

The Journey

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The Journey

by [Kadma32](#)

Summary

Esca was not a good slave. He was insubordinate, he never listened, and he paid for his behaviour with pain and humiliation. But he was a good son, and he had made a promise to his father: to always respect a debt of honour with another, should he enter one. And, when life, the gods, or the blind Roman Fates or the evil goddess Rome force him into an oath to a Roman, his life is forever changed.

His heart is forever changed.

Notes

Please note English is not my first language and this work is unbetaed.

It was originally meant to be just a one shot, but then I decided to break it up a little.

Enjoy! Do let me know if you have any feedback.

A bond of honour

Esca was fidgety.

Restless.

He hadn't been able to settle all day, ever since, early in the morning, he had seen his father and a few of their best warriors leave to go and help the Corieltauvi, who were having troubles with their neighbours further south.

He just didn't understand what the fuss had been about.

It had been their problem, right? Why did they need the best men of Esca's tribe to clean up their mess?

Surely, if they couldn't deal with it themselves, they should pay the consequences, right?

Idiot, stop being an idiot, he told himself. In truth, you are only jealous that you couldn't go with them.

Too young, they always told him.

Not a man yet.

Time was passing far too slowly.

'Relax' his mother told him, patting him on the shoulder as she sat down next to him. He didn't move or say anything to her, pretending to be deep in concentration as he worked on the little piece of wood he was modelling after a wolf. No, a dog. No, maybe....

He bit his lower lip in frustration. He couldn't even focus on that! But it wasn't his fault. The fault lied fully in that fire that was starting to stir right under his skin.

A fire he barely knew how to control.

From the corner of his eyes, he saw his mother smile, the soft, caring smile she only reserved to those moments they had in private, just the two of them.

'Your time will come' she said, giving him a little shove with her shoulder.

'When?' he asked.

He kept on seeing the men go to battle.

He was a man too now, why couldn't they see that?

'Don't rush the inescapable dance of the days. Give me a few more days with my sweet Esca' she said, laughing before planting a kiss on his cheek.

Esca felt his face grow warm with love, but also with embarrassment, as he spotted a couple of younger kids stopping their playing around in the village to just giggle at him, at Cunoval's son being smothered by his mother.

'Mum!'

She stood up, bright and tall.

She patted him on the head before saying once more:

'Your time will come'.

Esca heard the men coming back before actually seeing them. He heard the noises of the horses, rushing the last part of the journey as if they were looking forward to resting as much as the men. He heard the songs of the men, happy, euphoric men at the end of a settled battle that had been followed by celebrations, drinks and women.

He rushed forward, out of the house, as the light of the new day was starting to illuminate the vastity of the sky.

There they were.

There his father was. Esca watched him as he got off his horse.

He never looked more majestic than in that moment, bathed in sunlight.

The fire under Esca's skin made his blood boil.

He wanted to be like his father. He wanted to be a leader of men. He wanted to know what the pride that he saw shining in his father's smile felt like.

That night there were celebrations in their village too. Having had the blessing of a nice and dry day and night, everybody was out and about, dancing, drinking and already making songs of the battle that was, telling the brave deeds of Cunoval and his men joining Volisios of the Corieltauvi as they sent invaders back running.

'You seemed troubled Esca'

Esca had been so focused on the songs that he hadn't heard his father approaching him.

Good show, you idiot. What kind of hunter are you if you can't even hear a man approaching?

'No, all good' he replied

'Don't lie to me' Cunoval replied with a laugh, before grabbing him by the shoulder, placing a hand on his head and rubbing with enough strength to make his point, but not enough to hurt.

‘Leave me’ Esca said, trying to break the hold.

He knew full well that, if he really tried to get away, he could.

But he didn’t want to.

‘Not till you tell me what’s on your mind’ Cunoval replied, continuing the rubbing.

‘Your emotions are painted all over your face’

Esca grew serious at that point.

He fully well knew that he had that weakness. That he had much to learn.

He didn’t need his father pointing that out.

Cunoval seemed to understand that something was troubling him, because, suddenly, he let him go.

‘You can talk to me Esca’ he said, his voice suddenly serious.

‘I don’t understand why you went to Volisios’ rescue. Why did you risk your life and that of our men for the leader of another tribe, unable to keep his people safe?’ he said, speaking so quickly that he wasn’t sure his father had understood everything he had said. But at least it was out, and Esca felt the weight on his chest grow a little lighter.

Cunoval smiled.

But it was different now. It wasn’t the big, wide smile he had given his people when he said that they had come back victorious, without losing a single man of theirs while inflicting grave losses on the enemy. It wasn’t, of course, the romantic smile he had seen him reserve for his mother, and or the amused smile he had for his two younger siblings, when they had followed Esca to welcome back the warriors.

There was....nostalgia in it. Or something akin to it.

‘We rode to Volisios’ help because he and I share a bond of honour’ Cunoval finally said, looking straight ahead of him, at the people dancing and celebrating.

But, somehow, Esca had the strong impression that he wasn’t actually looking at them.

Cunoval was somewhere entirely else.

‘What does that mean?’ Esca said, his eyes fixed on his father’s expression.

Cunoval smiled once again.

‘Esca. Volisios saved my life in battle, more than once. And I his’

As his father’s gaze moved to his, the sudden weight of it made Esca blush.

‘It’s the first time I hear about this’ he mumbled, crossing his arms to his chest.

Once again, Cunoval rubbed his big hand on Esca’s head.

‘A bond made of honour and blood doesn’t need to be sung by others. Doesn’t need words. By the strength of it ties you to life, to the gods, and gives you the strength of a hundred horses’

‘I don’t understand’ Esca said, shaking his head. A bond that didn’t need songs. What did that even mean? There were always songs for the greatest warriors of the tribes, and if there was a connection of that sort, surely it needed to be celebrated and remembered and...

‘Don’t trouble yourself with these things just as yet. You are young, don’t rush the inescapable dance of the days’

‘That’s what mother said’ Esca said, rolling his eyes.

‘Ah, did she?’ he laughed.

‘Don’t laugh. Explain to me, what does this mean’

‘Don’t worry yourself. If your life will lead you to have a bond of honour with another, you will understand what I mean. Just promise me that, if you were to find it and recognise its strength, you will fight for it as only my son and heir would do. It doesn't matter how, where or with who it will be. All it matters is the honour it brings to a man's life'

Esca was silent for a moment.

How could he promise something he didn’t really understand?

‘Promise me, Esca’ Cunoval suddenly insisted.

‘Yes, I promise’.

That was a long time ago.

Seven long years followed that day of blood and agony.

Whenever he closed his eyes, Esca could see the Roman soldiers in their red uniforms. He could hear the screams.

He could see his mother’s grace right before she died.

And his brothers’ guts dripping out of their bodies.

His own pain flashing right throughout his body, so much that the legionaries thought he was dead.

But he hadn't been.

And all Esca had now was his memories.

Memories. Just damn stupid memories belonging to someone who wasn't him anymore, someone who had a future, Esca the slave told himself as he woke up with a startle in the little cell where the master of Calleva's amphitheatre kept him.

There was a little ray of sunshine filtering through the window further up on the wall.

It would not be long now. Soon they were going to come to take him to the arena.

And all these pains would be over.

The memories would stop haunting him and, perhaps, if he had at least retained a little shred of honour in all the past years spent as nothing more than an object, perhaps the gods will finally grant him some peace.

Perhaps, he would see his father and mother again.

'Get ready' the rough voice of the master shook him back to reality.

He hated that man. That huge, fat mountain of a man, who sometimes stood there, eating fat pieces of meat right in front of him and the other slaves.

Apparently, being the master of an arena full of desperate souls makes you rich, in the twisted world of Roman valour.

Romans had no idea what valour and honour really were.

Get ready. How stupid. He had been ready for this day for a long while now.

His mind detached from his body as they shoved a shield and a blunt sword in his hands, very poor replicas of what he had been once entrusted with as the son of a chieftain.

For a moment, right on the edge, he didn't feel anything.

Hands shoved him forward.

I'm ready Rome, do your worst, he thought, as he entered the arena.

The eyes of everybody in the arena were on him, expectant.

The clamour of the spectators' voices was growing, calling for his blood.

The faceless gladiator was slowing off his prowess with the sword.

Is this really your worst, Rome? I laugh at you, goddess of a pack of hungry wolves.

Esca quickly looked around himself.

Curse on you all, he thought. I curse you all. May the gods of the underworld torture you all.

You will not see me cower.

Rome trembled when Esca threw his shield and sword to the ground. He heard it in all the voices of the crowd.

He heard it in the voice of the gladiator and in the tension of his muscles.

You will not have me, Rome, was the last thing he thought before the first punch to his face landed right on his jaw

.

The other gladiator was a hard hitter, pushing him to the ground over and over again among the cries of the spectators that Esca was robbing of a good show.

Pain was cursing through his whole body, making his vision blur and his mind fog up.

He could taste blood in his mouth.

Just like that day in the fields with his tribe.

And, just like that day, he only needed to coax the enemy a little more.

And finally, his legs gave up and Esca fell on the rough sand that had been scratching his feet and now was attacking his back.

His faceless enemy's sword was finally on his chest. Nice and sharp, right above his heart.

Just like the one that had slaughtered his family.

With a bit of luck, it was going to be quick.

With a bit of luck, the fear that was gripping his stomach would ease soon in a pool of his own warm blood.

Right there and then, when he tried to push his chest further up to welcome the sword's sharpness, he noticed a movement in the crowd.

He noticed a young man who struggled to stand up.

A poor excuse, Rome. Of all things you can appear as, you goddess of monsters, you chose the shell of a broken man with a pained face and sweat matting his hair.

But the young man stood and, holding on to an older man's shoulder, extended his arm with an upward pointing thumb and shouted:

'Life'

What are you doing, Rome?

Please stop. Please don't prolong my agony.

I am so close to the end.

Rome, please don't do it.

The shouts continued. And soon other voices joined the first.

Esca's eyes burnt.

His body was in pain and the taste of blood was overpowering.

But now the whole arena was shouting for life.

And, soon after, the sharp sword moved away from his chest.

Fear abandoned his stomach.

But misery took its place fairly quickly.

Rome had bested him once again, taking the shape of that young man.

Damn you Rome.

As he stood up, his legs still shaking and his mind a little confused, he looked up and found the young man again. He hadn't disappeared, like the apparitions of the gods are meant to be. He had sat down now but was still looking at Esca.

His pained gaze fixed on him.

Esca wanted to shout back at him that he had robbed him of his last wish.

That Esca was cursing him, just like all the other Romans.

Always taking, taking and taking.

But he couldn't say a word.

For a moment, it was only the two of them in the arena. Every noise, every person around them, was gone.

And hate, a bone deep rage took over Esca as he looked at the young man once more before he was led out, to live one more day as he waited for his relief of death.

But the day after didn't lead to another fight, as he had thought. When the master of the arena came to tell him that someone had bought him, he recognised immediately the old man facing him with an obnoxious look on his face as the old man who had been near the damned young Roman.

He didn't say a word, for once behaving like the obedient slave they had wanted him to be, as he followed him out of the arena and then out of Calleva.

But, inside his head, inside his heart, the fire was raging.

He could run, he thought. The old man was too old to follow.

But he didn't know how rich this man was, he could always pay for some muscles to hunt him down, and Esca knew he was too broken right there and then to escape.

'I bought you for my nephew, you will assist him in his recovery. His name is Marcus Flavius Aquila' the old man said.

Recovery. The young man in the arena was clearly recovering from something painful.

He had just been bought to serve the man who had saved his life.

A bond of honour, his father's voice rang in his mind.

A twisted, hateful version of the bond his father had told him about so many years before.

A life for a life.

A bond that connects.

But how could a bond such as that start, blossom, on such shaky ground?

No, it just couldn't, Esca became painfully sure of that when the old man called him forward, not by his name, but by the simple and generic:

'Slave'.

And there he was, his new "master", the broken shell of a man trying to stand up by himself even though pain was spread all over his face.

When he saw Esca, the young man looked away.

What, you are embarrassed? Not ready to face the consequences of your actions?

God, I hate you.

Look at me, you monster.

And yet, the person in front of him wasn't Rome. It was another young man, like him. And, like him, he was hurt.

Hurt while killing my people, he thought.

And suddenly, that little burst of pity he had for the man barely standing on his own legs left space to hate once more.

Only to explode in utter rage the moment he said that he had done what he had done for no specific reason.

'I meant nothing by it'

You played with my life like it was nothing. You monster.

He took out his father's dagger, the one last thing he had tying him back to a future he was never going to have now.

And, for a brief moment, he thought of actually cutting the man's throat.

You made a promise to your father, he thought just in time.

A bond. A bond of honour.

He threw the dagger down Marcus Flavius Aquila's feet and pledged his life to him.

He could still fulfil his promise while hating the man that had forced this bond on him.

For as much as Marcus' uncle had told him that he just had to provide to Marcus' every need, Esca was relieved to always receive the same order by his direct Marcus: go and busy yourself with the other slaves.

Which meant making himself scarce, since also the other slaves didn't want him around. They were all born into slavery. He wasn't. And seeing how they bowed their head and even enjoyed the "kind" mastery of the Aquila family was making Esca's blood boil.

But the day the doctor came, he couldn't run away, for as much as he would have wanted. At first, during the visit, he stood to the side, as close as possible to the threshold on Marcus' cell.

'I have the best knives in the business'

A shiver went down Esca's spine at those words. He had seen Brigantes wisemen and women open wounds to try to save a soldier's life, or that of a pregnant woman whose baby had been very difficult.

He remembered the pain of the doctor's tools when the slave owners were trying to patch him up as best as they could to make him sellable goods.

And it had been painful beyond imagination.

Good, he should suffer, he thought for a moment.

No, that pain is not to be wished on anybody.

Remember that he is a Roman, he told himself. He doesn't deserve your pity.

And yet, there was the pity again, when Marcus, tied up to the table, looked at him for a moment, with fear painted all over him, even though he was trying his damn hardest to hide it.

The gods had cursed you with too many emotions, his father had often mocked him.

And perhaps he had been right.

'You can go' he said, and Esca felt immediately relieved.

'No, I will need the slave to hold you down'

Ah, he should have thought.

Rome was toying with him.

Rome was clearly laughing her laurel head out when the doctor shouted that Esca, the slave, needed to push down harder on Marcus, to prevent him thrusting around and hurting himself even more.

Just like when it happened to his brother, so long ago.

‘Take a deep breath’ the doctor said.

Esca lifted his eyes to Marcus’ the moment the knife cut through.

There was so much brutal, raw pain.

He hated Marcus. Marcus was Roman.

And yet, right there and then, he was just a young man in pain.

They were two men that had lost everything.

Esca wished he could take the pain away.

Esca was tired and sweaty when it was over. The strong smell of blood was nauseating, but he pushed through, cleaning up the room and helping to make Marcus more comfortable. Then he stayed there, through the night, refusing Stephanos’ offer of some food and drink.

Every now and again, when he thought he could hear Marcus’ moaning in pain, he lifted his eyes up, a couple of times even standing up, only to see that he was just asleep and, as the doctor said, it was better not to disturb him. Rest would do him good.

But it was not doing any good to Esca.

His mind was running around and around, trying to make sense of it all.

He is Roman. He is your master.

And yet he was a brave man facing down the fear of pain.

He is the man who saved you from the arena.

He smiled bitterly in the darkness, looking back once more at Marcus’ sleeping face.

In another life, perhaps, they could have been warriors together. Marcus would have painted himself with the colours of the Brigantes, even got a tattoo or too. Or maybe Esca could have worn one of those stupid helmets with the red crests.

Immediately at that thought, he thought he was losing his mind.

Maybe he needed sleep too.

It took a while longer before Marcus finally woke up and Esca moved to give him something to drink.

‘Did I shame myself?’ was the first thing Marcus asked.

Not how the operation went. Not how his uncle was.

He asked about his honour.

What are you? Who are you? Esca thought as he shook his head.

Romans are hungry wolves, but you, Marcus, are not.

And I don't understand you.

‘Thank you’ Marcus said then.

That was the first time Esca had been thanked for something, ever since becoming a slave.

He told himself to stop smiling as he left his master to rest.

Kindness

Chapter Summary

Marcus starts his journey to recovery.

Chapter Notes

Please note that this chapter is probably the least canon-compliant in this story (besides the “post-canon” one of course XD). This is because, in the movie, we don’t get shown much of the down time Marcus and Esca share before the start of their adventure, which, personally, it’s something I really would have liked to see.

Also, I reference here a deleted scene, a conversation the boys share. I believe you can find it on YouTube:)

The wisewoman had told him to go away.

The old crone was certain that his brother was fine and just needed to rest.

She had insisted that he should go and rest himself too, that he was of no good to either his brother or the tribe as a whole if he was too tired to do anything.

They had come back from a hunt, and accidents happened during hunting trips.

It was not his fault.

Even his father had said it was not his fault. His brother should have been less reckless, especially when hunting boars. He had been told time and time again. This accident would actually do him good, maybe finally calming his fire down.

But Esca didn’t pay attention to any of them. He was only vaguely aware of the wise woman shaking her head as she left the hut where they had brought him to rest.

They were alone now, and yet it almost felt more claustrophobic than before.

His eyes were not leaving his brother’s face. Sweat covered his forehead and his brother seemed to shake, even under all the furs.

Fever was gripping him.

The crone said he was going to be fine.

But Esca had seen young men dying of fever, even when everybody had agreed that they were going to be fine.

Overwhelmed, Esca moved his eyes up to the top of the hut and, quietly, murmured a prayer.

‘Please, please’ he whispered in the darkness, feeling his eyes burning.

He should have been more aware of the situation. That day he had let himself be too cocky, too self-confident, riding after his brother and that was the result.

And his brother’s blood had covered the forest.

It was only fair that, if the gods required a sacrifice, they would take him instead of his brother.

‘Take me’

‘Esca’

A barely audible whisper made him jump out of his skin.

He turned to his brother. His eyes were open but unfocused and his breathing was wild.

‘I’m here’ Esca said, quickly taking a cloth the wisewoman had left behind for him and, wetting it in the water bowl next to the bed, started to pass it on his brother’s face. Gently, he wiped away the sweat and the tears.

‘Esca’ his brother called once again.

‘I’m here, keep your strengths, don’t talk’

But he did, because, after all, stubbornness ran through the family.

‘I’m sorry’

‘Shhhh’ Esca whispered, the only thing he managed to say.

He was tired. Destroyed.

But his brother was alive.

‘You will get better. I promise you. And we will get our revenge on that stupid boar’

That brought a smile to his brother’s face and he slept a little better for the rest of the night.

The day after, the wisewoman found Esca asleep, kneeling over his brother’s bed.

The fever broke the day after.

But his brother still died three years afterwards, pierced by a Roman gladius.

And Esca didn't go on another boar hunt again.

The light of kindness and self-sacrifice was snuffed out of his chest.

Just like the ability to have a good night's sleep.

Because, ever since becoming a slave, Esca had learnt the importance of being a light sleeper.

Ever since becoming a slave, the slightest noise would wake Esca up.

A great skill to have, when you need to keep all your wits close to you, especially when your dominus is a violent, depraved man.

And, the night after Marcus finally woke up, the night when Esca thought he could finally rest a little bit more, it turned out to be the best of skills when attending to an injured centurion.

Because Esca woke up immediately from his pallet in Marcus' room the moment, he heard him moan one, simple, pained word:

'Father'

Esca stood up to check on his master.

Marcus was still asleep, but his face was covered in sweat and his hands were gripping the sheet. His teeth were grinding against each other.

For a moment, Esca just looked at him.

But the fire under his skin wasn't raging.

Maybe it was because he was boned tired, but, right there and then, his anger was tempered. Silent.

There was a man in that bed. A man in pain. And it was not only physical.

The fever was giving him nightmares.

'Father' Marcus moaned again.

And something tugged at Esca's heart.

Had he been calling for his father through the night as well, when his nightmare of a life started?

What has happened to you, Marcus? he thought.

No, dominus. Not Marcus. Remember that.

Yes, he did remember. It wasn't something you could forget.

And yet, the man on that bed didn't seem able to order Esca's death with just the snap of his fingers.

He looked like Esca himself, he thought, feeling himself blush. Like a man's whose past is still haunting him.

And, at that thought, a feeling that he thought his years as a slave had completely squashed from his chest, made its return in his heart. Instinctively, he took the cloth and the bowl of water next to it and, as gently as he could, went to wipe Marcus' face. Esca passed it on his forehead, wrinkled with far too many lines of worry for one so young. Slowly, he passed the cloth on Marcus' cheekbones and then a little further down, along his jawline and neck.

Then, he put the cloth away and he gently passed his own hand on the side of Marcus' face.

His touch was barely there, but he could feel the warmth of the other's skin. The softness under all the pressure.

Esca's breath itched for a moment.

The skin of his palm felt incandescent.

He hadn't been allowed to touch another with kindness in countless years.

He smiled when he noticed that Marcus' sleep seemed to have calmed down. In the stillness of the night, Esca then allowed himself to look at him, free from the anger, hate, and embarrassment that had been hot and alive between them.

The man in his care was handsome. For Roman standards sure, but also for the tribes.

For a moment, Esca allowed himself to imagine Marcus on a Brigantes' chariot, following him into battle. Stupid, pleasant dreams, he thought, looking up again at the man's face and

His whole body got paralysed by fear when he saw his master's eyes opening. It took a few seconds for them to focus, but then he seemed to recognise Esca.

Flee you fool, he told himself.

But he stayed.

Right that moment, there was nothing to fear from Marcus.

And he had more work to do.

‘Are you in pain?’ he asked.

He watched Marcus take several deep breaths. And then, he finally nodded.

Esca’s practical mind then took over. He stood up, took the little jug with the smelly concoction the doctor had left, with the express instruction to only give it to Marcus if he was in pain, and came back to him.

‘This stinks’ he said, with as much amusement in his voice as he could master.

A warm feeling spread in his chest when he saw Marcus’ attempting to smile back at him.

‘And it tastes foul’ Marcus muttered.

‘Familiar with it, aren’t we?’

‘Far more than I would like’ Marcus said, before making a face as Esca helped him up to take a sip of the medicine.

‘Well, you know what they say, doctors are all out to poison us’ he said.

What was he even talking about, he thought.

He wasn’t sure. But talking, finally talking, was making him feel better.

And was clearly making Marcus relax.

‘I always suspected as much’ Marcus replied, as Esca helped him down once more.

‘Try to rest a bit more now’ Esca said, putting the jug away.

He was about to go back to his pallet once more when Marcus’ hand closed on his wrist.

Esca looked at the hand and then up again to his master.

If they had been back in his land, if Marcus had been his brother or one of his friends, he would have immediately understood what that gesture meant.

In another life, he would have just sat back down on Marcus’ bed, keeping watch on his sleep and dispelling the evil spirits of the night.

But they were men of their time. A Roman and a Briton in now Roman land.

Romans are monsters.

Esca's heart shut down again.

Stupid. Stupid. Stupid. He is not your friend or your brother.

But he is my bond of honour.

‘What are your orders, domine?’

If a moment earlier, Esca could have sworn that Marcus was about to ask him to stay close, to help him keep away the demons of the night, now he could see that even Marcus was back to his loneliness and pain.

Surely, he was about to tell him to go. He was dismissed or something.

But Marcus, once again, surprised him:

‘Thank you’

Esca made a little nod with his head and stood up.

They had known each other for what, three or four days, and Marcus had already thanked him much more than any other Roman had done to him before.

Marcus had thanked him more than Esca himself had with Marcus, even though he had been the one to save his life.

Without looking at Marcus, he said:

‘I will be close by’

Screw you Rome.

You might have thought you bested me, making me a slave to this man.

But you are wrong.

I will protect him because he is my bond of honour. Like my father said.

I will bring honour to my forebears by protecting him.

I am not doing this for you.

Marcus' health slowly improved and, soon, he started to be a little too fidgety to stay trapped in his cell, lying down on his bed.

Not that Esca could blame him. Esca's world had become much smaller, to just what was trapped by the walls of the villa. Marcus' one had turned into just the space of his cell for far too long.

'If you are that bored it means it's time to hop out' Esca said, realising, a moment too late, that maybe he had said too much.

His place was on the threshold, looking in, listening in, but never to speak. That was what he had been doing those days while waiting for Marcus to feel better, especially when he had to interact with the other slaves or with Marcus' uncle.

And yet, somehow, as they were alone in Marcus' cell, the words just poured out.

A little smile appeared on Marcus' face.

'I might need a little help standing up though'

Esca made a little nod and, silently, he moved to Marcus' side helping him up.

'You are very strong, for one so wiry' Marcus said, as he passed his arm around Esca's shoulders and they made their first, tentative steps towards the outside world.

Esca was pleased to see a playful grin on Marcus' face.

Esca grinned back, surprising himself that his muscles still knew how to do that.

'And you are quite heavy, for one so tall' Esca replied, only to realise that it didn't make too much sense. Considering how tall Marcus was, of course he was going to be heavy. They had needed two men to help out of the arena.

He was tall, broad and muscular.

Even after the time he had been away from the physical exertion of the army, he still had quite the presence.

He still had the body of a warrior.

'Are you saying I am going soft?' Marcus replied with that same playfulness still in his eyes.

'You started it, saying I am short'

Marcus laughed.

Esca liked the sound of that.

Stop it. Stop it.

You hate this man.

Remember that.

He has been sent to you by Rome to corrupt you, you should better remember that.

They sat together side by side, in the garden, enjoying what was, for once, a nice, sunny day.

‘It rains so much here’ Marcus said.

‘Does it rain less in Rome?’ Esca said. His tongue ached as he pronounced that horrid word, those two stupid syllables that made the name of Rome.

But, for whatever reason, he wanted to continue that conversation with Marcus.

He hadn’t had a conversation with someone for so long.

‘It rains differently. It rains in big, scary downpours from heaven, sometimes so strong that they seriously damage things and rivers overflow. Here it seems to rain more lightly, but for days, with a strange rain that doesn’t seem to really wet you’

‘Oh, trust me, if you stand in it long enough it does wet you alright’ Esca replied, laughing.

He was the one laughing. Never before he had laughed with a master

What are you doing to me Marcus? I should not laugh with you.

‘I will try next time I have the chance then’ Marcus said, with all the solemnity of an important promise.

Could this man ever do things just for fun?

If he had been a friend or a brother, Esca would have given him a shove, told him to get off his mighty horse and relax a little.

But Marcus was not his friend or brother.

But, once again, Marcus surprised him by asking him:

‘Once I am better, would you’

Then he stopped. Esca saw him frowning, unsure if to continue.

‘Come on’ Esca said, hardening his heart immediately.

What was he going to say? Was Marcus finally going to show his true colours as a Roman and order him to do something untoward?

‘Would you like to come on a hunt with me? I hear that there are boars and deer around’ he said, looking straight ahead of him.

You know you could just order me to come with you, Esca was about to say.

Rome, this doesn’t make sense. Your son here doesn’t make sense.

But Esca didn’t say any of those things.

Instinctively, he smiled and said:

‘Of course’.

That night, Marcus’ leg, finally exercised for a bit, pained him greatly.

Esca’s heart started to pound like mad in his chest when it became clear to him what to do. He remembered the doctor’s instructions loud and clear:

‘The moment he recovers from the fever and starts to move around again, the leg will need to be helped a little while it heals. You will need to massage it with his oil’

And the doctor had shown him what to do.

Esca had hoped, deep down, that it was not going to come to this.

But there they were, Marcus’ expression was clearly pained once more.

And Esca was practical enough to know when things needed to be done.

‘Take you braccæ off’ he said that night, right before Marcus could dismiss him.

‘What?’

‘Doctor’s orders. I need to’ Esca took a deep breath, looking down at the floor.

‘I need to massage your leg to prevent pains and cramps’

He saw Marcus immediately blush.

‘I thought we agreed that doctors are just trying to poison us’ Marcus said

‘But this one in particular did help your wound. Perhaps we should believe him’ Esca said.

Don’t make this even more strange than it is.

I am a warrior too, not a wise man.

But I want to help.

Marcus nodded. He was clearly incredibly uncomfortable, his whole body stiffening up as he took his braccæ off.

He lied back down on his bed, looking at everything but Esca, as if he was trying to hide how burning his cheeks looked.

There was a time when Esca’s emotions were always paraded on his face. Slavery had knocked that out of him.

While Marcus’ heart was on his sleeves.

And, in a strange way, Esca found that endearing.

He put himself to work.

Maybe it was the smell of the oil. Maybe it was the feeling of touching Marcus’ warm skin.

But Esca was certain that he was blushing too.

And, finally, Marcus was well enough to go out. He was walking by himself, he was able to go to town on his own.

Esca couldn’t help it. He was proud of the work they had done together.

He was proud of the happiness he could clearly see in another human being.

And he was able to ride once again.

They woke up early, at dawn, and got the horses and the weapons ready.

Marcus had to be mad. He had to be.

Why was he giving weapons to a slave?

But Esca didn't ask, didn't complain, as the pleasure of riding away, the feeling of the powerful body of the horse beneath him and the wind in his face, overwhelmed him.

For a moment, it tasted of freedom.

For a moment, looking at Marcus, at the amazing rider that he clearly was, Esca was transported back to the hunts of his past.

For a moment, as the two of them chased a boar down, Esca felt home.

There was a little lake near the villa, and it was here that they decided to stop to take care of their prey.

And it was here that Marcus asked him about the ninth legion.

And about the eagle.

Esca made a joke at first, that the legionary had liked the weather in Caledonia so much that they stayed and married the women, which earned him a soft chuckle from Marcus.

But then, when he mentioned his tribe, Marcus asked:

'Your tribe?'

Esca's heart wouldn't stop pounding he looked back at Marcus with a challenge in his eyes:

'My tribe is gone'

What are you going to say now? Roman?

What are you or your precious eagle going to say now?

The fire roared in his ears, expectantly.

But Marcus didn't say a word. He simply looked away.

Which was a kindness.

No words could match what had been lost.

‘My father’s name was Cunoval’

A knot formed around his stomach.

It was the first time in all his years as a slave that he was uttering his father’s name out loud.

For a moment, in that golden afternoon, the ghosts and the memories were coming back to life, dancing on the surface of the water.

He could feel Marcus’ gaze on him as he told him about his brothers’ death. And about his mother’s sacrifice.

‘I alone of all my kin survive’ he said, with throat burning as he said those words.

He should have died that day.

He should have died in the arena.

Why was he still alive when they had all gone beyond? He was a shame to his father’s name.

When he knew that Marcus had averted his gaze once again, Esca turned to him.

Do you understand now? Do you understand my pain?

Nobody had before.

But maybe Marcus could.

‘I am sorry’

Marcus said, looking straight at him.

Esca’s words died in his chest.

Marcus was Roman.

Marcus had said sorry to him.

Esca knew it wasn't enough.

It would never be enough.

But Marcus hadn't been there on that day in the fields. Marcus was a killer. But, in a way, so was Esca.

Esca nodded.

Suddenly, he felt he need to move, change the subject.

Leave the ghosts to rest again.

'The hunting was good'

Metamorphoses

Chapter Summary

Esca and Marcus come back to the villa only to find two Roman politicians with Uncle Aquila.

Chapter Notes

Please note that English is not my first language and this work is unbetaed.

In this chapter I have made very vague references to Latin literature, in particular to the Metamorphoses of Ovid, but you don't need to have read them in order to follow Esca's thoughts.

Enjoy :) Do let me know what you think and if you have any feedback :)

Esca was aware that the Romans, just like the Brigantes, liked stories. They liked them recited in their big theatres and he knew that they wrote them down and held them in libraries and shops.

He also knew that some of these stories were about change, about one thing, or one person, changing into another, in an animal, or in a plant.

Esca had never read such stories, he had never had time, neither before nor, of course, during his slavery.

But he knew full well that, in that golden afternoon, when both of them still smelled of the hunt, of sweat, soil and blood, Marcus had metamorphosed into something new.

Something magnificent.

Marcus had turned from a broken Roman centurion to a Brigantes' warrior.

He was glorious, vibrating with strength and pride for a good hunt.

Long gone seemed his sickness. His weakness. His skin was bronze in the sunlight and he was smiling more broadly than he had done in so long.

For a brief moment, even his name in Esca's mind changed from "Of Mars", to "Of Belatucadros".

Something old, something primordial stirred inside Esca at that spectacle shining in front of him.

Something old that made Esca's chest explode with warmth, like life returning after a cold winter.

In that golden afternoon, for a brief moment when it was only the two of them in the vastity of Britannia, Esca loved him deeply.

Rome, you made a mistake with this son of yours. He is too kind for a Roman. He is too stupidly kind.

He is not like any other Roman I have ever met.

If you wanted to punish me, you should have sent someone else to torture me.

But Esca also had the vague notion that those metamorphoses in Roman stories were forever, the gods never changed a human back. Just like the Romans themselves, their gods were unforgiving monsters, changing a woman into a bear, or a young man into a swan for crying too much for his dead companion.

They were punishments for hubris, for pride, or for laying with the wrong god. Roman gods liked to play with the lives of mortals.

And Rome the goddess was still toying with him.

He was her pray.

Like a bored lioness, she was playing with her prey.

And for once, the metamorphosis didn't last, because the goddess knew that it would be much more devastating to make this change a fleeting moment.

So, his Belatucadros did change back. Slowly, he shredded his new golden mantle, making it all the more painful.

Bringing back the painful reality of Esca's misery.

On the approach to his uncle's village, this new Brigante was still there. He didn't even pay too much attention to the two Roman soldiers in full uniform standing right outside while, instead, the hairs on Esca's neck immediately seemed to irk up.

What were the wolves doing there?

No, go away, this is not your place, Esca thought as the old fire of rage roared in his ears.

Can I never have a moment of peace?

Then, Esca found himself in front of full horror waiting for them: Uncle Aquila was sitting in his chair, laughing together with two togati, a fat man with a red face and a young one, oozing of pride and privilege.

Rome was there. Staring right back at him. Turning him to stone, like that Roman story with the Medusa.

For one, last, fleeting moment, his companion looked back at him. If he could have, Esca would have smiled at him.

But he couldn't, as he saw the magic of the metamorphosis change, turning into dust at his feet.

Marcus the broken, Roman centurion was back there, welcoming the two strangers with that typical Roman way of grasping each other's forearms.

Silently, Esca left. It was too much.

He would need to regain all his strength and composure, knowing full well that he was going to have to be, once again, near Marcus the centurion, on the threshold, looking into the full horror of Roman occupation.

Gods, please save me from these illusions.

Lift this curse on my soul.

I can't bear this.

During dinner, Esca stood near the window, close enough to be ready for whatever Marcus would need, but he let his mind wander, barely aware of the idle chat of the pompous young

man, pretending that he wanted to be a soldier. From his position, Esca couldn't really see Marcus' face well, but, if he had learnt anything of the Roman he was serving, he suspected full well that he was finding the young politicians as idiotic as Esca was finding him.

So ridiculous.

Perhaps, if life had been different, after dinner they could have shared some jokes at the expense of the young man.

And then, the pompous man asked about Marcus' father.

And everything delicate, every "what could have been" thought in his mind vanished.

'He commanded the first cohort of the ninth' Marcus said, pride ringing true in his voice.

Esca froze on the spot.

No.

No, no, no, his mind shouted. Marcus' father had been one of the monsters up north. He had been part of the long snake of red uniforms marching to conquer.

And yet, it made perfect sense. Esca had deluded himself that perhaps Marcus' interest in the lost legion, in the lost Eagle, was the curiosity of a bored man not yet too familiar with the stories that every single person in the province of Britannia knew.

How stupid had he been? With a simple little calculation, he could have suspected that Marcus' father, the mysterious dead man, could have been involved with the butchery that went on in the Place of Heroes.

You deluded yourself, Marcus is the son of a killer.

And he is a killer himself.

He tuned back into the conversation, surprised to see how not only Marcus, but Uncle Aquila too got affected by the old man telling them about some strange rumours about the lost Eagle. For as different as uncle and nephew were, they were still family.

There were voices that the Eagle was with the painted people.

Right. The painted people.

The Barbarians.

He better remembered that Esca himself was a Barbarian too.

‘What would Rome say?’ Uncle Aquila said, trying to suggest that, perhaps, they could go and check if these rumours were true.

‘Eagle lost, honour lost, honour lost, all lost’ the old man said, brushing away such suggestions as if they were no more than a fantasy and thus turning off all hope in the old Aquila.

Selfish, Esca thought. You can lie to a dying man if you can give him some comfort. And yet, somehow, Esca felt glad. It was a foolish idea anyway. An ideal of victory that was doom to fail.

Like most ideals have always been since the dawn of time.

He had been a dreamer once, and, as far as he was concerned, ideals could only hurt you.

‘Not if you send one man’ Marcus then said.

If he could have shown some emotion, if he could have been free to be more than just an object in that room, Esca would have laughed.

Of course. Marcus was clever. Of course, he could have immediately come up with a way to circumvent the objections of the other Romans around him.

Marcus was also very stupid.

Going north of the wall would mean his death.

And Esca couldn’t stand for that. He had made a promise.

The fire under his skin raged.

‘North of the wall? No Roman can survive there’ Uncle Aquila said.

Exactly, you idiot, listen to your uncle, Esca thought.

It doesn't pay to chase dreams Marcus.

And then, right when Esca least expected it, the final blow to whatever sanity was left in Marcus stroke down, like a lighting in a blue sky:

'The loss of the ninth was humiliating enough, without adding another pointless death' the young politician said.

Marcus stood up, glaring at the young man.

Stubborn, stubborn Roman, Esca thought, as he silently followed his master and his uncle away from the prying eyes of the strangers.

And, silently, he listened to their conversation.

'Ever since I can remember, all I ever wanted to be was a soldier. I can still see him now, riding away for the last time. I can still feel how proud I was' Marcus said.

Esca could still see his own father too, riding in the face of destiny.
Even with the full knowledge that they were about to die, Esca had felt proud.
And, just like Marcus, he could still feel it, pushing him forward even in his darkest moments.

'My father, centurion of the first cohort of the ninth legion. Can you imagine anything more magnificent?'

Yes, a chieftain of the Brigantes, riding in front of five hundred spears, ready to battle at his command.

Had Marcus ever seen something that glorious?

'Can you imagine anything more magnificent than to be a soldier, and serve Rome, with courage and faithfulness'

'But you did son'

'For what? An honourable discharge?' Marcus shouted.

And you are lucky, Esca wanted to shout back at him. I did everything right, I served my gods and my tribe. I was a dutiful son.

And for what? Slavery at the hand of foreign savages.

You are lucky, Marcus Flavius Aquila.

‘That’s fate. That’s in the hands of the gods’ uncle Aquila said, shaking his head against the strength of the storm raging in front of him.

Well, the gods then are blind. The gods are all wrong and cruel, Esca thought, grasping his own arms around himself in a tighter embrace.

The gods took away Marcus’ chance of redemption. The gods took away Esca’ future.

Maybe one day someone was going to find a way to kill such cruel gods and get revenge for a broken centurion and a lost man of the obliterated Brigantes tribe.

It was right there then, against his better judgement, against all the reminders that were thrown in his face that night regarding Marcus’ past and identity, that Esca felt pity for Marcus.

And for himself.

Suddenly, it all became clear.

Marcus hadn’t metamorphosed into another man of the Brigantes.

He had turned into Esca himself.

Both broken. Both lost.

Just on different sides of the coin.

Just on different sides of a broken mask of the god Janus, with two faces.

‘When I was made a centurion, they asked me where I wanted to be posted. I knew the answer before they even asked. Britain.’

‘This is where my father lost the Eagle. This is where I was going to be covered in so much glory than no Roman would dare bring up his name again. What do I do now?’

Marcus' voice turned desperate, tugging again at Esca's heart.

He had been there, many a time, in the darkness of despair, when everything seemed lost and the water was coming to your throat, about to choke you.

Perhaps stupidly, he didn't want Marcus' voice to sound like that.

He wanted him to live. Just like Marcus had wanted Esca to live.

They were both alone. But perhaps they could be alone together.

'I sit and listen to some silk ass son of a politician piss on our family's name'

Esca almost smiled at that comment.

Yes, in another world and time they could have been friends and make fun of pompous bastards like Servius Placidus.

'I will not sit in some villa for the rest of my days, rotting away, remembering. If I can't win back my family's honour by being a soldier, then I will do it by finding the lost Eagle'

Esca barely stopped himself from laughing.
Honourable, stubborn and incredibly stupid Marcus.

'You can't. No Roman can survive north of the wall'

Surely, in a little while, this conversation will be over, Esca thought. For as stupid as Marcus is, surely, he will see reason too.

Rome, you cruel temptress, help your son see reason.

But Rome wouldn't listen to the prayers of a Barbarian who had cursed her children many a time.

'Then I will take Esca. I can use his knowledge, he speaks the language'

Esca forced himself to be as expressionless as he could as he tried to quieten his fury.

Use. Marcus had said "use".

Like a tool.

‘Esca?’ Uncle Aquila said, a hardened expression taking place of the patient one he had reserved for his nephew's anger till that point.

‘Why not?’ Marcus said, with the simplicity of a child who believes he has every mystery of life figured out.

And, right there and then, Esca was sure that Rome the goddess was speaking to him through Uncle Aquila's voice.

‘Because he is a Briton. He may not be from north of the wall, but he is a Briton. And he will slit your throat the minute you are gone’

Esca increased the pressure of his hands on his own arms to keep himself in check because, if he had been free to act, to speak, to be a human being once more, he would have shouted and spat all his hate at that old man.

‘He wouldn’t do that’ Marcus replied.

Oh Marcus.

Perhaps his master was really a little stupid. Or too blinded by his strange conception of honour.

‘How do you know?’

‘He gave me his word’

Something of the warmth he had felt earlier in the day tugged again at his heart.

That was the first time in seven years someone had treated him as more than an object.

As more than a slave.

Marcus believed in Esca’s words. In his honour.

Stupid Marcus. He was completely oblivious to the barriers between them.

‘He is a slave. He says what he says and does what he does because he has to’

I might be a slave in your eyes.

But I am Cunoval’s son.

Rome has not broken me in seven years.

It will not make me turn against what I am right when I am called to act.

You will see, old man.

‘If I am wrong, then I will die. And that is how it should be’

No. You will not die, Esca thought. I made a promise once, to treasure a bond of honour with my life. And I will make another promise tonight: you will not die north of the wall.

But I will also not let you dishonour my tribe’s past.

In the shadow of the wall

Chapter Summary

Missing scene from the boys' journey to the wall.

Chapter Notes

I couldn't resist adding a missing scene XD

Enjoy, do let me know what you think :)

At the start of the journey to the wall, Esca was sure that, for all of Marcus' enthusiasm as they left the villa, his uncle and all of Rome's pompous politicians behind, he was soon going to realise how stupid this whole thing was and back down before it was too late.

Like the old man had said "Eagle lost, honour lost, honour lost, all lost".

He should really focus on starting a new life, not chasing after ghosts, Esca thought, as they rode.

Yet, as they pushed forward, the stubborn Roman's resolution seemed to only increase a little more each step they took.

Esca saw Marcus draw strength from praying to his strange god with the Frisian hat.

Esca saw Marcus smile, when they rested in secluded areas under the cover of darkness, even though his leg was sore and there was no damn Roman bath for miles.

And he heard him talking more, so much more than he had ever done before, during their year together in the villa, waiting for his wounds to heal.

He talked to him about expeditions he had been in, he told him about the long marches and about how big and wild the world was. How full of wonders and diversity.

Sometimes he quietened down a little, almost as if he were expecting Esca to chime in, to tell him something about his life experience, maybe something about the Brigantes, maybe something about what to expect north of the wall.

But Esca never replied. Esca never told him that he didn't care much for how wild the world was, not when his mother land had plenty of wonders to explore. He never told him that

when you have no options, dreaming is a dangerous business, it can only bring you further down into darkness or lead you to insanity.

But it was nice to hear the stories.

It was nice to hear someone still enthusiastic about life.

For as much as Esca tried to fight it, it was drawing him in, like a moth to the fire.

More, tell me more.

Tell me everything, his heart sometimes seemed to whisper.

At times, he felt like he could open more with Marcus, that he could tell him about his memories of the hunts with his brothers, of the village festivals, or the first time that he had taken another man for a lover and...

But he always stopped himself from filling that silence.

So, Marcus kept on talking and talking, as if a massive weight had been taken away from his chest the moment they had gone out of the villa.

You see Rome, even your own son is better when he is far away from you, he thought, as he finally let himself fall asleep, as tried not to think of the strange thoughts whirling inside his head.

Marcus was better.

Freedom and the power of a new lease on life looked very good on him.

And those strange thoughts, thoughts about how his Roman was different, how his Roman was objectively attractive, kept on tormenting him, as he looked away from his fool of a master and instead tried to focus on hunting for their dinner.

It had taken a little bit of perseverance to convince Marcus to stay put and rest his damned leg, but he had done it, leaving him behind.

For the first time in forever, Esca ran in the forest.

Enjoying being alone, for once.

Enjoying the movements of his own body without being always, constantly watched.

Enjoying the thrill of being free, even if for an illusionary moment.

But, north of the wall, you could be free, a treacherous thought appeared in his head, as he quietly moved forward, once he had spotted two, plump looking rabbits.

You could slit his throat, just like that old fool had said.

That's what they expect of you, don't they? You are a Barbarian, behave yourself like a Barbarian and free yourself of the yoke of their domination.

That's what they expect, make them happy, confirm their distorted world views and you make yourself free.

His heart raced in his chest, as fast as that of the rabbits as they chased what was left of their lives.

Yes, I could be free. I could give my life to the northern tribes. It would be like going home. They could make use of skills, and of my knowledge of Roman customs and...

Use.

They could use him. Marcus said that he could use his skills.

Damn you all, he thought, as the rabbits died.

Was he ever going to be free?

And, in that very moment, his father's words came back to him loud and clear, the promise that it didn't matter who he would be bound by honour to serve, he will honour that connection because it was the right thing to do.

He bit his lower lip to prevent himself from growling like a feral beast.

Why, of all people, did it have to be a Roman?

Why did Marcus save his life?

One day he was going to ask him again, why he had done it.

There was going to be other days.

Because he was not going to go against a promise to his father.

He walked back, taking a far longer route that he needed to, hoping to calm himself down a little.

The wall wasn't too far away now. Soon, he was going to need all his wits about himself. He had a plan in mind, a plan to protect Marcus and protect the free Britons from the rage of a broken centurion.

The question was if Marcus was smart enough to see through the deception.

No, he probably was not going to see through it, Esca thought when, as Marcus spotted him approaching, the Roman smiled at him.

I have told you, I hate you. I hate Rome and all you stand for.
And you still smile at me.
You are a very stupid, stupid man.

And I am ready to die to protect you.

‘Thank you, Esca’ he said, as he took the rabbits.

Marcus took Esca’s hand and squeezed it for a moment, perhaps a little gesture of thank you.

Esca took his hand back as quickly as he could, the shock of the contact almost painful on his skin.

If Marcus noticed his reaction, he didn’t say.

The damn fool just smiled once more before setting himself to prepare the rabbits for dinner.

Esca let himself sit down for a moment.

If he is a damn fool, you are a stupid fool. Calm yourself down.
He barely touched your hand.
And he is Roman.

Yes. But he is kind.
And, for the love of all the gods, it has been so long and...

When he could finally trust his heart and his voice again, Esca said:

‘You are the strangest master I have ever had’

But regretted it immediately.

There we go, he thought, the moment he could relax his guard a little, the emotions came pouring out again.

‘How so?’ Marcus said, still smiling as he moved to prepare the rabbits.

Esca didn’t reply for a moment, marvelling at how his master hadn’t insisted on him doing that dirty work. He had been called to do it for the boar they had hunted, he had been called to it many other times.

But the villa was far away.

And Marcus seemed to enjoy doing something, anything, that wasn’t rotting away with the rest of the old men.

Stupid, of course, during his time in the army he surely has had to do stuff like this, and more.

‘You keep on spending so much time thanking a slave’

Marcus, for a moment, was completely silent.

Esca watched his deft hands move on their food, rapidly, they knew exactly what needed to be done.

His strong hands.

Esca saw Marcus swallow. The Roman kept his eyes fixed on the fire before finally saying:

‘It’s the proper thing to do. Jobs well done need to be recognised and appreciated’

Esca laughed.

‘Did I say something funny?’ Marcus asked, finally turning to look at Esca.

‘You just gave me even more proof that you are indeed the strangest master I have ever had’

‘How so?’

Gods, was he really that blind to the reality of their relationship?

Or had it perhaps been a very, very long time for Marcus too?

Now that he thought about it, nobody had ever come to the villa to visit him.

Not a friend.

Not a lover.

Whatever, not your problem, Esca thought.

He brought his mind to his previous masters. To the whip. To the scars on his back. To the pain that never let him sleep peacefully again.

‘Nobody ever thanks a slave for a job well done. But everybody punishes a slave for a poorly made job’ he stated, hoping that Marcus could finally open his eyes.

‘Esca. You’ Marcus had turned once again to the fire.

In the dim light it made through the darkness of the night, Esca saw his master’s resolution falter.

He saw him standing on the edge of what it was to be a proper Roman.

And what it was to be the decent human being that Esca was, somehow, coming to think he was.

‘You must know I don’t think of you like that’ Marcus then said, his eyes still eluding Esca’s. All his muscles seemed stiffer, as he talked in that strange, hoarse voice.

Esca didn't allow himself to think that, perhaps, deep down, he had come to think of Marcus as a friend too.

Because it just wasn't possible.

'But Rome does' Esca hissed, closing himself off to those stupid, useless thoughts.

They ate the rest of their dinner in silence, before taking turns to watch over each other during the night.

Friends.

Could it be?

Rome, goddess of treachery, please stop tormenting me.

This can't be.

Not in the shadow of the wall.

They arrive at the wall the day after and, amongst the jeers of the legionaries posted there, the doors opened and, together, they took their first steps in the world at the end of the world.

The ambush

Chapter Summary

Marcus and Esca continue their journey beyond the wall.

Chapter Notes

Please please please note that this chapter makes reference to the scene when Marcus kill the rogue warrior child.

The moment they left the wall behind, everything changed.

The air was different.

The sky was different.

Marcus was different. Since seeing the beheaded, naked bodies dangling from the trees in the white light of the northern sun, his proud smile was gone. Esca saw his body tense, all his senses alerted to the most miniscule signs of any rogue warrior studying them.

Esca felt differently too.

Lighter.

The land was not so dissimilar from that of his father.

The woods were ancient but teeming with the life he had forgotten, stuck behind the walls of the villa of his oppressors.

His heart felt less heavy.

Would his gods be more prone to listen to his prayers, in such a free land, a place where he could leave Rome and her cruelty was behind?

Cruelty.

That word made him pause for a second.

He looked once more at the bodies dangling from the trees.

His first thought at the sight had been “serves you well, pay the price for the pain you caused. You didn’t deserve these lands. You didn’t deserve to live”.

But then, for a moment, those bodies grew heads back.

And those heads were those of his brothers. And that of his father.

A cold shiver went down his spine as he rode ahead of Marcus.

Those dangling bodies were those of other men, men that had been following orders, chasing a dream they thought they had. There surely had been people destroyed at the news of their deaths.

The same pain he had experienced at the death of his family.

Who was he to say that they deserved to die, more than the warriors that had done that?
What did he even know of them?

They were not the butcher of a doctor that helped him through his recovery, not having even the good grace of giving him so wine to help him through the pain.

They were not the slave owners, with their whips.

They were not the one that had cut his ear.

They were not the fat man that torture him before sending him to the arena.

For what was worth, they might not have even been Romans. Esca was distantly aware that the Roman army had people from all over the world, taken from one place and catapulted in another, making them fight with the promise of citizenship for them and their children.

If they lived long enough to have children.

Stupid, stupid Esca, he thought. Your time as a slave has made you go soft in the head.

And yet he knew it was going to take a little while before forgetting the picture of his brothers’ dead eyes dangling from the trees.

But he hoped that the spirits of the forest would listen, and he prayed.

I hope, wherever you are, that you find peace.
I will be with you soon. I will just finish this mission.
I will bring honour to you the only way I have left.

He didn’t say a word to Marcus for the rest of the journey that day, knowing full well that it would have been better for the mission, for his plan, to put as much distance between the two of them as possible.

A distance that seemed to be increasing with each step they took.

He focused on moving forward, on enjoying the noises of the forest.

But he could feel Marcus's eyes on him as he studied the world around them.

What are you thinking about? Esca wanted to ask him. He could see Marcus looking, studying the land, filing things away for the time when he would need to make a strategy or something.

Like a good Roman soldier.

In that very moment, Esca had the clear perception of the chasm between them.

Are you assessing how barbaric the tribes are here, compared to your stupid, stupid scale of values?

Are those values even worth it, when people get caught in the crossfire between them?

He wanted to shout when the memory of his mother's last kiss washed over his pain.

Marcus was the one to break the silence Esca had been treasuring, when night fell, and they rested around a little fire in the most secluded area in the woods they could find.

Esca could have done with maintaining that silence. It was cold, so cold as he tried to make himself as small as possible within his clothes, somehow hoping to get more warmth out of them.

Oh, how he missed his father's roundhouse.

'You know, sometimes I dreamt I would find my father up here. That he survived in some hidden place'

Esca kept his face as stern as possible, hiding the way that comment had tugged at his heart.

He had those dreams too. They had tormented him over and over again, the illusionary images of Cunoval rushing in his chariot to come and save him, telling him that it had all been a nightmare.

That his brothers, his mother, the rest of his tribe and his future were not dead.

People get killed in the crossfire.
And hearts get shuttered.

He and a Roman shared the same pain. Something he had never thought possible.

'Is that why you are here? To find your father?'

Yes, please say yes. Tell me that you are as shuttered as me, he thought, hoping that the connection he thought they had established in that golden afternoon hadn't just been in his head.

'No. We are here to find the Eagle' Marcus replied, with the certainty of a Roman centurion, not that of a friend.

The certainty of someone who still thought the world was black and white.

Esca had to grasp all the restraint he had left not to jump at Marcus and punch him in the face.

How can you be so blind? Did you not see those dead bodies in the woods?

'How can a piece of metal mean so much to you?' he said, fearing his voice would shake too much.

Don't show him all these emotions of yours.

He wouldn't understand.

Marcus smiled, pride shining in his eyes against their little fire.

'The eagle is not a piece of metal. The eagle is Rome. It's a symbol of our honour. Every victory. Every achievement. Wherever the Eagle is, we can say, Rome did that'

Esca remained silent. What was there to say to that?

Marcus' worldview was one big monolith, like those of the stone circles he remembered seeing as a child.

Never moving. Never changing.

But Esca didn't challenge him. The idea of Rome was too tangled together with the memory of Marcus' father. He could perhaps show mercy on him and let him keep his delusional dream.

But that evening, Marcus seemed determined to drag all of Esca's anger out of him.

So, even though he could have just gone back to the silence they had been sharing, that bastard of a Roman went on to say:

'You wouldn't understand. How could you?'

Esca lifted his gaze then, staring at him for a moment.

For Marcus, he would only ever be a Barbarian.

For Marcus, they had nothing in common, even if he had told him about his losses.

He lowered his gaze back down to the fire.

Father, you made me promise something I don't know if I can keep.
Please, give me strength to protect this man from my own hatred.

So, he told Marcus his story again, hoping that drilling it in the stubborn Roman's head would help him understand.

He faltered a moment when it came to his mother's tale.

His graceful, indomitable mother brought down to her knees.

He remembered how she had smiled at him one last time.

Even in death she had not been as scared as he was.

'My father killed her before the legionnaires broke through. He knew what they would do to her' he said, spitting the words at Marcus.

Would you have done those unspeakable things to her too? You, the one taking time to thank a slave, would you have lost yourself in the frenzy of battle.

Blood turns men into beasts.

Marcus just stared back at him.

'Rome also did that'

Esca didn't think, called or curse Rome the goddess that night.
She didn't have any power here.
Just like Marcus didn't.

The silence, finally, returned.

The pushed forward. And forward.

He did try to make Marcus see reason. He advised him that five thousand men could indeed disappear in a glen.

And there were thousands of glens.

But Marcus' resolution continued to not waver, weighting his neck down like that damn, little wooden eagle he still had around his neck.

So, Esca decided to get comfortable. After all, the longer it would take for Marcus' strength to leave him and finally decide to march back, the longer he could enjoy the distance between him and the villa.

But right as he settled down to have something to eat during a midday pause, he felt his skin prickle.

He had heard the clear, distinct noise of someone moving around them.

And, as the trained hunter he was, he studied the forest without giving away that he knew.

Three warriors were hiding away in the dark forest behind Marcus.

If Esca hadn't been tensed enough, he would have laughed.

For all your Roman military training you have miserably failed to pick up on the presence of the rogue warriors right behind you.

'Don't look' he finally said.

Marcus stilled.

'There are three rogue warriors behind you. How many behind me?'

He had heard them.

'I don't see anyone'

Of course, you don't.

Funny how the barbarians have bested you.

'They're there. Are you ready?' he said.

The next moment the fight started.

Adrenaline rushed all over his body, making him hyper aware of everything.

Allowing him to save Marcus, shooting an arrow just in time to kill a rogue warrior that had jumped out of the water.

But it didn't help him when he was attacked by a warrior that jumped out of the trees at his shoulders.

A rogue warrior that turned out to be nothing more than a child.

A scared, terrified child that looked away from Esca and Esca's weapon when he knew death would come to him.

Had the children of his own tribe looked like that when their time had come?

Another child caught in the crossfire.

Esca let him go.

And, a moment later, he saw his young body flop down, grounded by an arrow.

Esca took deep breath, trying desperately to calm down.

But he couldn't.

'Next time don't hesitate' Marcus said, showing the mercy of a killer by finishing the child.

Monster.

Monster.

The fire under his skin was alight once more.

Up in the mountains

Chapter Summary

Marcus and Esca get to know about a mysterious man who could help them in their search.

But the path to reach him is a difficult one.

Chapter Notes

Extra little missing scene.

With the benefit of hindsight, Esca was convinced that, if he had made a mistake in the early days of their exploration of the lands north of the wall, it was that he had been too cocky.

To be fair, it was an easy mistake to make, with Marcus appearing to believe what Esca was feeding him, while, in reality, he was enjoying the simple pleasure of speaking a language similar to his own with all the people they encountered.

It was just like the pleasure one feels after scratching an itch that had been a pain in the backside for a while. A simple pleasure that, if he could have taken the liberty to do it, would have made Esca smile.

He didn't ask them about the Eagle or the lost legion but about all sorts of stuff: how they were fairing, how life was up there, and if they were having a lot of troubles with the men in the forts along the walls.

They said that well, life continued as it had always been up there, wall or no wall, and that, after what had happened to the legion that disappeared twenty years prior, the Romans were mostly letting them be.

'You are the son of Cunoval' an old man said to him one day, appearing out of his roundhouse when the rain had stopped.

Esca felt his eyes burning.

He hadn't expected the memory of his father to still be alive in places other than his mind.

'That man died a long time ago' he replied, trying to swallow down his heart full of emotions before going back to the Roman.

But yes, that cockiness led him to lower his guard. He didn't notice the signs in Marcus, how Marcus was studying him now, how he was even trying to tune in on the words that were spoken.

And, ultimately, that cockiness led to the failure of his plan, when Marcus pushed a young man against a tree shouting:

'Enough'.

He didn't want to. He really hated himself for asking the young man for the actual information Marcus was chasing so ardently.

He hated himself even more when saw the spark of joy in Marcus' eyes when the young man gave them a clue: another man with information.

But the journey to this man was not going to be easy. The path through the mountains was a perilous one.

And yet Marcus didn't hesitate.

For as much as Esca hated himself for even thinking that, he found himself admiring the blind strength and faith Marcus was showing.

But strength of spirit and faith are not much use to cross a mountain path and even Marcus had to see reason when it was clearly too dark and difficult to continue that night, and stupid, when they had just found a little, animal free alcove where they could rest for the night before continuing.

They ate in silence a little of the supplies they still had.

And, once again, Marcus was the one to break the silence between them.

'Why haven't you killed me?'

'Have you gone insane? Why are you even asking me this?' Esca replied immediately, surprising himself even more than Marcus.

Marcus, sitting across the fire from him, had his serious soldier face on.

'I have seen you fight. Like my uncle said, you could have very easily slit my throat and joined these people'

He finally lifted his eyes to Esca to say:

'You could have been free. So, I ask you again, why haven't you killed me?'

'I told you. I am honour bound to you' he said, hoping that it would be the end of it.

But Esca knew that Romans were stubborn. And Marcus was the most stubborn of the lot.

'Nobody would know' he said, shaking his head.

'You could have very well gone against that debt and'

'I would know' Esca interrupted him. His grip on his own knees increased to the point his knuckles would look white, if he could see them under the layers of clothing.

How could Marcus even ask him that? Wasn't he the man hell bound to restore his father's honour? How could he not understand that Esca would not be able to live with himself knowing that he had gone against everything his parents had instilled into him?

Everything he held most dear.

How could he think he could just kill Marcus, the only person who had been kind to him in years, and just go on to chase a life that didn't exist anymore?

Because you are a Barbarian, and Marcus is confused by you not behaving as a Barbarian, he thought, already feeling the familiar anger stirring in him.

He should say something, he should shout at Marcus that his world view was so small, so stupid and closed off.

But his voice died in his chest when he saw that Marcus was keeping on looking at him, with the intensity he had seen in those green eyes when they had first crossed the wall and Marcus was studying the land around him.

Always studying. Always absorbing the world.
Was he ever going to meet him halfway?

Will you ever see me as more than an enemy?

Esca tried to make himself smaller under his layers of clothing.

Stop looking at him, was his first thought, embarrassment for a moment taking hold of his heart.

But only for a moment because soon the obvious question came to his mind.

If Marcus thought Esca could just kill him and move on with his life, well, then why did he save a Barbarian like him from the death he was seeking in the arena?

'Why did you save me in the arena?' he said, in a whisper barely audible against the background of noises from the outside.

The mountain was feeling as stormy as he was.

'I told you, I didn't mean anything by it' Marcus replied, lifting his shoulders as he looked away from Esca.

Pretending it had been nothing more than an impulse, something unimportant, like he had done the first time they spoke.

And yet, when Esca saw him diverting his gaze so that he was staring once again at the fire, he was certain that there was something else.

The man was not as subtle as he thought he was.

'I don't believe you' Esca spit out, with as much venom as he could.

He deserved an answer now.

'Marcus, tell me'

'No'

'Why didn't you let me die as I wanted to?' he shouted.

Marcus stood up abruptly.

Esca smiled proudly at that. The same anger burning in him was shining in Marcus' firelit face.

'What do you want me to say Esca? Do you want to know that the moment I saw you throwing away your sword and shield I thought there was more honour in you than in all those people gathered there to gawk at the gladiators killing each other? Do you want me to tell you that I saw myself in you, scared of the pain but still throwing my body at the mercy of the gods because that was the honourable thing to do? And I didn't understand it, how could a man of the people who fought against Rome be like that?'

Marcus paused. His chest was heaving, his face was flashed. And he was staring at Esca like he was the last man on the face of the planet.

Esca maintained eye contact.

'Do you understand now?' he said, trying to challenge Marcus as much as possible.

Hit me.

Talk to me.

Marcus took one more deep breath.

'Not yet' he said, still looking at him.

Still staring at Esca's lips.

'You are infuriating Esca' he whispered, before finally sitting back down again.

Esca laughed.

‘It’s not funny’

‘Oh, it is. You are just as infuriating’ Esca replied.

He didn’t add how Marcus was driving him insane. He hated him, yes, for what he was, for his strange values. For what he had done to that child.

And yet, Esca was still drawn to him.

Marcus seemed to relax a little.

But the blush on his face was still there.

‘It’s late, we need to rest. I will take the first watch’ Esca said.

For once Marcus didn’t argue back, as they huddled together to try to keep warm.

Stupid, infuriating Marcus.

The Seal People

Chapter Summary

Esca and Marcus meet the Seal People.

Chapter Notes

Please note this chapter contains a couple of references to Esca's time as a slave that could be perhaps a little triggering.

He should have killed him, as he was ordered.

He should have slit Guern's throat the second he had him subdued.

But the surprise of seeing Guern's (or Lucius Caius Metellus, or whatever his name was) scar under his chin stopped him.

A legionary. He never thought they were ever actually going to find one of these people. Not alive anyway.

As he told them his story, Esca barely managed to contain his hate for the man, trying to distract himself with practical tasks but to no avail.

This Roman, this person had run away from his legion, his brothers in arms and his commander. And yet, with the luck of the coward, he had been welcomed in a British tribe. He had been treated for his wounds with care. He even found someone who loved him enough to have his sons.

The Romans hadn't extended the same courtesy to Esca, making him a slave, degrading him to less than an animal at times.

Why was this man more deserving than him?

Why had the gods decided to punish him so much, and this man got away scot free?

‘I don’t trust him, he is a deserter’ he whispered to Marcus, when he felt he needed to let a little of his anger out, otherwise he would have just exploded.

‘We don’t know that. He is still a Roman’ Marcus replied.

Esca moved away before he could give in to the impulse of scratching Marcus’ eyes out of his head.

Guern was still a Roman, worthy of being listened to, even under his roughed-up exterior, his fluent knowledge of the local language and his clear ability to move around the land without being heard, something that bull of a man that was Marcus was never going to fully learn.

While Esca, having learnt Latin, having shown, in Marcus words, more honour than anybody that day in the arena, was still a Barbarian, one that Marcus was still struggling to figure out.

Esca knew he should have killed Guern when, after Marcus asked him about the Eagle, Guern pointed his finger at him and, with a pleased smile on his face, said:

‘He knows. He is Brigantes. They fought here’

With just a few words, Guern destroyed everything Esca had tried to do, all these efforts he had put into keeping Marcus alive while not dishonouring his people.

He should have killed him when he had the chance.

Too late now. He just needed to ride out the storm.

‘You always knew that place existed, didn’t you?’ Marcus shouted, taunting him. His anger showing in the tense muscles of his face.

Let him shout, Esca told himself.

He was going to have to calm down at some point, if he was really that serious about finding the Eagle.

He is just an angry bull, he thought, trying to keep himself calm.

But then, the angry bull pushed himself too far:

‘Your tribe was there. And they butchered my father’s men like dogs’

Enough
Let the fire burn.

‘Your father came to kill’ he shouted back.

Oh gods, it felt good to let go. Every part of his body felt alive, exactly like he felt on the eve of the last battle of the Brigantes.

He was ready to fight against the attack of this Roman.

‘They came to punish us because we wouldn’t bow to the name of Rome. Yes, I know of this place’

Despite himself, he relished the hurt in Marcus’ eyes. The betrayal was clearly burning in the Roman’s chest.

I am not the meek slave you thought I was.

And Esca, for a moment, didn’t care that, although not as much as Uncle Aquila had said, he was behaving like the perfect savage they wanted him to be.

But he didn’t care, he couldn’t, not when the memories of all the blood that was shed washed up in his mind once again.

They hadn’t won their war against Rome; they had never really stood a chance.

But he could make at least this one Roman suffer.
For as much as it pained him to do it.

‘To me and to all my people’

They were dead.

And yet, for a moment, they were alive. Esca felt a surge in his chest as if all their spirits were finding the strength for one last attack through him.

‘It’s the place of heroes’

‘How dare you, you are still my slave’

That word, shouted back in anger, felt like a slap in the face.

But he could slap back.

‘And you would be dead in a ditch without me’

But he didn’t have any words to reply to the last five words his master ever said to him:

‘I saved your miserable life’

At that sentence, at the Roman playing the hero with something that he really hadn’t understood and continued not to understand, Esca lunged forward, pushing him off the horse.

If Marcus only understood violence, he was going to give it to him, as they tumbled in the grass.

It felt vicious, far, far away from the times they had “fought” together, when their desire was only to exercise Marcus’ body and to feel a little bit more alive in the deadening melancholy of the villa.

But it also felt so good.

This is for my family, Esca thought, landing a hit.

But, before he could continue, before he could once and for all subdue a Roman, he felt a presence.

As he lifted his eyes from Marcus’ face, he saw they were surrounded by men.

Tall and armed men.

While a moment before, his heart and soul had been in the hands of anger and hate and the fire under his skin had boiled, calling for blood, now every part of his body was cold, as his stomach knotted in fear.

He had recognised the men immediately.

They were the men of the Seal People.

And he wasn’t entirely sure how friendly they were going to be.

‘Act carefully with your friends, Esca’ his father had once told him, when he was old enough to start receiving some teaching in how to best deal with neighbouring tribes.

‘Because you can never know when a friendly smile might turn into a menacing grin’

And how menacing was that grin going to become if they knew who they were?

Who Marcus was?

As he stood up, the man closer to them, the one he was almost certain was their leader, asked him who he was.

That was the easy part. If even an old man in a lonely roundhouse could still recognise him as the son of Cunoval, surely the Seal People would still remember his father's name.

The real problem was what to say when he asked him about Marcus.

To his surprise, the answer came easier than he thought.

It was an answer interlaced with all the hate that he had felt when Marcus had shouted that horrible word right at his face.

'My slave'

The Seal Prince then moved closer to Marcus, looking at him curiously.

The vivid memory of a Roman slave owner, coming closer to Esca as he stood naked to the waist, washed over him. That man had forced his mouth open to check his teeth, as if he was a horse. Just at the thought, Esca could still feel the warmth and sweating of those fat hands on his face, as they travelled further down his body, forcing him to lift his arms, touching his muscles, examining if he were going to be any good in the fields.

It made Esca's body stiffen up. His heart raced in his chest.

But he didn't have much time to think.

Esca struggled to keep his face straight and not say a word as the Seal warriors grabbed Marcus.

Marcus, who was shouting for him to help.

Marcus, who had no idea what was going on.

Exactly like it had happened to him, even though he had been completely alone then.

For a moment, Esca wasn't there anymore, in the land north of the wall, but back in the fields of his tribe. He was bleeding, he was hurt and scared. And people were shouting things at him he wasn't understanding. People were forcing his body to do things he didn't want to. Shivers rushed down his spine as he tried to keep

Come on Esca, he tried to calm himself down.

Wake up son, his father's voice rang in his ears.

Not trusting himself to say anything, he simply nodded to the seal prince and moved away.

He told himself that it would get better, as he walked side by side with the Seal Prince. He just needed not to look in Marcus' direction, not to fixate his mind on every little pained noise coming from the Roman as he was dragged forward by the horse the Seal Warriors had tied him too.

And yet it wasn't.

The thought of his leg pains was hammering in Esca' mind.

He had been injured too, as he was transported away from his land.

He looked up just in time to see it, when one of the Seal Warriors hit Marcus square in the face.

He had to quickly move his attention back to his food.

Deep down, Esca understood them. Marcus was a slave for them, of the people that had tried to conquer their land.

There was no law to protect men, women, and children of different people, if they were captured after a war.

And Marcus, underneath all that Rome wanted him to believe, was also just another man.

And, right there and then, as Esca ate a warm meal undercover while Marcus sat in the rain, a scary thought appeared in his mind:

Could it be that the Seal People, and perhaps all the free tribes up here, were all capable of being as cruel as the Romans?

He shook his head.

No, it couldn't be.

No. Just no.

And yet, his heart pained for Marcus.

No man deserved the experience that Esca had gone through.

And even less the man that, under all the hate and anger, he had come to care about.

Stupid, stupid Marcus.

He needed to find a way out of this mess.

And quickly.

It felt surprisingly easy to slip into the life of the Seal People's village. After all, could anyone have blamed him? Hunting with the warriors during the day and gathering up together in their tents as the evening closed upon them, felt just like home, where there had been a warm fire to gather around together, to hear stories of old battles and their heroes.

Esca even felt he had made a friend, with the young son of the Seal Prince.

The sweetest young man he had met in a long time, reminding him of his youngest brother.

Perhaps, as he couldn't spare the life of the young rogue warrior, he could at least be nice and kind to this child, who seemed to take such a shine to him that, one evening, he was talking more to him than to his own father, asking him all that had happened during the hunt and if there were any tips he could give him, for when he would be allowed to join the men in their Run.

Sweet child, Esca thought, smiling back at him and giving himself the chance to relax for a moment, giving him tips like his own father had taught him.

'But for that I would need one of those beasts you have' the child laughed.

'Ah, yes, I guess' Esca replied.

His father's tips and instructions were for a world where horses lived alongside men, helping each other out.

Not the world where he was now.

There were no other horses in the land of the Seal People.

A world governed by the Seal Prince, who was a clever man and had already smelled that there was something wrong with Esca, arriving to the point of asking him the reason for their presence there.

He told him a half truth, that he was hunting for a place to be free.

But he wasn't sure how long that lie was going to last.

He needed to find even the faintest clue of the presence of the Eagle in that village as soon as possible.

Easier said than done. Especially when his stupid, stupid buffoon of a Roman seemed to have every intention of making Esca's job even more difficult than it was, forcing him to stand between him and the Seal Prince, clearly furious as Marcus had dared to look at his sister.

The Prince's sister.

Esca's mother.

Esca knew better than most what Romans could do to prisoners.

He looked at Marcus, his face still battered. His eyes were still full of confusion, as he had no idea what was going on.

Yes, Romans were savages.

But he was no Roman, he didn't want to do this. And Marcus too, for as much as he was infuriating, perhaps, after all, was not a savage either.

And yet, Esca knew he didn't have a choice.

The Seal Prince deserved this if they both wanted a chance to stay alive.

The smile could soon turn into a menacing grin.

Damn you Marcus, he thought, before shouting at him to kneel.

Please, please, just do it, he thought.

But nothing, Marcus wouldn't kneel, forcing Esca to hit him.

Marcus shot him the coldest of glares, as he did as he was ordered.

Esca saw his own eyes, as he glared to the first master who dared rip his tunic to then whip is insubordination out of him.

I don't want to do this. I am not like those men, he thought, but luckily for him, his body moved automatically, violently grabbing Marcus by the hair and forcing him to expose his throat to the Seal Prince.

He could still feel the tension in Marcus' body.
But his Roman didn't react.

He followed orders. Like a good soldier.

Like a good slave.

'If it pleases you, kill him' Esca said.

No emotion showed on his face.

The furious beating of his heart was hidden, at least for the moment.

The Prince moved closer.

To his surprise, Esca knew that, if the Prince would take out his dagger and kill Marcus, Esca would kill him on the spot too.

If they were then going to kill Esca, well, so be it.

He was on borrowed time anyway.
A time that Marcus had borrowed for him.

And he had never thanked him properly for that.

The prince didn't kill Marcus, as Esca thought. For as much as the Romans ignored these things, there were clear, precise rules when it came to guests and relations with others, between the tribes.

He wished, for a moment, to tell Marcus a kind word.

To tell him not to worry. He was working on this. There was going to be a way out, he was sure of it.

But he didn't tell him anything.
He couldn't risk his cover over something so stupid. So sentimental. For the world, Marcus was and had to remain his slave.

So, he just pushed him away, earning back Marcus' cruel eyes as he whispered:
'When I get the chance, I will kill you'

Those eyes haunted him, as he gathered little tidbits of information regarding what was going to happen that night.

Those eyes haunted him, as he waited for the celebrations to start, and for the cover of darkness to make everything easier for him.

Those eyes haunted him as he hesitated for one last second.
But it was only a moment, one moment of melancholy as he thought that no, the Seal People were not his people.

He wasn't even sure if, after all those years, his own people were still his, if they were still alive, somewhere, in whatever mythical land the gods give to the innocents being slaughtered.

So, he made his mind and, as the Seal Warriors slept, he tried to make himself as quiet as a mouse, sneaking around the bodies to get to the one he was looking for.

And there he was.

Beaten and bruised.

He suppressed any instinct of wanting to help Marcus' injuries. There was no time to waste.

'Marcus, it's time' he said, shaking him.

There was the mighty Roman centurion. Broken. Vulnerable. His eyes struggling to focus on Esca for a moment.

'We have to do this now. It's our only chance while they sleep'

'I thought I lost you' Marcus said, shaking under Esca's touch.

His was hoarse.

Esca's heart contracted in his chest.

Had he been wrong all this time?

Had Marcus felt the same confusing thoughts about Esca had experienced?

Did Marcus think of him as more than his slave?

So many things to ask. So little time.

‘Quickly’ he said instead, helping him up, the first gesture of kindness he had for Marcus ever since they had arrived in the village.

If his mind hadn’t been too full of the dangers ahead, he would have enjoyed the feeling of feeling Marcus’ body next to his.

He hoped with all his heart that, as they jumped into the unknown, they were going to have at least a little bit of time to themselves.

He hoped to have the strength to tell him everything, the whole thruth about himself.

Loyalty

Chapter Summary

Esca and Marcus run away from the Seal People's village.

But the journey will not be an easy one.

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for [notes](#)

The Eagle was there, standing tall at the end of that scary, dark and smelly walkway they had to crawl through to get to the cavern.

In the light of the torches, it shone bright and golden.

For a moment, Esca could believe the Eagle was more than a piece of metal. Maybe even a god.

Marcus had said that wherever the Eagle was, there was Rome.

Goddess, if you are here, help your son out of this, Esca thought, having noticed how Marcus had winced in pain as they had advanced in the dark.

Right there and then, as Marcus went to the Eagle, he seemed to have forgotten, pain and humiliation.

It was almost beautiful to see it, the son finally reconnecting with his past.
The son finally finding the memory of his father in the proud curve of the Eagle's golden body.

But Esca was not a fool. It looked too good to be true. Too easy. Esca took a deep breath to calm himself a little and concentrated, scanning the area for any signs of human presence.

Where were they hiding?

They had to be somewhere. Had they already seen them? Were they ready to attack at their first sign of weakness?

And, for all the gods, Marcus and himself were giving them plenty of opportunity to attack, with Marcus standing there, the Eagle in his hands.

He was looking at it, mesmerized.

Esca could understand, even sympathize. If he could ever retrieve the last object touched by his father, he would probably be as mesmerized too.

But, right there and then, they didn't have the luxury to bask in the light of the past.

'There is no time now, let's go' he said, trying to gauge a reaction from Marcus.

But the Roman didn't move.

'We have to go' he said once again.

'Traitor' the word bounced on the walls of the cavern.

The Warriors had come out of their hiding spot to meet them, weapons in hand.

And Esca was ready.

Father, give me the strength to face this, he prayed, as his body took over, moving fluidly as he hit the two Warriors that had gone for him.

This is the strength of the son of Cunoval, he thought, as they exhaled their last breath, blood flowing out of their mouths and wounds.

He lifted his eyes where he knew he would find Marcus.

He always knew where Marcus was.

And he saw him facing the Seal King.

Esca's grasp increased around the handle of his sword.

Go, help him, he thought. Esca knew Marcus' body was probably already starting to struggle, he hadn't been given much food and....

No. He needs this, he thought then, as he watched the two men struggle for purchase. Yes, Marcus needed that, needed that victory, but was he going to make it? He was much younger than the Seal King, stronger...but the Seal King wasn't injured and...

'Just another dead Roman. The coward knelt and begged for his life' the older man said, a taunting grin on his face.

Marcus couldn't have understood the words.

But the hate in that voice was unmistakable.

And, just like that, Marcus killed him, with one last violent attack.

The Seal King fell to the ground, at such a short distance from where the Eagle had once stood.

‘What did he say?’ Marcus growled, his eyes still on the body, watching the life escape from it.

I will never tell you, Esca thought.

It could have been true or false, Esca didn’t care. But Esca knew that, as much as he was chasing his own freedom, Marcus deserved to be free of the ghosts of his past too. Knowing what the Seal King had said would not have helped.

‘We have to go’ he said instead, relieved when Marcus didn’t ask further.

They moved faster out of the cavern, as they didn’t have a choice. Dawn was upon them, the Seal Prince and his Warriors were going to wake up soon enough, and it was not going to take long for them to figure out what had happened in the cavern.

The words of the old Roman politician resounded in Esca’s mind:

‘Eagle lost, honour lost. Honour lost, all lost’.

Was that going to be true for the Seal People too?

As he prepared his horse quickly, his hands running faster than they had ever done before, he hated the Eagle like he had never hated anything before.

Not even Rome.

That stupid, stupid piece of metal was meaning the destruction of so many people.

‘Esca’

His heart contracted so painfully at that sound that he thought he was about to choke.

He recognised that voice long before he turned around to see the son of the Seal Prince standing there.

Stupid, he thought of himself. He should have thought of him. He wouldn’t have been resting after the excesses of the night before.

Esca exchanged a look with Marcus.

The Roman was exhausted, he could tell. But he wasn’t certain that he would not repeat what had happened in the forest, now that freedom was close enough to taste it.

‘Are you leaving?’ the boy asked.

If the Eagle was Rome, was this boy Britannia? Were the spirits of the land asking him to stay?

I can't, please don't make this even harder than it is.

Marcus needs me.

I have a debt of honour with him.

I love him.

And then the boy asked him something that, perhaps in another time, in another life, would have made him the happiest man in all of the blasted Roman empire and in the lands beyond:

'Can I come with you?'

Esca's eyes burnt.

A family.

The boy was looking at him with hope in his eyes.
Even, maybe, love.

But such happiness was not for him.

'Go back to your family' he said, gesturing to the village.

'My father will be angry'

A cold shiver went down Esca's spine. He hoped Marcus didn't see that.

'You tell him, when he wakes, that Esca's sorry but he has to go now. Not until he wakes, yes?'

The boy nodded.

But Marcus had no idea what they had just said to each other.

'Esca. If he wakes them, we are dead, and you know that. He has no reason to protect us' he said suddenly, his voice quick and breathless.

Gods, he looked pale.

The journey was not going to be a pleasant one for him.

Be strong, my son, he imagined his father whispering.

'Do you trust me?' Esca asked him back.

Marcus didn't reply. He looked at him, studying Esca.

But he didn't say no.

Considering all that had happened between them, Esca counted that silence as a victory.

'He won't betray us' he insisted.

And Marcus, probably against his better judgement, didn't raise his sword on the boy.

Be happy, little man, Esca thought, as he rubbed his hand on the boy's head.

You will grow and you will be the leader of men you are meant to be. Your future will be golden, he thought.

And then, he passed him the little wooden fish he had carved in the idle moments during the journey.

Remember me, he thought, but didn't say.

One last look to what it could have been, and they were off.

It could take four, maybe five days if they were lucky, if they could ride hard and the horses wouldn't buckle under the pressure.

The question was: was Marcus fit enough to make it?

Esca was trying to go through all the possible scenarios, trying to come up with as many strategies as possible, just as his father had taught him to do in battle.

You never know what you might face, what the enemy might throw at you. But, if you have a counter plan, you might surprise them.

Which was fair enough, but his father had never told him what to do when you are being hunted like a dog as you try to save the man you are bound to.

The man that, for all intents and purposes, had become your slave.

It was in that frame of mind, as he tried to keep the panic at bay and concentrate on moving quickly up a rocky surface where even the horses were struggling, that he noticed how Marcus had slowed down behind him.

And it was in that frame of mind, when he was already struggling himself, that he saw the blood on Marcus' leg.

Stupid, stupid Roman.

‘You are wounded. Why didn’t you say?’ he growled. They didn’t have time for either of them to play the stoic hero. It was just logic, the faster they could address any problems, the faster they could move forward, and the faster they could reach the wall.

If Esca wasn’t tired to the bone, he would have found a veiled irony in that situation. For years he had thought of running away from Rome, and now he was riding towards its symbol in the land.

‘It’s nothing’ Marcus said, grinding his teeth.

Stubborn, stupid Roman.

I love you.
But you make it darn hard sometimes.

‘It’s your bad leg. Sit down’ Esca insisted.

‘We don’t have time’

‘Just sit down’ he shouted, cursing Marcus for making him act as a slave owner once again.

Esca thanked all his gods when Marcus did as he was told, and Esca went quickly to bound his wound.

The smell of blood was overpowering. And he could tell Marcus was sweating, and not just from the exertion of riding.

Which was not good.

His heart missed a bit at the thought that Marcus might soon develop a fever out of his wound, which would make an already impossible journey extra hard. An infected wound was only bound to make Marcus’ movements even slower.

Think clearly, his father would have said.
There is always a way out, his father would have smiled at him.

Father, I don’t know if there is one this time, but I will try my hardest to make you proud.

So, they continued on, pushing as far as they could till the darkness enveloped them.

Esca hoped that, in the vastity of the land, the cover of the dark would hide them from the Seal People's eyes.

Because Esca had a bigger problem that night: Marcus' strengths were leaving him, and quickly. His body was shaking and pale from all the blood loss.

Rome, damn you, what kind of goddess are you? Help your son.
Help me.

They needed food. Marcus needed food, but Esca knew he couldn't leave him alone.

And, perhaps, for the first time the goddess listened to the prayers of a Barbarian and sent a rat their way.

One easy prey for a starved hunter like Esca.

'No fire, it's too risky' he said, almost more to himself than to Marcus.

The body in his hands was warm and slimy.
It was possibly the most disgusting thing he had ever thought to eat.

But it was the only thing they could do.

He was sure that Marcus' disgusted expression was a reflection of his own.

'I'm not eating that. I am not a savage' Marcus said.

'Then die a Roman' Esca replied immediately, with all the spite he could master in the dark and wet environment they were in.

Only to feel pity the moment after he said that.

'You lost a lot of blood'

'You need to keep your strengths up. Eat'

Once again, Marcus listened.

Despite the rain, the pain and the tiredness in his muscles, Esca felt glad.

They were off as soon as possible. And the run only became worse.

They were coming closer.

Esca could hear the Seal People's shouts.

They were coming closer.

Esca could hear their dogs.

They were coming closer.

And Marcus' conditions deteriorated further.

Damn you Marcus, damn you, he thought, trying to push away the guilt in his chest. Maybe this was all his fault. He should have thought of something else, another excuse for Marcus' presence that far north. He shouldn't have said that he was his slave.

Concentrate Esca. Look at the land, find a clue, his father had instructed him once. And, under the unrelenting rain of Caledonia, he did once more.

Esca looked.

The answer came immediately: the river.

The river turned out to be a good choice, as they heard the Seal Warriors run past their little hiding spot. But it turned out to be a curse too, as it took what remained of Marcus' strengths.

There was water all over them. Water from the river. Water from the sky.

The fire under Esca's skin was the only thing keeping him going, as they pushed themselves through the water and the rocks.

'You need to rest, Marcus' he said. Perhaps they could have a little bit of time, a little bit of rest, while the Seal People figured out that the river had fooled them.

But Marcus didn't listen, his body moving forward even if Esca suspected his mind was reaching the same conclusion that was knocking on Esca's spirit, but that he was keeping on pushing back against.

No, he was not leaving Marcus.

Even if that was the most sensible thing to do, the one thing that could mean freedom.

‘You need to rest. Come on’ he insisted, and, with one last push, he moved him a little out of the river, on slippery rocks to the side.

‘I can’t go on’ Marcus said, giving voice to Esca’s deepest fear.

‘Yes, you can, you just need to rest’

There is always a way out. He just needed to concentrate a little more to find it.
If only the rain would give them a moment.

Water everywhere.

Water at his throat as desperation clawed its way into his heart.

It can’t end like this. Father please, I won’t be able to survive another defeat.

Think Esca, study the land.

‘Take the Eagle, if you find horses, come back. If not, just keep south, make sure this goes back to Rome’ Marcus said, pushing forward the basted Eagle.

‘I am not leaving you here’ Esca said.

Marcus didn’t get to die an honourable way under the chariot of his enemy.

He was not going to die there, forgotten. Abandoned.

Alone.

‘You will not dishonour me. Take it’

Think Esca, think, his father would have said.

But desperation had now pierced that blasted the heart of his.

No, no, it couldn’t be happening.

‘I came this far with you. I won’t leave you now’

Why was he always made to abandon people the moment he started to care for them?

‘Esca, I order you. Take it’

Order. Did an order even mean anything in those lands? Did an order even mean anything when Death is at your doorstep?

Orders and class didn’t mean anything anymore.

But honour still did.

‘I swore an oath of honour, never to abandon you’

And, just like that, everything became clearer in his mind.
Even through the darkness, even though the most desperate moment, there was a way out. It was crazy, and it might not work. But it was worth a shot.
He just needed to give his destiny a little push.

‘If you want me to leave, set me free. Give me my freedom’ he said.

Freedom.

He never thought it was going to happen like that, with his former master dying in a river in Caledonia.

But it was happening. And it was on his terms.

‘You are free. You are free my friend’ Marcus replied, stretching his arm.

Cunoval’s dagger was in his hand.

‘Take it’ he then said, pushing forward the Eagle.

‘No’ Esca said.

Don’t be scared, my friend, he thought, as he grabbed Marcus’ head.

I will not abandon you.

I love you.

‘I will return’

And Esca run.

He run with the strength of a thousand horses.

Was it the strength of the bond of honour he and Marcus shared? Like his father had told him?

No, he was free of those bonds.

He was running with the strength of the love he had for him.

Soon, his mind detached from his body as his muscles sprinted through the forest.
Sliding, tumbling, running.

He knew where he was going.

He just needed to go faster.

Rome, if you let him die, I swear, I will find I way to destroy you.

But he was going to die, wasn't he? Marcus had been so broken, desperate and in pain. He needed to drag his sorry ass to a nice, warm place where a surgeon could check out that damn leg of his.

That wound was going to kill him. And it was all Esca's fault.

Unless the Seal Warriors found him first. He could even see it, Marcus trying to stand up and fight.

And them killing him mercilessly. Cutting off his feet so that he wouldn't be able to go to the underworld.

And cutting off his head, before pinning his corpse to a tree.

If he could have stopped, those images alone would have caused him to puke his guts out.

But he didn't have time.

Marcus had once chance of survival.

And it was on his shoulders.

Esca felt tears run down his cheeks as he reached Guern's village. It was little, a handful of roundhouses, nothing more. But it looked peaceful enough, with old folks, women and children helping each other out.

And Guern was there too, tending to the carcass of a dear.

'Guern' he shouted.

Come on, one last push, he told himself, forcing his muscles through the pain.

The man of the Selgovae turned. And he didn't look happy to see him.

‘What are you doing here, Brigantes?’ he said, pronouncing the name of his tribe as if it was an insult.

Perhaps it had been his own father, Cunoval, the one to scare off Guern so much to push him to become a deserter.

A little present to Esca from his father.

‘I am here to plead for you help’ Esca said, through the pain of speaking through the lack of breath.

Esca had not pleaded for his own life. Marcus had done that for him.

And now, Esca was begging for Marcus’ life to be spared.

He was going to do whatever it took to have that life spared.

‘What do you need my help for? I have told you and your master everything I knew’

Esca tried to tell him everything about what had happened after they had separated. All the pain and anguish. Guern listened silently.

He only shook his head at the end of the tale.

‘So, this is how it end. It was mad to think that the honour of the ninth could ever be restored. Something that happened twenty years ago should be left in the shadows of time’ he said. But Esca picked up immediately on that note of bitterness in his voice.

He hadn’t been wrong.

Thanks to all the gods.

He hadn’t been wrong when he had thought he understood Guern and the shame bearing on his heart.

It was the same shame bearing on his own’s heart, after not dying in the fields with his family as it would have been his duty.

‘When we met you, I told Marcus I didn’t trust you, because you were a deserter. And Marcus replied that we didn’t know that and that you were still a Roman. He still, for whatever reason, trusted you. He seemed to be able to look beyond your shame, your running away when it was your time to prove your loyalties. And what do you do, you turn your back once again on his family? You turn you back at the son of the commander you left to die the most horrible of death?’

The exhaustion. The anger. The frustration. Esca wasn’t sure what did it, but he moved forward once more, grabbing Guern by the neck of his tunic.

Guern stood still as Esca growled right in his face:

‘The honour of the ninth will not be restored. But your honour will be, if you help him’

‘Why do you care? You could just run. Abandon all of this. It’s madness and you know it’

‘I’m not like you’ he said, almost spitting the word you with as much venom as he could.

‘I will not be able to move forward, to leave with the shame of having abandon Marcus Flavius Aquila to death’ Esca said, defiant, as he let Guern go.

‘Perhaps it is his time’

‘It’s his time only if you decide to be a coward once again’

There was nothing more to add.
Would Guern come through?
Esca took a deep breath. And then another.

Don't panic, my son.
There is always a way out.

And then, right when he was starting to panic, thinking that perhaps he had been wrong, that he hadn't understood anything about that strange man they had met in the forest, Guern smiled.

'Go in the roundhouse. My wife will give you some food. I need to speak with a few people'
'There is not much time. We need to run'

Guern patted him on the shoulder.

'You will no be any use to yourself or to your man if you are dead on your feet. Get a bit of food in you. We will be ready'

He saw Guern take a deep breath before smiling once more and say:

'The first cohort of the ninth legion will be ready before you know it'

As the immense weight on his shoulders was lifted, Esca's legs couldn't support him anymore. He fell down on the wet ground, shaking.

More silent tears fell down his face.

'Come on young man. You said it yourself, no time to lose' Guern said, as he helped him up and into the house, leaving him to his wife, a blonde, strong woman with a crooked smile that welcomed him in her house with the same warmth his mother would have shown.

Father, maybe you were right. There is always a way out.

When Guern returned to the roundhouse, he was not alone.

Esca had hoped Guern knew where the other legionaries were, but seeing them all there, armed with their old Roman military gear made a wave of relief wash over him.

One of them, Tiberius Sempronius known as Carausius, passed him a Roman shield.

Esca looked at it without touching it.

The monsters of his childhood had shields like those.

'It's for you. You will need it, trust me' he said, with a smile marred by a few missing teeth.

A Roman shield.

Not a Brigantes' one.

But did those divisions mean anything anymore?

'Thank you' he said then, taking the piece of equipment.

'Come on, let's go' Guern said.

Esca watched him kiss his woman deeply, before putting himself in charge of the other soldiers.

He hoped with all his heart that he was not going to be the cause of heartache for that kind woman that had fed him.

‘Brigantes’ Guern called him, with a stern, military voice.

And he rushed to his side. What did he want?

Esca expected him to say anything, but not what he actually did say:

‘Thank you’.

Esca simply nodded, not trusting his voice as he showed them the way to Marcus.

We are coming Marcus, just hold on a little longer, he thought.

Esca took a relieved breath when they found him. He was alive. All in one piece.

And he was standing, holding himself against a piece of wood, on top of which he had tied the Eagle.

The Eagle looked so proud once more.

Esca didn’t miss the muted gasps in the legionaries around him.

And he smiled, at the confusion on Marcus’ face. He had clearly thought he was about to face the Seal People all by himself.

‘You were wrong. The Dead can live’ Esca said to him, looking at Marcus with the proudest smile he could master through the tiredness and the worry of seeing how pale Marcus still was.

They had arrived just in time, the Seal Warriors soon were upon them. The two armies were now facing each other.

And Esca was side by side with Roman deserters.

The lines of loyalty can be drawn and redrawn.

And, in that very moment, Esca knew that he was only loyal to one man.

‘Esca’ the Seal Prince shouted.

A voice that Esca had wished to never hear again.

‘This is what happens to those who betray their people’ the Prince continued, as he dragged forward his own son.

No, his mind shouted.

This can’t be, he thought, as his disbelieving eyes saw the Seal Prince lift his weapon to the neck of his own son.

The boy's eyes were big and terrified.
Just like that eyes of the little rogue warrior boy in the forest.

No, stop it.
Esca stop him, he thought.
But his body couldn't move.
That little boy was going to have a golden future. That little boy deserved to be happy.

How can you kill your own son? He wanted to shout, as he watched the Seal Prince draw blood, before laying the boy down in the water.

Esca inhaled sharply from his mouth.
Another innocent caught in the crossfire.
And, when Marcus shouted, 'Out Swords', Esca followed his Roman orders.

He had been right. Both Romans and British tribes could commit the same horrors against the innocents.

And if fighting that battle would rid him once and for all of all that cruelty, that he would fight with all that was left of his courage and his strength.

It was easy at first. His body knew what to do before his mind could even think of it.
But, when he saw the Prince advancing onto him, Esca faltered.

Maybe it was time. Maybe it was the price for what had happened to the boy. A life for a life. Marcus, at least, would live.
But Esca did fight back. He tried to defend himself, but the prince was too strong, throwing him easily to the watery ground.

There, it was coming, the blow he had been waiting for since the arena.

But it never came.

Marcus had parried it, and, with the strength of a thousand horses, had pushed the Seal Prince off Esca.

With the strength of a thousand horses, Marcus pushed the Seal Prince in the water.
And killed him with all the strength of his desperation.

At the death of their lord, the remaining warriors quickly left.

Leaving their dead together with the Roman dead.

After all, there was no difference between the dead. The Dead don't have loyalties as they fly beyond the sunset.

Esca was still on the ground, breathing hard but he could see Marcus, kneeling in the water near the Seal Prince, staring at the dead man.

Marcus.

With what little strength he had left, Esca dragged himself up, wincing at the pain of the wound he hadn't even noticed before in his arm, and advanced to where Marcus was, letting himself fall next to the Roman.

'Marcus' he whispered.

With his eyes still on the corpse, looking so vulnerable and innocent, Marcus took a deep breath and his hand searched for Esca's.

Once he had found it, he squeezed it so tightly that Esca had to bite his lower lip not to make a sound.

A part of him welcomed that feeling.

'It's done' Marcus whispered. A joyous incredulity in his voice. He sounded like a man sure to drown suddenly finding himself on the shores.

'Yes' Esca replied, his voice choking in his chest.

It was over. And they were alive.

'You restored my family honour' Marcus said, still keeping his eyes away from Esca, but Esca saw him smiling softly.

'You did' Esca replied.

He knew how important that was for Marcus. But he couldn't stop the wave of warmth in his heart at that recognition.

Marcus finally turned to him. His face was so pale it was a miracle he was still standing. But he was alive. His damn, stubborn buffoon of a Roman, with his stupid honour and pride, was still alive.

Esca had kept the promise to his father.

Then, Marcus lifted his hands and, before Esca could move, he was cupping his face, dragging him closer so that they rested forehead against forehead.

Esca could feel Marcus' ragged breathing on his face.

It was ragged and he still needed a surgeon as quickly as possible.

But he was still alive. Alive and breathing.

Esca's eyes burnt again, but, even if his heart was running even faster than when he was chasing after Guern's shadow, he kept his emotions in check.

'Thank you, Esca' Marcus said, surely, his voice devoid of any insecurities.

Till, suddenly, it broke:

'Esca, I...I...'

Esca smiled, as he moved one hand to cover one of Marcus'.

'Marcus, I'

What were the right words to talk about how he felt? How his chest was burning with a happiness he would have never thought possible?

But the gods seemed to give me a chance to think that over perhaps a little more, because, when somebody near them coughed loudly, Marcus' hands immediately lost their grip on

him.

‘Sir, we need to organise the funeral pyres’

‘Yes, certainly’ Marcus replied, almost as startled as Esca was.

Then he turned to Esca.

‘What would be best for the Seal Prince and his warriors?’

Esca’s eyes widened.

Marcus could have decided to cut their feet, preventing their journey forward. He could have decided to cut their heads off and their revenge for the bodies they saw dangling right beyond the wall.

And that stupid, stubborn, buffoon of a Roman had decided to have mercy and give them too the right honours.

‘We should bury the Prince and his son at least’ he said.

‘So, it shall be’ Marcus replied, smiling.

Esca watched Marcus as he helped with the burials and the fires.

He watched Marcus as he stood near Guern’s pyre and pronounced his speech.

He watched him as his strengths left him.

And panic set in his chest once more.

Chapter End Notes

Next chapter will be my "beyond the movie" part :) It will possibly require a change of rating from M to R.

Please [drop by the Archive and comment](#) to let the creator know if you enjoyed their work!