beneath the awning.

“I’ll run out of ointments at this rate!” she exclaimed.

“Well, can you hold out until we reach Vienne? There should be someone...”

“Alric, Look!” she cried, pointing to a small garden on the hillside, well-tended and carefully laid out with fruit trees, vines and vegetables. “I loved working in mama’s garden! I so badly want to see it again. That’s how my interest in herbs must have started. I think every garden is a piece of Eden.”

“Producing fruit every month, with leaves for the healing of all the nations?”

“Yes!” Tola clapped her hands at the idea like the eight-year-old sister I remembered. Cadmon drew alongside our barge, glancing at the two of us sitting beneath the awning. He pointed to the wax tablets piled up at my feet.

“Mustn’t let the sun melt the wax, Alric! A good excuse for staying on the boat?”

I picked up a wax tablet. “Let’s see, how shall we mark this moment? Perhaps ‘Warrior re-marks on melting wax?’”

“Very good,” Cadmon waved, resuming his patrol.

\*

As we drew near to Vienne Augustinus reread a copy of the Pope's letter to Desiderius, Archbishop of Vienne, then handed it to me. There was little warmth in the tone of the Pope's letter, more overtly demanding than other Bishops he had written letters to on our journey.

Augustinus commented as I handed back the letter, "Bishop Desiderius is not one of His Holiness's favourites. I've heard he still teaches his clergy from the Greek philosophers. His Holiness sees that as merely a distraction from the real business of preparing for the imminent End of all things."

He shook his head as he stepped down onto the quay.

"Still," he added, "both Protasius and Virgilius spoke well of him, so that is something in his favour."

We moored a short distance downstream of the Cathedral, alongside other barges holding vast quantities of merchandise ready for shipment.

Our guide confided, "Most of what you see here is for shipping to Cabillonum. Queen Brunhild's appetite for luxury goods keeps the whole river afloat!"

We entered the loggia of the Archbishop's Palace alongside the Cathedral into a spacious loggia, supported by columns and arches. The atmosphere felt very different from that described by Augustinus, after his first meeting with Bishop Vergilius of Arelate. White marble busts of Greek philosophers, Socrates, Aristotle, and Plato were carefully placed on their plinths in the loggia. Laurentius nodded his patrician approval at seeing distinguished statues of ancient philosophers adorning the palace, and on our right, a cloister joined the loggia to a small chapel.

Desiderius came to greet us with open arms, and I warmed to him at once. He had the bearing of an aristocrat but was much warmer than Laurentius; not surprisingly, our host came from a well-respected Gallo-Roman family in Burgundia. Courteous and refined, trim in his black cassock, Archbishop Desiderius was very nearly as tall as Augustinus. I could not guess his age, but his tonsured hair was grey, his brow a little wrinkled, and face burnished by the sun.

“Welcome, welcome!” He greeted in a rich, deep voice, extending a firm hand to each of us as we entered. Soon after, the two Bishops drew aside to speak together in private concerning our mission, our journey, our various encounters and of course, news from the Holy City. Augustinus mentioned the pallium he brought for Virgilius.

The Archbishop laughed.

“Well, no one, so far, has petitioned our Sovereign on my behalf for the pallium! Nor would it enter my mind to do so—the cost for buying this honour would be greater than a year’s provision for the poor in this city!”

As he had done with the Bishops of Provincia, Augustinus handed over the Pope’s letter to Desiderius. His immediate response was more than we could have hoped for.

“I shall give you whatever support you need, Bishop; on that score you need not have any concern.”

“Thank you, Your Grace, that is most kind and generous, as your welcome to us has been already. However, Virgilius has amply provided for us, so we are not in immediate need. But, on what score ought I to be concerned?”

“I will be frank with you, as I know that you, in turn, will be discreet. You intend to proceed to Cabillonum, and meet with the Dowager Queen Brunhild?”

Augustinus nodded. “Yes, I have a letter for her too.”

“Then let me advise caution—extreme caution—despite any familiarity, real or imagined, that may exist between His Holiness and Queen Brunhild. She is without question a devoted and committed Catholic, and a generous supporter of the Church; but she also has her favourites. She supports their causes and demeans those who fail to do her bidding or meet her demands. I am certainly one of them, as I object to her attempts to use the Church for her own ends. Her Bishop at Cabillonum is just such a victim of her ‘support’. People she does not trust or who oppose her soon disappear, suffering some dreadful fate. The same may soon be true of the Irish monk Columbanus, who once held great sway under the late King Guntram.”

“So far, I have only heard his name mentioned. But you say that he has no influence with the Dowager, Queen Brunhild?”

“Columbanus is renowned as a miracle worker in this Kingdom, so she respects him; but she also fears him. For the moment, his life does not seem in danger. But the Queen will stop at nothing to silence anyone who threatens her regency or her influence over her two grandsons.”

Augustinus and his host reflected together on these matters. Desiderius said, “Queen Brunhild is like a lioness with her cubs. She will do anything to protect her grandchildren—and in doing so, she also protects herself. Her son was taken from her soon after her husband Sigebert was assassinated, and she was cast out of the Austrasian Kingdom. The Queen will do anything to avoid a repeat of that experience.”

Shaking his head and sighing, Desiderius returned to the matter of support for the mission.

“To please the Pope, Brunhild may well give you all the support you ask for, as it will certainly enhance her status amongst the powerful Mayors of the Palace in Austrasia and Burgundy. But stay alert, Augustinus; nothing comes for free from these royals. Nothing! Did you see the barges lined up on the quay, destined for

her palace? They are all loaded with exotic goods, and paid for by those in her Kingdom who fear her most.”

The bells began to ring out from the tower announcing the Mass, and the two bishops rose. “Whatever I can provide for you to continue your journey you have only to say, my dear brother Bishop, and it is yours!”

A short while later, reading over my notes of their meeting, I felt a shudder of fear as a vision of thick, dark smoke drifted before my eyes, obscuring something I could feel but not see. This uneasy darkness rolled down from the Queen’s Palace at Cabillonum, filling the air with suspicion and fear. And, I thought, would our quest have to face a dragon after all?

\*

Following breakfast the following morning I browsed through the Archbishop’s library of classics, and my heart warmed at the sight of some familiar friends on the shelves. Brother Petrus entered as I opened a copy of Plato’s Republic. He nodded approvingly.

“Come”, he beckoned, “time for your lessons.” I groaned aloud, and reached towards a chair at the long library table while fishing in my pocket for a writing tablet and stylus.

“No, not here, Alric. We’ll walk into the forum so you can read me the inscriptions, and tell me what these buildings are used for.” With a sigh of relief, I followed him out of the library through the cloister and into the busy street.

Petrus was a good man and a masterful tutor. His discipline was never too severe, and I had to admit, also well deserved. I was surprised that he had agreed to join the expedition—not because he was too old, but because his abilities as a teacher were so greatly valued in our monastery in Rome. That gave me some

understanding of how much he wanted a place on the mission to Cantia. Petrus had thrown everything he had into this venture, hoping that in preaching the Kingdom our long-awaited heavenly King might return at last.

At Aquae Sextiae, when I had given Petrus the books we had brought from Rome, I had not mentioned the poor state of our San Andreas Library, nor did I mention that a tutor had not been appointed to take Petrus's role in our monastery.

The two of us made our way uphill through the streets at a gentle pace, past a temple that stood in the town's bustling forum. "To whom is this dedicated?" Petrus challenged, his face beneath his wide-brimmed hat a puffy pink in the heat of the sun.

I peered at the inscription. "It's the temple of Augusta and Livia," I said.

"Very good! Now used as a church, so I'm told." We walked on through the crowds in a columned piazza. I looked up over the roofs of the shops and saw in the distance a vast theatre perched high on the hillside. Petrus asked,

"Do you have a written language for your Saxon tongue, Alric?" Petrus already knew the answer, but I said, "I know of no one at home who can write at all, except for Queen Bertha and her Bishop, that is; but that's in Latin, not Saxon."

Petrus walked on, ruminating on this for a few moments, then stopped and turned to me. "Then perhaps you should put your Saxon tongue into writing? So that you can teach others to read and write in their tongue also."

Now it was my turn to remain silent. I had thought of this before, but to hear my tutor echo this so emphatically was a surprise.

Petrus shook his head. "There is no point forcing everyone in Cantia to learn Latin, now is there? But no doubt there will be some who would benefit a great deal from learning to read for

themselves?”

I had thought along these lines before, but now a seed had been planted and shoots had begun to grow in the fertile soil of my mind.

We climbed steadily up a narrow street leading to the amphitheatre, talking animatedly at the possibilities this could open up for traders, fishermen, farm stewards, warriors, farriers and blacksmiths, boat-builders, lawmakers, herbalists, and, well, for just about everyone. We entered the theatre and climbed to the top row, sitting down on the cracked marble seats.

Petrus, somewhat out of breath from exertion, fanned himself with his hat.

“We’re sitting in the cheap seats up here, you realise Alric? The Roman notables all sat down there, in the front row. But there are no theatrical performances here now. The spectacle has moved into the basilica instead.”

I sat admiring the breathtaking view of the river far below. The outlook was magnificent, the Rodonos winding around a bend and gently flowing beneath a white stone bridge almost directly below us. The Cathedral with its two tall towers faced the river, standing out clearly against a backdrop of whitewashed townhouses, terra cotta roofs and narrow streets. Vienne was an unmistakably Roman city.

Above and behind us loomed a large, brooding fortress overlooking the city. To our left we could see three gateways near the riverbank, and beyond the city walls were several magnificent townhouses and villas, mostly in a good state of repair compared to the houses in Rome. I could also see a circus, similar to the Circus Maximus, beyond the city wall. Barges clustered along the shore on both sides of the river, and stevedores unloaded cargo into warehouses. More villas, and broken public baths, lay across the river. Most notably there were none of the towering, insula apartments that so dominated the swampy, low-lying marsh of Rome’s Campus of Mars.

I turned to Brother Petrus, continuing our earlier conversation.

“I have seldom thought about what I would do after we arrive in Cantia, except to see my parents and siblings again. But now I’m remembering that many of our Earls back home have more than one son, and only some of them are truly suited for the life of a warrior. For the rest, their abilities and capacities, like mine, lie elsewhere. But the expectation is that they also will become warriors, but in battle, they are among the first to fall by the spear or the sword. What could be more rewarding for them than learning to read and write, manage their father’s estates, or enter into trade?”

Petrus sat silent for a while before replying. “It seems that you have found a quest to fulfil, after all, Alric.”

The Cathedral bell began to toll.

“Time to go.” Petrus rose from the hard stone seat and stretched. “We mustn’t miss Bishop Augustinus celebrating Mass in Vienne!”

He looked at me thoughtfully. “I look forward very much to seeing how this unfolds for you, Alric.”

With that, we hastened down the hill.

\*

After two nights in Vienne and a full day attending to our baggage, carts and mules, we secured another barge to Lugdunum and returned to the Rodonos.

Girardus awaited us at the quay.

“We’ll take everything upstream and join our barge above the cataract. From there it’s twenty miles to Lugdunum, less than two days.”

As a parting gesture, Desiderius brought out three fine horses



from his stables and presented them to Augustinus.

With a twinkle in his eye, he said, “In Francia my dear brother, appearances matter. I appreciate that as a monk you would prefer to arrive in Lugdunum barefoot; but as a Bishop, you will be expected to arrive on horseback. So, receive these horses as a gift from Vienne. I also have for you a letter of introduction to Bishop Etherius of Lugdunum—otherwise, the Bishop might suspect that you come as an imposter!”

XV

LUGDUNUM  
LYON

*October, AD 596*

RIDING ON HORSEBACK and spruced up in full episcopal regalia of mitre, cloak, pectoral cross and shepherd's crook, Bishop Augustinus led the way from our barge to Bishop Etherius's episcopal compound in ancient Lugdunum. An imposing cliff on our left rose high in the deep blue sky, and to our right the river Sona slipped gently by, separated by an island from the more turbulent waters of the Rodonos.

We arrived at the Gatehouse. One of Archbishop Desiderius's messengers had arrived before us announcing our arrival to prepare the way. We clattered across a drawbridge on to a small island, surrounded by a high wall, into the Episcopal Compound. Bishop Etherius, a Gallo-Roman aristocrat and Burgundian, greeted us in the Cloister attached to the Cathedral.

During King Guntram's reign as King of Burgundia a number of years earlier, Etherius had served as an officer of the King's Court, and in return, Guntram had given his approval for Etherius to serve as the Bishop of Lugdunum. However this had changed, and the Dowager Queen had little time, and even less respect, for Etherius.

At the outset, Etherius couldn't disguise a deep suspicion of our

motives in coming all this way from Rome. Did he imagine, I wondered, that we had come merely to gather evidence to pass-on to the Queen? Etherius was nervous and possessed the haunted appearance of a man trapped in a permanent state of anxiety. It was hard to believe he was Primate of All Gaul, a title from ancient times bestowed only on the Bishops of Lugdunum. Etherius had a nervous twitch in his right cheek, and in conversations he seemed obsessed by the prospect of his private conversations being overheard. He was suspicious of everyone who came from outside his Episcopal Compound, not knowing whom to trust or how long he would hold his post.

The darkness I had felt spreading over the land as we travelled upriver now seemed to grow ever thicker, even though the sky above us was clear blue and a refreshing breeze blew from the Alps.

To help the Bishop make up his mind whether to trust Augustinus or not, Etherius arranged a series of outings for our companions, beginning with a pilgrimage. He explained, "Our destination is the Theatre of the Three Gauls, once a meeting place for ancient Gallic tribes. On our way, we pass through the Jewish Quarter near the river and cross over to the north bank of the River Sona." At the mention of the Jewish Quarter, I wondered whether Jacob had managed to travel this far north.

In this ancient Theatre, we sat on rows of carved stone seats, facing south. Bishop Etherius told the story of how two Christians, Blandina and Pothinus, were put to death in this Theatre for their beliefs. Etherius celebrated the Mass in the semi-circle of sand below us as a reminder of those darker times.

Afterwards I sat looking down the hill, the view opening out to reveal the Basilica of San Ioannis Baptistae at the centre of a small settlement where the turgid Rodonos encountering the placid River Sona. Our procession moved down the hill to this sparsely populated island and onwards to a small church, dedicated to San Martinus of Turones. Etherius pointed out a flat stone on the floor. "Our two

martyrs, Blandina and Pothinus, were buried here,” he said, and invited us to gather round in a circle.

Tola knelt and reached out her hand to the stone inscription, moved as we all were by this place and its atmosphere, remembering these two young martyrs buried beneath.

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Four anxious days after our arrival Etherius finally made up his mind about Augustinus, and the two met behind closed doors in the Episcopal Palace. The following day we hauled all our carts and equipment into a barge, and horses drew us upstream towards Cabillonum on the gentle River Arar.

As we walked along the towpath, I asked Augustinus how his conversation with Etherius had turned out.

“Etherius outlined in great detail how matters have unfolded, since King Childebert’s unexpected death some eighteen months ago. The situation is unsettling for Etherius, and it might also become unsettled for Queen Brunhild. Who knows which way the tide might flow for either of them?”

“And how do you think that tide might affect our own fortunes?” I queried.

“Etherius believes that our arrival at this time may be more providential than we seem to think. Apparently, Queen Brunhild is desperately looking for allies. She needs a significant supporter, and our mission to Cantia may well provide one in the person of His Holiness. If we play our hand right, we might be able to turn this to our advantage. Let’s wait and see.”

\*

Summer had merged into autumn, the harvests were gathered in, the bare fields ploughed and waiting for sowing in spring. A mile from Cabillonum we moored our barge near a bridge, hitched the mules to the carts, and said farewell to Girardus, our exceptionally helpful guide. Cadmon, Theodore, Martinus and I set off at once to the Abbey of San Marcellus to alert Abbot Alduin of our arrival. From a distance, the lime-washed walls of the abbey stood in sharp contrast to brown ploughed fields, extending right to the monastery wall. Terracotta tiles on the church roof and cloister provided an attractive aspect as we galloped towards the Gatehouse.

We were expected and our welcome was warm, thanks to a messenger Bishop Etherius had the forethought to send ahead. The Guest Master took us into the church to meet Abbot Alduin. We entered this charming space to the sound of perpetual chant, sung by four monks in the Quire. Martinus raised his hands in joy at hearing such a chant for the first time in many months. A large raised shrine behind the altar marked the last resting place of King Guntram, declared a saint by common acclaim only hours after his death.

The Abbot came forward to welcome us. I was struck by his open manner, a man without guile or artifice, straightforward, helpful and not least, concerned for our welfare. Within the hour, the remainder of our party arrived in the courtyard.

“Our numbers in the monastery are not what they once were,” the Abbot sighed; “nor is Queen Brunhild as generous as King Guntram had been. We work the fields for our living and supply the village with wheat and sometimes the Palace for their bread. There is a cubicle to sleep in, for each of the monks; and,” he turned to Tola, “I have set aside a comfortable room for you. Our farm workers on the estate use it during harvest. And for your laymen, we have cleaned out one of our barns and put in fresh straw and blankets. The livestock will add warmth if the nights turn cold. There are also stables in the courtyard for your horses, and another

barn you can use for your mules.”

\*

We sat and prayed before the shrine of Guntram in the Chapel of Perpetual Chant, giving thanks for our safe passage, and seeking the Saint’s support for our journey. That night, in the flame of a flickering lamp and a roaring fire, Laurentius, Cadmon, Candidus, Petrus and I gathered with Augustinus and the Abbot. I looked at the faces of our companions; haggard, unshaven, bone-weary after months on the journey, fighting off marauders as well as fears and doubts along the way, and more than ready for a good night’s sleep. Yet there was no sign of fear or defeat in anyone’s eyes—alert, attentive, expectant. That, I thought, as my gaze shifted to Augustinus, is what he has done for us, and at no small cost to himself.

Our Bishop began, “Abbot, do you think it would be wise for us to outline a course of action before we meet with Queen Brunhild?”

For Abbot Alduin’s benefit, our Bishop summarised the conversations he had held on our journey, beginning with Abbot Stephanus at the island of San Honoratus, and ending with Bishop Etherius of Lugdunum.

He finished saying, “Despite our concerns, I believe that this is a propitious moment for a meeting with the Queen to ask for her support. Do you agree?”

The Abbot carefully considered his response.

“Queen Brunhild has hardly set foot outside the Palace since her son, the late King Childebert, died. She is still in residence, preparing for a banquet in a few days’ time. So, this would be a good moment to request a meeting with her and her two grandsons—and with the Mayor of the Palace, Count Warnachar.

He has only recently—this year in fact—taken up his post, and he is keen to prove himself. In more settled times, the Queen might be less inclined to grant you support for your onward journey, despite the Pope’s letters to her and the young princes. But providentially, this is a very opportune time to make your case.”

Augustinus was puzzled. “Why so, Abbot?”

“With her son and protector now deceased, and the young prince Theudebert about to depart for Metz to take up his crown, the Queen’s situation is much more exposed. Count Warnachar will have great influence in the education and shaping of Theuderic, a very impressionable and impulsive nine-year-old, I’m told. But also, as the Queen seems in good standing with His Holiness, she may well be inclined to support his mission.”

The Abbot paused.

“But this might also be an opportunity for Failende, who is the mother of these two princes, to assert her own rights as Queen, and seize the moment by aligning herself with Count Warnachar against the dowager, Brunhild. There is clearly no love lost between these two women. So, all in all, it seems that Queen Brunhild could well use fresh support—such as a significant endeavour that she could sponsor, or a noble cause that would call forth the approval of the aristocracy of Burgundy and bring her closer to His Holiness because of her commitment.”

In the silence that followed we ruminated on what we had heard. The Abbot’s line of reasoning seemed plausible. Cadmon also nodded agreement, and Augustinus came to a decision.

“Then I propose we send a small party to the Palace and present letters of introduction to the Count, requesting an audience with

Queen Brunhild. She might invite us to a private audience, and hear our plans.”

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We were acutely aware of the high cost of failure. Asking for support on our way to Cantia was one thing; but asking for support to turn back tired and defeated, would be another matter entirely.

We had learned an important lesson on our travels through Francia. The great and the good give to ventures they believe have the smell of success, and bathe the giver in glory.

But failure is ever an orphan.





XVI

CABILLONUM  
CHALON-SUR-SAONE

*November, AD 596*

WITH PAPAL PENNANT attached to Cadmon's lance snapping in the breeze, we rode two miles on a country road to arrive at a bridge over the Arar, and came to a halt at the city gateway into Cabillonum. Cadmon cut a handsome figure on Belisarius, his armour burnished, crimson cloak flying behind, a red comb on his helmet. Laurentius wore his customary black cassock, white ruff, leggings and slippers, while I wore a fresh habit and carried the letters that Pope Gregorius had composed to the Queen and her two grandsons. We made a good if not overly impressive trio; enough perhaps to show we came with important matters in hand.

"What's your business here?" the gatekeeper demanded.

Laurentius replied in Latin, but the guard at the gate had never heard the language. I cut in, speaking my native Saxon tongue. "We come from Rome with letters for Queen Brunhild and their Royal Highnesses."

The guard nodded and waved us in.

At the Palace Gate a large, slightly stooped man appeared in the doorway, richly dressed in silks and lace, a sword at his side. His beard and moustache covered much of the lower portion of his face,

a thick gold chain and emblem of office hanging around his neck, and his dark clothes were of the finest tailoring. This was Count Warnachar, Mayor of the Palace in Cabillonum.

He looked Cadmon over with a brief nod of approval. Next, his eyes skimmed over Laurentius, noting his haughty, patrician bearing. Lastly, he looked at me in my monk's habit, and I made no impression on him at all.

"What can I do for you, gentlemen?" His voice was polite but authoritative.

Laurentius attempted his Latin again, and this time he was understood. "We are from Rome, sent by Pope Gregorius with letters for Her Majesty Queen Brunhild and her grandsons. The Pope's emissary, Bishop Augustinus, requests a personal audience at her majesty's earliest convenience."

I took the letters from a deep pocket in my habit and handed them carefully to the Count. He examined the seal for a brief moment and responded, "I shall pass these on to the Queen with your request. Where will you be found if she wishes to meet with you? I cannot tell how long it may take, she is busy with the affairs of state at the moment."

"A message will find us at San Marcellus Monastery, where we are guests of the Abbot."

"Thank you, and good day, gentlemen," he said, the door to the Palace closing behind him.

We looked at each other.

Cadmon shrugged, and we returned to the monastery.

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Two days later Queen Brunhild summoned us for an audience.

We entered through a guarded gate on the east side of the Palace and emerged onto the forecourt of the Reception Hall. Everything was built in imitation of the Roman pattern, but lacking only the craftsmanship. Another gate led to a great circular Assembly Hall for lawmaking and councils, public assemblies, petitions, the reception of foreign dignitaries and other worthy guests. Alongside the Assembly Hall lay the Banqueting Hall, the largest room in the Palace and divided into three parts—for the royal family, the officials of the household, and a very large number of guests.

During King Childebert's reign, so it was said, the King had always provided magnificent hospitality. No person of notable rank visiting the King would leave without sitting at his table or at least draining a cup to his health. Nobles once listened to a bard who sang in their native tongue here and praised the brilliant deeds of the King's ancestors.

As we hastened down a corridor, the Palace felt more sombre and less celebratory place than it probably had been in days of yore. Still, I marvelled at the walls lined with vast, sumptuous hangings, magnificent marble statues and carved chairs inlaid with gold. Lamp-stands illuminated the corridors and cast their light into dark, ornamented corners. The under-floor heating was a legacy from ancient Rome, now hardly ever used. At intervals along the corridor, household servants waited to direct us at every turn.

At last, we entered the great Assembly Hall, already crowded with diplomats, and merchants bringing their wares from across the world; foreign dignitaries, a Bishop from some distant place, and large numbers of petitioners begging for their rights under the law.

The circular shape of the hall magnified the buzz of conversation, then trumpets sounded and a hush fell upon the chamber. Queen Brunhild, tall and regal, entered with her grandsons, followed by Flavius, Bishop of Cabillonum whose Cathedral lay within the walls of the city.

Count Warnachar stood to one side, a step below the podium

where the Queen sat with her two young princes. Brunhild wore a jewel-encrusted gold crown, her slim waist belted with a gold chain ending with the image of an eagle, ready to seize its prey. Dazzled as I was by this spectacle, the most striking aspect I beheld was the Queen's gaze.

I shuddered. Nothing I had seen or felt since we arrived at the gate offered any reassurance; my feeling of darkness only grew stronger. Brunhild was the oldest daughter of the King of the Visigoths, her hair the colour of copper like all her family. Her sharp green eyes, heavy-lidded beneath arched eyebrows, were alert, taking in everything at a glance. She sat upright and imperious, her face serene, leaving us in no doubts that she was accustomed to unquestioning obedience.

What could she possibly be afraid of? A grandmother of more than fifty years of age, her looks were still striking. I found it hard to imagine how the person seated on the throne before us could have endured the harsh life that the Abbot of San Marcellus had described for us the day before.

Queen Brunhild's grandson Theudebert, now coming of age at thirteen years, would soon leave for Metz to take up his Crown with a significant escort from Austrasia accompanying him. He wore his hair long in the exclusive manner of Merovingian royalty. The prince was a tall and willowy youth, his face expressionless, a gold crown on his head, a dark mauve cloak held by a gold clasp thrown over his shoulders, and beneath that his perfectly tailored tunic with wide sleeves trimmed with gold. A jewelled sword hung from his gem-studded belt, his hose was white silk and he wore black shoes that had never, ever stepped into the grimy, muddy streets of Cabillonum.

His nine-year-old brother Theuderic, nicknamed Thierry, was little more than a child beside him, his red hair a little shorter than his older sibling, and wearing a grey tunic with gold trimming, and a dagger at his belt.

The Bishop of Cabillonum said prayers, the Queen welcomed everyone and the audience began.

The Mayor of the Palace, to our far left, remained standing throughout, leaning on his jewelled staff, looking around sharp-eyed at the eager assembly gathered before the podium. Encouragingly, we were the first called for an audience with the Queen. Count Warnachar motioned us forward, and we approached the bottom step. Augustinus and Laurentius, Petrus, John, Ruffian, Cadmon, Tola, Candidus and I stood close together.

Our moment to make an impression on the Queen had finally come.

Bowing to the Queen, the Count said in a booming voice, “Bishop Augustinus and his companions from Rome, your majesty!”

Queen Brunhild smiled, extending her jewelled hand to Augustinus. He took her proffered hand gently in his, bowing respectfully over it. The Queen sat back and snapped her fingers; a chair was placed for our Bishop on the broad, raised platform below the steps.

The conversation that followed was remarkable, conducted as though the Queen and Augustinus were the only two people in the entire chamber, their voices audible to the surrounding assembly, yet intimate and seemingly confidential.

“Welcome to my humble Kingdom, Bishop Augustinus! I trust your journey so far has not been too arduous?”

“No, your Highness, but thank you for your concern. A journey of a thousand miles is not without its moments!”

Brunhild laughed knowingly.

Augustinus continued, “May I present to you a gift from His Holiness Pope Gregorius the Bishop of Rome, for your devotions?” He reached out to give a small wooden box to the Queen.

Count Warnachar was visibly disturbed lest it contained a

weapon or poison perhaps; but the Queen's Lady-in-Waiting opened the lid and extracted a small book, bound with a beautifully tooled leather cover. Brunhild, both pleased and intrigued, slid back the gold catch to reveal a breviary, containing all the liturgical texts needed for daily prayers. The vellum pages were ornamented with Merovingian favourites—creatures perfectly painted, leopards, herons, geese, a lion, a dragon, goats, a deer, foxes, and wolves—all submissive before an icon of Virgin and Child.

Augustinus received the breviary from Abbot Stephanus when we were at Lerinus, and the Pope later supplied the box, so we could truthfully say this was a gift from Rome.

"How exquisite!" Queen Brunhild cried, carefully opening the first dozen or so pages before returning the box to her handmaiden.

"And I gather from the letters you so kindly presented from His Holiness that your goal is to bring the Gospel to the Cantwara people where, by the grace of God, my niece Bertha presides as their Queen?"

"That is so, your majesty."

"Then be assured, as I shall also assure His Holiness, that our Kingdoms of Burgundy and Austrasia shall wholeheartedly join with you in this venture!"

I glanced at the Count and saw the smallest flicker of disquiet across his face, but it was enough to confirm the advantage that such a commitment would mean for the Queen's future.

"The Count will furnish whatever it is that you need," she promised, looking meaningfully at Warnachar, who pursed his lips and briefly bowed.

The Queen looked beyond Augustinus to the remainder of our party. "But you do not travel alone, I see! Who are your companions on this journey?"

The Count gestured for us to step forward. Augustinus rose to

his feet and bowed.

“May I introduce to you Candidus, Your Highness, a Presbyter from Rome, who comes as the Rector of the Papal Lands in Provincia.”

Candidus, dressed in a black cassock, took a short step forward and bowed, a smile appearing on his square-jawed face beneath his thick, tonsured hair.

Queen Brunhild responded, “We welcome your work among us, Presbyter, and do inform me should there be any way that we might assist you in your endeavours.”

Laurentius stepped forward as Augustinus announced, “This, your majesty, is Presbyter Laurentius, recently Prior of His Holiness’s community at the Lateran Palace; and now Prior of our mission.”

Queen Brunhild smiled and nodded, but did not extend her hand.

“And these are Brother Petrus, Brother John and Brother Rufinian, all from the Pope’s monastery in Rome.”

Augustinus now turned to the last members of our party: Tola, Cadmon and me, announcing, “And three young people, who were seized by pirates from the Kingdom of Cantia, taken as slaves to Rome, and who are now returning home with us on our mission.”

The Queen looked pleased, particularly as her eyes had fallen on Cadmon, dressed in his full imperial cavalry uniform, burnished helmet under his arm, his long, thick flaxen hair falling loose to his shoulders.

Augustinus motioned for Cadmon to step forward.

“Cadmon is the finest cavalry officer in Rome, and his protection of our small expedition has been nothing less than exemplary!”

Queen Brunhild leaned forward slightly, fully attentive. Her



unwavering gaze fixed firmly on Cadmon, and in the pit of my stomach, I once again felt darkness deepening.

“What a fine soldier you are, young man! It would be a pleasure to have you in our guard here in Cabillonum!” She leaned further forward, her flashing green eyes holding Cadmon with a penetrating gaze. Her words slowly spoken, and she seemed to weave a spell over our unsuspecting protector, her voice compelling, spellbinding.

“Surely that is what you want too, to remain here with us, to protect us, to serve us and keep us safe in this troubled world.” Cadmon’s eyes became fixed and unblinking; his body and mind froze.

I caught the look of concern on Augustinus’ face; but how could he intervene before such a powerful Queen? Even Count Warnachar looked alarmed. I now tasted something of Queen Brunhild’s power as the source of darkness, sweeping fear and confusion over the land.

We were all helpless, caught in this moment. She was a Catholic Queen, but her religion seemed less of the Catholic faith and more a personal superstition. Brunhild had no limits, censure or control. She took whatever she desired; and in that moment, her desire was for Cadmon.

The awful moment was shattered suddenly as Tola gave a cry and fainted on the floor. Cadmon snapped out of his trance. The Queen calmly commanded her maidens to take Tola to one of the Palace rooms where she could rest a while and recover.

“Poor child,” sighed Queen Brunhild, “the journey does take such a toll on the young, does it not? I think our business is done, Bishop Augustinus. It has been such a pleasure meeting you. My Count will take care of your needs for your onward journey, which we wholeheartedly support in every way for the sake of the true Kingdom, and for which we all long!”

Count Warnachar led us swiftly from the Audience Chamber to a small reception room nearby, and set about clarifying our needs for the onward journey.

Cadmon sat all the while with his head in his hands, his mind still confused.

“Pull yourself together, boy!” Laurentius snapped. “Fainting is no way for a soldier to behave! You’ve disgraced us all in front of Her Majesty.”

“Leave him, Laurentius,” Augustinus intervened, glancing towards the Count. “There is more to this than meets the eye.”

There was a knock at the door and one of the Queen’s ladies appeared, followed by a sorry-looking Tola. She was shaken and pale, somehow managing a brave smile as she saw us. I put my arm around her and sat her down.

The Count looked relieved. “I see this young woman is recovering. For now, I must return to the Chamber. Return tomorrow, and you shall have what you need. Good day to you all.”

He rose, turning on his heel, and slipped from the room.

“What happened, Tola?” I asked. “Are you alright?”

Tola nodded. “I saw what was happening to Cadmon, and I was so afraid I must have fainted. When I awoke, the woman looking after me told me to rest while she went out to bring me a tumbler of water. No sooner had she gone than I heard a cry. I got up and looked up and down the corridor. A woman was shuffling along the passage towards me. She reached out and begged me to help her, saying her name was Failende, mother of the two young princes. She said Queen Brunhild has kept her away from her sons ever since their father, King Childebert, had died. Then the maid returned with the tumbler and took this woman back to her room. The maid told me not to pay any attention to a mad woman who thought she was the Queen, then she brought me back here to you.”

We listened aghast as Tola's story unfolded. She was shaking as she finished, and cried out, "This is a terrible place. Please take me away from here!"

\*

Later, at the monastery, we gathered to review the events of the morning. I waited anxiously to hear from Cadmon's lips what had happened to him in the Audience Chamber.

Cadmon struggled to find the words. "It was strange! No sooner had the tone of the Queen's voiced changed and seemed to come from beneath the throne itself, like smoke, or mist, until I could see nothing except this swirling darkness!"

The dragon's breath, I thought to myself, reaching back to the folk tales of my childhood. Cadmon had been scorched, but mercifully not consumed by her fire. He went on, "I felt that I was on the edge of a precipice, about to float away, heaven knows where. Then Tola, you cried out, and suddenly the darkness vanished! I believe that was the source of darkness we have felt since we landed at Canas—and it emanates from the Queen!"

"It seemed like witchcraft to me!" Tola declared. "How else could she do this?"

"We need to proceed with even greater caution than we had anticipated," Augustinus declared. "Who knows what else she has up her sleeve?"

"But she has agreed to give us all the support we need, and that's no small thing," Laurentius said defensively on the Queen's behalf.

Augustinus nodded. "We are grateful for the support that our Pope was able to secure for us by his letter to the Queen, but that only

makes me more cautious and more uncomfortable. Still, we can't look this gift-horse in the mouth. We press on, but we do so with a great deal of caution."

\*

The following day Augustinus, Laurentius, Cadmon and I returned to the Palace to conclude our business with the Count. Warnachar finished saying, "Her Majesty also requests that you take some clergy from Turones to accompany you, as they speak a dialect of Saxon. Is that acceptable to you?"

We weren't expecting that. Turones was a long way off our path, but Augustinus responded, "That is most generous of Her Majesty. We shall endeavour to do as she has requested."

Warnachar said, "If I may suggest Bishop, as Turones is on the River Liger, that you proceed to the estuary and find a suitable vessel there to take you to the Kingdom of Cantia?"

"That is a splendid idea, Count! Most helpful."

We thanked Warnachar for his support, and left the Palace.

As we prepared to return to the Abbey Augustinus suggested, "We should pay our respects to Bishop Flavius. The Cathedral is not far from here I believe."

We rode a short distance through narrow and crowded streets to the Cathedral, dedicated to San Vincentius. Market day was in progress on the square, and we worked our way through the crowd to this attractive basilica. Leaving our horses with a footman and a coin pressed into the man's hand, we entered a great arched doorway.

Bishop Flavius was standing beside the altar after Mass, in earnest conversation with a man standing with his back towards us. He said, "Flavius, I will show you my calculations again since you

seem so slow to understand! We must end this farce in the Church! All of us, Bishops included, must adopt the true date of Easter, as we do in Hibernia!”

This stranger’s hair was long and unkempt, and I took him to be a vagabond looking for food or money, but it was unusual to hear a peasant arguing with a bishop over the date of Easter. The speaker held a wooden staff in his hand, arguing loudly as he waved his thin arms about. He turned around as we approached and I saw he was a monk, his hair cut away from his domed forehead from ear to ear, giving a somewhat frightening appearance. His thin, craggy face wore an expression of distaste, and his large bony hands suggested a man accustomed to hard manual labour. A large dog lying at his feet stood up warily, giving a deep, menacing growl as we approached. Only then did I discern that this was not a dog, but a wolf.

I stopped in my tracks. Laurentius put a cautioning hand on Augustinus’s elbow and Cadmon drew his sword halfway from its sheath. The monk looked down, hissing a word of command. The fearsome animal fell silent and lay down at his master’s feet again.

Bishop Flavius looked relieved to see us, but the monk demanded in a loud voice, “Who are you? Declare yourselves!”

Instead, Augustinus returned a charming smile and looking at Flavius he said, “Bishop, do introduce us; we shall be pleased to make this man’s acquaintance!”

“This is Abbot Columbanus, who oversees three monasteries in the mountains to the east, at the former Roman camp of Luxovium.”

I had heard tell that Columbanus first arrived in Francia some eleven years earlier, bringing a dozen monks from Hibernia and settling in the Kingdom of Burgundia during King Guntram’s reign. It was said that the growth of his monasteries had been remarkable.

Bishop Flavius continued with the introductions.

“This is Bishop Augustinus, who has come from Rome, and is on his way with his companions to bring the Good News to the Kingdom of Cantia.”

Columbanus grunted. “There may be more holiness amongst their pagans than there is in Rome!”

Augustinus swiftly replied, “There is vice everywhere, Abbot, and we struggle against it with all our strength. But do not impugn us for taking on a task that none of the Frankish Bishops has responded to, even though they, like your Hibernian Bishops, are much closer than we are, coming as we do from Rome!”

Columbanus snorted in displeasure, but it was true that the Hibernians had refused to have anything to do with us Saxons. He held his peace and did not pursue the matter any further.

Augustinus asked, “What brings you all this way from the mountains, Abbot?”

Columbanus seemed to soften a little, replying in a quieter tone.

“The day after tomorrow, a large party from Austrasia arrives to escort the young King Theudebert to Metz. I shall accompany him as his spiritual mentor for the journey. The Mayor of the Palace at Metz, Count Waldalenus, is leading the escort.”

Waldalenus was a Patrician of Burgundy with extensive and powerful family connections along the Alpine Salt Road. Bishop Flavius added his own admiration.

“He was a generous patron in the founding of Columbanus’s Abbey at Luxovium, and there he also dedicated his third son to the Church.”

Columbanus said airily, “Both these Kings have sought my counsel these last few years, and Brunhild’s grandson, young Thierry, is coming to me in the spring to seek God in silence in the mountain caves—away from his grandmother and this ghastly

place!” He threw up his hands in disgust, glancing in the direction of the Palace.

Columbanus suddenly turned his gaze back to Augustinus.

“You have had an audience with the Queen!” He asked this as a question but spoke it as an accusation.

“Indeed! We had an audience with her yesterday.”

“Be careful of that woman! She is consumed by her lust as much as she is by her power!” He looked at each of us with penetrating eyes, until his gaze fixed on Cadmon. “Especially young men such as yourself! Beware!”

Augustinus broke the awkward moment.

“Wise words, Abbot! One cannot be too careful. Danger of this nature lurks everywhere.”

Columbanus abruptly terminated the conversation saying, “But now, it is almost noon, and I am summoned to meet with Count Warnachar! However, Bishop, I shall pray for you before we part!”

He gestured for Augustinus to kneel before him on the flagstone floor. Taken by surprise, he nevertheless knelt down, and Columbanus, laying his hands on Augustinus’s head, began to pray. His prayer was as powerful as his voice, and Augustinus found himself sinking down until his forehead touched the flagstones, a groan escaping from his lips. He remained prone on the floor for a while after Columbanus had ceased praying, and then rose unsteadily to his feet.

“I thank you,” Augustinus said to Abbot Columbanus, and the two men embraced briefly. The Hibernian monk gave a low whistle, and strode towards the great west door and into the light of the marketplace, his large grey mountain wolf trotting obediently behind.

Bishop Flavius grasped Augustinus by the sleeve, and drew us aside to a quiet place in the Cathedral where we would not be overheard.

He whispered, “News has come to me that, last night, a woman fell into the river from one of the Palace windows. It seems she broke her neck in the fall, and drowned. Her body was found floating near the bridge by a boatman. It is also rumoured that she had rope marks on her wrists and ankles. The boatman has since denied saying this but it seems he disappeared soon afterwards and has not been seen since.”

“Who was she?” Augustinus asked, but I felt I already knew the answer.

“My brothers, I regret to say that the twilight existence of poor Queen Failende has finally come to an end. But this information is being withheld from her children until the young King arrives in Metz, so not a word!”

We nodded. Bishop Flavius continued, “Queen Brunhild insists that I arrange for a private funeral, to avoid any fuss or scandal, you understand.”

We understood all too well, and stood silent for some moments, stunned by this unexpected turn of events.

In a quiet voice, Augustinus said, “We won’t mention this to Tola just yet. I feel these events are too raw for her, and I do not want her to blame herself in any way for this unfortunate event. I believe she would be deeply distraught. Are we agreed?”

\*

We returned to the Abbey of San Marcellus and made preparations for our departure on the morrow.

“I can’t wait to leave here!” Tola exclaimed, with some of her fire returning. “But I do wish we didn’t have to go back through that horrible town again!”

However there was only one road north to our next destination,



Augustodonum, and that meant riding through Cabillonum itself. Later, as we all crossed the bridge with our carts, mules and horses, we found Count Warnachar already waiting for us at the gate.

“Here are the letters of introduction from the Queen for your journey, and I have a box of gold and silver coins that you might need to purchase supplies—or bribes if need be—along your way.”

Augustinus said he hoped that would not be necessary and thanked the Count for all the work he had done on our behalf.

Count Warnachar asked, “Have you finally decided on the route you will take?”

“Our immediate destination is Augustodonum,” Augustinus confirmed. “We shall decide what is best from there to reach Turones.”

He paused, “There are twenty people in your party for Cantia? Her Majesty wishes that you include another twenty men as priests and translators to go with you to the Kingdom of the Cantwara.”

Augustinus said, “That’s wonderful news, and very generous of the Queen!”

“Her Majesty is delighted to give you all the assistance you need,” the Count bowed, and added helpfully, “As I have mentioned, the best place to recruit more men is in Turones, at the shrine of San Martinus. I’m sure you will find an abundance of young men there who would be more than willing to travel with you. Your route from Augustodonum is to Nevirnum on the River Liger, where you can hire boats to take you to Turones. You should be able to find a vessel that will take you to Cantia as I have suggested, if the weather favours you, because winter will soon be upon us.”

The sound of voices arose from the direction of the river.

Warnachar said, “The King’s escort has arrived! You had best leave immediately, or the crowd will be too great for you to reach the North Gate!”

“What a splendid fellow,” Laurentius exclaimed as we rattled on. “Very polite and helpful. One can always tell a well-born man of virtue.”

I shook my head, thinking, I know nothing about Count Warnachar, a consummate Mayor of the Palace, and completely opaque.

As we walked with our cart and mule, I whispered to Petrus, our Tutor and Librarian, “It is said, never judge a book by its cover.”

Petrus nodded, making a downward gesture with his thumb.

We pressed on through the town with our eight carts and mules in the direction of open country, shaking the dust off our feet.



## XVII

AUGUSTODONUM  
AUTUN*November, AD 596*

THE NORTH GATE out of Cabillonum was still open.

Cadmon led the way, his eyes narrowing as he saw the horsemen assigned for our protection. Their appearance was scruffy, their assorted armour unconvincing, and their bearing in the saddle ill-disciplined, scarcely able to lead a parade through the town, I thought, let alone offer protection on the open road.

Their captain was the biggest disappointment. He wore a soft, wide-brimmed hat, a long peacock feather sprouting on the left side.

With barely disguised contempt, he said to Cadmon, "I'll take it from here, boy. We won't be needing your protection on this journey."

Cadmon did not reply but slowly turned Belisarius around in a full circle, pointing to each of the riders in turn. "This man, where is his mail? And this one—where is your lance? And you—no helmet! No one carries a shield! And no one has either bow or arrow! And as for you, your nag will drop dead before we reach the next a town!"

Cadmon drew up close alongside the Captain of this troop, leaning forward until their faces were only inches apart.

“Captain,” he hissed, “this is an insult to our Bishop who is on a mission endorsed and fully supported by the Queen. Know this. If brigands ambush us on our journey, it is me, not you, who will be the last man standing.”

Augustinus intervened, cheerfully greeting the Captain before he could give Cadmon a reply.

“Good morning, Captain! We thank you for taking us on to the next leg of our journey! Ready when you are!”

\*

The sun had begun to set, a chill breeze crept in, and the golden evening light sparkled on the last of the autumn leaves. Ahead, and above us, rose the city of Augustodonum, ‘Autun’ to the locals; solid and proud, like their defensive city walls. An attractive town, Autun was unmistakably a former Roman city and boasted a large theatre overlooking a reservoir, large enough to stage a mock sea-battle. A large monument to the long-departed Roman god Janus stood forlorn in a field outside the walls. San Nazarius Cathedral stood on a north-south axis rising high on the crown of a hill, dominating the city.

We entered through the nearest of the city gates and arrived at the Episcopal Palace near the Cathedral. As the carts rattled into the Palace Courtyard, Bishop Syagrius bustled out to meet us. No longer a young man, as his limping gait and somewhat rotund figure with thinning silver hair revealed, Syagrius was nevertheless all smiles as he extended his hand in a warm greeting.

“I have held this office for the last thirty-six years,” he explained in his Reception Room where we had gathered around a welcoming fire; “and I had the honour of accompanying King Guntram to Parisius for the baptism of the infant Chlothar, who is soon to be the future King of Neustria, I hear.”

Later that evening Augustinus spoke discretely to Syagrius.

“It is the Pope’s intention to grant you the pallium, once he receives news that we have safely arrived in Cantia!” Syagrius was stunned by Pope Gregorius’s promise of such a gift, which he received with as much regard as if it were the Holy Grail.

“How can I thank His Holiness for such a gift?” he wept, embracing his brother Bishop.

Augustinus added, “However, the Pope not only grants you the pallium. His Holiness will also decree that future bishops of Autun will have precedence in Francia over all other bishops—except for the Archdiocese of Lyon.”

Much later, Augustinus asked that our party stay two nights in Autun, but Syagrius cried, “No, stay longer! You have only just arrived!” But Augustinus was adamant. “It is now late in the year, my dear brother; we will be fortunate even to reach Turones before Epiphany, let alone land on the shores of Cantia!”

Augustinus lodged the night in the Palace while Cadmon slept in the stables with the horses. “Can’t be too careful,” he cautioned.

Laurentius and Candidus passed the night at the Abbey of San Symphorianus—where Archbishop Virgilius of Arelate had also served as Abbot, some years earlier.

Rufinian, Martinus and John lodged the night in the Abbey.

Tola, Theodore and I, along with our lay brothers, slept not far from the Cathedral in a substantial hospice, founded decades earlier in much happier days by King Sigebert and his Queen Brunhild.

\*

In the morning, we gathered in the Bishop’s Palace.

“Are we refreshed?” Augustinus asked, looking much brighter

after a night on a feather bed in the Palace. “What about you, Tola?”

“It wasn’t what I had expected for a hospice,” she said, pulling a face. “I found sleep difficult, doors opening and closing all through the night, whispers coming from a man’s voice somewhere down the passage, some coarse laughter, a scream—not a restful night! And that was in the women’s quarters! I am left wondering whether someone is using that place as a brothel.”

“I spoke with the Prioress last night,” I said, “hoping for a brief audience with the Abbess, but she has been away for some time apparently, and the Prioress seemed to run the hospice as she wished.”

“And your night, Laurentius?” Augustinus asked.

“The night went well enough,” our Prior said somewhat grudgingly. “However, when I asked to meet the Abbot, I had a similar response to Alric’s request. The Guest Master informed me that the Abbot was away at his lodge in the forest, hunting for venison—for his monks, would you believe—before winter sets in. I gathered from our conversation that the Abbot is seldom in residence.”

Augustinus was far from pleased with our reports. “The Prioress at the shrine of San Maria Magdalene appears has spoken the truth. Last night I asked our host how Archbishop Virgilius’s successor was appointed here, as Abbot in Autun. It came as no surprise that the person behind it was King Childebert! Clearly, some of the abbeys seem to be under the oversight of Abbots who have paid for their very comfortable living under his regency. Can it get any worse?”

“It can!” Cadmon said. “Last night I slept in the stables. During the early hours, Belisarius became restless and I awoke to see a figure at the open door. I worked my way round in the dark and overpowered him, holding my knife to his throat. I could guess who

he was before he revealed his face—by that ridiculous feather in his hat! The captain of our so-called escort squealed like a pig, and in truth, I was ready to carve out his bacon. He tried to argue that he had merely come to see the horses were safe for the night, but there is no doubt that mischief was afoot. As a gesture of good faith, I let him go, after removing the feather from his cap. I said I would return it to him when we went our separate ways.”

“Good work, Cadmon!” Augustinus said. “The plot thickens, and Bishop Syagrius seems to have no idea what is happening beneath his nose. There may well be a plot here associated with us, but it is not clear what—or why. Or for what purpose!”

\*

True to his word, Augustinus raised these issues that evening following Night Prayer. Bishop Syagrius listened intently as Augustinus spoke of the various comings and goings the previous night. When he finished, our host put his head in his hands.

“My brother, I thank you for sharing this with me. Your comments are well made. Since King Guntram’s passing—a true saint—many things have changed in a short space of time. Much of my attention is occupied with the wider affairs of the Church, and I do not interfere in the life of the monasteries because a Bishop has no jurisdiction over them. So in that sense, I am as guilty as the Abbot and Abbess you mentioned!”

“I do not wish to cause you distress, my dear brother...” Augustinus began, but Syagrius pressed on. “You have my pledge that I will raise these matters when the Abbot and Abbess return. And as for my brother Bishops—it is now widely known that those who can buy their office will do so, for the pickings available to those who wish to live in this way are rich indeed! For some of the Franks, the Church has become a business! In King Guntram’s time, that was never the



case, and no one could purchase a bishopric—or even the gift of the pallium. And on my oath, nor have I!”

\*

Augustinus asked for volunteers to sleep the coming night in the stables and barn in the event of another visit occurring. We all came, weapons and implements by our sides with Numerius the blacksmith lying close by the stable door, his huge hammer beside him; but on this night there were no intruders.

We left at daybreak, and for two days passed through a changing landscape of open hilly country and coniferous forests as the road dropped steadily towards the River Liger. Our party lodged overnight at hamlets on the way until at last, we arrived at the town of Nevirnum.

Augustinus thanked the captain and his horsemen for the excellent manner in which they had looked after us. Cadmon rode alongside the Captain, removed a feather from his bag, and stuck it into the man’s hat. Their cavalcade departed without a word while we continued down to the river, seeking a barge to take us to Turones.

# XVIII

## THE RIVER LIGER LOIRE

*December, AD 597*

HIGH UP IN the soaring cliffs of the Central Massif, the River Liger begins in spring as a mere trickle of melting snow and ice. At this late stage in winter the river is shallow and sluggish, struggling to reach the open waters of the distant ocean. We pushed away from the quay at Nevirnum, the flow of the river just sufficient to carry us slowly down-stream.

“There are no cataracts on this river,” the barge owner, skipper and guide said as he steered with a long paddle. His son trimmed the tall sail and the boat slowly picked up momentum. So began another journey, following the long leftward arc of the river to the city of Turones many, many miles further downstream.

The skipper steered with a sure hand, easing his boat away from ubiquitous sandbanks lurking in shallow waters. His calculations for reaching King Guntram’s former royal city of Aureliana were not in terms of distance but of days.

“About thirty days,” the skipper responded to Augustinus. “But much depends on the weather. The more it rains, the faster we travel.”

And the wetter we’ll be, I thought, as we drifted towards the

distant sea. My companions from Rome were exposed to the elements, floating in an open boat through the midst of an unsheltered land.

\*

Cadmon rode along the riverbank while most of us walked with the mules and horses. On board, our shoemaker Vivius worked tirelessly mending our footwear that now closely resembled the marching boots of Roman infantry. Vivius had also scoured the garment-makers in Autun for thick, hooded winter cloaks to keep us warm and dry against the night's cold, while we slept night by night alongside the river. It felt good to leave behind the trials of our overland journey, and we found time for other occupations.

"Come, Theodore!" I said, "It's time we caught some more fish!"

We spent much of the day casting from the barge, throwing our catch of river lamprey and smelt into baskets. Occasionally the sun broke through a leaden sky, casting a yellow-gold streak over sandbars and the bare arms of naked trees.

\*

As we settled around the fire on the south bank one evening, Cadmon threw a few sticks on the blaze and said in a calm voice that was devoid of any drama, "I think we are being followed."

There was a shocked silence.

"Are you sure?" Augustinus asked.

Cadmon gave a nod towards the far bank of the river.

"Sometimes I catch a glimpse, a movement among the trees—like

the rump of a horse passing through a thicket, perhaps. Then it's gone. It's more than an intuition or even my imagination. There's something out there."

"How long have you noticed this?" Augustinus pressed him.

"Perhaps the last couple of days. The pines give them some cover, but even the bare trees are so dense along the riverbank that the view is almost impenetrable. Once, I saw a thin column of smoke rising further back among the trees."

"Some foresters, surely; or poachers perhaps." Laurentius scoffed.

Cadmon shook his head. "There is so little traffic on the river, why would they bother to hide? No, I don't think it's poachers—or locals."

After further discussion, we agreed that Cadmon and Brother John should take a closer look come morning.

Our two scouts caught up with us the next afternoon as the sun began to dip towards the horizon. The skipper found a landing place for the night, the fire was lit, and we gathered around the roaring blaze. Tola snuggled close to me as I put an arm around her shoulder, giving her a reassuring squeeze.

"What news, Cadmon?" Augustinus asked.

"As I suspected, Bishop. We eventually found their campsite from last night. About half a dozen horses, I'd say."

"Perhaps the Captain and his merry men stayed on in the end, following our route for extra protection?"

"No, they were clowns, not professionals. With these men, there's hardly any trace left of their camp, the fire scattered, no coins or the like, and the area swept clean to hide any boot or hoof marks. Would brigands or poachers take these precautions? No, I would say they are highly skilled, and it's troubling."

"But why?" Laurentius queried. "What possible interest could

we be to them?”

“I have no idea.” Cadmon’s brow furrowed. “They could have broken into our camp and slaughtered all of us in our sleep last night—with ease. For whatever reason, I think they are merely following our movements, but that could change. From tonight, I suggest we all sleep in the barge and anchor beside one of the sandbanks in the middle of the river, and place a watch, changing every few hours or so. Whoever they are, we don’t want to be taken by surprise. With the skill they have shown so far, my guess is that they are more than outlaws—possibly even assassins. But on what mission, sent by whom, and for what purpose I cannot say. We might find more light to throw on this when we reach Aureliana.”

\*

Augustinus pulled the heavy bell-rope and banged on the great wooden door set in a high, stone gate, the entrance to the city of Aureliana. A window in the guardroom above flew open, the gatekeeper peering down at us through the gloom and the drizzle.

“We have come from Queen Brunhild, with a letter for the Steward of the Palace!” Augustinus boomed.

The bearded face disappeared, and in a few moments, a hatch opened in the door. “Where’s the letter?” he demanded in a surly tone.

Augustinus pushed it through the hatch. “Kindly deliver it at once! We are freezing out here in the rain!”

Another half-hour passed before we heard a bolt thrown back and a small door set in the gate was flung open. An unfamiliar face beamed, “Greetings, Bishop Augustinus! What a pleasure to see you! Please, come in, come in!”

The Steward of the Palace was a man of stout build, beady eyes

beneath dark bushy eyebrows, a curled moustache clinging to his upper lip, and a short, pointed beard on his chin. Not unlike Count Warnachar, I thought. Except that his tunic was not fully buttoned, and I guessed he had not expected any visitors.

One half of the great South Gate was pulled open and we entered with our mules and horses while the skipper and his son remained on the barge with the carts for the night. We followed the Steward down a narrow street, parallel to the high wall of the castrum, and soon came to the former Royal Palace, once King Guntram's residence in the days before he took all his Court to Cabillonum.

The Steward explained apologetically, "We have only a small staff here, as the Palace is now little more than a hunting lodge at this time of the year, as you see . . ." his voice trailed away as he gestured at the empty hall. "Come, settle into your quarters, and supper will be brought into the hall shortly. You can leave your horses and mules in the courtyard stables."

Later that the evening, our conversation turned to our recent experience of horsemen dogging our steps on this last part of our journey. The Steward was dismissive. "Probably poachers, or perhaps brigands. Give them no thought. Now that you've arrived here safely, they will move on, looking for fresh pickings, I'm sure!"

Augustinus said nothing, but he seemed far from convinced.

The Steward asked, "What are your plans after you reach Turones? Will you attempt a route down to the sea, and find a way to Cantia from there?"

"That would be our preference, certainly. But we shall see how the weather goes. Failing that, we'll return and take the longer route through Austrasia, then aim for the coast at the shortest crossing to Cantia."

The Steward nodded, and announced, "Now, you are all looking very tired! Your rooms await you!"

\*

Early the following day we returned to the barge. The skipper reported a disquieting event after we had entered the city the previous night.

”Soon after you entered the city, six horsemen arrived at the gate. We could hear them speaking quietly to the Gatekeeper, and he let them in immediately. They did not know I was still on the boat with my son, but one of them did notice the barge and started to come over for a closer look. At that moment the Gatekeeper opened the door, and this fellow turned back to join his companions, and they all rode into the castrum.”

Augustinus thanked him for this information.

“What do we make of that?” Augustinus asked.

Cadmon said, “Well, it seems clear to me they are more than mere bandits or poachers.”

I suggested, “Perhaps they were sent by Queen Brunhild for added protection?”

Laurentius nodded. “Yes, Her majesty probably didn’t want to make a fuss; she just asked them to keep an eye on us for our safety.”

I doubted Laurentius’s conclusion, but I had no clear or convincing evidence. We journeyed on downriver towards Turones, that feeling of unease staying with all of us until after a few days, Cadmon said, “We’ll stay alert, but I think they’ve stopped following us.”

# XIX

## TURONES TOURS

*January, AD 597*

TWO DAYS BEFORE the Feast of Epiphany we finally came to Turones. The River Liger had remained placid as we continued steadily downstream, the wintry sun rising on our weary backs and slowly melting away the night's frost.

The sound of horses' hoofs was muffled on the damp pathway alongside the river, as Cadmon and Brother John saddled their horses and galloped towards the city. In his pouch, John carried a letter for Bishop Pelagius, announcing our arrival within the hour.

A bridge soon became visible in the distance, and to our right, ancient anchorite caves dotted a high, chalk cliff-face.

"Look!" Tola pointed excitedly. "There's San Martinus's Maior Monasterium!" She was clearly delighted to be back, close to the city where she had begun her service to Queen Bertha's mother, the late Dowager Queen Ingoberga. A towering brick-and-stone wall came into view, enclosing the ancient castrum that once protected the Roman city of Caesarodunum.

"That's where Queen Ingoberga lived!" Tola called out, looking up at the towers on the left bank.

"You had a wonderful view, for a lady's maid!" I said. Tola dug an elbow into my ribs. "I was on the ground floor, Alric! At the bottom of this corner tower."



Augustinus stepped onto the riverbank and set off at a good pace to the Cathedral of San Mauricius. Laurentius hurried along beside him, the remainder of us pulling our heavy carts into the grounds of the old fort that enclosed the Cathedral.

Bishop Pelagius alerted to our arrival, stood on the steps in conversation with Brother John, Cadmon, Augustinus and Laurentius as the rest of us arrived. After initial greetings, we were conducted to the Refectory. Deacon Agilulf arrived to meet us, and I recognised him at once from the time he spent with us at San Andreas, nearly seven years earlier. I did not expect he would remember me, a young boy scarcely ten years old at the time. Nor had there been an opportunity for a conversation with him then, and a connection between Agilulf, Tola and me was never made. How greatly I regretted that now, before consigning the thought to my imaginary 'if only' bucket.

Augustinus drew a letter from his pouch and reached across to the Bishop. Pelagius opened the parchment carefully and spread it out on the table to read, then looked up at Augustinus.

“His Holiness has indicated that you will fully acquaint me with the business you have in hand. Please, my brother, tell us what that matter in hand is, and perhaps I may be able to support you more fully.”

Laurentius and Candidus followed their conversation attentively.

Augustinus began, “His Holiness has sent me to lead a mission on his behalf to the Kingdom of Cantia. To this end, he appointed me as Abbot of our little community that has no permanent home. But also, Virgilius, Archbishop of Arelate, consecrated me as Bishop on our journey here a few months ago, at the request of Pope Gregorius. We also met with Queen Brunhild at Cabillonum several weeks ago; she very generously offered us the support we need to reach Cantia, the Kingdom of the Saxon Cantwara people. The Queen strongly advised that we turn to you, Bishop, for

interpreters from Turones who might accompany us and play a vital part in this mission. As you have noticed, we come with a party of twenty people—half a dozen monks,” his hand gestured in our direction at the table—“and lay brothers, all from the Pope’s monastery in Rome. Queen Brunhild requests that a similar number of priests and lay brothers from Turones accompany us to Cantia.”

“But are the Bishops of Neustria not closer to The Kingdom of Cantia than our city of Turones?” our host queried.

“Indeed they are, but the Neustrian Bishops did not respond to the request from Queen Bertha for the mission she had wanted for her people. That is why you, Deacon,” he turned to Agilulf, “took Queen Bertha’s letter to Rome, and gave it to His Holiness at the time of his consecration.”

“That is apparently so, “ Agilulf nodded, “and we are deeply blessed that you have now come to fulfill Queen Bertha’s earnest request. As you say, there is no appetite amongst the Neustrian bishops for a mission such as you envisage. In truth, we wondered many times whether anyone would ever answer the call.”

Bishop Pelagius exclaimed, “A risky venture such as this into a remote territory beyond the protection of Roman legions, and at a time when Rome herself appears to have lost so much territory to invading tribes, seems to be an extraordinary act of courage—and faith.”

Pelagius paused. “I also observe that you bring monks and lay brothers with you, but not priests?”

Augustinus nodded. “We do bring one priest, Laurentius; but their absence is one of the Pope’s greatest disappointments, because many of our Roman clergy are in no fit state to bring any good news to the heathen. Some cannot even read the Gospel, let alone proclaim it. Therefore the charge to preach now falls to our monks, or else the Good News we bring to the Saxons will not be preached at all.”

Bishop Pelagius nodded agreement, and Augustinus continued.

“There is a genuine desire to renew and strengthen bonds with the Frankish Church, coming after a long period of neglect. The Pope desires to take the Gospel to the ends of the earth—and if possible, to hasten the coming of the Kingdom in what must surely be the Last Days—which His Holiness firmly believes will soon be upon us.”

The End must come, I knew, but not before the quest I had discussed so fervently with Brother Petrus while we were in Vienne, had come to fruition.

Bishop Pelagius thumped the table in a gesture of support, saying to his Deacon, “Agilulf! I put this in your hands to find suitable and willing recruits for this venture, and Bishop Augustinus shall assess the suitability of each one!”

As Agilulf rose at once to his feet I thought, wouldn’t it be excellent to have Agilulf with us.

“I shall start at once,” Agilulf said as he left the refectory. Only then did I notice his injured leg, as he limped out with the aid of a stick.

Pelagius asked, “How long do we have for this, Augustinus?”

“To have any chance of arriving in Cantia in time to celebrate Christ’s Resurrection, we must aim to depart in four weeks, after the celebration of Candlemas—if the weather allows!”

“Four weeks!” Pelagius threw up his hands. Laurentius shook his head. Augustinus merely smiled. “Well, His Holiness gave us only two weeks to select companions for this mission; I think four weeks should be sufficient.”

\*

“It seems you have a choice,” I said to Tola. “You can either

billet in the Convent of San Augustinus here in Turones, or in the old fort where you once served as handmaid to Queen Ingoberga.”

Deacon Agilulf nodded, “The fort is only used for occasional guests now, so you may be the only one there. But if you wish, you can have Queen’ Ingoberga’s chambers with a good view of the river.”

Tola squealed with delight as we hurried over to the fort. We climbed the winding stairs and hastened down panelled corridors, lined with large wall hangings to insulate the building from the cold. Agilulf struggled on behind, while Tola inspected the rooms and nodded approval.

She turned to Agilulf as he entered the chambers.

“You don’t remember me do you, Deacon?”

He screwed up his face in concentration, looking at Tola in her postulant’s habit. She threw back her head covering, her dark hair tumbling around her shoulders. Agilulf’s face broke into a smile.

“Yes. You were younger then, a child; now you are a woman!”

“And you took me to the convent at Massilia after Queen Ingoberga died,” Tola said.

“And then I continued on my way, to make a pilgrimage to Rome,” Agilulf added as the memory returned.

I took up the story. “Then, Agilulf, you stayed with us at San Andreas monastery, during the time that Abba Gregorius was enthroned, remember? But you and I had no opportunity to speak, and anyway I was too young to approach a dignitary such as you. I noticed you over meals, but I had no opportunity to ask if you had ever seen my sister.”

“Yes, most of my days were spent with priests at the Lateran, or I went outside the city wall as a pilgrim. But unfortunately, no one I spoke to asked me about your sister, Alric.”

Tola turned to me, “But had you known where I was, Alric,

would you have come to Massilia to find me?”

It pained me to shake my head in what felt like an act of betrayal. I said, “Rome was in a terrible state, I did not have the means to set off and bring you back with me. But at the least, I would have known you were still alive. That’s what haunted me, not knowing. Many times I have imagined what Ma and Pa must have felt like, not knowing where we were, dead or alive. Still, had I found out where you were, that would have been a starting point. And now, you’ve returned to this place once more, to all your happy memories!”

“Not all of them were happy, Alric,” Tola said a little sadly.

She turned to Deacon Agilulf.

“What became of Queen Ingoberga’s step-daughter—Bertelfede? Is she still in the convent here?” Tola’s expression reminded me that Bertelfede was still one of her worst memories.

“No,” Agilulf said emphatically. “Soon after you left, several of the nuns were relocated to the Convent at Pictavium. Bertelfede joined her half-sister Clothilde there—she is also a nun. I believe they are both still there.”

Tola gave a sigh of relief.

“If it would help,” I said, looking to Tola and Agilulf in turn, “would you feel safer if I stayed in your old chamber downstairs while you are up here?”

Tola grinned. “Only if I can ring the bell-rope when I need anything!”

\*

The following morning Bishop Pelagius led a group from our companions to the Shrine of San Martinus. The long avenue of trees was bare yet also striking in the sharp light of winter sunshine.

Pelagius explained as we walked.

“Turones has many natural advantages to commend it, but all of them are surpassed by the relics of San Martinus. In the two hundred years since his death, Turones has become the religious metropolis of Gaul, because here San Martinus devoted himself to the task of bringing the Catholic Faith to pagans living in the surrounding countryside. He converted the hearts and minds of a desperate people, and his influence continues here, even long after his death.”

The centre of Martinus’s cult was his shrine, set in a magnificent basilica and built a century earlier, outside the walls of this ancient Roman city. Ahead of us, the Basilica’s towers and apse sparkled in a cream-coloured stone. We entered, slowly making our way towards the stone altar. The Basilica of San Martinus was already crowded with pilgrims, come to seek a blessing or healing. Behind the dais lay the mortal remains of San Martinus, preserved in a raised sarcophagus. To our left, a long line of pilgrims shuffled slowly forward to reach the shrine.

Bishop Pelagius whispered, “In times of deep-rooted superstition and social disorder, this shrine means a great deal to our people. They come here to find inner peace—but there are others, of course, who come hoping to win influence and wealth.”

We came close enough to read the words inscribed on San Martinus’s tomb:

*“Here lies Martinus, the Bishop of holy memory, whose soul is in the hand of God, but he is fully here, present and made plain in miracles of every kind.”*

Pelagius said quietly, “San Martinus’s shrine is the chief focus of pilgrimage in all of Francia. His shrine draws the crippled, the sick and anyone possessed by demons from a great distance around Turones. This Basilica is a sanctuary to which many flee, seeking protection. I do not exaggerate when I say that San Martinus’s

monasteries all over the land are the true places of power in the Frankish Church.”

As we looked on, I saw pilgrims bringing their gifts to the shrine and tokens of their illness shaped from wood, metal or wax. Some of these pilgrims were returning to give thanks for healing, or release from evil powers. In return, they brought money, gold, oil and even gems as expressions of gratitude.

Pelagius continued, “During San Martinus’s lifetime he received a gift, the power of healing. When he died, in a village halfway between Turones and Pictavium, the inhabitants of these cities were all prepared to fight for his body, but the people of Turones managed to seize his remains by stealth. They were brought here to Turones, and now here he lies, the greatest prize of any city.”

Later, as we left the basilica, Augustinus asked, “What does all this mean for the people who come here? Is their faith strengthened?”

Pelagius replied, “Cures carried out on their own may do little to strengthen their faith in Christ. Still, news of these cures passes by word of mouth and brings even greater numbers to this shrine, making it the chief place of healing of all the shrines of Gaul.”

As we made our way back to the Cathedral, Pelagius added, “The truth is, everyone looks upon disease as having a supernatural cause. The sick come to this shrine believing they have a better chance of a cure if they call for the prayers of a priest, rather than the medications of a physician. Our deceased Bishop Gregorius of Turones told the story of one man who was suddenly covered from head to foot with angry pimples. He rubbed himself with oil consecrated at San Martinus’s shrine, and the welts that covered his body quickly disappeared.”

“But what were that man’s thoughts?” Augustinus queried.

The Bishop replied, “His thoughts were that if his ailment had been driven away by Martinus the saint, then his welts must have

been sent by Beelzebub the devil in the first place. To him, his illness was entirely supernatural, and the saint's mystical power is what drives out the false supernatural power that had caused him all his misery. So, very many people come to the shrine to be healed through a priest's prayers, rather than going to a physician."

Tola asked the Bishop her own burning question. "Are herbal medicines and remedies ever used here for healing?"

He shook his head. "Seldom, my child. Unlike Rome, the profession of medicine has almost completely disappeared in Francia."

With that response from Pelagius, Tola felt certain of her calling.

Pelagius and Augustinus robed for the Mass of the Epiphany in the cathedral vestry, and Theodore and I served as acolytes.

Pelagius pointed to an ancient, three-legged wooden milking stool, mysteriously chained to the wall.

"That was San Martinus's stool."

"He milked the goats and cows?" Augustinus asked.

Pelagius chuckled. "Perhaps! It's what he would have done. Whenever he went out and spoke with pagans in the country, he took this stool with him instead of a throne, so that he could talk eye to eye, not standing over them like a landlord. But apart from this stool, I have something else to show you. I'll show you this afternoon."

\*

The winter weather had not improved by the time we stepped into the boat, but all the same several of our companions joined us on the journey of a mile or so upstream, to Maior Monasterium, the great monastery founded by San Martinus. A cave in the cliff that first served as his monastic cell was still preserved, but that was not what the Bishop was about to reveal.



Bishop Pelagius introduced us to the Abbot who led us to the chapel vestry. It was a surprisingly spacious room, with several closets for hanging the monks' vestments lining the walls.

"You have heard the story of San Martinus at the gates of Ambianum, cutting his military cloak in half, and giving it to a poor beggar freezing to death one night?"

We nodded, enthralled, and stood in a half-circle, intensely following every move. The Abbot inserted a large key into one of the closet doors and carefully brought out the top half of a threadbare, red cloak, cut across the garment, its metal clasp still attached.

Cadmon stared with intense interest.

"Yes," he acknowledged, "this is certainly a piece from a military paludamentum, the cloak worn by a cavalry officer. And it still has its clasp for fastening at the shoulder. Remarkable!"

The Abbot nodded in response and held up the cloth while he explained its significance.

"There are many stories concerning this cloak, as you can imagine, but this is the half that San Martinus kept for himself. Not so, Cadmon?"

Cadmon agreed. "Martinus as a cavalryman would have needed the clasp to hold his cloak together as he rode into the city. But the beggar only needed the bottom half of the cloak to keep himself warm."

"Thank you for your explanation, Officer! But what happened to the other half?"

We shook our heads.

The Abbot continued, "It is said that the other half of this cloak found its way into the hands of King Clovis, and he passed it down to his successors. They had their relic carried into battle, attached to a wooden cross, to give them victory. But where that half is now, I

cannot say, as the Kingdom of the Franks was divided into four parts nearly forty years ago.”

On our return journey to Turones, a conversation ensued concerning the contrast between the half-cloak carried before the Kings into battle on the one hand, and the humble milking stool on the other—both highly significant relics of San Martinus, but with very different implications.

Pelagius asked, “Augustinus, if you could choose, which symbol would you take to the pagan Kingdom of Cantia—the half-cloak, or the milking stool?”

Augustinus was puzzled.

Bishop Pelagius continued, “In other words, would you rely on the authority and power of the King, compelling his subjects by the power of the sword to bend their knee before Christ? Or would you choose the painstaking business of going out into the countryside, to the peasants, hovel-by-hovel, speaking personally to them with the humility of Christ, giving without the expectation of reward? Whichever you decide, before you arrive in Cantia you will need to choose the symbol that will define both you and your mission!”

\*

The days passed all too swiftly. In between interviews with twenty new recruits for our mission, and discussions with Bishop Pelagius, Augustinus spent time in the library reading the volumes of *The Ecclesiastical History of the Franks*, and another seven books on *Miracles*, written by recently deceased Bishop Gregorius of Turones.

I sat in the adjoining Scriptorium, writing up the chronicle of our journey. This was timely, as I had used nearly all of my wax tablets and needed to prepare fresh ones. I called on Tola’s help

with this enterprise.

“You know how to prepare wax tablets?”

“Of course!” she snapped scornfully. “And I can read and write too!”

“Good! That will bring the total number of literate Saxons in our Kingdom to three! Now, let’s start with these.”

A short while later the door of the Scriptorium opened and Wulfrun, Deacon Agilulf’s nephew, entered the room. Wulfrun had gladly taken on the challenge of finding suitable recruits for Augustinus. He knocked on the door of the library.

“Bishop, my apologies for disturbing you, but I have three more recruits for your mission who eagerly wish to speak with you! Are you able to see them now? Two of them accompanied Queen Bertha from here to Cantia to build her a Chapel. They seem very keen to return!”

\*

Augustinus intended that we leave Turones and continue downriver to the coast, reasoning that “The weather shows signs of closing in, and we must secure a ship at once for the sea route to Cantia. If we try now, we should arrive before Easter!”

Bishop Pelagius was unconvinced, and more snow began to fall in this harsh winter. Pelagius sought out some pilgrims who had managed the journey up-river from the town of Anger, several miles downstream from Turones, and reported what he had learned to Augustinus.

“I have received reliable information, Augustinus, that the weather is not propitious for a sea journey, and no skipper would be willing to take you on the high seas for many more weeks to come. Why not celebrate Candlemas with us tomorrow, and afterwards you have our blessing as you return upstream - by way of Aureliana.”

## XX

AURELIANA CIVITAS  
ORLEANS*February, AD 597*

WE DEPARTED from Turones after the Celebration of the Presentation of Christ in the Temple, on the second day of February. Now transported on two barges, our combined mission of forty people headed upstream into the swollen and fast-flowing river that made our upstream progress more difficult.

The Steward of the Palace at Aureliana seemed surprised to see us. Augustinus explained that “attempting to travel by sea under present conditions has proved impossible, and I am anxious to arrive in Cantia to celebrate the Resurrection of Christ.”

“What are your plans then, Bishop? How will you proceed from here?”

“That, Steward, is what we must now discuss. Do you perhaps have a room where we can gather to consider this matter more fully?”

Augustinus called together Laurentius, Petrus, Cadmon, Tola, Wulfrun and me, as the chronicler of our journey, to decide on the most suitable path to Quentovicus, reputed to be the closest port to the coast of Cantia. We gathered in the flickering glow of a roaring fire in a carved, stone fireplace. Flakes of snow drifted against the windows. Images of Merovingian Kings with their dogs and deer

running in the chase stared down from huge tapestries, resentful of our intrusion.

The Steward said in a tone of regret, "This was once King Guntram's favourite parlour, before he moved his court to Cabillonum. In recent years King Childebert and his young princes often came here, using it as a hunting lodge in the forest; but regretfully, even that is passing away now the King is dead. And the young King Theudebert has departed with his court to Metz, as you know. But also, our dowager Queen finds no pleasure in a long journey to reach here, so this palace remains unused."

The Steward turned to leave. "Please pull the bell-rope if you need any assistance!" he said, closing the door discreetly behind him.

Augustinus leaned forward in his chair, gazing into the fire.

Wulfrun asked, "What alternatives do you have in mind, Bishop?"

Augustinus sat up and said, "Firstly, we could take the most direct route to the north, but that would not be without its dangers. We would be entering Neustrian territory, where we would need to negotiate with Queen Fredegund and her young son Chlothar. I have no letters for either mother or son—I don't think that His Holiness considered we might pass through the Kingdom of Neustria. However, as Queen Bertha is a Frankish princess, born in Parisius when her father was King, we might find them sympathetic towards us."

We continued exploring fresh alternatives, and variations of alternatives, finding the strengths and weaknesses in each.

"In simple terms," Laurentius summarised crisply, "If we aim to arrive by Easter, we will need to take the fastest route and shortest distance, which is through the Kingdom of Neustria. If we choose instead to arrive, say, by Pentecost, we could take the longer journey through Austrasia."

The alternatives seemed to offer an impossible choice. There were no good options on the table. Then Wulfrun spoke again.

“We believe, do we not, that God is on our side, and desires us to fulfil this mission?”

We all nodded.

“So, why do we run away in fear? Have we not sat in prayer before San Martinus’s shrine? Have we not seen his torn cloak that kept a beggar alive, even in the harshness of winter, like this one? And have we not seen miracles performed before our eyes? In the name of our Saint, let us throw ourselves upon the Almighty without fear! Therefore, I propose we follow a course that takes us by way of monasteries dedicated to San Martinus—for there we shall always receive a warm welcome, and their prayers will be for us like a cloak in battle, protecting us like beggars at the gate, and bringing us to fulfil our sacred mission!”

A long pause followed Wulfrun’s passionate oratory.

Augustinus eventually broke the silence. Something had changed.

“Wulfrun, you shame us with your zeal. I am content to proceed as you have challenged us.”

“Where is the next monastery of San Martinus from here?” I asked, my stylus poised over the wax tablet.

Wulfrun smiled.

“Bishop, the next monastery of San Martinus, is in Parisius!”

\*

Before we turned in for the night, Augustinus informed the Steward of the decision we had reached.

“It seems there are only two roads from here that will take us to

Parisius. The one goes directly north across an open, wind-driven plain with bitter wind and snow and very little shelter on the open road. The other begins just beyond these walls towards the east and then north, into the Lignum Aureliana, the King's forest. Is that correct?"

The Steward nodded but said nothing.

Augustinus continued, "Wulfrun suggests it is perhaps slightly longer, but the canopy of the forest offers more protection from the elements."

The Steward wore an expression of disappointment that we had chosen to cross into Neustrian territory. "If you must pass through Neustria, then I would advise the second path," the steward said, and it seemed to all of us the better way.

The next morning, as we stood on the quay with fresh mules and horses, and our carts were disembarked and ready to depart, Augustinus took the Steward aside.

"When we left you a month ago on our way downriver to Turones, our skipper mentioned something that was disturbing."

The Steward raised his eyebrows in what I assumed was a look of surprise.

Augustinus said, "Both the skipper and his son stayed with the boat that night."

"Yes?"

"Shortly after we had passed through the gate, six horsemen arrived and also gained admittance. Do you know anything about them?"

The Steward shrugged. "Perhaps they were foresters, returning after nightfall?"

Augustinus shook his head.

"No Matter. Thank you for your assistance and hospitality!"

Augustinus thanked the skippers of the two boats for their assistance and paid for their services. He asked the one, “Did you notice any riders arrive after we entered the gate last night? Perhaps half a dozen men, dressed in black?”

The skipper nodded. “Yes, as you say. They also left again early this morning—the first people out of the gate.”

“Did you notice which way they went, perhaps?”

“Yes,” he said, pointing down the towpath towards the east.

“They took the road following the river—into the forest.”

\*

One of the barges returned to Turones, the other continued upstream, carrying Presbyter Candidus on his long journey back to Provincia and the Papal Patrimony. We waved a sad farewell, and Augustinus took the road leading into the forest.

There was no turning back.

“Let us not fret over the unknown road that lies ahead,” he said. “Put your hand in the Lord’s hand; it will be the better way.”

A single, mournful bell tolled within the city walls, sounding a knell of impending doom.





## XXI

LIGNUM AURELIANA  
THE FOREST OF  
ORLEANS*February, AD 597*

SNOW HAUNTED OUR steps from the moment we left the shelter of Aureliana, and within the hour our view of low hills to the north gave way to swathes of dense scrub. The winter woods were dramatic, but beauty does not keep a person warm. My feet soon froze, despite woollen socks and leggings, sapping the heat from my body as we pulled our carts from snowdrifts, my damp clothes sticking to my skin.

Our horizon shrank as taller and taller trees came to the fore and we penetrated further into the forest. Giant trees seemed to lean-in closer, listening to the soft thump-thump sound of our feet on the snow. We pressed on over snow-filled tracks to the sound of creaking carts and the crunch of feet and hoofs in the snow, our boots squelching in patches of muddy ground.

Time and again, we dug and cleared the path, the snow heavy on spade and pitchfork. The noise of creaking carts and snorting mules combined with our puffing and groaning at every step of the way. Occasionally we heard the distant cries of birds and saw sparrows, blackbirds and wood pigeons, swooping down to snatch morsels from the ground.

And still it snowed.

“Is this the best path, Bishop?” Laurentius challenged.

Augustinus’s reply was unusually pointed.

“In this neck of these woods, there are no safe paths, Laurentius, only wilderness. Return if you wish. But saying farewell as our path darkens is also to choose the way of the coward.”

Cadmon, Brother John and Wulfrun rode ahead to find the most suitable way. Many paths led off from ours, but we did not find any tracks of the six riders who had slipped out of the city before us. On our first night out from Aureliana, Augustinus called some of us together after we had made camp.

Gathered around a roaring fire, he asked, “What do you think, Cadmon? Are those riders still a danger to us? We haven’t seen any sign of horses all day.”

“That depends on their intention, Bishop, and we do not know what that is. They may have taken a path into the woods to our left or our right, leaving no tracks in this snowfall. In any case, we can certainly expect an ambush sooner or later.”

“Who are these dark riders who go to such lengths not to be seen?” Augustinus asked.

We listened closely as Cadmon went through the possibilities.

“One, they may be no more than the Steward has said they are, merely foresters. Two, someone has sent them to keep an eye on us, for reasons unknown. It could perhaps be a local magnate who is curious about our intentions. Three, they may simply be a group of bandits who want to rob us. Or lastly, they could be a squad of assassins, waiting for an opportunity to ambush us, for reasons unclear. Take your pick. But I feel sure of one thing; the Steward of the Palace was lying. He must have learned who those riders were by asking the Gatekeeper. Perhaps we even spent a night under the same roof in the Palace. But if they were intended for our

protection, surely the Steward would have told us, and we would all be travelling together.”

I shuddered at the thought that we could have died in our beds.

“Whatever the reason,” Cadmon concluded, “ we have no option but to take every precaution we can. They may believe that we are unaware of the scrutiny they are giving us—remember, they left Aurelia very early this morning. If so, we may have a small advantage—the advantage of surprise. Our best course is to prepare and remain alert. Perhaps not tonight, or even tomorrow; but by our third night, I think we may receive an unwanted visit in the early hours of the morning.”

“Why so, Cadmon?” Laurentius demanded, throwing a branch onto the fire.

Augustinus sighed. “Because, by our third night, we should be about mid-way—sufficiently far from Aureliana, and sufficiently close to leaving the forest. Even if they do not overcome all of us, no survivor on foot could make it back to the city in three days without food, warmth, and an intimate knowledge of the woods. But once we are in open country again, an ambush becomes infinitely more difficult to mount. They would want to avoid that.”

We agreed to place the carts in a circle with the mules in the centre, as we had done many times before. As we turned in for the night, the unmistakable sound of a wolf some distance away carried into our camp. We froze, listening hard for a second howl, but it didn’t come.

“To the north of us,” Cadmon said. “They’re not all that close. But they’ve done us a service tonight. I would wager that the riders are camped less than a mile away. Get some sleep. They won’t come tonight. And this time, we’ll be ready.”

\*

On the third night, we lit a blazing fire at each end of the pathway, leading to a large clearing where we camped. I fell asleep with little difficulty, utterly exhausted after our exertions of the last three days.

Before the gloom of first light lifted, a twig snapped somewhere outside our tent. I sat up, glancing at Tola sleeping beside me, wrapped against the cold in a thick sheepskin. Cadmon had not returned from his early morning vigil. I crawled over to the entrance and paused, dreading to discover what lay beyond. Taking my courage in my hands, I carefully opened the tent-flap. There was nothing to be seen except our eight tents, sagging under the weight of snow and encircling the carts and mules. Two tarpaulins were tied together stretching over the mules to keep ice and flakes of snow at bay during the night.

Then another snap came. I pulled my hood firmly down, creeping out on my hands and knees through a gap in the tent-flap. The moment we had anticipated since leaving Aureliana had finally come.

I looked to my left and right. Our four-man night watch had risen to their feet. Augustinus was standing in the doorway of his tent, silently observant, leaning on his wooden crook. Then a black-cloaked figure emerged silently from the dark trees and the gloom, sword in hand, followed by another, and another, until six armed men encircled the camp, cutting-off any hope of escape down the woodland path.

Cadmon's judgment had been correct. They had come to kill us.

Augustinus broke the eerie silence. In a loud commanding voice, he called out, "In the name of San Martinus, declare what you seek!"

The leader of the group came forward a few paces into the

clearing. He said in a calm voice, “Throw down your weapons. We seek only spoils. Then we shall be on our way.”

Augustinus replied, “I believe that it is you who should throw down your weapons and go on your way. We are here on God’s business.”

“Then, may your God protect you,” he called back.

Tola, disturbed by the sound of loud voices, crawled out, saw the black-cloaked figures encircling the camp, and screamed. The leader of this gang took two paces forward towards her, raising his sword. An arrow shot into the back of the assassin’s leather lamellar armour. He fell to his knees, sword dropping from his hand.

Augustinus raised his crook as a second figure took a step towards Tola, now on her feet. He too received an arrow, and as Tola screamed again, he crashed hard against the trunk of an elm tree, falling dazed to the ground with sword falling on to the snow. Augustinus stepped swiftly forward, swinging his crook to point at each of the remaining four assassins, now utterly confused, trembling in fear, and rooted to the spot.

Thirty-five of our men emerged from the forest holding their makeshift weapons, encircling the black-coated assassins. Cadmon rode Belisarius into the camp, dismounted and pulled his arrow out of the ringleader’s armour.

It was then I realised Cadmon had alerted everyone in our camp, except Tola and me. I had snored away unawares, and as this dawned on me I could have wept at his deep concern for us.

Augustinus now struck a conciliatory note.

“Come, come, throw down your weapons, and let us give you some refreshment for your journey back to Aurelia!”

He turned to our companions. “My brothers! Bring some food and drink for our guests! Let us not be churlish in our hospitality, even to those who would seem to do us harm,” but none of them

wished to eat.

A few minutes later, with their hands tied and their horses commandeered from the woods around us, and their two injured companions on their feet, Augustinus sat down and began his interrogation.

“Who has sent you? Where have you come from?” They made no reply.

Cadmon signalled he wanted to interrogate their captain, his face pale with pain and loss of blood from the arrow pulled out of the man’s back.

“It would be a pity to waste this on you” he said calmly, and pushed the bloodstained arrowhead against the man’s throat. “You have heard what the Bishop has asked you! The truth, now! Only lies hurt. Answer the question!”

The leader of these assassins was not easily persuaded.

After more pressure on the arrowhead, Cadmon asked again, “Who sent you?”

Finally, the captain whispered an answer from between clenched teeth.

“Warnachar,” he croaked.

\*

We swiftly packed our tents into the carts without delay in this wretched place. We left the six assassins tied around the trunk of a large oak tree, stripped of their weapons, their horses now travelling with us.

“I’m sure Count Warnachar will find the account of your failure interesting,” Cadmon said. “By the time you have wriggled yourselves free, we’ll be long gone. Shouldn’t take you more than

an hour!”

We continued as fast as the snow permitted along the track towards distant Parisius, aiming to leave the forest behind us well before nightfall.

An hour later, as we pushed forward on the track we had followed since striking camp, the quiet of the forest was disturbed once again. The distant howl of a wolf barely reached us. Then another. Cadmon cocked his head and looked back over his shoulder, a mirthless smile appearing briefly on his face, before turning once more to patrolling the path.

\*

Over a meal that night, Augustinus held a post-mortem of the events that had unfolded before sunrise.

“Well, what are your thoughts in the light of today’s events?”

Laurentius offered a rare expression of praise. “We owe you a great debt for your forethought and your timely actions today, Cadmon!”

“I still believe we should have silenced them,” Cadmon reflected. “But if they have survived, they are of no use to Warnachar; they are a risk to him if news of this gets back to Queen Brunhild. We would have done them a service to let them perish in the snow.”

Wulfrun nodded agreement, but Augustinus said, “We are in a better place without blood on our hands. We must remain blameless in this, as we ought to be.”

Cadmon disagreed, shaking his head, but said nothing. In his own experience, a good adversary was a dead one.

Augustinus asked, “The Captain of their sorry band uttered



Warnachar's name. But how, and why, is the Count implicated?"

Wulfrun queried, "Are we suggesting that Warnachar might want to act on his own account, unbeknown to Queen Brunhild? But why?"

"There may be another reason!" Tola broke in. We all looked at her in surprise, but Augustinus urged her to speak.

"What if the Dowager Queen Brunhild herself was behind this? What if she had instructed Count Warnachar to ambush and destroy us—had we chosen to take this route through Neustria?"

"But why?" we all chorused, puzzled by her line of reasoning.

"The Queen is surrounded by a court full of men, with few allies to support her. I would guess that she demotes, replaces, and humiliates whomsoever she pleases in her desperate effort to retain control."

A few of us nodded.

"So, she seizes upon the Pope's letter to her as the key to save her reputation, and her standing amongst her Mayor, her Court and her nobles. She extends to us her support and encouragement. She has given her name to our mission by the letters she has written on our behalf, and given us money from her treasury to reach Cantia for this purpose."

"Yes, but that still does not tell us—".

Tola shot back, "May I finish, please? Yes, the Queen supports us, but she is also expecting us to take the sea route home once we left Turones; and this we failed to do. Except for this cruel winter, of course, we might not have come near the Kingdom of Neustria. But instead, we have no choice but to continue directly through Neustria, making who knows what compromises and promises in the process! In the Queen's eyes, she would see this as double-dealing. Worse still, it's treason! We promised one thing, and now she finds we are doing another—turning to her sworn enemy in the

Kingdom of Neustria for support by allowing us safe passage.”

“So, you are suggesting that, through Warnachar, the Queen placed these six assassins on our tails, ready to act if we changed course and entered Neustria?”

“Well, yes! Brunhild would feel betrayed, like a fool, made weak in the eyes of her Court, and also her grandsons. Our deaths by ambush would also be a tragedy for Queen Bertha and the Pope, and not least for our families; but not for Queen Brunhild. Either way, she comes out on top.”

We sat deep in thought, exploring the alternatives laid out before us.

Augustinus shook his head.

“For the moment, we cannot know what their true motives are. But now,” he said, rising stiffly to his feet, “it is time for Night Prayer. We have much to give thanks for—particularly today’s miracle!”



## XXII

PARISIUS CIVITAS  
CITY OF PARIS*February, AD 597*

FOR FOUR DAYS Frankish cavalry and foot soldiers had slowed our journey, compelling us to stop at the side of the road for troops to overtake us. At last the Neustrian capital of Parisius came into view, its city walls looming large as we approached the South Gate.

The bitterly cold road we had taken from Aureliana to Parisius was an extension of the ancient Via Agrippa. For the last ten miles, an aqueduct away to our right ran parallel to the road, stopping just short of this ancient Roman castrum. Its archway was in ruins, no longer supplying water to the ancient Roman public baths in the town.

Once through the city gate the Via Agrippa becomes the Cardo, a street running through the heart of the city from the South Gate to the River Sequana. Bell-towers of two churches were just visible above the rooftops on this crowded south bank.

Like Rome, many buildings were crudely patched with cheap masonry, and their roofs covered with thatch rather than terracotta tiles of old imperial days. Similar to Rome, the population was said to be about thirty thousand souls; and also like Rome, several large sections of the original town were completely deserted.

Augustinus led us through the southern gateway into the city. A

beggar at the gate cried out, "In the name of God, help me, Father! I have nothing in my begging bag, and these soldiers have only war, not compassion, in their hearts!"

Wearing his monk's habit, there was nothing to mark out Augustinus as a Bishop, except for a wooden cross around his neck. Attending to the beggar whose skin was disfigured by a dreadful disease, Augustinus knelt beside him in the dust of the street.

"What is it you want, my son?"

"Whatever blessing you can give me, Father! You see my condition!"

Augustinus drew the beggar to him. He touched the wretched leper's cheek, and I shuddered at the sight. Augustinus laid his hands on the man's head and blessed him, then fetched a small coin from his bag pressed it into the beggar's hand.

Tola, standing behind Augustinus, took a small pot of herbs from her bag and handed it to the beggar. "Let him take this too."

Augustinus nodded and taking the pot pressed it into the man's hand. Tola said, "Boil these herbs for a short while in water, mix them with some clay, and spread it on each infected part of your body. Leave it until dawn tomorrow, then wash it off."

With sobs of gratitude ringing in our ears, we continued down the *Cardo* to an island in the midst of the river.

We had resolved where possible to find abbeys and priories on our route that bore the name of San Martinus of Turones. Parisius was no exception. The Sancta Genovefa Abbey and its Basilica lay close by the river to our right, outside the wall of the small island. Another basilica, the monastery of Sanctæ Crucis e Vincentii, also stood on the south bank near to the island, but Wulfrun shook his head.

"Neither of these, Bishop; we must cross the river."

A single wooden bridge carried soldiers and travellers across to the *Insula ex Urbe*, the Island City, where an imposing wall

surrounded this small island. We approached the sturdy bridge from the south bank. The *Cardo*, lined with new buildings, continued across the Island and the older Roman style was beginning to give way to half-timber and stone structures, more to the Germanic taste of the Franks.

I said to Tola, "Charibert's Queen, Ingoberga, gave birth to Princess Bertha here in this city. Perhaps this was where a different future for our Kingdom of Cantia began, and we have come to respond to her call."

A large synagogue caught my eye as we crossed the island. This place of worship, as I learned later, was the centre of a thriving Jewish community that financed much of the trade in the city, including the ageing Queen Fredegund's military adventures. I thought of Jacob and wondered how he was faring. Had he managed to travel this far?

The ancient Roman Wall south of the river continued on the north bank. We came to a second bridge, leading off the island, and crossed over, passing through the North Gate into open countryside. Much of the land beyond this wall was divided into small allotments. Cottages dotted here and there stood scattered across a barren landscape, and in the distance, a windmill stood on a hill.

Our goal was north of the Sequana River in a sparsely populated and low-lying marshland, where the road took us to our destination for the night to *Prioratus San Martini in Agro*, the Priory of San Martinus in the Field.

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Passing through a gateway leading off the street, we found ourselves standing before the façade of a spacious new chapel, joined to a monastic cloister. Prior Ingomer rushed out to greet us, dispensing blessings left and right to our party as we drew up at the chapel door. Ingomer was an impressive figure, tall and broad-

shouldered, his dark hair somewhat wild but also tonsured, his face stubbled and his large hands those of a man who worked hard on the soil.

“Welcome, my brothers.” he cried. “And sister,” noticing Tola, speaking rapidly and in a strong but not overbearing manner.

Ingomer recognised most of our party from Turones.

“It seems a long time since I left you all to come here and establish this monastery! But by the grace of God,” he enthused, “I am permitted to see your faces once again.”

Augustinus apologised for not having a letter of introduction from His Holiness the Pope. “But we had not expected to journey through Neustria on our way to the Kingdom of Cantia.”

The Prior grinned broadly and clasped Augustinus’s shoulders. “I need no letter, Bishop! That you have brought all these brothers with you from Turones is all the introduction I need.”

Ingomer showed us around the chapel, the cloister and the monastery grounds. The Priory of San Martinus had an atmosphere of welcome and peace. Beyond the priory wall, several acres of reclaimed farmland were worked by the monastery, covered with groves of fruit trees and crops, and grazing for sheep and goats. Thatched huts of farm labourers dotted the large compound.

Prior Ingomer explained how this monastery came to be formed. “Twelve years ago, after King Charibertus died, I came here from Turones with a dozen brothers from San Martinus’s Priory to seize this golden opportunity and establish a new monastery here in Parisius. There is more, but I shall tell you later!”

As we returned to the Refectory Ingomer asked, “What is your aim, Bishop, for such a large expedition as this? It is almost the size of a small army!”

Augustinus briefly explained the background of our Pope’s mission to the Saxons and described our meeting with Brunhild.

Finally, we explained why we had chosen to pass through Neustria. Augustinus came straight to the point.

“What I am hoping for in Parisius is an audience with Queen Fredegund. How might we go about securing this with her?”

Ingomer shook his head. “The Queen no longer gives audiences, Bishop! She is in Abbaye Sanctæ Crucis e Vincentii on the south bank, desperately ill on her deathbed where she is attended to by the nuns.”

I groaned, noticing the anxious look on Tola and Cadmon’s faces. At a stroke, all our plans seemed swept aside.

“What of her son? Is an audience possible with him?”

“That too won’t be easy—the army will soon acknowledge Prince Chlothar as King Chlothar II! This takes place tomorrow, at the annual Marchfields gathering with his Neustrian soldiers. They all come together in a large field on that date once a year, close to the Abbey of San Denys. Your best hope will be to seek him there.”

\*

After supper in the Refectory, we pushed two tables and benches together; with only one night at our disposal, it was imperative to learn all we could about the Queen and her son in this short space of time.

Tumblers and jugs of water were placed on the table, the light of tall candles flickered on our faces, casting dark shadows on the wall directly behind Ingomer. Augustinus sat opposite the Prior, Laurentius on one side, Cadmon, Tola, Wulfrun and me on the other. It felt as though we were conspirators, brewing a highly perilous plot.

Tola, sitting next to me, was exhausted after our day’s exertions. I touched her arm and mouthed, “Do you want to stay?” She



nodded. Then, with Wulfrun and some of our Turones clergy seated next to him, Prior Ingomer began.

“Establishing a Priory in Parisius was very important for us, you understand, because over the years monasteries all over Francia have fallen under the corrupt influence of Merovingian Kings and Queens.”

We nodded, having heard this from the Abbess who tended the Shrine of Maria Magdalena.

“Parisius was the only city in all Francia where we could establish ourselves, free from the interference of these Merovingian rulers—until last year. When Chlothar turned twelve years of age, the Prince and his mother Queen Fredegund suddenly seized this city, flouting all agreements to keep Parisius a free and neutral city. Parisius, with no army to defend it, gave no resistance.

“Also, all four brother-kings had died by then—Charibertus, Sigebert, Chilperic, Guntram—all of them! And King Childebert, Sigebert’s son, has also passed away, leaving two dowager queens to share a mortal and mutual hatred of each other; and three young and immature princes to rule over the whole of Francia!”

Ingomer threw up his hands in dismay. “So, who was there to stop Fredegund and her son from taking Parisius? No one! Mother and son installed themselves on the Island of Parisius—in King Charibertus’s former palace, of course—and for the first time in twelve years, the city was taxed to pay for someone else’s army of occupation!”

“And what befell Fredegund’s husband, King Chilperic?”

“Ah, Chilperic. By some strange coincidence, he was assassinated around the time that Queen Fredegund was found to be with child. It was rumoured that Chilperic’s eye had begun to wander over fresh pastures in a way that might usurp the Queen’s position. Fredegund came from a low-ranking family with no noble blood in her. She is both ruthless and extremely cunning, and many

regarded her as the chief suspect in her own husband's assassination. She had been implicated in several assassinations before this, by the way, starting with Chilperic's first wife, Galswinth, who happened to be Queen Brunhild's younger sister! Am I going too fast, Bishop?"

Augustinus buried his head in his hands as Ingomer's account unfolded. "No, no, it's the barbarity that stuns me. Please continue."

"After this, she was also accused of the assassination of Queen Brunhild's husband, King Sigebert of Austrasia-Fredegund certainly knew how to protect herself."

"This has a familiar ring," Augustinus said bleakly. "But surely, King Chilperic would have been pleased that his Queen was about to bear their child as his heir?"

"Ah, but there is more to this story! There was much talk about the reason for Chilperic's assassination in the stables at his palace in Noviodunum, when he returned home one night after a hunting trip. It was rumoured that the child in Fredegund's womb was not Chilperic's. She too, it seems, was also exploring fresh pastures."

"Does this tale get any worse?" Augustinus groaned.

But Ingomer pressed on.

"After the child's birth, King Childebert and his uncle King Guntram took counsel together with some of the Bishops to decide whether or not to accept this child as Chilperic's legitimate heir. The child that was born to Fredegund was a male heir, and that tilted sentiment in her favour, so that the legitimacy of Chlothar's birth ceased to be contested. The child was recognised as King Chilperic's rightful successor, and Fredegund survived as Queen."

Augustinus asked, "Was there a chief suspect for the identity of Chlothar's real father? At whom did the finger point?"

Ingomer reflected for a moment, stroking his beard before

continuing. “This is where it becomes both interesting—and dangerous for you to know this! Suspicion fell on Fredegund’s Adviser, Landric, a Frankish nobleman but not a royal, who also happens to be Mayor of the Palace of Neustria. Yes, Landric is Chlothar’s father! But the young prince is ignorant of this. And yet tomorrow, when young Chlothar is lifted up on a shield and presented to his troops, they will think they are acknowledging him as King, but they will be mistaken. When they raise him up on his shield at Marchfields tomorrow, they will not be making him King, because Chlothar is illegitimate—there is not a drop of royal blood in him!”

Tumblers were filled with water and passed around, the shadows dancing on the walls. Ingomer took a deep draught and asked what the impetus was behind the launch of our mission.

Augustinus explained, “The mission was requested by Queen Bertha and King Ethelbert. We are here at the Pope’s behest to answer their call. Is there perhaps anything you can tell us about Bertha that may be useful in our dealings in Cantia?”

Ingomer nodded. “Of course, I once knew her. Her father was King Charibert, as I’ve said; and Ethelbert’s father was King Eormenic, who arranged the marriage between the Ethelbert and the Princess when she was still young. It is said that she is a devout Catholic. When Bertha was old enough to marry, she accepted Ethelbert’s hand on the assurance that she would be allowed to worship freely as a Catholic, so Bishop Letardus was chosen to accompany her to Cantia as her Chaplain.

Letardus came from the nearby city of Silvanectium. Now, Letardus knew Bertha when she was a little child, while still in Parisius—Silvanectium is only twenty-five miles from here in this Kingdom of Neustria. But I have also heard said of Bishop Letardus that, in addition to his role as Chaplain to the royal household, he also acts as an ambassador for trade between Cantia and Neustria, and that he has minted his own medallions for such use. If there is

any credence to this view, then he may still be involved with lucrative commercial business on behalf of Neustria. Your arrival may disrupt a cosy trading relationship that the Bishop has developed. That may seem cynical, but you only need to reflect on the poor state of Neustrian Bishops!”

Augustinus took a moment to collect his thoughts. “Nothing is what it seems on the surface. And there is always some bargain to be struck for commercial or political advantage!”

Prior Ingomer sighed. “When the carcass turns rotten, you can smell it everywhere!”

Augustinus asked, “Am I right in thinking that this Archdiocese extends all the way to the coast?” Ingomer nodded.

“In that case, these are the Bishops Bertha mentions in her letter, who failed to respond to her request for a mission. It is because of that we are sent as missionaries to respond to her appeal.”

Tola rested her head on my shoulder.

“Want to turn in?” I asked. Tola blinked her eyes and nodded, slipping quietly out of the room.

Augustinus told Ingomer what had occurred on our journey through the forest from Aureliana.

“Do you have any insights on this? Who might have sent these assassins to us? Was it only Warnachar, or was Warnachar working on behalf of Queen Brunhild herself?”

Ingomer pondered this for a moment.

“The Mayors of the Palaces have agendas of their own, not the least their own preservation in these shifting political sands. The question is, who would benefit most from your assassination? If it puts Warnachar in good standing with King Chlothar, it may be something he might risk, even if he takes this step on his own account.”

“As we have no formal introduction for the new King from the

Pope, Ingomer, how might I best approach Chlothar? Perhaps a surprise encounter might give as an advantage in requesting an unhindered passage to the coast”

Ingomer shook his head vigorously.

“No, no, the royals do not welcome surprises! I suggest a bolder approach, one that San Martinus once adopted. Let us pray together so that Chlothar has a dream tonight night in which an angel appears to him and says, ‘A stranger will come to you with a request to pass through your Kingdom. Give him his wish, for he is sent by the King of Kings.’”

Ingomer looked searchingly at Augustinus. “Your arrival at this time is fortuitous indeed, Bishop. Chlothar will be acknowledged as King of Neustria tomorrow at the army muster, and he will be crowned afterwards in the Abbey of San Dionysius. Our young King, if he is properly advised, would do well to seize this opportunity and show his willingness to please both the Pope and King Ethelbert on such a public occasion as this!”

Augustinus smiled. “Let’s pray, then, that Chlothar is listening to that angel!”

Afterwards, I sat alone in the chapel, digesting and sifting what I had heard. Ingomer was no ordinary farmer, and no ordinary Prior. He possessed significant political skills as well as a spiritual presence, and managed within a decade to create both a monastic community and a successful farm. I had no doubt we could trust his knowledge and his judgment.

What troubled me most was the prospect of not securing a meeting with the young Chlothar. Without his permission, we would be foolish to attempt a journey through his Kingdom. Instead, we might be cooling our heels in a vermin-infested prison for ages.

Come the new day and we lined up together after breakfast to say our farewells. The monastery gate was opened, and as we turned into the street, the beggar that Augustinus had prayed for the previous day stood before us, wrapped in his cloak. Augustinus came towards him and the beggar threw aside his cloak, revealing his much-healed skin for all to see. Falling to his knees in the dusty road, he gave thanks for his recovery when he saw his flesh healed. We rejoiced with him, not least Tola, who had selected the herbs. The beggar danced a jig, passers-by stopped to see what was happening, and the man followed us as we made our way up the street, praising God all the while for this good deed.

We were overwhelmed by what we had witnessed. Whether it was the herbs or the prayers, we would never know; perhaps both were needed for the miracle.

Now we needed a miracle for ourselves—the King’s permission for safe passage to the coast.



## XXIII

THE MARCHFIELDS  
GATHERING*March 1st, AD 597*

SAYING FAREWELL TO Prior Ingomer and his monks, we turned north onto a long narrow street, passing through the city's North Gate into open country. Ingomer's monastery of Prioratus San Martini in Agro was the last on our route dedicated to San Martinus. Now we were truly alone, with no guarantee of a friendly welcome, no safe passage to the coast, yet attempting to leave in a spirit of peace on the same day that the young King had set his face for war.

After an hour we came to a grassy knoll that overlooked an open field rapidly filling with tents, flags and several thousand soldiers. A chill wind seemed to mock the clear sky; the snowfall had ceased, but the road was slippery as ice.

Cadmon galloped to the crest of a knoll and stared down at the vast spectacle below us. "Look at this," he called out, beckoning us to join him. In the distance to our right, a large monastic Basilica dedicated to San Dionysius presided over all the comings and goings. Time passed, the day wore on, and still they flooded in on foot from the north and east, and in ships from the far west, disgorging ever more warriors on the bank of the Sequana. The river coiled back and forth like a serpent, slithering downstream towards the city of Rotomagus, and the far distant coast beyond.



For a long time we all stood together in a single line on the brow of the knoll, absorbing this awesome spectacle. Cadmon pointed out the tents, drawn up in neat rows in the centre of the field.

“See that large pavilion at the centre? That’s unmistakably King Chlothar’s tent—you can see the royal flag of Neustria down there, fluttering high in the breeze.”

A dozen smaller pavilions encircled the King’s tent, occupied by his highest-ranking officers.

”Those are his experienced field generals, but you don’t often see them engaged in the fripperies of the Royal Court.”

We continued watching for some time, unsure of how to proceed. Cadmon broke the silence again.

“Also, the King’s immediate circle will comprise members of his elite bodyguard. They are aristocrats in military service. Junior soldiers support them—up-and-coming young men with promising careers in the army. How do I know this?” he said, in answer to one of our companions from Turones. “Because King Clovis borrowed all of it from the Roman Army!”

From what I could see taking place below on our slightly elevated position, the Neustrian army used lances, shields, coats of mail, swords and archery, but only a small number of horses. Wulfrun, the leader of our Turones contingent, explained what the Marchfields muster was for.

“At this time of the year all soldiers, their Earls and their noble Lords are required to be present at this annual gathering of the army with their King. Now that winter is drawing to an end, and there are spoils of war to be had, they make plans for war and every soldier has a stake in this decision—they all have a vote.”

The army comprised Franks from the eastern regions of the Kingdom, some Gallo-Romans from the south and Saxons from the west, towards the coast. I recognised them at once; so did Cadmon. Saxon Warriors were still leaving their ships and crossing a broad

field towards the great throng of Chlothar's army, their helmets, chain mail and spears glinting in the sunshine and their round shields brightly painted.

Cadmon turned to our companions from Rome and pointed towards the Sequana River. "Do you see those ships tied up along the riverbank? They are the barbaric Saxon warriors the townsfolk in Aquae Sextiae warned you about! They are mercenaries, out for booty. It seems that we are to face them at last!"

Our Roman companions looked on in silence as Cadmon added, "The Saxons organise in warbands under their chief, but I cannot see where he is with all this movement. Unlike most of the soldiers here at the Marchfields muster, these warriors are mercenaries; I'd say numbering about three hundred."

A cry rose up as the Saxons entered the field. Only the Earls and some of their Thanes rode horses. Each officer led a group of a hundred or so warriors on foot, equipped with a shield, spear, and a single-edged short sword, the *seax*. A small number of 'skirmishers' brought up the rear, men who came armed with a bow or a sling.

Not everyone who came to the Marchfields muster was as well equipped as these Saxons. Many of these men were not recognisable as soldiers at all without armour or weapons, merely poor farmers wearing only their working clothes and carrying pitchforks, hoes or axes; but still, they were welcomed as part of the muster.

We continued watching from the ridge, overawed by the picture unfolding before us. Only Cadmon and I had ever seen anything like this before, and that was a siege of Langobards, outside the walls of Rome.

"Let us press on," said Augustinus. Cadmon, Wulfrun and Augustinus started down the slope on horseback as a squadron of cavalry galloped out from the camp towards us.

"Who are you? What are you, and what is your business here?" their commander demanded. "Declare yourself, and follow me!"

We followed behind, galloping downhill into the heart of the muster, and arrived at a large circular arena from where a path led to Prince Chlothar's pavilion. A squad of four smartly turned-out soldiers, a general and the youthful Prince Chlothar, followed by his home guard, walked down the path into the ring to a roar of cheers, applause and foot-stamping. Four soldiers, carrying a large shield between them, came to a halt at the entrance to the circle, holding the shield almost upright behind Chlothar.

Landric, Mayor of the Palace, placed a gold jewelled crown on Chlothar's brow and guided him back into the curve of the shield. The shield-bearers lifted Chlothar high in the air so that everyone could see him.

"Long live the King! Long live the King!" roared thousands of voices. Then, waving his hand in the manner that kings are expected to do, Chlothar was carried three times around the circle, so confirming his hereditary standing as King.

But as I watched I thought, he doesn't have even a thimble of royal blood in his veins! What would happen if he were found out?

Chlothar, as the King, stood on a raised platform to deliver his speech to his subjects. The roaring sound from the muster continued for several more minutes, then the King gave his first address, outlining what he expected everyone to vote for.

The muster was meant as a show of strength on behalf of the monarch, and a way for him to strengthen loyalty with his Earls and troops. Chlothar and his nobles used this occasion to state the aims for the coming campaigning season—invading the Kingdom of Austrasia, seizing the city of Reims, and even taking the capital of Austrasia, the city of Metz.

Two hours later, the Earl who had brought us down from the knoll, found us and said, "The King will see you now!" and we were ushered in to meet with Chlothar in his pavilion.

There was not even a gesture of hospitality as we entered the King's tent. Chlothar reclined on a couch; his tone was

contemptuous as he extended his hand, not in welcome, but for a glass of red wine, and popped a delicacy into his mouth.

“What is it that you want of me, Bishop? By some strange coincidence, I had a dream last night that a monk would come to make supplication! I wasn’t expecting you, but perhaps there is some purpose to it, so what is your request?”

I noted with disapproval that the young King’s Latin was guttural and not entirely grammatical, but we understood him well enough.

Augustinus handed the Mayor of the Palace one of the generic letters signed by Pope Gregorius, having hastily added the address himself in the early hours of this morning. The King glanced at it and dropped the parchment on to a silver tray. He was bored and yawned.

“A plea from my cousin Bertha, it seems. She still requests a mission to the Cantwara,” he said dismissively. “You should rather speak to my mother, but she is on her last legs at the Monastery of San Crucis.”

I was shocked at the callous way he spoke of his mother.

Chlothar turned to the Mayor of the Palace.

“Landric, what do you know of this?”

I glanced from one to the other, looking for facial and other similarities between the two.

“Nothing, Your Majesty. These events took place before my time.”

Augustinus explained, “Our request, Your Majesty, is for your blessing to pass through your Kingdom without let or hindrance, so that we may come safely to the Realm of King Ethelbert.”

Chlothar pointedly ignored the request.

“You have Clerics from Turones with you, I understand,” he

said accusingly, looking at Wulfrun. “From a Kingdom that is hostile to us too,” he added, referring to Queen Brunhild, his archrival. The King glowered at Wulfrun; then, picking some fruit, glanced accusingly at Augustinus.

“Your Majesty,” Augustinus swiftly added, “these men from Turones have come because of the Pope’s wish for men who speak a dialect that is understood by Saxons, and without whom the mission to Cantia will be very difficult indeed!”

Chlothar looked beyond Augustinus to Cadmon, his eyes narrowing.

“And who is this?”

“A cavalryman who has accompanied us from Rome, Your Majesty.”

After a brief silence, the King gave his judgment, turning to Augustinus.

“I will let you and your party pass through my Kingdom to the port of Quentovicus, as your letter requests—but on one condition. Your soldier here joins our attack on Reims as my surety.”

Augustinus turned pale. The implications of Chlothar’s cunning were all too clear. To refuse would mean turning back and taking the long route through Reims, the very city that King Chlothar intended to capture and annexe as his own. Such a delay would be devastating for us, making arrival in time for Easter quite impossible—and given the impending battle for Reims, almost certainly suicidal.

Then Cadmon intervened, speaking in a calm and steady voice.

“I will go, Your Majesty,”

The King turned to Landric. “Send for the Saxon! Our Roman cavalryman here will serve under Hrothgar for the duration of this campaign!”

Hrothgar? No, no, no! Anyone but Hrothgar, I silently screamed. In a flash, I saw our prospects for reaching the Kingdom of Cantia vanishing like smoke before my eyes. Surely, Hrothgar would discover Cadmon's identity as the one who had, seven years earlier as a young boy, destroyed Hrothgar's plans to seize the Kingdom from Ethelbert, the rightful heir. For their treason, Hrothgar and his son Falk were exiled to Francia, and Hrothgar was now the leader of a small army of Saxon renegades. All our efforts, all our trials, all our labours to come this far, counted for nothing!

Landric dispatched a messenger to bring Hrothgar to the King's pavilion.

Chlothar, dismissing us with a wave of his hand, turned to his father, and snapped, "Next!"

\*

In our farewells to Cadmon, Augustinus gave my life-long friend a relic from the Shrine of San Martinus for his protection. Then, with the best part of the day behind us, we returned to our companions, anxiously awaiting our return on the grassy knoll. The three of us—Augustinus, Wulfrun and I—returned alone, our companions watching from the knoll, straining their eyes to see Cadmon, but we had returned without him.

Sorrow and disappointment weighed heavily on us as Augustinus broke the news, explaining all that had taken place.

He concluded saying, "By securing the King's blessing, we are now able to set off for Quentovicus; but through this curse from the King, Cadmon has no option but to stay behind and ride with Hrothgar's men. King Chlothar could not spare us an escort for our passage through Neustria, so he said."

Tola silently wept, expressing what all of us felt. I comforted her

as best I could, holding back my own tears at this sudden and unexpected loss of my closest friend, and I feared greatly for his safety.

Augustinus pointed to the Abbey of San Dionysius half a mile away.

“Let’s press on, and ask for their hospitality tonight while we consider our next step. We have lost Cadmon’s protection, but he wanted us to continue to our journey’s end. He is a pilgrim on a quest, prepared to meet whatever lies ahead to reach his goal. But there is more in him than an adventurer or a warrior. He did not hesitate to enlist in the battle for Reims. Nor does he hesitate to lay down his life for his friends—he is a hero we can all give thanks for.”

Awake in the night I tossed and turned in my bed, recalling Cadmon’s adventures over these last few years. He had involved himself in confrontations with a squad of four Langobard cavalymen outside the walls of Rome as a very young soldier; and in these last few months, he had played a significant role in destroying a threat posed by Macello the renegade knight on our way to Aquae Sextiae. But Cadmon had never engaged in a major battle before, with a thousand soldiers and warriors all around him. And now, in what seemed the cruelest twist of fate, he was risking his own life serving under Hrothgar’s command, a man exiled for attempting to seize King Ethelbert’s throne. Despair wrapped itself around me. Despite the protection of a relic of San Martinus around his neck, I wondered whether would we ever see Cadmon alive again.

\*

Once the army departed for Reims, we left the Abbey of San Dionysius with heavy hearts and began a two-day journey north to a walled town called Caesaromagus, Caesar’s Field.

The town had no monastery to welcome us, but the gatekeeper pointed us to lodgings in inns and barns dotted around the town, boasting a small church, but no priest. The church was unlocked, and there we prayed for Cadmon, and for our own safety.

Late that night I awoke to the loud and rhythmic sound of horses' hoofs clattering swiftly up the cobbled road leading to the town, then followed by loud banging on the gate. I arose and looked out the window, shut against the night cold and steamy with my breath. Rubbing a panel of glass with my sleeve, I looked into the dark street below as Theodore and Martinus now joined me. Tola had the good fortune of a small room to herself for the night, but she too awoke at the sound of shouting. She knocked softly on our door and we made space for her at the window.

“What’s going on, Alric? What’s all the shouting about?”

We peered through the window, and in the light of a blazing torch in the gatekeeper’s hand, we saw him struggling to open the gate. A party of a dozen or so cloaked horsemen entered, swearing at his delay in opening up, and cursing the poor gatekeeper with terrible threats as they galloped past on the street below us. Darkness soon swallowed them, the sounds diminished, and in a minute all was quiet again.

For a wild moment, I thought Warnachar’s assassins had somehow followed us north, hot on the scent for revenge; but then I recollected how assassins worked in stealth and silence, unlike those who had entered through the gate a few moments ago. But if they were not a troop of stealthy killers, who were they?

The serving maid was no help when we spoke with her over breakfast in the morning, asking what all the noise was about during the night.

“Really can’t say, good sirs,” she said, with not an ounce of regret in her pouting smile; “Just some people passing through, but I am sworn to say no more!” She curtsied and left us humming, and



a smile on her lips.

The landlord entered at that moment, shooing her back to the kitchen. We left our lodgings for Morning Prayer in the small, empty church on the market square, and left the town none the wiser, and continued on our journey.

\*

For two more nights and three days, we pressed on. The cold weather persisted as one mile followed another, but there was little rain, only the chill of the wind.

Our immediate destination was the Cathedral of Samarobriva, also known as Ambianum. Bishop Salvius greeted us warmly, pleased to have such a large contingent arrive from Rome and Turones. The Bishop read King Chlothar's letter, demanding unhindered passage for us, but showed little enthusiasm for its author. As the Cathedral was an Augustinian foundation, some of our companions were accommodated with the Canons. For the rest, we were glad to receive the Bishop's hospitality of hot food, clean bedding, barns for our carts and mules and stables for the horses. Our flagging spirits were refreshed by the daily rhythm of prayer, which now included everyone on this expedition.

Augustinus explained to Bishop Salvius the purpose of our long journey and told of our meetings on the way, particularly news from Turones and recent events at the shrine of San Martinus himself.

Bishop Salvius led us to the river where many boats and barges came and went at the wooden quay, loaded with wool and cowhides and much merchandise. Then, turning around for us to face the large stone gateway, the Bishop said to Wulfrun, "Here is a sight that few of your people from Turones hardly ever see. You have San Martinus's monastery and his shrine, but this is the gate where San

Martinus's journey of faith began. Here he cut his cloak in half for a beggar dying of the cold. You have been blessed to see in Turones the half of the cloak that he kept for himself. As for the other half, who knows who carries it into battle now? What I do know is that the Kingdoms of the Franks continue to tear themselves apart on the battlefield, even as we speak."

Augustinus sighed. "Come! Let us kneel at this spot and bring to mind Cadmon our own Roman cavalryman, for his protection in battle and for his safety on the road."

We knelt, and there we fervently prayed.



## XXIV

QUENTOVICUS  
'THE FIFTH TRADING  
PLACE'*April, AD 597*

WE MISSED CADMON terribly as the days went by and his constant presence patrolling tirelessly back and forth, keeping a keen eye on how each member of our expedition was faring and another eye on the surrounding countryside for anything that might seem untoward, or any place where we might be ambushed on our path. Brother John and Prior Laurentius had partially filled the gap as they took on Cadmon's duty, but it did not feel the same.

Two more days passed as we hastened on the road under leaden skies, lodging at inns and barns dotted around a succession of marshes. To the north, a plateau rose between two rivers, flowing through extensive and ancient woodland. A road passed nearby, linking the forest to the coast, from Samarobriua to Quentovicus, and further northwards to the former Roman naval port of Benonia.

We billeted one night on a sprawling estate. At its heart stood a once-abandoned country villa, recently donated by a wealthy landowner to a monk on condition that he formed a monastic community, and offer daily prayers for the welfare of their benefactor. As there was nowhere for Tola to stay in the monastery, she spent the night at a local inn, run by an elderly and welcoming

couple. Tola took to them at once and mentioned what had happened to us a few nights earlier at Caesaromagus.

The innkeeper's wife turned pale. She glanced at her husband and made up her mind to speak, telling Tola of her own recent experience.

"Something like what you've said also happened here, the night before last, and I would even recognise these young men again just from what you described! They demanded supper, got drunk on the wine, and broke almost every stick of furniture in the parlour! Late morning, when they all came down for breakfast, I presented them with the cost of the damage they'd done. Then one of them pointed to a young man, he couldn't have been fourteen years old, and demanded, "If you knew who this is, you'd beg forgiveness for your presumption old hag, or you'd be in irons awaiting trial before you know it!"

Tola was certain this was the same group of men we had also encountered, but we could make no more sense of it.

At the Monastery, where everyone else in our expedition had spent the night, we stood waiting in the sheltered courtyard facing the gatehouse, ready to depart. The Guest Master's assistant threw back the bolt, dragged open the heavy door, and Augustinus stepped out. The storm met us in a full assault with a deluge of freezing cold rain and wind. Augustinus signalled to close the door again. He turned to us, all eyes fixed on him to see what he would decide to do. Abandon our departure? Wait another hour perhaps? With both hands Augustinus raised his wooden staff to the heavens, and prayed loudly against the raging wind, rebuking it and calling upon the blessing of the saints, San Martinus in particular. He turned again to the gate.

"Open!" he commanded the assistant again.

Against his better judgment, the hapless fellow pulled open the door, and we stepped into the maelstrom. Ten paces beyond the gate the wind dropped, the rain ceased, and our carts rumbled out

onto the road.

Woodsmen were busy along our route through the forest, cutting down trees, sawing up trunks and loading the logs onto wagons for building repairs after the ravages of winter. They looked up as we trundled past, but they neither greeted nor challenged us. By mid-morning we came upon a lodge, hidden deep in the forest. The compound comprised a timber-built hall and a substantial mansio on two floors, with a tiled roof instead of the more usual thatch. Wooden tables and benches were dotted about a grassy space in front, and a low picket fence separated the villa from the road. Nearby at the stables, a team of ostlers busily groomed a dozen tethered horses for the day's hunt.

Two guards standing on the forest road watched our approach. As we drew near, one called out, "Declare yourself! Who are you? What is your business here?"

Our party came to a halt. Augustinus, walking as usual with the front cart, leaned on his staff and said, "We are on our way to Quentovicus, travelling to the Kingdom of Cantia at the invitation of their King and Queen. And if I may ask, who might you be?"

The guard said, "You are trespassing on royal land that belongs to King Chlothar! Now move on before I arrest you!"

Augustinus stood upright ready to reply, with Chlothar's letter in his pocket, when a group of young men came stumbling down the stairs of the villa into the open grassy area facing the road, laughing and giggling, each with a crystal goblet in one hand and a skin of wine in the other. A young man, leading the way, stumbled on the steps and landed on his back. Two others piled on top of him and they rolled about laughing in the wet grass. A fourth man stopped on the porch, taking a deep draft, then looking around noticed our long train of carts, mules and companions on the road.

I recalled Prior Ingomer saying to us in Parisius, "These royals love nothing more than escaping to the country and from their

families as far as they can go! Hunting is the most preferred pastime amongst the Frankish aristocracy! They live for feasting and gambling, giving themselves up with a determination and wildness worthy of uncivilised barbarians. And such as these rule the Kingdom!”

The mood at this hunting lodge suddenly changed, as another young man appeared in the doorway clutching his chest, his shirt stained with blood.

“Help me!” he said in a thick voice, stumbling down the steps and sprawling over one of the wooden tables. “Help me! I’m dying!”

The sound of laughter from a woman’s voice drifted down to us from a window above, “No, Your Majesty!” followed by a muffled response from another voice in the room. The guards seemed uneasy at the spectacle before them, but intervening was not in their remit.

Tola snatched up her bag of potions and ointments and walked swiftly towards the entrance to the villa. One of the guards blocked her way. “You can’t enter here!”

“Stand aside!” Tola snapped, speaking in Saxon so that he might possibly understand her. “He’s badly injured and dying! Do you want to be the one to tell his parents you just stood there and watched this young man die because you wouldn’t let him have treatment?”

Tola brushed past and entered the compound. A young woman looked out of an upstairs window.

“Hello down there! What’s the matter with him?”

“He has a wound! Come down and give me some help! Somebody needs to know how to change his bandages when I’m gone, and you are the only sober one here!”

The young woman ran barefoot down to the porch while the

others lay sprawled on the grass, watching the unfolding drama through bleary eyes.

“Here,” Tola said, “help me roll him over” The young woman was still in her nightdress, her hair dishevelled, and appeared to be even younger than my sister.

“My name is Tola. Fetch me some boiling water so I can clean out this mess in his wound! Quickly!” The young woman ran inside, returning shortly with a kitchen maid, a bowl of steaming water and some cloths. “And my name is Haldetrude,” she said.

The two women laboured together as swiftly as they could for half an hour cleaning, wiping, dabbing, compressing, binding until at last, Tola stood up and dropped the blood-soaked bandages into the bowl.

“That’s all I can do. Here, keep the ointment, Haldetrude—you know how to use it now.” She looked around at her patient’s companions. “Now, who will help carry him to his bed?”

As she spoke, another young man, younger even than his companions, stepped out, a glass of wine in his hand also.

Looking at no one in particular, he said in a voice that had not yet broken, “Nice work everyone! Now, who’s game for some hunting?”

\*

We moved on, leaving the lodge behind us, and almost immediately great oaks and elms, overhanging the pathway seemed to swallow the track before and behind us.

As we disappeared around the first bend, Augustinus congratulated Tola for her quick thinking. “What you did back there saved that young man’s life, Tola! But I regret that the young King didn’t thank you personally for saving his friend’s life!”



“The King?” Tola exclaimed. “That was the King? I had no idea! He’s so young!”

The way Tola had handled the whole episode was remarkably calm and certainly saved the young man’s life, but I was steaming at the galling disparity between the behaviour of the King and his companions, and Cadmon’s own self-sacrifice, choosing to fight for us in a war that had nothing to do with any of us. And as Cadmon had set off with the army, Chlothar prepared to ride away with his aristocratic retinue, to the comfortable playground of a hunting lodge in a forest near Abbeville, far away from any battlefield.

As for Chlothar, the youngest amongst his group of peers, self-important and swaggering, he was nothing but a commoner! No better than any of us, and clearly a great deal worse!

\*

Nine days had passed since we left the Abbey of San Dionysius outside Parisius, and by my reckoning two more days lay ahead on the road, eleven days in all before we saw the estuary at Quentovicus again. I agonized over whether Cadmon would find his way back to us before we sailed for home. There was so little time left. I shuddered as I wondered whether Hrothgar and Falk had worked out who Cadmon was, and the part he had played in Hrothgar’s downfall.

At last, we began to emerge from the forest onto sandy soil and scrubby bush, the track taking us directly to the estuary. Our journey of seven years had come almost full circle. Only a strip of ocean now stood between home and us; but even so, elation and nagging anxiety wrestled with each other deep in the pit of my stomach.

The clouds had begun to break, but at this time in late March, the winds were strong, blowing onshore when the sun dipped towards

the horizon.

No ship was moored near the estuary this early in the season, but the situation was very different upstream, to the east, where the markets at Quentovicus stretched out on both sides of the riverbank. Taking what looked a well-worn path, we turned towards the distant, sprawling marketplace.

A ship, coming in from the ocean, began making its way upriver from the estuary. I glanced up, and then I looked again.

“Tola!” I cried, pointing to the vessel. I would have recognised that ship anywhere, its striking yellow dragonhead rising menacingly from the prow, rowers pulling on their oars, garishly decorated shields hanging over the side, the sail billowing breeze; and I began to run as I had never run before, shouting and waving until everyone joined in, catching the attention of Saba, Earl Sighart’s Steward, responsible for the ship.

“Saba!” I yelled like a maniac. “Saba, It’s me! Alric! From the Haven! Remember? Friend of Cadmon!”

At first, Saba could make no sense of our shouting and waving. Nor did he pay much attention to me until I shouted ‘Cadmon!’ and pointed back down the way we had come. Saba’s response swiftly changed. He signalled they would be landing further upriver, and for us to follow.

Tears of relief flowed as Tola and I hugged each other, shouting with joy and relief that, at last, something had come right! We savoured the moment and hurried after our party. I slipped and stumbled in the thick, wild grass, a stab of pain suddenly shooting up my ankle.

“Stop complaining, Alric! I’ll fix you in a moment!” Tola said. We waved Augustinus to carry on with our companions with all speed. Tola produced a length of cloth from her bag, stripping off a narrow piece to make a bandage, and wound it around my leg, ankle and foot; but it was still painful.

By now, our companions with their carts and mules were some distance ahead of us, and I leaned on Tola's arm, limping slowly upriver. "What else could go wrong?" I muttered to Tola. "Is this Wyrd and her sisters up to their tricks again?"

"Be brave, Alric! Use your staff. We'll catch them up soon enough."

\*

We neared the marketplace, a narrow pathway choked with traders and their slaves, carrying goods back and forth from ships to warehouses. As I limped along, a ship moored on the jetty caught my eye, and I stopped in my tracks. "Tola! Does that ship look familiar to you?"

Tola looked as we passed. "I think so," she said hesitantly.

A ship lay moored alongside the jetty, its sail furled, rocking slowly on the tide, as slaves hurried back and forth with merchandise to a warehouse on the shore. The doors stood open at either end. A figure, bent down at the prow adjusting some ropes, straightened up. I recognised the navigator as he turned towards the warehouse, and Tola managed to say, "Look Alric," when a stocky figure with a baldhead, dark weather-beaten face and a trimmed beard came towards the door.

"Felix!" I said without thinking, and Tola dug her nails into my arm.

"Hello! Are you looking for something? What can I interest you in?" boomed a familiar, dreaded voice. He came to the door of the shed, squinting in the sunlight. "Some silk perhaps? Or a pair of gold earrings for your beautiful woman?"

It was unmistakably Felix, followed by Souk, the two of them now partially blocking our way.

My heart pounded. I stared at Felix's chest, my gold coin still hanging around his thick neck and I felt conflicting emotions welling up.

"No thank you! We'll be on our way," I said lamely, taking a desperate step forward in a futile effort to put some distance between us.

"Haven't we met before?" Felix demanded, standing on the path so that I could not push past him.

Nearly seven years had passed since I last saw Felix and his crew, as they last pursued me across the Forum Boarium in Rome. I was taller now the shadow of a beard around my face, my voice deeper and Tola looked completely different from the last time Felix had seen her. But a good memory for names and faces and ruthlessness in his trade-dealings were part and parcel of Felix's commercial success. He had last seen me in a habit like this one, and he had noticed that I had stared at my medallion hanging around his neck.

"No," I said, but Felix would not be deterred.

"Aren't you Alric? Is this your sister? 'Fraid I can't remember your name, love."

On the path behind, oblivious to our plight, traders and slaves passed by in a continuous stream going about their business, and I knew from bitter past experience that shouting for help would bring no support at all. No one would be interested in us, and drawing attention to our plight would invite a fist in my face that could only add to the misery of my already painful limp.

Souk, the first mate on the ship, laid a heavy hand on my shoulder, blocking any attempt to escape.

"Tola," Felix said. "Alric and Tola, that's it. Well, you two will certainly bring us commercial success, don't you think so, Souk?"

Felix bent down and picked up a pair of chains. "So where's

your other friend?" he said, as an unexpected voice from behind commanded,

"Drop the chains, Felix! Kneel down."

I turned to see Cadmon in full armour with his sword in hand and covered in thick dust from the road, the ship's crew of slaves unaware of his arrival against the shouts and hubbub of traders all around us.

A tidal wave of relief swept through me. The ship's slaves, now chained to their oars, stared open-mouthed at this sudden switch of fortunes.

"Now, now, there's no need..." Felix began.

"NOW Felix, or you breathe your last."

There could be no doubt from Cadmon's tone, or the look on his face, that he meant what he said.

Felix chose to stay alive. Frozen motionless as the point of Cadmon's blade, pushed into the back of the skipper's neck at a point below his shaven skull, Felix sank to his knees.

"Anaxos," Cadmon commanded the ship's navigator, "lie flat on the ground and don't move! Souk! Put the chains on Felix's wrists and ankles. Do it!"

Felix climbed awkwardly into the ship and held out his arms to Souk.

"Cadmon," I cried out, "Am I glad to see you," and Tola burst into tears of relief, giving Cadmon a hug. "I'm so glad you've come back safe, Cadmon."

"Alric, now put the irons on Souk! We don't want him running loose on our journey home, do we, Felix?"

Another voice broke in behind us.

"Ah! Here we all are!" Augustinus said as he joined us on the jetty.

Looking around at the crew in chains, he asked, "What's

happening here?”

“Felix is giving us a bit of assistance, Bishop. Alric, secure Felix to the stern, and Anaxos to the mast! You know where they always stand!”

Having endured five months through a bitter winter with these three slavers, I knew exactly where everyone stood, and in a different sense, I knew exactly how matters stood for them now.

Felix stared at us down the length of his ship, his face a picture of confusion, his self-confident bullying manner oozing away before our eyes.

Cadmon took control of proceedings. He gestured towards Belisarius. “My steed travels home with us. All this other cargo goes back into the warehouse.” He threw a key down to one of the slave crew. “Here! What are you waiting for? Move!”

Cadmon turned to Augustinus, “When do we sail, Bishop?”

“Wait!” Felix shouted. “I’ll tell you something important—in exchange for our freedom.” Felix was utterly confused, always the man in command, but now he now found himself in a completely strange and incomprehensible position. His mask of confidence slipped away and we saw desperate fear in his eyes and panic on his face.

Cadmon sheathed his sword.

“Say what you have to say, Felix, and I may decide to spare your life. Cast aside any thought you might have of freedom.”

Cadmon put one foot on the ship’s rail, the other on the jetty.

“Start by telling us why you took us captive at Sandwic Haven.”

As Felix began his tale, Tola put an arm around me. This was Cadmon’s story, and we all needed to hear it.

Felix raised one chained hand and pointed to Cadmon. “Remember the day you left Raculf and the King’s Hall? After King Eormenric died?”

I nodded, but Cadmon remained as still as a statue, his eyes boring into Felix.

“Someone came to me with an offer of money to seize you, and take you as far away as possible. That’s why we followed you later that evening, but we couldn’t find you before dark. Still, we had an idea where you might be, which turned out to be the case. We came upon you early morning and took you by surprise.”

“And what about me and Tola?” I blurted out. “Who paid you for us?”

“Nobody. We didn’t come for you. You were a bonus! You were there on the quay that morning, getting in our way. But on the bright side, there’s always a market for young people like you, so we took you too.”

I thought of all we had gone through because of Felix’s opportunistic, spur of the moment decision on that last morning at Sandwic Haven: the misery, the lost years, and the agony of not knowing whether Tola was alive or dead.

“You stole our childhood, you took our lives from us,” I hissed.

Felix shrugged. “No, you should be grateful. Look how things have turned out for you. You became a monk, and your sister a nun. And the man who made a bid for your sister at Bononia—I also gave the man a letter from Queen Bertha for her mother. I provided a service, you see. And he promised to deliver it to her.”

“He did,” Tola said. “At least he was an honest man!”

Augustinus said to Tola, “And that was the letter Deacon Agilulf brought to Rome after he took you to the convent in Massilia. And he gave it to Pope Gregorius.”

Tola nodded, as the last piece of Tola’s account of the letter had fallen into place.

Felix pointed to Cadmon. “And this big fellow here with his horse—look, he is now a cavalryman. Think of all the experiences

you've had. What would you be doing if you'd stayed at home all these years? You could have been dead by now."

Bishop Augustinus interrupted, "You were not the cause of their good fortune, Felix, but the unwitting servant of God's hand upon their lives, making good what you had made bad. You intended none of this. Making a virtue out of a criminal act is no defence."

Felix shrugged. "Well, that's how I see it. Some may see it differently."

"I do," snapped Cadmon. "Tell me now, Felix, who paid you to take us from Cantia?"

Felix paused for dramatic effect and leaned back, his sunburned face splitting into a huge grin as we waited in agonized silence for his answer.

"You mean, who was the one who stole from his father more than he could ever save up for? The one who then paid me to take you to Rome?"

Felix paused a moment, then emphasized every single word.

"The one who paid for me to take you all the way to Rome was your own brother!"

A stunned silence struck all of us as Felix's confession began to sink in. Cadmon's eyes narrowed, his lips a thin line as he heard Felix's words. "That's all I need to know, Felix. You have signed your own execution order."

Start running now, Derian, I thought. With one sentence, you have made your life worthless.

Cadmon stood up, beckoning to the slaves sitting at their oars.

"Come, clear out the hold as well. It is time to make room for Belisarius!"



We set out early from Quentovicus, sailing towards the grey sandstone and chalk cliffs of Cap Gris Nez. Crossing over from the Cape provided the shortest distance to the coast of Cantia, and at dawn, on that clear day, we could glimpse the white cliffs on either side of the port of Dubris. Earl Sighart's warship, now packed with nearly forty additional passengers, baggage and implements, followed behind.

"HOW did you know where to find us?" I asked Cadmon.

"When I finally reached Quentovicus, the road came out upstream, where most of the ships seemed to be moored. I recognised my father's ship at once—and saw you, Bishop, trying to secure our passage with Saba, and all this said in Frankish! Saba was as glad to see me, as I was to see him! He agreed at once to take all of us with our cargo to Ratteburg. You also told me that Alric had sprained his ankle and was following behind; but Alric, you seemed to take suspiciously long time, so I came looking for you. I recognised Felix's ship with no trouble at all!"

My gold coin was still hanging around Felix's neck—the coin he had taken from me the day we were taken from the Haven. I leaned forward to Felix and held out my hand. "My gold coin, Felix. Time for it to return home."

The skipper scowled, pulled it from his neck, and threw it to me.

"Easy come, easy go! I was thinking of selling it for another one anyway."

Augustinus responded, "As the saying goes, Felix, you are a man who knows the price of everything, but the value of nothing."

I carefully examined the two, round surfaces, reading the inscription for myself for the first time, running my fingers over the embossed image of Bertha's father, King Charibert.

"It's not a lucky charm, as I had once thought," I said. "Queen

Bertha gave it to me at my birth as a gift, with a blessing. You remember Mama telling my story every year, how Bertha gave me the coin on the day I was born at Ratteburg fort?” Tola nodded. “How could I forget? I heard it so often!”

I stared at the image stamped on the coin.

“Charibert was neither a good man nor a great king. He led an unworthy life, and he exiled Bertha and her mother to Turones when he found another wife. All the same, it meant a great deal to Queen Bertha, and so it means a great deal to me.”

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Felix called out, “It will take most of the day to reach Ratteburg! We sail with the southwesterly currents in our favour and then pick up the northeast running currents. A ten-mile shoal of sand lies in the way. It’s a graveyard for ships in poor weather. But it brings us to a line of cliffs of the Isle of Tanet and the bay. With luck, we can expect to take thirteen hours from here on the Frankish coast before we reach the entrance to the Wanstum Channel.”

Augustinus asked a question that had recently weighed heavily on all of our minds.

“You risked so much on our journey, Cadmon. Perhaps we made a mistake, coming through Neustria, even though it was the shorter route. This has weighed heavily on my conscience ever since we parted at Marchfields. Risking your life in this way was simply too high a price.”

Cadmon shook his head.

“I will tell you my story once we return home, as it is not for the ears of Felix and his crew. But for the moment, let me reassure you on this score. Had we avoided Parisius, and travelled instead to Reims –we would have arrived at the same time that Chlothar’s

cavalry swept down from Laffau. Had they found us coming up the open road, all of us would have been butchered. Once their bloodlust is up, Saxon warriors don't care who they kill, as long as they keep killing. Perhaps we owe more to San Martinus leading us through Neustria than we realised. No, bishop, never believe that lie, for you chose our path to Cantia not through fear, but through conviction."

Cadmon rose to his feet, made his way to Belisarius in the hold and slid a hand into his saddlebag.

"As the Abbot said to us in Turones, even half a cloak is better than none." Cadmon carefully withdrew a threadbare red cloak half of it cut away, and held it up for us to see. "The other half is where we all saw it, in the Abbey of San Martinus."

Augustinus stretched out his hand and carefully touched the woollen cloth, gently rubbing the threads between his thumb and forefinger.

Cadmon continued, "You know the long-standing practice of Merovingian kings to have a cloak held high on a wooden cross as someone walks ahead of the army before the commencement of battle. Regrettably, the chaplain who carried the cross and this cloak was struck down moments before I came upon his dead body. It seemed appropriate to rescue the cloak rather than have it thoughtlessly trampled and destroyed in the heat of battle; but as I had no opportunity to return it, I left the scene of battle to join up with you again. So I give this to you, Bishop, for a shrine in Queen Bertha's church of San Martinus, if you are willing to accept it. This seemed to me to be a most appropriate gesture for you to offer our Queen on our return home."

\*

Towards evening, as we passed the northern tip of treacherous

sands near the Haven, Tola and I leaned over the rail, staring at every feature of the rugged coastline, remembering that fateful day seven years ago.

“How does it feel to be going home?” I managed to ask.

Tola eventually replied. “I’m glad I’ll be seeing Mama and Pa, and Greta and Godric again! It must have been harder for them than for us in some ways because they wouldn’t have known whether we were alive or dead. How could anyone live with that for the rest of one’s life? I don’t want them to be carrying that burden forever!”

Her eyes filled with tears, all the experiences we had been through still so raw.

Are they still alive? I asked myself. Seven years is a long time.

I pushed my thought away.

Tola said, “I’m also a little glad, because my life and what I expected from it, has changed so much since we last saw the Haven. It must be the same for you, Alric.”

I nodded.

She said, “My world seems bigger now, and I can read and write, but Mama and Pa won’t easily see the use of it—or even worse, they may think its magic and say I’ve become a witch, with all my strange symbols on writing tablets, and my herbs! I can also see that Mama would soon want me, as her elder daughter, to be thinking of finding a good man to marry, have lots of babies, and spend my life at the loom and cleaning out our hovel! But now I know how to use herbs and potions to make people well, and I want to use that knowledge to help our people!”

I put a comforting arm around Tola’s shoulder.

“I know, I know. We’ll have to play this carefully, one step at a time. I’m in a very similar situation to you, Tola. Pa will want me to come back to fishing and help him on Earl Sighart’s estate. They won’t understand why someone should choose never to marry and

raise children or understand what practical use the life of a monk could possibly be. We have a mountain to climb, that's for certain!"

Cadmon came and stood behind us, placing his hands on our shoulders. The three of us stared ahead, too choked-up to speak. The coastline of Cantia slid by as we watched and waited for the ship to turn towards the broad estuary of the Wantsum Channel.

With a loud cry a seagull swooped over the ship, and I remembered our departure nearly half a lifetime ago. Glancing up at the heavens, I somehow expected to see Wyrð and her sisters at their loom again, spinning yet another dreadful chapter of my life. But there was nothing, only wispy evening clouds drifting towards the shore on an evening breeze. And when a cry called out again, it wasn't the Skipper, or the gulls; the cry came from Cadmon.

"Landfall in sight!" he roared. "Ratteburg ahead!"

## P L A C E S

*Ambianum*, Roman Samarobriva; (Amiens); Kingdom of Neustria

*Aquae Sextiae*, (Aix-en-Provence), on the Via Aurelia, Kingdom of Burgundy

*Arelate*, (Arles), Provence, Kingdom of Burgundy

*Augustodonum* (Autun), Kingdom of Neustria

*Aurelian Wall*, a defensive structure surrounding Rome

*Aureliana*, (Orleans), on the Loire

*Autun* / Augustodonum

*Benonia*, (Boulogne)

*Cabillonum*, (Chalon-sur-Saone), Kingdom of Burgundia

*Caesaromagus*, (Beauvais), Caesar's field, Kingdom of Neustria

*Cantia*, Kingdom of, (Kingdom of Kent)

*Castrum Caneto*, (Vieux Canet), Provence, on the Via Aurelia, Kingdom of Burgundia

*Civitas Silvanectium*, (Senlis), Kingdom of Neustria

*Decumanus Maximus*, main street, Ostia

*Forum Julii*, (Frejus), a port in Provence, on the Via Aurelia

*Laffau*, (Laffaux) in northern France, between Senlis and Soissons

*Laon*, (Lugdunum Clavatum, or Alaudanum), a town in Picardy rising a hundred meters above the Picardy plain

*Lerins*, (Lerinus), a Monastery Island off Cannes

*Liger*, (Loire)

*Lignum Aureliana* (Forest of Orleans)

*Lou Muei*, (Le Mui,) village in Provence on the ancient Via

Aurelia

*Lugdunum*, Lyon, on the River Rhone

*Marchfields*, an annual meeting of the army with the King, held

March 1st north of Parisius at the Abbey of

*Mare Nostrum*, Our Sea, The Mediterranean Sea

*Maximin*, town, Provence, on the via Aurelia

*Nevirnum*, (Nevers), city on the Loire

*Noviodonum*, ‘New Fort’, (Soissons), Kingdom of Neustria

*Parisius*, (Paris), Kingdom of Neustria

*Pictavium*, (Poitiers), Kingdom of Burgundia

*Porta Romana*, Roman Gateway, Ostia

*Porta San Paolo*, Saint Paul Gateway, Rome

*Quentovicus*, modern Etaples, Kingdom of Neustria, (OR

Austrasia), a cluster of trading markets on the river estuary

*Ratteburg*, Richborough Fort, Kingdom of Kent (Cantia)

*Reims*, (cathedral city), Kingdom of Austrasia

*Rodonos*, (River Rhône), Kingdom of Burgundy

*Rotomagus*, Rouen, on the Seine, Kingdom of Neustria,

*Samarobriva*, also known as Ambianum, (Amiens), Kingdom of  
Neustria

*San Denys*, an Abbey outside of Parisius, near the Marchfields  
gathering

*Sequana*, (Seine), Kingdom of Neustria

*Silvanectium*, (Senlis), Kingdom of Neustria

*Sona*, (Saône), Kingdom of Burgundia

*Turones*, (Tours on the River Loire), Kingdom of Burgundia

*Vienna*, (Vienne), City on the in Burgundia on the Rhone

*Wanstum Channel*, Estuary of the Great Stour, Kingdom of Cantia





## C H A R A C T E R S

Below are the names and brief descriptions of characters in the novel. The names of historical characters are shown in italics.

*Alric*, Postulant and Scribe, Saxon, Kingdom of Cantia

*Arigius*, Patrician and Magnate, Provence

*Augustinus*, d. 604; Abbot, Bishop and Archbishop of the Mission to Cantia

*Aurea*, Saint martyred in Ostia (before AD 312)

*Belisarius*, Cadmon's horse—named after General Belisarius who saved Rome

*Bertelflede*, daughter of King Charibertus I

*Bertha*, Queen, Kingdom of Cantia

*Brunhild*, d. 612; Dowager Queen at Cabillonum,

*Cadmon*, Saxon, Cavalryman in Roman Army, protector during journey through Francia

*Cantwara*, collective name of the people of the Saxon Kingdom of Cantia

*Cato*, carpenter for the expedition to Cantia from San Andreas Monastery, Rome

*Childebert II*, d. AD 595, King of Austrasia, and later of Burgundy

*Cornelius*, a lay brother on the expedition to Cantia from San Andreas Monastery, Rome.

*Derian*, Cadmon's older brother, Ratteburg Fort, Kingdom of Cantia

*Desiderius*, Archbishop; d. 607; Archbishop of Vienne, Burgundia

*Domenico*, Cardinal Bishop of Ostia

*Epiphanius*, Bishop of Frejus

*Ethelbert*, d. King of Cantia, m. Queen Bertha

*Etherius*, Archbishop of Lugdunum, Primate of all Francia,

*Failende*, Queen and mother of King Childebert II

*Godogisel*, late King of Burgundy; father of Queen Ingoberga of  
Neustria

*Gregorius*, late Bishop of Turones

*Gregorius*, Pope and Bishop of Rome, 590-604 AD

*Haldetrude*, first wife of King Chlothar II, of Neustria.

*Ingoberga*, Dowager, Queen of Charibert I, mother of Bertha,  
Queen of Cantia

*Marinianus*, formerly Abbot of San Andreas Monastery, Rome;  
later Bishop of Ravenna

*Merofleda*, daughter of Charibert I

*Monica*, d. Ostia 387; mother of Bishop Augustinus of Hippo  
Regis, in North Africa

*Numerius 'the Hammer'*, blacksmith for the expedition to Cantia  
from San Andreas Monastery

*Paulina*, Alric's beloved; farm girl at San Quattro Coronati  
nunnery, Rome

*Pelagius*, Bishop of Turones

*Petrus*, Brother and Schoolmaster at San Andreas Monastery in  
Rome

*Protasius*, Bishop of Aquae Sextiae, Provincia

*Rufinian*, Monk from San Andreas Monastery, Rome; a member of  
Augustinus's companions to Cantia

*Russo*, skipper of ship from Ostia to Lerins

*Rusticius*, Canon at Aquae Sextiae Cathedral

*Sigebert I*, King of Austrasia; assassinated c. 561 AD; m. to Queen Brunhild.

*Syagrius*, Archbishop of Autun

*Theudebert II*, King of Austrasia, d. 612; Son of King Sigebert I.

*Theuderic II*, King of Burgundy, and later also Austrasia. d. 613.  
Younger brother of King Theudebert II.

*Theodore*, postulant monk from San Andreas Monastery, and member of Augustinus's' mission to Cantia

*Tola*, younger sister of Alric, Saxon, Herbalist, postulant,  
Kingdom of Cantia

*Vegetius*, d. 450; writer on Roman military warfare, written for Emperor Gratian; Constantinople

*Virgilius*, Archbishop of Arelate, southern Francia

*Warnachar*, Count, Mayor of the Palace at Cabillonum, serving Dowager Queen Brunhild, Francia

*Wulfrun*, Frankish priest, Turones (Tours), leader of the Frankish contingent; Kingdom of Burgundy

