

THE EAGLE OF THE NINTH

by
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Based on the novel by Rosemary Sutcliff

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Blackout. Fading slowly out of the darkness, an ancient map of Roman Britain appears. The sound of marching feet, disappearing into the distance.

SUPERIMPOSE:

BRITAIN. 120 AD. THE NINTH LEGION
OF THE ROMAN ARMY OF OCCUPATION
MARCH NORTH TO CONQUER THE WILD
SCOTTISH TRIBES.

ALL FIVE THOUSAND MEN DISAPPEAR
WITHOUT TRACE, ALONG WITH THE
TREASURED STANDARD OF THEIR
LEGION, THE EAGLE OF THE NINTH.

SHOCKED BY THIS GREAT LOSS, THE
EMPEROR HADRIAN ORDERS THE
CONSTRUCTION OF A MASSIVE WALL TO
CUT OFF THE FAR NORTH.

HADRIAN'S WALL BECOMES THE LINE
MARKING THE END OF THE KNOWN WORLD.

A flaming torch slams down on a hut roof.

DISSOLVE TO:

EXT. FARMSTEAD, SOUTH WEST ENGLAND - DAY.

Veteran LEGIONARIES march between the huts of a small farmstead, torching everything. They duck in through doorways, hauling out anyone inside. Terrified LOCALS plead or run for cover.

FIFTEEN YEARS LATER.

A gaggle of CELT BOYS dart about, shouting insults, like barking puppies. They follow ten LOCAL MEN being frog-marched to some trees by armed LEGIONARIES. Fear in their faces. No quarter given. They disappear into the copse.

Emerging from the largest of the burning huts, LEGIONARIES dump anything of value into a waiting cart - beautifully woven cloth, sacks of grain, metal work.

In the distance, through the trees, we see the first of the LOCAL MEN being executed on their knees.

EXT. ROMAN ROAD - DAY.

A COHORT of leather-clad auxiliaries marches down a Roman road, their Standard glittering in their midst. Pristine uniforms sparkle in the morning sun.

At their head walks the Pilus Prior Centurion, the Cohort Commander, MARCUS AQUILA. Nineteen, the world at his feet, he carries all the confidence of youth with graceful ease.

Something up ahead makes him stop. He raises his hand. The COHORT and its baggage train halts.

In the distance, smoke billows up from the burning farmstead.

MARCUS stares for a moment, face expressionless. Then, with a sweep of his hand, he orders his men on.

EXT. FARMSTEAD - DAY.

Further down the road, MARCUS and his COHORT near the farmstead. They pass LEGIONARIES salting a field. In uniforms filthy with mud, the soldiers fan out across the length of the field, a bullock cart in their midst, loaded up with 'white grain'.

MARCUS and his COHORT reach the section of road running directly past the burning farmstead. They continue on, smoke billowing around them. As they march past, the fresh-faced COHORTS stare at the veteran LEGIONARIES, looting and burning.

MARCUS catches a glimpse of the LOCAL MEN being executed in the copse - a sword slashing down on a neck, the body toppling forward.

For a second, we register a glimmer of shock on MARCUS's face. The level of brutality here is something new to him.

Meanwhile, the gaggle of CELT BOYS are getting braver. One of them picks up a rock and chucks it at a LEGIONARY. Spinning round, he grabs the child and raises his sword for the kill.

MARCUS
(with quiet authority)
Leave him, soldier.

The LEGIONARY stares at the young Centurion. He drops the CELT BOY, who races away. Other LEGIONARIES turn and stare.

MARCUS marches on.

EXT. FORT - ISCA DUMNONIORUM - DAY.

The Roman fort of Isca Dumnoniorum dominates the hillside, overlooking a small satellite village. A Roman road leads out from the fort, slashed across the countryside like a cut.

EXT. FORT - ISCA DUMNONIORUM - DAY.

MARCUS and his COHORT near the fort, watched by war-weary LEGIONARIES from the parapet above. The great gates swing open and they march inside.

EXT/INT. FORT - ISCA DUMNONIORUM - DAY.

The LEGIONARIES stare down on the new arrivals marching into the main courtyard.

A grizzled Centurion, LUTORIUS, steps up. MARCUS salutes.

MARCUS

Marcus Aquila, Pilus Prior
Centurion of the Fourth Gaulish
Auxiliaries, come to relieve this
garrison.

LUTORIUS

Centurion Lutorius. Commander of
the Dacian Horse.

MARCUS

Where's the garrison commander?

LUTORIUS

He left this morning, sir. Couldn't
wait to get away.

A look from MARCUS.

EXT/INT. FORT - ISCA DUMNONIORUM - DAY.

A series of angles on LUTORIUS showing MARCUS round the garrison - a small square of rectangular buildings around a colonnaded courtyard.

LUTORIUS

The cohort Standard and officers
are all housed here, the rest of
the men across the yard.

They pass another ranker Centurion (GALBA) with two JUNIOR OFFICERS. They stop talking and salute. MARCUS returns the salute. The OFFICERS watch him walk away.

GALBA

(mutters disparagingly)
So that's Fabius Aquila's son.
(beat)
He's a boy.

MARCUS heard that. He smiles to himself and continues on.

INT. FORT - ISCA DUMNONIORUM - COMMANDER'S QUARTERS - DAY.

The commander's quarters comprise a sleeping cell, a polished oak pay-chest, a writing desk, a cabinet for the record rolls and a rather tasteless bronze pedestal lamp. Just outside the door is a rose bush in a pot. The buds, just appearing.

LUTORIUS scoops up a duty-roster and a rope of keys. He hands them to MARCUS.

LUTORIUS

Duty-roster and the keys to the pay-chest.

MARCUS

You don't have a paymaster?

LUTORIUS

We're too small a garrison. Unfortunately that job falls to you.

(beat)

As you can probably tell, there's been a problem with the latrines, but we have someone working on it.

MARCUS

(smiles)

Unsuccessfully.

LUTORIUS

(smiles back)

So far.

(off a gust of wind)

The west wind I'm afraid I can't change.

MARCUS glances into the sleeping cell.

MARCUS

What do you do for sport here?

LUTORIUS

Not much. Every two weeks or so the men are allowed into the village for "rest and recreation". Other than that, we stay in the fort.

MARCUS

You don't hunt?

LUTORIUS

We don't encourage the men to fraternize with the enemy.

MARCUS
 (nicely deadpan)
 Just to sleep with them.

LUTORIUS acknowledges that with a thin smile. He moves to the door, then turns.

LUTORIUS
 May I ask why you chose Britain for
 your first tour of duty?

MARCUS
 I heard the hunting was good.

LUTORIUS
 (pointedly)
 Don't you have a family connection?

MARCUS
 I've an uncle here, in Calleva,
 though I've never met him.

INT. FORT - ISCA DUMNONIORUM - COMMANDER'S QUARTERS - DAY.

MARCUS hangs up his sword and begins unpacking his trunk. He brings out some official-looking documents, some jars of *garum*, a brooch of the god Mithras, and a small carved wooden bird which he hangs with particular care beside his bed.

EXT. ISCA DUMNONIORUM - FORT/ROAD - DAY.

MARCUS and LUTORIUS ride out of the fort with a GUARD OF DACIAN HORSE. All the way, they're followed by a gaggle of third world LOCALS selling fruit, drinks, cloth, anything they can flog.

A flap of wings makes MARCUS glance up.

High above him, a kite flutters, crow-black against the sky. The same CELT BOY whom MARCUS saved the day before, runs the kite along the side of the road. MARCUS and the CELT BOY stare at each other. The kite wings flutter and snap.

EXT. ISCA DUMNONIORUM - VILLAGE - DAY.

MARCUS, LUTORIUS and the GUARD OF DACIAN HORSE ride through the fort's satellite village, a shanty-town on the fringe of Empire.

LUTORIUS
 Most of the time, we rub along.
 They sell us food, we take their
 taxes. If they attack us, we punish
 them. They know the rules.
 (MORE)

LUTORIUS (CONT'D)

(beat)

But you once let a holy man into their heads and they stop thinking at all. It's as if punishment has no meaning. The only meaning is war.

MARCUS

So, if the priests get into their heads, what are they fighting for?

LUTORIUS

Nothing. They're keeping faith with their gods. We're just the unbelievers.

Somewhere - impossible to tell where - a male voice calls out in prayer. A single note, rising and falling on the air.

At the same moment, they round a corner and meet a young Celt, CRADOC, leading two horses. CRADOC is lean, athletic and composed - compelling and distant. Three British chariots stand outside his hut, half-built or ready for repair.

LUTORIUS (CONT'D)

Cradoc. Over here.

In his own time, CRADOC turns and looks at them.

LUTORIUS (CONT'D)

Cradoc's a horse-dealer. He does work for the fort.

MARCUS nods at the chariots.

MARCUS

You're a charioteer?

CRADOC

I am accounted the best in my tribe.

MARCUS

Our racing chariots in Rome are smaller.

CRADOC

The Commander also is a charioteer?

MARCUS

I am accounted the best in my Legion.

CRADOC

British chariots are not as easy to ride.

MARCUS

I'm here to prove you wrong.

MARCUS and CRADOC hold each other's level gaze.

CUT TO:

EXT. CORNFIELD - EARLY MORNING.

A few days later, early morning mist enshrouds a beautiful, blue cornfield.

MARCUS stands on a British chariot, four harnessed horses steaming in the cold air. To his side stands CRADOC.

A pause.

MARCUS cracks the whip. With a jerk, the chariot moves off. At first, he finds the unfamiliarity difficult. He checks himself. Readjusts his stance.

In the distance - a still figure against the sky - CRADOC watches.

MARCUS begins speeding up. He feels the earth thumping upward through the base of the chariot. Adrenaline begins to pump.

MARCUS builds to a gallop. Hooves thunder under him. The cornfield flashes green-blue to his side. He turns the chariot for the final run, then - without warning - he steers the horses straight towards a forest of trees.

Close-up on CRADOC stiffening at the Roman's audacity.

EXT. FOREST - EARLY MORNING.

The chariot sweeps through the trees at full gallop, dipping and twisting with each check MARCUS makes to the reins.

EXT. CORNFIELD - EARLY MORNING.

The chariot explodes through the forest-edge and back into the field.

Slamming high and wide, we take in MARCUS, crouched low on the chariot, reins held high, whip slewing the air, animal and machine cutting a perfect line through the blue field.

With one expert manoeuvre, MARCUS rears up to CRADOC, reining the chariot to a halt. Silence. The two young men - Celt and Roman - hold each other's gaze.

MARCUS

Well?

CRADOC
The Commander begins to be a
charioteer.

CUT TO:

EXT. FORT - ISCA DUMNONIORUM - EARLY MORNING.

The LEGIONARIES complete arms drill in the central courtyard.

INT. FORT - ISCA DUMNONIORUM - COMMANDER'S QUARTERS - DAY.

MARCUS sits at his desk, working through the record rolls.

INT. FORT - ISCA DUMNONIORUM - DAY.

MARCUS and the QUARTERMASTER examine a delivery of grain on a bullock-drawn cart.

INT. FORT - ISCA DUMNONIORUM - NIGHT.

A trumpet sounds Late Rounds. Watched by MARCUS, the LEGIONARIES complete fatigues and begin breaking up for the night.

INT. FORT - ISCA DUMNONIORUM - COMMANDER'S QUARTERS - NIGHT.

MARCUS prays at a small altar to Mithras.

EXT. FOREST - EARLY MORNING.

MARCUS and CRADOC ride through the trees, out hunting. Frightened by their approach, a boar suddenly smashes away through the undergrowth.

MARCUS
A wager. One of your feathered
spears if I catch that boar.

CRADOC stares back. With a faint smile, he nods.

INT. FORT - OFFICER'S MESS - EARLY MORNING.

The RANKER CENTURIONS, including LUTORIUS and GALBA, drift into the officer's mess for breakfast.

GALBA
Where's our boy-commander?

LUTORIUS
Out riding with Cradoc.

GALBA shakes his head in disgust.

EXT. ISCA DUMNONIORUM - VILLAGE - EARLY MORNING.

The thunder of hooves. Pure adrenalin.

MARCUS is at full gallop, leaning low in the saddle, spear poised. Below him, the boar races through the undergrowth.

MARCUS hurls the spear and lets out a cry of triumph. He leaps off his horse, knife out for the kill.

CRADOC
Look out!

MARCUS turns too late. The speared boar is charging towards him, horns down. In a flash, CRADOC hurls his knife, striking the boar in the neck. The animal collapses, only feet from where MARCUS is standing.

A shocked beat. MARCUS turns to CRADOC, smiling gratefully.

MARCUS
Thank you.

CRADOC looks down, nods a fraction, then dismounts and begins pulling the dead boar out of the undergrowth.

INT. ISCA DUMNONIORUM - CRADOC'S HUT - EARLY MORNING.

CRADOC walks MARCUS into his hut. A line of spears stand against the wall, newly made. CRADOC nods MARCUS forward. He tests a few in his hand, then picks one out. It's tipped with a beautiful blue feather.

CRADOC
Any, except that one.

MARCUS gives him a quizzical smile, but CRADOC remains expressionless. Replacing the blue-feathered spear, MARCUS picks another one.

INT. FORT - OFFICER'S MESS - EARLY MORNING.

GALBA, LUTORIUS and the other RANKER CENTURIONS eat and talk.

GALBA
You mark my words. Marcus
Aquila is tainted.

DRUSILLUS

What are you talking about...?

GALBA

(giving him a look)

His father's Fabius Aquila. The man who lost the Ninth Legion.

LUTORIUS

Worse than that - he lost the Eagle.

GALBA

Unbelievable! The Legion's soul and standard. You just don't - you never let that go.

The OFFICERS take this in.

DRUSILLUS

Somebody tell me - how do five thousand men simply disappear?

PAULUS

I've heard they're still roaming the hills...or they marched as far as the ice mountains and fell off the edge of the earth.

LUTORIUS

My sergeant says that if you stand on the hilltop at Are-Cluta in Caledonia, when the moon is full, you can hear the ghosts of the Legionaries scream.

GALBA

I'm telling you. Marcus Aquila's a bad omen.

The door opens on MARCUS, holding his spear. The room goes silent. Did he hear that? If he did, he betrays nothing.

MARCUS

Morning.

GALBA nods at the spear, deadpan.

GALBA

Nice spear, sir.

MARCUS

(smiling)

I won a wager.

MARCUS puts the spear aside and joins them. An awkward silence. He turns to LUTORIUS.

MARCUS (CONT'D)

The delivery of grain from Durinham hasn't arrived. I want you to send out a cohort to investigate.

LUTORIUS

I wouldn't worry, sir. One day late is nothing in Britain.

MARCUS

Send one out.

GALBA

Do you really think that's wise, sir? There's a lot of unrest out there. We've had to make four punishment raids in the last month.

MARCUS

(calmly)

I want you to send out a cohort.

(beat)

The men need to eat too.

Silence. GALBA gives LUTORIUS a look. Feeling suddenly self-conscious, PAULUS lowers the hank of meat poised at his lips.

EXT. FORT - ISCA DUMNONIORUM - COURTYARD - DAY.

From the doorway of his quarters, MARCUS watches a COHORT OF CAVALRY march out of the fort. A moment of doubt, then he turns and goes back to work.

INT. FORT - MARCUS'S QUARTERS - NIGHT.

MARCUS prepares for bed.

He's about to enter his sleeping cell when the faintest shushing noise makes him stop. He walks over to the window. Pulling back the leather curtain, he peers into the blackness, listening. Nothing. He lets the curtain flap back.

EXT. HILLSIDE OUTSIDE FORT - NIGHT.

With preternatural speed, the camera glides over the surface of the grass, towards the fort.

INT. FORT - MARCUS'S BED - NIGHT.

MARCUS jolts upright, wide awake.

EXT. FORT - PARAPET - NIGHT.

Hauling a cloak over his nightshirt, MARCUS hurries towards the dim light of the watchtower. Three LEGIONARIES spring to their feet and salute.

MARCUS
Wake Lutorius.

One of the men hurries away. MARCUS stares over the parapet. There it is again. The faint swish-swish of wind in grass.

MARCUS (CONT'D)
Can you hear it?

LEGIONARY
Sir-?

He holds up his hand. Through the dark, they hear the faint grunt of cattle. MARCUS swears softly under his breath.

LUTORIUS races up, cloak hauled roughly over his nightshirt.

MARCUS
It seems I may have called you out
under false pretences.

LUTORIUS
You heard something?

MARCUS
Cattle, most likely.

LUTORIUS peers into the blackness. Faint but clear, we hear the shushing sound, then it stops.

MARCUS (CONT'D)
There. That. Hear it?

LUTORIUS nods. Both men stand there, staring intently over the parapet.

MARCUS (CONT'D)
(under his breath)
Damn the dark.
(beat)
Should I call the men to arms?

LUTORIUS
Depends. If it's just cattle, they won't
thank you.

MARCUS
Better angry than dead. Call them out.

CUT TO:

INT. FORT - MILITARY QUARTERS - NIGHT.

A series of visceral, fast-cut close-ups. A LEGIONARY races down the dormitory, men twist out of bed, haul on armour, short swords, boots, everything fast and jagged.

EXT. FORT - COURTYARD - NIGHT.

A line of LEGIONARIES rush out into the courtyard, fitting helmets as they go. One of them nicks the underside of his chin with the buckle. His mate races past, slapping his helmet on as he runs.

LEGIONARY 1
Bloody buckle cuts.

LEGIONARY 2
(holding up his helmet)
What do you expect? Made in Rumania.

EXT. FORT - PARAPET/COURTYARD - NIGHT.

LEGIONARIES pour onto the parapet, taking up their positions. As each man hits his post, a weird silence settles. Slowly, the whole fort goes still.

MARCUS stands in the courtyard, a lone figure in full armour, his men at battle stations all around him. The seconds tick by. Nobody moves. Feeling his nerves kick in, MARCUS adjusts the buckle on his helmet. He winces, glances up. LUTORIUS is on the watchtower. He's about to turn away, when his shield-arm flies up involuntarily and a spear smashes into it.

All along the parapet, like a silent uprush of shadows, the CELTS attack. For a moment, the shock of the assault renders attackers and defenders silent, then...

MARCUS
Sound Arms!

A trumpet blasts through the silence and everything roars.

CUT TO:

EXT. FORT - PARAPET - NIGHT.

Close-up on MARCUS scrambling up the parapet. Staying right on his shoulder, we experience the attack not as an epic, but as a physical and emotional assault on one person's senses; raw, shadow-looming, chaotic.

He hits the parapet at a sprint. Smack. He wheels round on a CELT rearing out of the dark. Short-sword out.

One quick stab. Someone screams. A LEGIONARY thumps to his knees, spewing blood. Another CELT rears over the parapet. MARCUS spins. Lunges. Misses him. Skids back. Ducks an axe-swing. Shoots out two quick stabs. One. Two. The CELT collapses over the parapet. Dry mouth. Heart pounding. He races on. Suddenly the sky ignites. A fire-brush flies over the ledge. Then another. Then another. MARCUS stamps wildly at them, sparks flying. A warning shout from behind. He spins round. Two CELTS are charging him. Shield up. Hard punch. One of the CELTS reels left. A smack to his armoured shoulder. He twists in agony. The shield spins out of his hand. LUTORIUS bangs up alongside.

LUTORIUS
(yelling)
Back to back!

MARCUS slams round, back smacked up against LUTORIUS. Another wave of CELTS flies over the wall. MARCUS grabs for his fallen shield. His fingers scrabble madly for a purchase on the leather handle, then lock into place. He punches wildly into the darkness, and...

EXT. FORT - PARAPET/COURTYARD - NIGHT.

MARCUS races among his men, yelling encouragement, filling gaps in the line, carrying off wounded - each moment shot through with purpose, as if the full force of his leadership has been released by the battle.

EXT. FORT - COURTYARD/PARAPET - DAWN.

Through thick mist, streaks of dawn light reveal the chaotic courtyard. Dead and wounded lie amid burned-out fire-brush, abandoned arms and spilled grain from the upturned cart.

MARCUS helps carry a wounded LEGIONARY to the FORT SURGEON. Turning back, he glances at his exhausted men sitting about the yard. He gives them the thumbs up, grinning. The MEN smile back. A few call out. He's blooded now. One of them.

MARCUS
(turning to the Quartermaster)
Breakfast. Now. And double their rations.

A cheer from the men. The QUARTERMASTER grumbles off. LUTORIUS approaches. He and MARCUS climb back up the parapet.

MARCUS (CONT'D)
(suddenly remembering)
What happened to the cohort of cavalry?

LUTORIUS'S FACE. He clearly thinks they've no chance.

MARCUS (CONT'D)
How long can we hold out?

LUTORIUS

With luck, several days.

MARCUS

Keep a fire burning on the roof.
Once the mist clears, we'll send up
a smoke column.

They reach the watchtower. What they see halts them in their tracks.

Below the fort - seeming to rise out of the mist - a vast army of CELTS forms before their eyes. They swarm around the single figure of a saffron-coated DRUID. The priest stands on a chariot, the still centre amid a storm of warriors. Even at this distance, his presence is palpable. An elemental sense of menace underscored by the beat of invisible drums.

MARCUS stares at the DRUID, furious with himself.

MARCUS (CONT'D)

Fetch me our best archer.

A LEGIONARY races away. LUTORIUS and MARCUS stand together, staring at the enemy massing in front of them.

An ARCHER races up.

MARCUS (CONT'D)

See the priest?

(beat)

Kill him.

A thin smile from LUTORIUS. His young commander is hardening fast.

The ARCHER loads his bow, takes aim and fires. MARCUS watches the arrow fly straight and true. But the moment it strikes the holy man, it appears to sail right through him. MARCUS blinks in shock.

WATCHTOWER O/S

Sir!

MARCUS looks up. There, behind the line of CELTS, just emerging on the brow of the hill, is the COHORT OF CAVALRY. MARCUS stares out, urging them back with all his being.

MARCUS

(under his breath)

Turn around...turn around...go back.

Realizing their situation, the COHORT OF CAVALRY begins turning for a retreat. But before they can fall back, another LINE OF CELTS emerges on the horizon line, behind them. They're surrounded. With no option but to push on, they prepare to engage.

MARCUS stares, grim-faced. He turns and starts walking down to the men mustering at the gate. LUTORIUS follows.

LUTORIUS

It's not your fault. You did the right thing.

MARCUS

I'm not leaving them to die.

(beat)

Muster a squadron and hold them at the gate.

MARCUS begins arming himself to engage.

LUTORIUS shouts the order and the hastily mustered SQUADRON begins forming in the shadow of the great gates - checking weapons, tightening helmet straps, shield grips, spears.

LUTORIUS turns back to MARCUS.

LUTORIUS

Sir.

(beat)

Let me lead them, sir.

MARCUS

It was my decision. It's my responsibility to bring them back.

(beat)

Open the doors.

The huge bars are drawn back and the great doors begin swinging apart. With each inching second, the roar of the battle closes in, louder and louder.

MARCUS steps to the front, ready to lead his men out. He can hear some of them offering up murmured prayers. He glances skyward. Instinctively, he whispers fast...

MARCUS (CONT'D)

Mithras, god of the sun, father of our fathers, let me not bring misfortune to my Legion...Mithras, god of the sun, father of our fathers, accept whatever sacrifice, that I may not bring misfortune to my Legion.

The gates are open. There's about a hundred yards clear between them and the battle between the CELTS and the CAVALRY.

MARCUS (CONT'D)

After the charge...only when I call it...form Testudo.

(off their nods, beat)

Ready.

(MORE)

MARCUS (CONT'D)
 (beat, sword out)
 CHARGE!

EXT. FORT - ISCA DUMNONIORUM - DAY.

From high over the fort gate, we look down on the extraordinary sight of the tiny SQUADRON OF LEGIONARIES, roaring out of the fort towards the mass of CELTS.

EXT. SQUADRON - DAY.

Close-up on MARCUS, his whole body jolting at full sprint. Ahead of him, he can see the battle raging. As the first CELTS turn to engage them, he yells out...

MARCUS
 FORM TESTUDO!

Suddenly - like a steel sky - the shields shoot up and the squadron is transformed into a mailed wedge. The move is so fast and unexpected that their momentum smashes them through the stunned line of CELTS and up to the COHORT OF CAVALRY, still fighting to break through on the other side.

MARCUS (CONT'D)
 BREAK TESTUDO!

The SQUADRON burst out of formation, fanning out into a rough v-like corridor of escape for the CAVALRY.

MARCUS (CONT'D)
 OUT SWORDS!
 (drawing his sword)
 CAESAR! CAESAR!

SQUADRON
 CAESAR! CAESAR!

Another smack of energy as the entire SQUADRON draw swords, battling to maintain the escape-corridor. The CELTS are about to re-assault, when...the strangest thing. A British war-horn rings out and they fall back.

MARCUS blinks in surprise.

EXT. FORT - ISCA DUMNONIORUM - DAY.

Cutting wide, we see that the ROMANS are now isolated on the hillside outside the fort. Almost instantly, a warning trumpet sounds from the watchtower behind them.

MARCUS spins round. Then he sees it.

Rising over the horizon, in a thunder of hooves, sweeps a single, breath-taking line of CHARIOTEERS, the blades on their wheels spinning ferociously. The sheer speed and theatre of their approach is awesome.

MARCUS
FALL BACK!

A trumpet blares out. In a desperate scrabble for safety, the SQUADRON begin sprinting for the still-open doors of the fort. From the parapet, their mates urge them on, screaming encouragement, yelling their names.

Close-up on MARCUS, falling back with his men. He glances over his shoulder at the still-separated COHORT OF CAVALRY. The sight of them there, fighting impossible odds.

Suddenly - aware that his men will die in retreat - MARCUS swerves aside and turns back on his tracks. He stands alone on the hillside, the sole Roman in a field of onrushing chariots. Purely and insanely heroic.

In the split-seconds left to him, MARCUS tenses for the spring, his whole body absolutely still and focussed.

Seeing their Commander's courage, the SQUADRON begins regrouping.

All MARCUS's attention is focussed on the lead chariot. Even from this distance, he can make out the DRUID standing next to his rider - saffron coated, hair flying out around him, one hand raised to the skies.

As it draws nearer, the rider looks up.

MARCUS freezes.

He's staring straight into the grim face of CRADOC. In his up-raised hand, the Celt grips the same blue feathered spear Marcus saw in his hut.

MARCUS'S FACE. Staring up at CRADOC. Before he can take in the moment's meaning, CRADOC is raising the spear, aiming it straight at him, then...MARCUS leaps - sword outstretched - at the on-coming chariot.

His dive carries him straight into CRADOC, killing him instantly. The chariot begins rearing out of control, then hits a rock and explodes into the air.

BLACKOUT:
DISSOLVING INTO:

EXT. ROMAN VILLA - GARDENS - DAY.

Against a bright sky, YOUNG MARCUS plays soldiers with his FATHER. On his finger, we glimpse flashes of an emerald ring. Laughing and squealing with delight, YOUNG MARCUS circles his daddy, round and round, until everything dizzies into blue.

EXT. FOREST - CALEDONIA - DAY.

A timeless, dreamlike angle on the back of a ROMAN OFFICER and five LEGIONARIES, sprinting for their lives through thick forest. Clenched in his emerald-ringed fist, the OFFICER grips the standard of his legion. There at the top, wings outstretched, is the great metal bird.

The Eagle of the Ninth.

EXT. ROMAN VILLA - GARDENS - DAY.

YOUNG MARCUS bursts out from behind a tree, brandishing a wooden sword. He slows to a halt and stares.

Kneeling in the shade of a branch, his FATHER is carefully carving a tiny wooden bird. With wings outstretched, it resembles a rough copy of the great Eagle. His father lifts the little bird into the sky. MARCUS watches it gripped in the emerald-ringed HAND, swooping this way and that.

EXT. FOREST - CALEDONIA - DAY.

Another hallucinatory, close-up flash of the Eagle of the Ninth, clenched in the OFFICER's emerald-ringed fist. It jerks wildly about as he runs for his life.

EXT. ROMAN VILLA - DAY.

YOUNG MARCUS stares up at the silhouette of his FATHER on horseback, dressed in the magnificent uniform of Legionary Cohort. Further off, other CAVALRY OFFICERS await their commander.

Bending down out of the sun, FATHER kisses YOUNG MARCUS on the forehead and hands him the little bird, smiling softly.

FATHER

The bird is charmed. If you speak to it
I will hear you, wherever I am.

YOUNG MARCUS

(staring into his father's eyes)
Wherever you are?

Their fingers remain linked over the bird. The only sign of emotion his FATHER can bear to show, is the merest stroke of the boy's hand. He sits back into the saddle. Blinding sunlight reduces him once more to a silhouette.

Stepping close to his MOTHER, YOUNG MARCUS watches his FATHER ride away. He glances at his mother. Tears run down her cheeks, but she holds herself still. Courage drummed into her breaking heart.

EXT. FOREST - CALEDONIA - DAY.

Tiring now, the OFFICER tears and stumbles through the drenching forest. In his fist, he still grips the Eagle of the Ninth.

Suddenly, like ghosts emerging from the dark, a great line of CELTS appears through the trees, brandishing spears.

The OFFICER jerks to a halt and...

INT. FORT - SICK BAY - DAY.

MARCUS comes-to.

LUTORIUS and the FORT SURGEON are standing over him. He blinks at them, searching for his bearings.

MARCUS

How long-?

FORT SURGEON

Six days.

MARCUS

(taking this in, then...)

The cohort?

LUTORIUS

Safe, sir.

MARCUS lets out a sigh of relief. He tries to move. Pain roars up from his leg.

FORT SURGEON

Lie still.

MARCUS

The relief force. Did they come?

LUTORIUS

They came. Their Commander's in his quarters - sorry, your quarters.

MARCUS blinks. The first glimmer of the loss to come.

FORT SURGEON
You must rest. Drink this.

The FORT SURGEON lifts a cup of bitter broth to his lips.
MARCUS drinks. The FORT SURGEON settles his head back.

MARCUS
(starting to drift)
How did I get off the battlefield?

LUTORIUS
Oh a lot of us had a hand in that, sir.

MARCUS
How are the men?

LUTORIUS
The men are anxious to know how
their Commander fares.

MARCUS
Tell them...
(a glint, beginning to go)
I've decided to give up chariots.

He blacks out.

CUT TO:

INT. UNCLE AQUILA'S VILLA - SOUTHERN ENGLAND - DAYS LATER.

The sound of bird-song.

MARCUS opens his eyes.

He's lying on a different bed, in an unfamiliar room.

For a second he assumes himself to be dead, then slowly, he
turns his head to look down at himself. He lifts the sheet.
The whole of his lower half is a mash of blood and bandage.

Turning away, he glances at the sun-drenched room. Opposite,
is an open door with a different potted rose outside. On the
walls are beautiful frescoes of fish. An elderly servant
(STEPHANOS) lies asleep on a divan, snoring softly.

MARCUS tries to speak. All that comes out is a croak. The
sound wakes STEPHANOS with a jerk. He takes one look at
MARCUS and promptly hurries out.

MARCUS tries to call him back. But even the slightest
movement brings a stab of searing pain. He lies back.

After a moment, a huge man steps into the doorway and smiles
dispassionately.

UNCLE AQUILA is in his mid-50's, bald, big boned - with limbs that appear to have been loosely strung together from wet leather. When he speaks, his manner is bluff and acerbic, with a certain self-conscious irony.

UNCLE AQUILA

Morning.

MARCUS peers - who is this man? UNCLE AQUILA reads his look.

UNCLE AQUILA (CONT'D)

I'm your uncle, Aquila.

(beat)

Your father's brother? You're in Calleva now.

MARCUS

Calleva-?

UNCLE AQUILA

The fort Commander had you transferred. You nearly died.

(beat, moving on)

Do you have any memory of the journey here?

A beat. MARCUS shakes his head.

UNCLE AQUILA (CONT'D)

No. Just as well. Two hundred leagues in a mule cart, with an injury like yours...not my idea of fun.

(with a twinkle)

You don't happen to play draughts, do you?

MARCUS

(taken aback)

Um...sometimes...

UNCLE AQUILA

I'm addicted. Most of the time, my only opponent's old Stephanos. I rather suspect he's humouring me. I look forward to a more willing adversary.

(beat)

He's a fine nurse, mind you. Hasn't left your side all week.

MARCUS

I've been here a week?

UNCLE AQUILA

Thereabouts. I'm afraid I lost count.

(calling through the door)

Stephanos?

STEPHANOS bustles back in, carrying a jar of hot water.

STEPHANOS
How is the patient?

UNCLE AQUILA
Alive.

STEPHANOS's face. A look. He begins mixing a sack of dried herbs into some hot water.

UNCLE AQUILA (CONT'D)
Well, I hope that whatever he's about to give you does you good. It smells repellent.

Smiling, UNCLE AQUILA walks out. STEPHANOS gently lifts MARCUS's head and brings a cup of bitter broth to his lips.

STEPHANOS
Drink. It was made up for you by the Fort Surgeon.

As MARCUS drinks, their eyes meet.

MARCUS
How long before I can go back?

STEPHANOS blinks nervously.

STEPHANOS
Sleep.

MARCUS lies back. His eyes close down.

FLASHBACK TO:

EXT. FOREST - CALEDONIA - DAY.

The Eagle of the Ninth is now gripped in a ringless HAND. Different, but as yet unexplained. The HAND lifts the great bird skyward. As the Eagle rises, a roar like the sound of baying wolves swells the sky.

BACK TO:

INT. UNCLE AQUILA'S VILLA - MARCUS'S QUARTERS - DAY.

MARCUS jerks awake. As he comes-to, the first wave of regret washes over him. He turns to face the wall.

INT. UNCLE AQUILA'S VILLA - MARCUS'S QUARTERS - DAY.

Some days later.

MARCUS is now well enough to hobble about on two sticks. With painful slowness, he makes his way towards the window. UNCLE AQUILA appears in the doorway.

UNCLE AQUILA

You have a visitor.

LUTORIUS steps into the room. In honour of the occasion, he wears full armour. Sunlight catches the metal, making him seem unreachably glorious.

MARCUS adjusts his sticks, humiliated to be seen like this. In his awkwardness, he stiffens. Formal.

MARCUS

Lutorius.

LUTORIUS

Sir.

(beat)

The men have been asking after you.

MARCUS

Thank them from me.

LUTORIUS

I will, sir.

Silence. LUTORIUS looks down at his old Commander. He is deeply shocked to see him so transformed. UNCLE AQUILA can see it in his face. He comes to his rescue.

UNCLE AQUILA

You had good news for my nephew,
did you not?

LUTORIUS

Yes - sorry - I received news
yesterday from headquarters. For
holding the fort under extreme
duress, the Cohort of the Fourth
Gaulish has been awarded the gilded
laurel. From today, their standard
will carry its first wreath.

MARCUS smiles, genuinely touched.

MARCUS

Tell the men I could not be more
proud.

LUTORIUS is delighted to catch a glimpse of the old MARCUS. He stumbles straight on.

LUTORIUS

And that's not all, sir. You yourself have been awarded the military signum for conspicuous gallantry.

LUTORIUS hands him the bracelet.

LUTORIUS (CONT'D)

The citation reads "honour and faithfulness."

MARCUS holds the heavy metal in the palm of his hand.

MARCUS

(softly)
Honour and faithfulness.

LUTORIUS

It's etched into the metal. There.

MARCUS

Yes. I see it.

A beat.

LUTORIUS

May I be the first to offer my congratulations.

The effect of his own emotions - too personal now - makes MARCUS unable to respond as before. He can only nod, eyes fixed on the bracelet. A pause.

UNCLE AQUILA

I think perhaps my nephew is tired.

LUTORIUS

Yes.
(beat)
Sir.

LUTORIUS salutes.

MARCUS

(without looking up)
Thank you, Lutorius.

LUTORIUS hangs there a moment, then he and UNCLE AQUILA walk out. MARCUS can hear them talking softly as the old man sees the Centurion out. The door shuts. Lutorius is gone.

MARCUS stares down at the bracelet in his hand.

Slowly - carefully - he attempts to fix the bracelet around his wrist. But even this tiny feat is too painful.

He's reduced to picking it up in his teeth and trying to slip it over his fingers. The metal links keep skewing. He tries again. A flinch of pain makes him gasp and the bracelet falls to the floor.

He stares down at it, lying there at his feet. Suddenly, all his pent-up pain and frustration explodes into his chest and he lets out a roar.

INT. UNCLE AQUILA'S VILLA - MASTER QUARTERS - DAY.

Hearing him cry out, UNCLE AQUILA looks up. STEPHANOS hurries past, ready to rush to Marcus's aide. The old man holds him back.

UNCLE AQUILA

Leave him, Stephanos. There's no medicine for that.

INT. UNCLE AQUILA'S VILLA - MARCUS'S QUARTERS - DAY.

Close-up on MARCUS, rocking back and forth in an agony of lost hopes.

CUT TO:

EXT. UNCLE AQUILA'S VILLA - GARDEN DAY.

Some months later.

Spring has come again and the garden is bursting with life. STEPHANOS potters about the garden, tending to the plants. MARCUS limps out on his sticks and the old servant immediately hurries over to help. He carries over a cushioned chair and eases MARCUS into it. MARCUS sighs at being so "mothered", his frustration beginning to surface.

EXT. UNCLE AQUILA'S VILLA - GARDEN - DAY.

Later, MARCUS is seated in the cushioned chair, staring vaguely at the neighbouring house and garden. The sound of barking. He sees a flash of a white toga. A beautiful young girl (COTTIA) - about eleven or twelve - races through the garden, chasing a dog. Her innocence and freedom are in such stark contrast to his own mood, as to seem almost otherworldly. Someone calls for her.

MOTHER O/S

Cottia...?!

COTTIA turns - catching a glimpse of MARCUS - then hurries back inside.

INT. UNCLE AQUILA'S VILLA - MASTER QUARTERS - EVENING.

MARCUS is seated, his leg heavily strapped. He's playing draughts with UNCLE AQUILA. In the background, old STEPHANOS sweeps the floor. A pause.

MARCUS
What was my father like?

UNCLE AQUILA
Your father...?

MARCUS
I hardly knew him.

UNCLE AQUILA pauses - taking this in - then resumes playing.

UNCLE AQUILA
Your father was the perfect Roman.
With all that's good about that.

MARCUS
Did you like him?

UNCLE AQUILA
(smiling ruefully)
We were brothers. We weren't brought up to "like" each other, we were brought up to compete. In that respect, our dear mother was a true Roman.

(beat)
I'm not even sure I actually knew him well enough to "like" him or not. Was I jealous of him? Yes. Did I love him? Yes.

MARCUS
But when you were older - you were both soldiers. That's something you shared, isn't it?

UNCLE AQUILA
A little.
(beat)
When my Legion was stationed here, I fell in love with a local girl. She died not long after and...I simply stayed. Sometimes, grief holds you in one place forever.

On that last line, he looks directly at MARCUS. For a moment their eyes meet, then MARCUS breaks it.

UNCLE AQUILA (CONT'D)

I saw very little of your father after that. My fault. I should have moved on. I'm too old to change now. You however...you have your whole life ahead of you.

MARCUS

What life? All I ever dreamed about was being a soldier.

UNCLE AQUILA

You'll get over it.

(moving his piece)

When your mother died, her - what was it - her sister brought you up?

MARCUS nods stiffly.

UNCLE AQUILA (CONT'D)

You could return to her, I suppose.

MARCUS

I'd rather die than go back there.

UNCLE AQUILA

So. That's settled then. Your move.

INT. UNCLE AQUILA'S VILLA - MARCUS'S QUARTERS - NIGHT.

Moonlight fills the sleeping quarters. MARCUS lies facing the wall, unable to sleep.

INT. UNCLE AQUILA'S VILLA - MARCUS'S QUARTERS - DAY.

The next morning, sunlight streams into the room. MARCUS lies awake on the bed, still facing to the wall. On the table beside him, a tray of untouched food.

UNCLE AQUILA strolls in carrying the small, carved wooden bird.

UNCLE AQUILA

This came for you, from the fort. It was found in your quarters. You recognize it?

MARCUS nods. He takes the small bird in his hand. The weight of it, there, in his palm. A beat.

UNCLE AQUILA (CONT'D)

Up you get. We're going to the games.

MARCUS

Games...?

UNCLE AQUILA

Yes. You know, fun?

(beat)

If that's not too outrageous an idea.

CUT TO:

EXT. CALLEVA COLISEUM - DAY.

A third world version of the big time. A single street leading to a small, wooden coliseum. Along the way, the usual STREET KIDS selling drinks, sweets, fried food and souvenirs. CROWDS OF LOCALS AND LEGIONARIES pour past in holiday mood.

INT. LITTER - DAY.

A still bewildered MARCUS sits in a litter with UNCLE AQUILA, on his way to the games.

UNCLE AQUILA

It's not the Coliseum, obviously, but they put on quite a good show. A few wild beasts, a sham fight, even a couple of real ones if they can afford it.

MARCUS couldn't care less.

He stares out across the crowd. He notices the beautiful young girl, COTTIA, from the neighbouring house. She's walking towards the coliseum with her GIRLFRIENDS, laughing and joking with the same easy freedom as before.

INT. CALLEVA COLISEUM - DAY.

Ashamed of his invalidity, MARCUS descends the stairs on the arm of two SERVANTS. UNCLE AQUILA walks ahead, chatting to acquaintances. All the way to his seat, LOCAL WORTHIES, MOTHERS and DAUGHTERS point and giggle - their first glimpse of the handsome young Commander staying in their midst.

Down in the arena, GLADIATORS are sham-fighting. Some of the CROWD watch, others talk amongst themselves, catching up on business.

UNCLE AQUILA

(helping Marcus into his seat)

Here we are. Ease him down. Gently.

He's not a sack of rice.

Seated, MARCUS looks about. The sudden magic of space and light hits him between the eyes like a shot of adrenaline.

In the arena, twenty GLADIATORS are sham-fighting. Swordsmen, wrestlers, axemen - all hand-to-hand. The crowd roar on their favourites and boo the losers.

Finally, an ASSISTANT blows a warning on his trumpet and the GLADIATORS stop.

ASSISTANT
(bigging it up)
And now...a fight to the death!

The CROWD turn in their seats. All talking stops.

At a command from the CAPTAIN OF THE GLADIATORS, all his men retreat, except for one. He carries a three-pronged spear and net. He's clearly a favourite with the crowd, who call out his nickname, THE FISHER.

Two ASSISTANTS drag a young Celt slave (ESCA) into the arena.

Stripped to the waist, ESCA bears the blue markings of the northern tribes, his long hair flung back, grey-blue eyes staring straight ahead with a fierce pride. One of the ASSISTANTS hands him a sword and dagger.

Something about him immediately captures MARCUS's attention. In his look and demeanour, he resembles the charioteer, Cradoc. But it's the look in the Celt's eyes that really holds him.

UNCLE AQUILA
(mutters disparagingly)
A gladiator and a slave? Never a fair contest.

At a sign from the CAPTAIN OF THE GLADIATORS, ESCA and THE FISHER step into the centre. The CAPTAIN places them ten paces apart, then licks his finger, checking for the direction of the breeze. He shifts each man very slightly, ensuring no advantage of wind or light. Finally, he retreats to the barriers.

For a split-second, MARCUS notices the young girl, COTTIA, in the stands opposite. She stares intently at the two men in the centre of the arena.

Absolute silence. MARCUS can hear his own breathing. A sudden cramp in his leg makes him wince, but he keeps his eyes fixed on the young Celt.

For a long moment, ESCA and THE FISHER are still. Finally, ESCA starts circling his opponent. THE FISHER stands poised on the balls of his feet, net and trident at the ready. Suddenly, ESCA lunges. The net flies out and lands harmlessly behind him. The FISHER darts aside, just missing ESCA's sword thrust. The crowd "oohs" appreciatively.

Grabbing his net from the ground, the FISHER sprints away. ESCA chases after him, running low like a hunter. The two men tear around the perimeter, making a half-circle of the arena, until they are back in front of the private boxes.

Without warning, the FISHER whirls about and flings the net once more. It whips out, hitting ESCA full in the body. Caught off-guard, he crashes headlong and rolls over and over, helplessly enmeshed in the netting.

MARCUS wrenches forward, breath caught in his throat. The young Celt is lying right below his seat. He can hear him panting, see the sweat glisten on his upper-lip.

The FISHER strolls over. The CROWD roar. He raises his trident for the death strike. Glancing up, he gives his fans a little me-again smile, waiting for their verdict.

The CROWD hold out their thumbs. A few turned up, most down.

For a moment, ESCA appears to raise his arm from inside the mesh of netting - signalling an appeal for mercy - but he lets it drop back. Suddenly, he is staring straight into MARCUS's eyes, a look as direct and intimate as if they were the only two people in the arena. Then...still looking at MARCUS, he twists his head and offers his neck for the kill.

MARCUS spots COTTIA. She's standing as high as she can on her seat, both thumbs turned upward.

Suddenly, MARCUS is gripped by a mission to save this man's life. He shoots out of his seat, one hand on the barrier to steady himself, the other held high, thumb upward.

MARCUS

Come on...

But the thumbs in the crowd are still majority-down.

Clenching his whole body with the effort of will, MARCUS thrusts out his hand.

MARCUS (CONT'D)

Thumbs up! Thumbs up, you fools!

Finally, a few spectators start turning their thumbs upwards.

The FISHER glances round, uncertain which way it's going.

MARCUS (CONT'D)

(pressing forward)

Come on...!

More and more thumbs begin turning upward. MARCUS glances round, determined, angry.

UNCLE AQUILA sits beside him, slight smile, thumb raised.

Still it's in the balance. Finally, with a little mocking bow, the FISHER raises his trident and steps back. ATTENDANTS rush forward and begin disentangling ESCA. An ironic cheer goes up from the FISHER's fans

UNCLE AQUILA

(aside, dryly)

You keep this up, the Captain of the Gladiators will have you on commission.

MARCUS's leg is suddenly agony.

MARCUS

I need to go...

UNCLE AQUILA clicks his finger. The two SERVANTS begin helping MARCUS out. As he stumbles up the steps, he throws one last look back over his shoulder.

ESCA lies where he fell, staring straight at MARCUS. A moment of the purest shame.

INT. UNCLE AQUILA'S VILLA - MARCUS'S QUARTERS - NIGHT.

Night. MARCUS lies in bed, staring at the little wooden bird. His finger traces over the wings, the nooks where his father carved the feather-curves.

FLASHBACK TO:

INT. ROMAN VILLA - MAIN COURTYARD - NIGHT.

YOUNG MARCUS wanders through the moonlit courtyard, gripping the little wooden bird. He's drawn forward by the sound of weeping. As he nears his parent's rooms, he sees his MOTHER wailing and keening with all the ferocity of grown-up grief. She's tearing at her hair, overwhelmed with emotion.

YOUNG MARCUS stares, helpless, at her agony.

CUT TO:

INT. UNCLE AQUILA'S VILLA - MARCUS'S QUARTERS - DAY.

The next morning.

MARCUS is trying and failing to put on his sandals. In frustration, he calls through the door.

MARCUS

Stephanos! Stephanos!!

The sound of feet on stone, then UNCLE AQUILA appears.

UNCLE AQUILA
I've bought you a slave.

MARCUS
I don't need a slave.

UNCLE AQUILA
I'm not sure poor old Stephanos is
up to serving two masters. I
thought a body slave would
complement the household.

MARCUS
I should have been consulted.

UNCLE AQUILA
Well...you weren't.
(calling through the door)
Boy!

ESCA walks in. MARCUS stiffens in shock. ESCA stares straight
ahead, avoiding his eye

UNCLE AQUILA (CONT'D)
His name's Esca.

UNCLE AQUILA walks out.

ESCA doesn't move. MARCUS sits stiffly on the bed. A long,
sullen silence, neither young man giving an inch. Finally...

MARCUS
I've no use for you.

ESCA
I had no wish to be bought.

Angrily, MARCUS picks up his sticks and hobbles to the window.

MARCUS
You could have run. My uncle would
never have been able to stop you.

ESCA
I have a debt of honour to you now.
There's no choice in that.

MARCUS
You don't sound very pleased.

ESCA
No man should have to beg for his
life.

MARCUS
You didn't. I did. And I meant
nothing by it.

Another sullen pause. Finally, ESCA pulls out a dagger from inside his tunic and throws it at MARCUS's feet. MARCUS stares down at the exquisitely decorated hilt, the deadly metal.

MARCUS (CONT'D)

What's that?

ESCA

It came from my father. He who owns it, owns me.

(beat)

The knife is yours.

MARCUS is held by that glittering knife - the most aggressive act of submission it's possible to imagine.

CUT TO:

INT/EXT. UNCLE AQUILA'S VILLA - DAY/NIGHT.

A series of angles on:

1/ An evening meal in the main quarters. MARCUS and UNCLE AQUILA eat, while STEPHANOS fetches and carries. By contrast, ESCA stands in the shadows, barely part of the scene. A fringe-figure, outside the circle of light.

2/ MARCUS hobbles back to his quarters on his sticks. Behind him, walks ESCA. ESCA hangs back in the doorway, but MARCUS ignores him completely.

3/ Night. MARCUS tosses and turns in his sleep. Barely visible in the doorway, stands ESCA. He stares down at the sleeping figure with hooded eyes; dangerous, unreadable.

4/ MARCUS hobbles across the garden towards his favorite spot on the cushioned chair. ESCA walks a pace behind. As usual, he is ignored by his new master. Losing his footing, MARCUS stumbles. ESCA whips down his spear in a single movement, catching MARCUS under the arm, stopping him from falling. And yet, the latent violence is unmistakable. Unnerved and angry, MARCUS shrugs off the spear and hobbles on.

MARCUS

Leave me alone.

5/ STEPHANOS works busily in the kitchen, moving to and fro. Ignored by the other servant, ESCA crouches by the door. He now seems barely part of the household at all.

INT. UNCLE AQUILA'S VILLA - MAIN QUARTERS - NIGHT.

MARCUS cries out in agony. A middle-aged FIELD SURGEON kneels in front of him, examining his leg. ESCA stands nearby, holding his spear. The FIELD SURGEON gives a little grimace.

FIELD SURGEON
Who searched this wound?

MARCUS
The surgeon at the fort.

FIELD SURGEON
Was he drunk? I've never seen such
a mess.

MARCUS
(stiffening)
We were under attack. He did the
best he could.

FIELD SURGEON
(shaking his head)
A butcher could have done a cleaner
job. I'm going to have to re-open
the wound. There's still metal in
there. You'll never heal properly
until it's out.

MARCUS takes this in. UNCLE AQUILA sighs.

UNCLE AQUILA
Well then...best get it over with.

FIELD SURGEON
Tomorrow morning?

Trying not to show his nerves, MARCUS nods. The FIELD SURGEON
starts packing up his bag.

FIELD SURGEON (CONT'D)
I'll be round after breakfast. If I
were you, I'd get some rest. It'll be
over before you know it. I've the
best knives in the business.

The FIELD SURGEON pats MARCUS on the chest and walks out with
UNCLE AQUILA. A pause. MARCUS with his back to ESCA.

MARCUS
Some wine.

INT. UNCLE AQUILA'S VILLA - MARCUS'S QUARTERS - EVENING.

MARCUS stands at the window, the small wooden bird clutched
in his hand. ESCA walks in with a pitcher of wine.

MARCUS
On the table.

ESCA lays the pitcher on the bedside table and walks out. At no point do they even meet each other's eye.

CUT TO:

INT. UNCLE AQUILA'S VILLA - MAIN QUARTERS - DAY.

The dining room has been transformed into a temporary surgery. UNCLE AQUILA stands a little gingerly in the doorway, watching the FIELD-SURGEON prepare his implements. He washes each one in barley spirit, whistling softly as he works. KAESO potters back and forth, fetching water and blankets as requested.

MARCUS walks in on ESCA's shoulder.

FIELD SURGEON

Ready?

MARCUS

Ready.

MARCUS lays himself down on the table. ESCA covers him in a clean linen sheet. MARCUS avoids his eye.

MARCUS (CONT'D)

You can go.

ESCA turns for the door.

FIELD SURGEON

No, I'll need him to hold you down.

MARCUS and ESCA are embarrassed.

MARCUS

Can't my uncle do it?

UNCLE AQUILA

I haven't the strength dear boy.

FIELD SURGEON

(busying about)

Quickly now. Hold him down.

ESCA steps up. Reluctantly, he takes hold of MARCUS's wrists.

FIELD SURGEON (CONT'D)

(impatient)

Get your weight on him, boy!

ESCA leans down, pinning MARCUS to the table with the weight of his chest. Suddenly, their eyes are very close.

FIELD SURGEON (CONT'D)

Tighter!

ESCA grips tight. The FIELD SURGEON prepares to make the first cut.

FIELD SURGEON (CONT'D)
Deep breath in. When I say "now",
let it out.

MARCUS nods. His eyes meet ESCA's.

FIELD SURGEON (O.S.) (CONT'D)
Now.

MARCUS lets out his breath and the knife goes in. His arms spasm involuntarily. ESCA grips him tight. Pain screams up his body. He blacks out.

FLASHBACK TO:

EXT. FOREST - CALEDONIA - DAY.

The roar of battle. Close-up on the Eagle of the Ninth flying through the air, slashed by rain.

We are back with Marcus's FATHER and his five surviving LEGIONARIES, sprinting for their lives through the forest. Clenched in his emerald-ringed fist, FATHER grips the Eagle.

And now - for the first time - we catch flashes of the CELTS closing in on horseback. Closer and closer until the closest rider is galloping right behind FATHER, his spear rising for the kill and...

BACK TO:

INT. UNCLE AQUILA'S VILLA - MARCUS'S QUARTERS - DAY.

MARCUS wakes with a start. He is back in his own bed. ESCA crouches by the door. Seeing MARCUS stir, he rises from his post. MARCUS licks his lips, slowly coming-to.

Without waiting to be asked, ESCA picks up a cup of water. Lifting the back of MARCUS's head, he helps him drink.

MARCUS
Did I shame myself?

A beat. ESCA shakes his head. He lays MARCUS down on the pillow and steps back. We hold on the two of them there, ESCA standing a few feet from the bedside, MARCUS lying alongside.

MARCUS (CONT'D)
Thank you.

CUT TO:

EXT. FOREST - DAY.

Six months later.

A startlingly different, winter landscape.

Shooting through the trees, the camera dips and lifts with the rise and fall of two riders at full gallop.

MARCUS and ESCA are out hunting, their horses charging through frosted woodland. Hidden in the undergrowth, a wild boar scatters ahead of them, turning this way and that.

ESCA is a superb rider. He closes in on the boar, matching it, swerve for swerve. Finally, stooping low in the saddle, eyes ablaze with warrior-instinct, he raises his spear and hurls.

EXT. HIGH HILL - DAY.

MARCUS and ESCA ride their horses back along the trail, the dead boar tied over ESCA's horse. MARCUS adjusts his injured leg in the stirrup and holds out his hand. ESCA pulls out a leather flask. MARCUS drinks and hands it back. They ride on.

MARCUS

You're from the north. Which side of Hadrian's Wall?

ESCA

North east, a day's ride.

A beat. MARCUS stares towards the endless horizon.

MARCUS

What do you know about the Ninth Legion?

ESCA

Some in my tribe boasted that they saw a great army of Romans march north, fifteen years ago. They say that the soldiers liked the weather so much, they stayed and married our women.

MARCUS smiles.

MARCUS

What else do they say?

ESCA

That their Eagle is a god and he haunts the mists, still.

MARCUS

Your tribe believes that?

ESCA

My tribe is gone.

MARCUS looks at him. A pause. ESCA stops on the crest of a hill, staring out over a vast tract of frosted land. It rolls away into infinity, hauntingly beautiful. Finally, out of the silence...

ESCA (CONT'D)

My father was bearer of the Blue War Shield of the Brigantes, Lord of five hundred spears. I was his armour-bearer until I became a warrior in my own right.

MARCUS stares quizzically at the Celt. This is the most ESCA has spoken in months. He continues without turning.

ESCA (CONT'D)

A year after my sixteenth summer our Clan rose against the Romans. My father and two brothers died. My mother also. My father killed her before the Legionaries broke through. She knelt in front of him and he slit her throat. She made no sound.

A long silence. The terrible pain of this memory, etched in his still face.

ESCA (CONT'D)

I, alone of all my kin, survived. The few who were with me were all taken as slaves.

ESCA looks away, shielding his face.

ESCA (CONT'D)

It is not good to remember too closely.

EXT. UNCLE AQUILA'S VILLA - DAY.

MARCUS and ESCA return from the hunt to be met by a GUARD OF LEGIONARIES milling about outside the villa. STEPHANOS bustles out to meet them, looking harassed.

STEPHANOS

Your uncle has guests. Quick-quick, I'll see to the horses.

MARCUS and ESCA dismount and head inside.

INT. UNCLE AQUILA'S VILLA - MAIN QUARTERS - DAY.

MARCUS and ESCA enter, to be met by UNCLE AQUILA and two strangers, both Romans. One is an elderly Legate, CLAUDIUS, the other a young Staff Officer, PLACIDUS. They look pristine in their uniforms.

MARCUS stiffens defensively, still grimy from the hunt.

UNCLE AQUILA

Claudius, may I present my nephew, Marcus. Claudius is an old friend and - of course - esteemed Legate of the Sixth Legion.

CLAUDIUS gives UNCLE AQUILA a smile. Old sparring partners. MARCUS raises his hand in salute. The older man smiles.

CLAUDIUS

Delighted to make your acquaintance. Your uncle's been boasting about you.

The young staff officer gives a little cough.

CLAUDIUS (CONT'D)

Excuse me.
(gesturing Placidus)
Tribune Servius Placidus, my staff sergeant.

Smiling silkily, the young Staff Officer salutes. MARCUS returns it. Unconsciously, he touches his wounded leg.

UNCLE AQUILA

Stephanos!
(smiles, gesturing them in)
Boiled eggs and fish. Don't all rush at once.

INT. UNCLE AQUILA'S VILLA - MAIN QUARTERS - NIGHT.

MARCUS, UNCLE AQUILA, CLAUDIUS and PLACIDUS eat. STEPHANOS and ESCA serve and pour wine.

UNCLE AQUILA

Tell me, Placidus. How do you find working for a Legate, no less?

CLAUDIUS

Placidus is far too well-connected to be impressed by a few oak-leaves. Soon as he's completed his year in the military, he's off to the Senate.

PLACIDUS

If it was my choice, I'd be a soldier all my life. However...my father will insist I go into politics.

(turning to Marcus)

Have we met before? Your name sounds familiar.

MARCUS

I doubt it.

PLACIDUS

The Tribunes club, in Rome?

MARCUS

No. I was only a ranker Centurion.

PLACIDUS

Ah. Right.

CLAUDIUS

(gently reprimanding)

I told you. This is Marcus Aquila. The officer who saved the fort at Isca.

He lifts MARCUS's sleeve to reveal the iron bracelet.

CLAUDIUS (CONT'D)

He carries the Signum for outstanding bravery.

(beat)

Not something Rome hands out every day.

PLACIDUS gives the bracelet a cursory glance.

PLACIDUS

Forgive me. I should have remembered. Aquila. Your father marched with the Eagles, too, did he not...?

MARCUS

First Cohort of the Ninth Hispanic.

PLACIDUS

Of course. The Ninth. Every Roman remembers the Ninth.

An awkward pause.

CLAUDIUS

Talking of the Ninth, there's been a rumour recently along the Wall, which, if it's true, would suggest the Hispana did indeed go down fighting.

UNCLE AQUILA

Oh?

CLAUDIUS

The story goes that the Eagle's been receiving divine honours in some tribal temple in the far north.

PLACIDUS

An Eagle in the hands of the Painted People. That's a potent weapon. One has to wonder how any Roman could let it go.

MARCUS tenses. UNCLE AQUILA gives him a look - stay calm.

CLAUDIUS

What can I do? We've only three Legions in Britain. I can hardly send an expeditionary force into the unknown, based on a rumour.

UNCLE AQUILA

What does Rome say?

CLAUDIUS

Eagle lost, honour lost. Honour lost, all lost.

(beat)

Rome would love to get the Eagle back. They'd pay handsomely for it too, but...politics being politics, no Senator's going to risk scores of lives for a tainted Legion. My hands are tied.

MARCUS

What if one man were to go on his own?

The others all stare at him. For a long moment, no-one speaks.

UNCLE AQUILA

North of the wall? No Roman could survive there alone.

MARCUS

But if he did it for Rome, aren't the risks worth it?

UNCLE AQUILA

(quieter, eye to eye)

What's past is past. Don't waste your life chasing ghosts.

PLACIDUS

Quite right.

(straight at Marcus)

(MORE)

PLACIDUS (CONT'D)

The loss of the Ninth is humiliating enough, without adding another pointless death.

MARCUS bursts out of his seat, ready to smack him down. An electric silence. Reining himself in, he turns and storms out.

INT. UNCLE AQUILA'S VILLA - MARCUS'S QUARTERS - NIGHT.

MARCUS lies on the floor, working out his fury in a series of punishing exercises. ESCA waits in the shadows.

UNCLE AQUILA appears in the doorway.

UNCLE AQUILA

Ignore him. He's not worth it.

MARCUS

It's not him.

UNCLE AQUILA

What then-?

MARCUS gets up and wipes off the sweat. He moves to the window. A pause.

MARCUS

Ever since I can remember, all I ever dreamed about was being a soldier, like my father.

(beat)

I can still see him now, riding away for the last time. I can still feel how proud I was. My father. First Cohort of the Ninth Hispanic.

(beat)

Can you imagine anything more magnificent? A soldier, serving Rome, with honour and faithfulness.

UNCLE AQUILA

And you did the same.

MARCUS

(turning on him)

But what now?!

UNCLE AQUILA

Marcus-

MARCUS

I'm nothing now! I sit around, while some silk-arsed politician's son pisses on my father's honour! That's what I do! That's my life!

(beat)

(MORE)

MARCUS (CONT'D)
 Well, it's not enough.
 (beat)
 I will not sit in some villa, for the rest
 of my days, rotting and remembering.

A beat.

UNCLE AQUILA
 Then what would you do?

MARCUS stares. Both of them, eye to eye.

MARCUS
 Look for the Eagle. Where a Legion
 could not get through, one man
 might. If I can serve Rome and my
 father at the same time-

UNCLE AQUILA
 Getting yourself killed won't
 redeem the family's honour.

MARCUS
 My father would be proud of me!

Silence. MARCUS stares stubbornly at his uncle. Finally,
 seeing the truth, UNCLE AQUILA sighs.

UNCLE AQUILA
 You may as well tell me your plan,
 since it's clear you already have one.

MARCUS's shoulders drop. Instantly, anger gives way to a
 surge of excitement. A short pause, and then he's away.

MARCUS
 Esca is the son of a Clan
 Chieftain. It's not unknown for the
 Brigantes to take slaves of their
 own. We'll buy a pair of retired
 cavalry horses and make our way
 towards the wall...

MIX TO:

EXT. THE ROMAN FRONTIER - HADRIAN'S WALL - DAY.

High and wide over the northern borders. Cutting across the
 rolling landscape, awesome in its scale and grandeur, runs
 the great gash of Hadrian's Wall. Eighty miles of stonework,
 cresting hills, weaving with the land, a bastion of Empire.

MARCUS (V.O.)
 While we're on the this side, we
 remain a Roman and his slave,
 travelling for trade...

EXT. HADRIAN'S WALL - MILE ENCAMPMENT - DAY.

ESCA and MARCUS ride slowly towards one of the encampments along the wall.

Drawing nearer, we become aware of the sharp contrast between the hubbub of activity on the Roman side, and the silent wilderness beyond.

MARCUS (V.O.)

Once we clear the frontier, we become a Celt warrior and his Roman slave...

EXT. HADRIAN'S WALL - GATE - DAY.

MARCUS and ESCA ride up to the heavily manned gate. Around them, MERCHANTS, TRADERS and MILITARY PERSONNEL come and go in what amounts to a satellite village attached to the Roman side of the wall.

As the gates open, a few SOLDIERS turn to watch the still-unusual sight of two traders crossing into the unknown.

MARCUS (V.O.)

Esca knows the southern uplands and speaks the language. He can guide us through. Once we make the high hills, we'll stay in the forests. Should anyone question us, they'll discover a young Clan Chief heading north to pay his respects to the hidden Eagle...

As ESCA and MARCUS pass under the gate, the camera lifts up and over the wall, revealing, the great sweep of land beyond the frontier. On and on it runs, forest upon forest, mountain upon mountain, dark and forbidding.

EXT. LOWLANDS - BEYOND THE FRONTIER - DAY.

Drifting slowly down, the camera finds MARCUS and ESCA alone on the far side of the frontier. Evening light plays on the distant wall, now only a thin line in the distance.

They are riding along a track fringing impenetrable forest.

Already, the sense of isolation is palpable. MARCUS glances round, then pulls up.

MARCUS

We'll stop here. Ready?

They dismount and swap clothes, each man becoming the other. A beat. MARCUS studies ESCA with a grin.

MARCUS (CONT'D)
Very smart. How do I look?

ESCA
Your hands are too Roman.

MARCUS rubs in some earth and "shows". ESCA smiles, nods.

ESCA (CONT'D)
I can't be a Clan Chief without a
weapon.

MARCUS'S FACE. In all his planning, he hadn't thought of that. He walks over to his horse and pulls out the short sword and the intricately decorated dagger Esca gave him, when submitting himself.

MARCUS hesitates. Should he give him back the dagger?

ESCA watches him.

Finally - without quite realizing the significance of this hesitation - MARCUS sheathes the dagger back in the saddlebag and hands over his short sword.

ESCA says nothing.

MARCUS
This was mine. If anyone asks, you
say it's a war trophy.

ESCA
I'll tell them we fought and I won.

Deadpan, MARCUS lunges with the dagger, catching ESCA off-guard. ESCA falls onto his backside, both laughing.

INT. FOREST - DAY.

A few hours later, ESCA and MARCUS ride down the slope of a thickly wooded vale. ESCA raises his hand. They stop.

ESCA
Listen.

MARCUS
What?

MARCUS strains to hear. Faintly, he catches the sound of humming. ESCA kicks on, his whole body alert to the slightest motion of the air.

As they near the bottom of the vale, the sound of humming mutates into the buzzing of flies. Suddenly, ESCA freezes. MARCUS rides up and stops dead.

The stench is almost unbearable.

Twenty yards away, almost obliterated by the frenzy of insects, hang the rotting, headless corpses of three young Celts. Blue body markings are still visible on their putrid flesh. They have been strung by their legs from long ropes slung over branches.

MARCUS (CONT'D)

Who did this?

ESCA

Rogue warriors. None from my tribe would do such a thing.

(quiet)

This is a bad place to be.

MARCUS looks across. ESCA's still face is unreadable. He turns his horse and rides on. MARCUS glances back one last time - the image of those gently swaying bodies imprinting themselves on his mind.

EXT. LOWLANDS - HIGH GROUND - EVENING.

ESCA and MARCUS have made camp on a high dale. In front of them, deepening into gloom, the great hills of the northern territories stretch away and beyond.

ESCA kneels over a small fire, cooking a ration of cured meat. With a heightened sense of danger, he completes a bow, pulling the string across the arc. At his feet lie a pile of completed arrows.

A wolf howls in the distance. ESCA lifts his head, scanning the horizon.

Satisfied that they're alone, he picks up the meat and carries it to where MARCUS is kneeling on the ground, digging at the earth with Esca's dagger.

ESCA

What's that?

MARCUS

An altar.

MARCUS carries on digging. ESCA crouches nearby and watches.

MARCUS digs the last of a series of small square turfs from the grass. With these, he constructs the altar. Onto the top, he adds bark, sticks and sprigs of heather.

He hollows them into the shape of a nest, then sprinkles flower petals over the top. He brings out the wooden bird and lays it carefully in the middle of the nest.

ESCA hands him the flint and steel.

Close-up on MARCUS as he kneels forward, sending out the first golden sparks.

FLASHBACK TO:

EXT. ROMAN VILLA - DAY.

Blinded by sunlight, YOUNG MARCUS stands beside his MOTHER, re-living that moment when the silhouette of his FATHER rides away for the last time.

BACK TO:

EXT. LOWLANDS - HIGH GROUND - EVENING.

Extreme close-up on the yellow flames licking around the small bird. Gradually, the sculpted wood catches fire and the tiny animal is enveloped.

MARCUS completes a murmured prayer, then sits back, eyes fixed on the burning sacrifice. A pause. The two of them, staring into the flames.

ESCA

Who do you pray to?

MARCUS

Mithras, light of the Sun.

ESCA

He's your protector?

MARCUS nods.

ESCA (CONT'D)

What's the bird? You always carry it.

MARCUS

My father gave it to me.

ESCA

You must love your god very much to give him such a sacrifice.

MARCUS doesn't answer. ESCA stares at the fire. A beat.

ESCA (CONT'D)

I cannot love what I do not know.

MARCUS

You have no gods?

ESCA

We have many gods, for many things.
But they did not protect my family
when we needed them.

MARCUS

Then what guides you?

ESCA

My eyes. My heart.

MARCUS

Nothing else?

ESCA is still. After a moment's doubt, he shakes his head. A pause. MARCUS gazes at the horizon.

MARCUS (CONT'D)

Sometimes, I think I'll still find
my father alive. Do you believe
that's possible - that he could
have survived in some hidden place?

ESCA

I have seen my father kill my mother
for love.

(beat)

I know there is no impossibility
the world cannot contain.

EXT. HILLS - LOWLANDS - DAY.

The next day. From high and wide, we look down on MARCUS and ESCA riding slowly across the side of a hill, dwarfed by the huge landscape.

EXT. FOREST - LOWLANDS - DAY.

ESCA and MARCUS ride through dense forest.

EXT. RIVER - LOWLANDS - DAY.

Stripped to the waist, ESCA stands dead-still in the middle of a river. Very gently, he dips his hand into the water and under the belly of a trout. Tickling the underside of its skin, he soothes it to stillness, then - plop - he lifts it out.

EXT. RIVERBANK - LOWLANDS - DAY.

ESCA and MARCUS eat the cooked fish while their horses graze. Slowly ESCA goes still. He stares over MARCUS's head.

ESCA
(softly)
Don't move.

MARCUS freezes. Carefully, ESCA reaches out a hand and pulls his spear and short sword close. He pushes the sword towards MARCUS.

ESCA (CONT'D)
Behind you, across the riverbank.
Six warriors.

Keeping the same stillness, ESCA gathers his bow and arrows.

ESCA (CONT'D)
When I say 'now', make for the tree
to your left.

MARCUS pulls out his dagger, balancing sword and knife in either hand.

ESCA pretends to eat, eyes fixed on the trees across the bank. The YOUNG WARRIORS are clearly visible now, darting between the trees, forming a semi-circle around their prey. Twenty yards away, the LEADING WARRIOR raises his hand. They freeze. Slowly, he raises his spear and...

ESCA (CONT'D)
Now!

ESCA and MARCUS burst left and right. In the same split-second, a spear smashes into the turf exactly where Marcus sat. A roar goes up and the SIX WARRIORS charge.

ESCA hits one with his first arrow.

Hidden in the undergrowth, MARCUS can hear them coming. He crouches low, testing his leg. At the last second, he bursts straight into the path of a YOUNG WARRIOR. One stab and the YOUNG WARRIOR collapses.

The next two are suddenly above him. Only an arrow from ESCA's bow saves him from an axe blow. A third WARRIOR collapses.

MARCUS spins to face his other attacker. As he does so, he's hit with a glancing spear-blow. The short sword spins out of his hand. Blood burns from a cut in his arm. He thrusts himself, head first, into his attacker. Both of them fall to the ground. As they tumble down the bank, MARCUS manages to knock the Celt's spear away. They bang up against a tree.

Slamming down his hands, MARCUS pins the other man to the ground.

He finds himself staring into the eyes of a terrified YOUNG WARRIOR. The boy's eyes are drug-glazed, but still child-like in their fear. The YOUNG WARRIOR struggles a moment, then his body goes limp and he twists his neck, offering himself for the death blow.

MARCUS falters. Nothing happens. He pulls back. The YOUNG WARRIOR scrambles to his feet and begins sprinting away.

He reaches the riverbank when an arrow slams into his back, killing him instantly.

MARCUS spins round to find ESCA, bow poised from the strike.

MARCUS

What are you doing?

ESCA

He'd have been back with twenty others and we'd be dead. Next time, don't hesitate.

ESCA begins gathering up his weapons.

On MARCUS, taking this in.

EXT. RIVERBANK - LOWLANDS - DAY.

ESCA's found the warriors' horses, tethered to a tree. On each saddle hang the skulls of their victims. MARCUS walks up, still shaken.

ESCA

We'll take their best two horses, the rest we'll turn out. Their animals will be more used to this terrain.

EXT. FOREST - LOWLANDS - DAY.

MARCUS and ESCA ride two warrior-horses out of the forest. The animals are magnificent, with beautiful Celtish markings burned into their rumps.

EXT. HILLTOP - LOWLANDS - DAY.

Rising to the top of a hill, ESCA and MARCUS take in the endless wilderness all around.

ESCA
 (pointing)
 Over those hills is as far as I've
 ever been.

MARCUS stares into the distance.

MARCUS
 The Legion would have had to pass
 through here. After that, we're
 guessing.

ESCA
 There's a village to the west of
 that range. We could ask there.
 Maybe someone remembers.

EXT. LOWLANDS - VILLAGE - DAY.

MARCUS and ESCA ride up to a small hamlet of huts. The moment
 they're sighted, the WOMEN bundle their CHILDREN out of sight.
 The only man appears to be a lone VILLAGE ELDER who stands his
 ground, spear in hand. MARCUS holds back as ESCA rides on.

EXT. LOWLANDS - VILLAGE - DAY.

From the shadows, MARCUS watches ESCA talking to the VILLAGE
 ELDER. After a while, ESCA turns and rides back.

ESCA
 (shaking his head)
 Nothing.

A beat. MARCUS takes in the WOMEN, peering from hut doorways.

MARCUS
 Where are all the men?

ESCA
 (shrugs, uneasy)
 I don't know. Hunting, maybe.

A beat.

MARCUS
 What now?

ESCA
 You have to choose.
 (beat)
 Left, to the Western Isles, right,
 to the Northern Highlands.

MARCUS

We'll go right. But not direct. We
cast across and back on ourselves.
That way, if there's a trail, we
don't miss it.

CUT TO:

EXT. LOWLAND HILLS - DAY.

A series of angles on MARCUS and ESCA as they begin the long
trek north through the lowlands.

EXT. CENTRAL VALLEY - DAY.

Autumn rain across a valley-landscape. The horses slip and
slide through mud as MARCUS and ESCA trudge on.

EXT. LOCH LOMOND - DAY.

Winter is closing in as MARCUS and ESCA reach Loch Lomond. In
the distance, the first highland peaks.

EXT. CENTRAL HIGHLANDS -- MOUNTAINS - DAY.

Battling through heavy snow, MARCUS and ESCA ride across the
highlands. The ground is so icy, they're forced to dismount
and walk beside their horses.

EXT. CENTRAL HIGHLANDS - MOUNTAINS - NIGHT.

Cloaked against the wind, MARCUS crouches beside the dying
embers of a fire. Curled up beside him, ESCA sleeps.

A wolf howls in the dark. MARCUS glances up, suddenly alert.
He reaches for his short-sword, rests it over his knees and
tucks the cloak tighter around him.

EXT. CENTRAL HIGHLANDS - NORTH EAST - DAY.

ESCA and MARCUS ride through the far north eastern highlands.

EXT. CENTRAL HIGHLANDS - NORTH EAST - DAY.

From a distant hill-top, we watch MARCUS and ESCA trudging on.
A CLOAKED HUNTER drifts into frame, close-up.

Someone is watching them.

EXT. CENTRAL HIGHLANDS - COASTAL CLIFFS - DAY.

A glorious spring day, high skies blurred with cloud.

MARCUS and ESCA ride to the top of a peak and halt. Below them, as far as the eye can see, is ocean.

A long silence.

MARCUS

Three months and we've found nothing.

ESCA

We've covered only the smallest part of the north. They could have gone west. Or we could have missed the trail.

MARCUS

What do we do now?

ESCA

This is not the farthest north. If we were to follow the coast, we'd continue on through Caledonia. We could do that, or we could double-back and hope we missed something.

MARCUS is silent. Finally, he digs in his pocket and brings out a coin.

MARCUS

When there's nothing to guide a man's choice, then it's time to lay the choice on the gods.

(beat)

Heads we push on, ships we cast back.

MARCUS balances the disc of silver between thumb and forefinger, ready to spin. ESCA leans forward, drawn to the moment. MARCUS grins.

MARCUS (CONT'D)

I thought you didn't believe?

Caught in the act, ESCA sits back in his saddle. MARCUS flicks the coin to reveal...

MARCUS (CONT'D)

Ships.

(beat)

We turn south again.

CUT TO:

EXT. CENTRAL HIGHLANDS - NORTH EAST - DAY.

In an exact mirror of the earlier shot, ESCA and MARCUS ride back through the far north eastern highlands.

EXT. CENTRAL HIGHLANDS - EDGE OF FOREST - DAY.

MARCUS rides behind ESCA as they enter another forest. MARCUS tenses in the saddle. A flicker of movement on the edge of his vision has alerted him. He scans the forest. No sign of life. He rides on.

EXT. CENTRAL HIGHLANDS - DEEP FOREST - DAY.

MARCUS and ESCA are deep in the forest, when MARCUS sees it again - a flicker of movement on the high ground above them. Riding up to ESCA, he points in the direction of the movement.

MARCUS

I saw something...on the ridge.

ESCA stares. Silence. Only the wind in the trees. He shakes his head. They ride on.

MARCUS hangs back, hoping to catch another glimpse of the mysterious shadow. But the forest is still.

EXT. CENTRAL HIGHLANDS - DEEP FOREST - DAY.

We are close on MARCUS now. The path ahead is steep and stony. His horse shifts uneasily beneath him. Loosening the reins, he sits back in the saddle and...

A WARRIOR flies through the air, hitting him chest-high.

MARCUS and the WARRIOR soar through the air.

ESCA turns in his saddle, grabbing for his bow and arrow.

All of this, in the space of a single war-cry.

Smack. MARCUS and the WARRIOR hit the ground, scrabbling for control. This man is much older and stronger than the boy warrior. He spits, snatches, claws - anything to gain the upper hand. Eventually, MARCUS's youth proves too much for him. MARCUS pins him to the ground, one hand thrust against the underside of his chin.

This time, MARCUS has no doubt. Pulling out his dagger, he prepares to slit his throat, when...

MARCUS

Wait.

ESCA

Do it!
 (beat, screaming it at him)
 DO IT!!

MARCUS

He's a Legionary.

MARCUS has stopped, mid-strike. The warrior (GUERN) stares back, eyes fixed.

ESCA shakes his head in disgust.

ESCA

Your wound has made you soft.
 (dismounting)
 I'll do it.

MARCUS

(rounding on him)
 STAY WHERE YOU ARE!
 (back to Guern)
 YOUR NAME?!

GUERN

(celtic, shouting at Esca)
 WHAT DOES HE WANT FROM ME?!

MARCUS

WHAT'S YOUR NAME?!

ESCA

HE DOESN'T UNDERSTAND YOU!!

Viciously, MARCUS grabs GUERN's hair and yanks back his head, showing the thickened scar on the underside of his chin.

MARCUS

Chin-strap scar. Only a Roman helmet
 does that.
 (beat)
 Your name, Roman.

GUERN stares back, refusing to budge. MARCUS gives his hair another vicious tug, face close, right into him.

MARCUS (CONT'D)

Your name.

A long pause. Finally, guttural, low...

GUERN

My name is Guern.
 (beat)
 Formerly sixth Centurion, Senior
 Cohort of the Ninth Legion.

A long silence. MARCUS studies him. GUERN grows uneasy.

GUERN (CONT'D)
Are you here to take me back?

MARCUS shakes his head. GUERN stares, still unsure.

GUERN (CONT'D)
I'm not afraid. I know what happens to deserters.

MARCUS
I'm not here to take you back.
(beat)
Tell me what happened to the Ninth.

No answer. MARCUS looks him in the eye.

MARCUS (CONT'D)
My father was your commander.

GUERN goes very still. He stares coolly at MARCUS.

GUERN
I should have known it.

Silence. MARCUS leans forward.

MARCUS
What happened?

FLASHBACK TO:

INT. FOREST - CALEDONIA - DAY.

Amid the scream of pitched battle, MARCUS'S FATHER snatches the Eagle from a falling LEGIONARY.

BACK TO:

EXT. DEEP FOREST - DAY.

As memory roars back, GUERN shakes his head.

GUERN
I can't speak of it.

MARCUS
Tell me.

GUERN
I ran before the end.

MARCUS
You were attacked?

GUERN stares at the ground in stubborn silence. Finally...

GUERN
I can't tell you, but I'll show
you.

MARCUS looks at him. Their eyes meet.

EXT. NORTH EAST HIGHLANDS - RIDGEWAY - DAY.

MARCUS and ESCA ride behind GUERN. They are travelling along a high ridge, surrounded on all sides by highland peaks. A dead deer is strapped over the back of GUERN's horse.

ESCA moves up to MARCUS's side, voice low.

ESCA
I don't trust him. He's a deserter.

MARCUS
What are you afraid of?

ESCA
He ran away from your father when
he needed him most. If it comes
down to it, he'll slit your throat
rather than risk being tried for
desertion.

MARCUS
He knows I'm not here for that.

ESCA
Why would he risk it?

MARCUS looks at him.

MARCUS
You have no faith in anything, do you?

Angrily, he kicks on his horse. He comes alongside GUERN, leaving ESCA behind. A pause.

MARCUS (CONT'D)
Why did you attack us?

GUERN
I thought you were rogue warriors.
Your horses had the markings-

MARCUS
We stole them. They attacked us too.

GUERN

You should be careful who you steal from. A man doesn't wait for such people to find his family.

MARCUS

Where is your family?

GUERN

(tiny flash of a smile)

Not in Rome.

(beat)

Two days ride north. Soon after we...a local tribe found me dying. One of their women took me in. We have two sons together.

EXT. HIGHLANDS - HIGH HILL - EVENING.

Evening sunlight cuts across a high hill. GUERN crouches over a fire, cooking fresh meat.

EXT. HIGHLANDS - HIGH HILL - EVENING.

MARCUS prays by a nearby stream, whispering softly.

MARCUS

Mithras, god of light, hear my prayer and let my father live.

Opening his hands, he sends water rushing back into the stream. A shower of droplets catch the light, each one a perfect miniature of the sun.

In the distance, GUERN watches this ritual. His face betrays the echo of old memories, uneasy in his eyes.

EXT. HIGHLANDS - HIGH HILL - EVENING.

GUERN, MARCUS and ESCA eat round the fire. MARCUS looks up.

MARCUS

How could an entire Roman legion just disappear?

GUERN stares at the fire for a long moment. This is hard for him to talk about, but he's ready now.

GUERN

The truth is, the Ninth was doomed long before it marched out to meet the northern tribes. Rome had been in occupation here over sixty years. Count it. Sixty years.

(MORE)

GUERN (CONT'D)

A Legionary could live and die in that time and his only memory would be the weather, the blackmarkets and endless bloody raids. If we'd been satisfied with what we had, maybe we'd have survived. But, oh no, Rome's never satisfied. Rome wants more territory, more wars, more conquests. And who has to make it happen? Who has to slog into the unknown, in the name of Empire? The bloody footsoldiers.

(beat)

My first tour of duty was against the Iceni. Now that was a war. We had instructions to kill anything that moved.

FLASHBACK TO:

INT. HUT - DAY.

A ROMAN SOLDIER storms into a hut, slashing at infant screams.

CUT TO:

EXT. HIGHLANDS - MOORLAND CLEARING - DAY.

MARCUS, ESCA and GUERN ride south across open moorland.

GUERN (V.O.)

In those days it was easy. They ran at us like babies. Problem was, they learned fast. The more we killed them, the better they got. Used to make me smile, the way our Legates talked about "civilizing the savages".

EXT. HIGHLANDS - EVENING.

MARCUS, ESCA and GUERN crest a hill amid glorious sunset.

GUERN (V.O.)

The greatest gift we ever gave the Celts was the art of war. They may pray to different gods, but they kill like true Romans. Believe me.

EXT. CAMP - HIGHLANDS - NIGHT.

MARCUS sits by a fire, while ESCA and GUERN sleep.

GUERN (V.O.)

When the order came to march north, we were almost relieved. Waiting's always the worst. Once you move, you're on orders. You stop wondering. You just do.

EXT. FOREST NEAR THE KILLING FIELDS - DAY.

MARCUS, ESCA and GUERN enter a huge forest. As the trees swallow them up, they disappear from view.

GUERN (V.O.)

It was autumn. Worst weather in years. For weeks we marched without a sign of them, then, all of a sudden, they appear out of the mist.

FLASHBACK TO:

EXT. FOREST - CALEDONIA - DAY.

A PAINTED WARRIOR rears out from mist-engulfed trees, sudden, terrifying, like a dream-horror.

BACK TO:

EXT. FOREST NEAR THE KILLING FIELDS - DAY.

MARCUS, ESCA and GUERN ride through thick forest. They're nearing the killing fields now. Dotted between the trees are hundreds of poles. Rammed on the top of each, is a skull. The death crop.

GUERN (V.O.)

You could hear them, picking men off at the back, one by one. That went on for a week. We lost hundreds of men. When we sent out sorties, they never came back. The weather was starting to kill us too. The further north we marched, the worse it got. By the end of the second week, we'd abandoned most of our equipment. Shields, swords and spears were all we had with us. Once we'd given up sending out sorties, they picked us off with arrows.

FLASHBACK TO:

EXT. FOREST - CALEDONIA - DAY.

Close-up on an arrow shooting through rain - silent, surreal. It hits a LEGIONARY in the neck. His shocked face fills the screen, his mouth a little "o". Then, he's gone.

CUT TO:

EXT. THE KILLING FIELD - DAY.

MARCUS, ESCA and GUERN ride through the last of the trees until they reach a circular glen of open ground, surrounded by forest.

Flat limestone rocks, like altars, protrude from the turf. On top of the rocks lie the remains of Roman armour, bits of bone, everything still laid out where the bodies were sacrificed. Around the altars, covering every inch of ground, are half-rotten sandals. Hundreds and hundreds of sandals.

GUERN (V.O.)

Finally, we gave up looking for open ground. We just turned and faced them. For four days and nights we held off their attacks.

FLASHBACK TO:

EXT. THE KILLING FIELDS - DAY.

Close-up on THE EAGLE OF THE NINTH, held shoulder high in a soldier's fist. It hangs there, a dull glint of metal wings surrounded by a blur of ARMS, LEGS, SWORDS and FACES, everything a rain-grey mass of slugged-out, exhausted war.

BACK TO:

EXT. THE KILLING FIELDS - DAY.

MARCUS, ESCA and GUERN stop-dead on the rim of the killing fields. The three of them stare at the frozen devastation.

GUERN (V.O.)

On the fifth night, the men mutinied. Your father tried to stop them, but by that time all pride had gone. We were no longer Roman. We were hardly even human.

GUERN stares.

GUERN (CONT'D)

(quiet)

That's it. No further.

MARCUS dismounts, transfixed.

MARCUS

Why are there sandals everywhere?

GUERN

Their joke. They pulled them off the dead bodies and threw them at us. So our souls could march to hell.

MARCUS

The rocks?

GUERN

Altars for our officers. We could hear them being sacrificed.

MARCUS walks into the glen. He moves slowly amid the sandals, bits of bone and discarded armour.

MARCUS

And my father?

GUERN

After the mutiny, your father planned to break out to the west of the glen with the remaining men. That's when I ran.

MARCUS

How many were left?

GUERN

About a hundred.

MARCUS

The enemy?

GUERN

Many thousands.

MARCUS takes this in. He stares off in the direction Guern has pointed. Finally, he steps towards the imagined point in the trees where his father ran.

FLASHBACK TO:

EXT. FOREST - CALEDONIA - DAY.

Another angle on the same flashback of MARCUS'S FATHER and five LEGIONARIES, sprinting for their lives.

Clenched in his emerald-ringed fist, MARCUS'S FATHER grips the Eagle of the Ninth. This time, because of the new angle, we see that there is real fear in his eyes.

BACK TO:

EXT. THE KILLING FIELD - DAY.

MARCUS turns sharply away. He stares back at GUERN and ESCA, still waiting on the far side of the glen.

MARCUS

What happened to the Eagle?

GUERN

They say a tribe in the far north have it. The Seal People. They're a strange, violent race. I don't recommend you go there.

MARCUS

And if I do?

GUERN

(beat, a look)
North west of here, a week's ride.
(beat)
You won't be alone. Many men are on the move now, all heading that way. Why? I don't know. But something strange is happening.

A pause.

MARCUS

Thank you.

GUERN

I wish you'd never come. You've made me re-live my shame.

MARCUS

I don't judge you. I've never been hunted.

GUERN

Pray you never are.

A beat.

MARCUS

Go. Freely.

GUERN hangs there a moment. He's not sure why he says this...pride, shame or both...but he does.

GUERN

We still have our swords and shields.
All of us.

He turns his horse and rides away.

CUT TO:

EXT. CENTRAL HIGHLANDS - DAY/NIGHT.

A series of angles on MARCUS and ESCA beginning the long march north west. Back across the mountains, the glens and the lochs.

EXT. WESTERN HIGHLANDS - EVENING.

MARCUS and ESCA ride across a vast landscape of rolling heathland, within sight of the coast. MARCUS stares at the endless road to be travelled - still on edge.

MARCUS

You always knew we should have
ridden west, didn't you?

ESCA doesn't answer.

MARCUS (CONT'D)

If you knew, why didn't you say?

ESCA

I didn't know.

MARCUS

I don't believe you.

ESCA

I didn't know.

MARCUS

(pointing at the land ahead)
Look at that. Hundreds of miles of
wilderness and we haven't even begun.
I've wasted a whole summer and winter
wandering the north east, and you
never once opened your mouth.

ESCA refuses to be drawn. MARCUS stares furiously at him, convinced of his own argument.

MARCUS (CONT'D)

You knew.

ESCA

I didn't know.

MARCUS

You're lying.

(beat)

What I saw in that forest is beyond imagining. Fifteen years ago - when that happened - you were here. Your tribe was here. And you're telling me that the greatest victory in the history of your people was unknown to you?

ESCA

"My people"....?

MARCUS

Don't pretend to me!

ESCA stares stubbornly ahead. Finally...

MARCUS (CONT'D)

Damn you Esca! You will speak!

Finally ESCA snaps, turning on him with cold eyes.

ESCA

You're angry because you're afraid you'll find out your father was not the hero you wish him to be! You say you love him, yet you never knew him! All you have is what you believe!

He almost spits out the last word. He turns his horse and rides on. MARCUS canters after him, incandescent with rage.

MARCUS

COME BACK HERE!! ESCA!!

They're riding side by side now, yelling at each other.

MARCUS (CONT'D)

HOW DARE YOU SPEAK TO ME LIKE THAT!!

ESCA

YOU WANT ME TO LEAVE, BOY?!! YOU THINK YOU CAN GO ON ALONE?!!

MARCUS

I SAVED YOUR MISERABLE LIFE!!

ESCA

YOU'D BE DEAD IN A DITCH WITHOUT ME!!

MARCUS leaps off his horse and crashes into ESCA, pulling him off his horse. They thump to the ground, rolling down the hill, fighting like dogs. As they hit the bottom, they smack to a halt and...

Staring down at them are FIFTEEN SEAL PEOPLE on horseback.

Utter silence.

ESCA and MARCUS freeze.

The SEAL PEOPLE are unlike anyone we've seen up until now. Darker skinned, heavily decorated, with dark facial markings, seal skin coats and long, feathered spears. On the back of some horses, hang dead deer and boar.

Their leader is a handsome young SEAL PRINCE, marked out by the twisted gold torque around his neck. He stares at MARCUS with fixed curiosity. Despite his stillness - or because of it - he is truly frightening.

ESCA suddenly turns on MARCUS, smacking him across the face. MARCUS crashes to the ground.

ESCA (CONT'D)
Never speak to your Master like
that again!

Stunned, MARCUS stares up at him, but ESCA refuses to engage.

The SEAL PRINCE watches, expressionless. ESCA steps away from MARCUS, putting distance between them.

[Note: whenever Celtic is spoken, this is indicated in italics, and translated on screen in English subtitles]

ESCA (CONT'D)
(celtic)
Good hunting?

A beat.

The SEAL PRINCE nods faintly, then returns his gaze to MARCUS.

ESCA (CONT'D)
(celtic)
*I am Esca Druin, eldest son of the
slain Chief of the Brigantes.*

SEAL PRINCE
(celtic)
What do you do here?

ESCA
(celtic)
*I heard that the Eagle god is
calling people north. I've come to
pay my respects.*

The SEAL PRINCE stares at him in silence. Finally, maintaining the same dangerous reserve, he nods towards MARCUS.

SEAL PRINCE

(celtic)

Who is he that you talk to in the Roman tongue?

ESCA

(celtic)

My slave.

The SEAL PRINCE's lips curl into a faint smile. He kicks his horse forward. Coming right up to MARCUS, he rides around him, staring all the time.

MARCUS keeps his eyes on the ground.

Bringing up his feathered spear, the SEAL PRINCE points it at MARCUS. MARCUS holds himself steady.

Using the spear like an extension of his arm, the SEAL PRINCE begins an examination of MARCUS. He investigates his hair, his clothing and his face. Finally, placing the tip of the spear on the underside of MARCUS's chin, he pushes it upward, forcing his head back. His neck is now bared, revealing the thin chin-strap scar.

The SEAL PRINCE gives a little grunt of delight. Keeping his spear on MARCUS's neck, he turns to the others.

SEAL PRINCE

(celtic)

It's true. Their god marks them all with the same scar.

He turns to ESCA.

SEAL PRINCE (CONT'D)

(celtic)

I've heard of German tribes with Roman slaves, but never here. Is he good?

ESCA

(celtic)

He works hard, but he has a tongue on him.

The SEAL PRINCE grunts in amusement. With his spear still resting under MARCUS's chin, he casually observes...

SEAL PRINCE

(celtic)

You were seen before by one of our tribe. After the last winter. In the East.

ESCA

(celtic, careful)

Yes.

SEAL PRINCE

(celtic)

*Why do you travel so much if you have
nothing to trade?*

ESCA hesitates a fraction.

ESCA

(celtic)

We seek the Eagle.

SEAL PRINCE

(celtic)

You do not trade?

ESCA

(celtic)

No.

SEAL PRINCE

(celtic)

*Then how did you learn to speak
their tongue?*

ESCA stalls. MARCUS watches him tensing, without knowing why.

ESCA

(celtic)

*My tribe was wiped out by their
Legions. I was captured and sold as
a slave. After three summers, I
escaped.*

SEAL PRINCE

(celtic)

How did you come by him?

ESCA

(celtic)

*A raiding party. The rest of his troop
were killed. I spared his life.*

Silence.

The SEAL PRINCE stares at MARCUS, still considering his response.

SEAL PRINCE

(celtic)

*My father would like to see such a
slave. You will be my guest. Our
village is five days march to the
west, among the Loch of Many Islets.*

ESCA

(celtic)

The Eagle-

SEAL PRINCE
(cutting in, celtic)
We do not speak of Holy Things.

A beat. Finally, the SEAL PRINCE lowers his spear from under MARCUS's chin. He turns to ESCA, grinning boyishly.

SEAL PRINCE (CONT'D)
(celtic)
*You must teach your slave not to talk
 to you as he does. We will help you.*

Before ESCA can reply, the SEAL PRINCE snaps his fingers and one of his WARRIORS begins tying MARCUS's hands to the end of a long rope.

MARCUS can feel panic rising. He has absolutely no idea what's going to happen next. He turns to ESCA, whispering frantically.

MARCUS
 What are they doing? Esca?

Avoiding his eye, ESCA turns away.

Suddenly, the SEAL PRINCE yanks the rope and MARCUS smacks to the ground. A giggle of childish laughter from the other WARRIORS.

CUT TO:

EXT. WESTERN HIGHLANDS - DAY.

High and wide over the Western Highlands.

Diminutive against the vast landscape, the horsemen of the SEAL PEOPLE lead ESCA along the trail.

Stumbling behind, one end of the rope tied to ESCA's horse, the other to his wrists, comes MARCUS.

EXT. WESTERN HIGHLANDS - DAY.

The WARRIORS reach a high-peak overlooking the sea.

MARCUS stumbles on the icy ground. Suddenly, his feet go from under him and he's dragged along the ground by his hands.

Scrabbling back to his feet, he stumbles on. Blood dribbles from cuts to his thighs. Still, ESCA does not turn.

EXT. WESTERN HIGHLANDS - NIGHT.

Through the dark of the encampment, MARCUS walks the horses to a stream to drink. Behind him, seated around a fire, ESCA and the SEAL PEOPLE eat and talk.

Crouching down among the horses, MARCUS cleans his cuts. A twinge of pain in his wounded leg makes him wince. He splashes his face with the water and tries to ignore it.

EXT. WESTERN HIGHLANDS - DAY.

An increasingly battered-looking MARCUS walks behind ESCA and the SEAL PEOPLE along the trail.

Drifting into vision - like a slow swell - TRIBESMEN from different clans begin to appear on the edge of the horizon. All of them are heading in the same direction, north.

EXT. WESTERN HIGHLANDS - NIGHT.

MARCUS crouches in the dark, cleaning pots. Ignoring him completely, ESCA strolls past with the SEAL PRINCE, talking softly in Celt.

This time, the SEAL PEOPLE's campfire has been augmented by the fires of the other travelling TRIBESMEN. They dot the hillside, creating a small village of firelight.

EXT. WESTERN HIGHLANDS - DAY.

High over the coastal trail.

The slow swell of TRIBESMEN has now become a steady stream, as differently decorated warriors converge on the Western Isles.

EXT. WESTERN HIGHLANDS - COAST - DAY.

Rounding a bend in the trail, ESCA pulls up. MARCUS halts.

Stretching away into the horizon are numberless islets, curling and counter-curling like hurled ribbons - blue sea against white sand, white sand against grey granite, grey granite against green.

EXT. WESTERN ISLES - SEAL PEOPLE'S VILLAGE - EVENING.

ESCA rides up the hill, MARCUS walking behind on the end of the rope. He now looks badly beaten up from days of walking.

They head towards the seal people's village - a fortified mound, guarded by WATCHMEN.

EXT. WESTERN HIGHLANDS - SEAL PEOPLE'S VILLAGE - EVENING.

Nearing the main gate, MARCUS passes another avenue of skulls lining the roadside - the same death-crop as in the killing fields. Some skulls are not fully rotted. Flesh clings. Hair obtrudes.

At the sight of the returning hunters, the VILLAGERS pour out to meet them. They stare curiously at MARCUS. CHILDREN race alongside. One of them dares to prod him. He squeals with happy fright and races away.

EXT. WESTERN HIGHLANDS - SEAL PEOPLE'S VILLAGE - EVENING.

The SEAL PRINCE rides up to the central hut, followed by the others. More death-crop skulls decorate the entrance.

A crowd of TRIBESMEN and WOMEN gather to watch. Finally, with a theatrical pause worthy of any Emperor, the elderly CHIEFTAIN appears in the doorway, flanked by two of his SONS. He takes in the two strangers, then returns his gaze to the SEAL PRINCE. Everyone waits respectfully for him to speak.

CHIEFTAIN

(celtic)

The hunting was good?

SEAL PRINCE

(celtic)

It was good, father.

CHIEFTAIN

(celtic)

You wish me to eat these people too?

The crowd giggles and the old man puckers his lips, a stand-up, dead-panning his audience.

SEAL PRINCE

(celtic)

I bring a guest, Esca Druin, eldest son to the slain Chief of the Brigantes. And his slave. A Roman.

ESCA bows his head, but the old CHIEFTAIN is staring at MARCUS.

CHIEFTAIN

(celtic)

Does the slave have a name?

ESCA

Marcus.

CHIEFTAIN

Marcus.

(beat, celtic)

I have brought many Romans back to my village, Marcus, but never with their head attached to their body.

Another big laugh. The old man smiles. MARCUS whispers nervously at ESCA.

MARCUS

What's he saying?

ESCA

He says he's brought many Romans back to his village, but never with their heads attached to their bodies.

MARCUS looks for some sort of reassurance, but ESCA is already gone. MARCUS bows to the grinning old man.

CUT TO:

INT. STABLES - EVENING.

With night closing in, MARCUS settles the horses in their stables. As he unsaddles them, he becomes aware that he's being watched.

A line of WOMEN and CHILDREN stand in the shadows of the doorway, staring at him with wary curiosity. Each move of his saddle brush is echoed by a delicate shift of their heads. Beautiful, still faces, decorated with sophisticated curlicues, like miniature copies of the ribboned islets.

INT. CHIEFTAIN'S HUT - NIGHT.

MARCUS hesitates on the threshold of the Chieftain's hut. He's caught by the sight of a huge fire burning in the centre. Smoke rises into the roof, creating a fog-like screen. MARCUS can just make out the ROYAL FAMILY drifting about, chatting and drinking.

FLASH TO:

MARCUS'S VISION. INT. CAVE OF MITHRAS - NIGHT.

From the same acute dream-angle as the earlier flashbacks, we see MARCUS'S FATHER moving about behind the flames of an altar fire, chatting with other ELDERS.

BACK TO:

INT. CHIEFTAIN'S HUT - NIGHT.

MARCUS blinks back the vision, struggling to centre himself. Ahead of him, the ROYAL FAMILY mill about. Nervously, MARCUS lifts takes a first, tentative step into the hut.

FLASH TO:

MARCUS'S VISION. INT. CAVE OF MITHRAS - NIGHT.

Behind the altar fire stands a stone effigy of the god, Mithras. Emerging through the smoke, MARCUS'S FATHER turns slowly in our direction. He is about to face us when...

BACK TO:

INT. CHIEFTAIN'S HUT - NIGHT.

MARCUS jolts back from the second vision. Before he can recover, ESCA passes. MARCUS grabs his arm; shaken, angry.

MARCUS

Esca-

ESCA

Let go of my arm.

MARCUS

What do you think you're doing? You let them drag me here like an animal and you don't even tell me why they're doing it! They could be about to kill me for all I know!

ESCA

(voice level, avoiding his eye)
If they see you speaking to me like this, they'll kill both of us.

(beat)

You're my slave now. Act like one.

MARCUS pulls back a fraction, but only a fraction.

MARCUS

I need to know where I stand.

ESCA

The Eagle's somewhere here. The men from the other tribes are gathered for the feast of the New Spears. When that happens, we'll learn more.

MARCUS

How long will that be?

ESCA

A few days.

MARCUS

What do we do until then?

ESCA

We wait.

MARCUS sighs with frustration. A beat.

MARCUS

Just remember why you're here.

MARCUS searches ESCA's face. ESCA stares ahead, face expressionless. His eyes flick to the fire. The SEAL PRINCE is watching them, steadily.

SEAL PRINCE

(celtic)

Esca. Come. Join us.

ESCA moves off. MARCUS gets into step behind him, head bowed respectfully. Suddenly, mid-walk, it strikes him...

MARCUS

What does a good slave do here?

ESCA

(pointedly)

Exactly what I did for you.

INT. CHIEFTAIN'S HUT - NIGHT.

YOUNG WOMEN and CHILDREN serve food on exquisitely decorated silver platters. Chief among the YOUNG WOMEN is the beautiful daughter of the Royal Family, MOYRA.

MARCUS stands behind ESCA's chair in a direct reversal of their previous roles. Now, it's him who's fetching and pouring the wine while ESCA talks to his hosts.

As MARCUS stands there, he lets the conversation drift over his head. The CHIEFTAIN gets up from his place to make a point. For a moment, he's hidden behind the fire, then...

FLASH TO:

INT. CHIEFTAIN'S HUT - NIGHT.

MARCUS'S FATHER turns. This time he faces us directly. With a sweet paternal smile, he beckons us to join him.

BACK TO:

INT. CHIEFTAIN'S HUT - NIGHT.

The CHIEFTAIN sits back in his chair.

MARCUS tries to control his breathing. He glances frantically about. Nobody else has noticed except him. But he saw it. It was real. His father.

INT. CHIEFTAIN'S HUT - NIGHT.

ESCA is following the ROYAL FAMILY out of the hut when MARCUS grabs his arm, unable to contain himself any longer.

MARCUS

He's here. My father's here. I saw him. He's here.

ESCA

(spitting at him, tugging free)
Not now!

The SEAL PRINCE glances back. ESCA hurries after him, muttering an apology under his breath.

MARCUS can still barely contain himself. He stands in the shadows, watching everyone drift away, fists clenched against the wall. Finally, he turns to the empty hut.

Nobody but him and the embers of the fire.

MARCUS

Father...?

Silence.

CUT TO:

EXT. SEAL PEOPLE'S VILLAGE - DAY.

Under a beautiful sky, MARCUS watches ESCA laughing with the SEAL PRINCE and other members of the ROYAL FAMILY. They ride off with a party of hunters, thundering out through the gates and up the hillside.

EXT. SEAL PEOPLE'S VILLAGE - DAY.

Alone and ignored, MARCUS crouches in the doorway of a hut, watching CHILDREN play in the mud.

EXT. SEAL PEOPLE'S VILLAGE - DAY.

MARCUS watches ESCA walking through a group of VILLAGERS with the SEAL PRINCE.

The Chieftain's daughter, MOYRA, and other YOUNG WOMEN, point and giggle at the handsome new warrior. The SEAL PRINCE points this out to his companion and ESCA laughs - warming, with each new beat, to the life he once had.

INT. CHIEFTAIN'S HUT - NIGHT.

A council of war. The CHIEFTAIN sits with the TRIBAL ELDERS. TRIBAL PRINCES stand behind, ESCA amongst them. In a third, outer circle, MARCUS and other SERVANTS wait behind their respective masters.

The young SEAL PRINCE presents his case from the centre.

SEAL PRINCE

(celtic)

*Now is the time to strike. Bring
the great bird south and complete
the victory of our clan brothers
fifteen years ago.*

A clatter of spears from the TRIBAL PRINCES. The ELDERS confer. The CHIEFTAIN raises his hand for silence.

CHIEFTAIN

(celtic)

*At the ceremony of the New Spears,
we will ask the The Horned One. If
he blesses your request, we will
march south.*

A howl of approval from the TRIBAL PRINCES.

Through the roar of voices, MARCUS looks up to find the SEAL PRINCE staring straight at him. Cold eyes. Watching.

EXT. STREAM BY THE ISLET - DAY.

Next day.

MARCUS is washing pots in a stream when he observes MOYRA again.

She's huddled together with a crowd of high caste YOUNG WOMEN on the hillside, watching ESCA and other YOUNG WARRIORS bathing off the islet.

ESCA looks up and meets MOYRA's eye. He smiles.

SEAL PRINCE O/S
(celtic)
You!

MARCUS spins round. The YOUNG WOMEN scramble away, terrified. The SEAL PRINCE bears down on MARCUS, lifting him bodily off the ground and hurling him against the hillside.

SEAL PRINCE
(celtic)
Take your eyes off her, slave!!

Instinctively, MARCUS flinches, body bent low in the posture of the low-caste.

ESCA hurries over, calling out.

ESCA
(celtic)
What's the matter?

The SEAL PRINCE glares down at MARCUS, spear poised.

SEAL PRINCE
(celtic)
He had his eyes on my sister.

ESCA
(celtic)
He meant nothing by it.

A pause. The SEAL PRINCE - those still eyes, observing.

SEAL PRINCE
(celtic)
How do I know he's not a spy?

ESCA
(celtic)
He swore allegiance to me.

The SEAL PRINCE spits in disgust.

SEAL PRINCE
(celtic)
I don't trust the word of a Roman.
All Romans are savages. If you have
seen - as I have seen - what they
do to their prisoners. Such people
are not to be trusted.

ESCA
(celtic)
He would not dare to disobey me.

But the SEAL PRINCE still isn't satisfied.

With a flick of his finger, ESCA beckons MARCUS over. The two of them stand there, eye to eye in front of the SEAL PRINCE.

ESCA (CONT'D)
 Kneel in front of him.
(beat)
 Do it.

MARCUS stares into ESCA's eyes. Slowly, he turns and kneels in front of the SEAL PRINCE. Without warning, ESCA pulls back his head, bearing MARCUS's neck to the warrior.

Absolute silence.

Everything, still.

For a long moment, the SEAL PRINCE stares down at MARCUS. Finally, he nods and walks away.

ESCA releases his grip. Angrily, MARCUS pulls himself up.

MARCUS
 What was that for?!

ESCA
 You insulted him. I had no choice
 but to offer you as a kill.

Before MARCUS can recover, ESCA walks off.

CUT TO:

INT. CHIEFTAIN'S HUT - NIGHT.

A strange energy has overtaken the evening meal. As usual, WOMEN and CHILDREN serve food, but the assembly is now much larger. TRIBAL CHIEFS from the gathering clans pack the room, some sitting, some standing.

The CHIEFTAIN rises. He begins reciting a low incantation. Cups of a narcotic brew are ceremoniously drunk. The SEAL PRINCE offers one to ESCA. He drinks, then rocks back with the shock of the drug.

MOYRA rises from her place. Deliberately, she takes a tray from one of the serving WOMEN and carries it to ESCA. Watched by everyone, she serves ESCA his food. ESCA blinks into her delicately down-turned face. In his eyes, it's clear. ESCA feels for this girl.

MARCUS watches, fearful of ESCA's betrayal. Suddenly...

FATHER (V.O.)

Marcus?

MARCUS spins round. That was his father, right beside him.

MARCUS

Father...?

A crowd of TRIBAL WARRIORS pack the doorway, stoned-eyes staring. MARCUS searches madly for a sign of his father. Nothing. Panicked, he pushes forward.

EXT. SEAL PEOPLE'S VILLAGE - NIGHT.

MARCUS bursts out of the hut and stops. What confronts him is a completely different human landscape.

Hundreds of torches light the hillside. Drums beat a low, bass pulse. All the children have vanished. WOMEN huddle in doorways, rocking in ritual grief. They begin a low wailing, first one then another and another.

Beyond the women come the YOUNG WARRIORS, ghosts made flesh, their whole bodies daubed grey-blue with mud. They pour into the village from the surrounding hillside, crowding into clan-groups between the huts. TRIBAL ELDERS hand out horn-shaped cups and the YOUNG WARRIORS drink.

Pushing past MARCUS, the SEAL PRINCE bursts out of the chieftain's hut. A howl goes up from the waiting WARRIORS.

MARCUS turns to find ESCA standing right behind him, his body bathed in sweat.

MARCUS

What's happening?

ESCA

(staring straight ahead)

It's started.

CUT TO:

EXT. PATH BEYOND THE SEAL PEOPLE'S VILLAGE - NIGHT.

The silent rush of bodies. Feet pounding. Breathing hard.

The throng of torchlit YOUNG WARRIORS floods out of the village, streaming down the hillside towards the sea.

EXT. VALLEY TO THE HOLY ISLAND - NIGHT.

Sweeping high, the camera glides just above the throng of YOUNG WARRIORS as they rush towards the shoreline, their torches bobbing and weaving in the dark.

EXT. VALLEY TO THE HOLY ISLAND - NIGHT.

MARCUS races behind ESCA, jostled by the pressure of grey-blue bodies, like myriad soldier-ghosts hurtling into battle.

EXT. THE SHORELINE TO THE HOLY ISLAND - NIGHT.

Racing over the brow of the hill, the ghost-army floods down the hillside towards the beach. Separated from the shoreline by a stretch of water stands a small island.

EXT. THE SHORELINE TO THE HOLY ISLAND - NIGHT.

MARCUS reaches the beach, surrounded by YOUNG WARRIORS. Drums beat. The YOUNG WARRIORS face the island, thrashing the air with their spears. In the confusion, MARCUS loses sight of Esca.

MARCUS
Esca?! Esca?!
(searching madly)
Esca...?!

MARCUS races along the shoreline, but ESCA has vanished. Before he can look any further, the YOUNG WARRIORS let out another cry.

One by one, the TOTEMS of each tribe shuffle out of the shadows, trance-like, into the torchlight. Each TOTEM is naked, except for a pelt of animal skin or the head-dress of a bird. As every tribe recognises its totem, another roar goes up. There's a seal, an otter, a wolf, a bear. They scuffle and bound about the shoreline, their animal skins swinging behind them.

There is no music, only the pounding of drums. Slowly, as the dance builds to a frenzy, the drums become a single roar of noise, and then...MARCUS feels his throat tighten.

Walking across the surface of the sea towards him, comes a figure of nightmare beauty.

Wearing a cloak of eagle feathers, his face masked, his head crested with antlers, comes THE HORNED ONE. He is accompanied by ASSISTANTS bearing torches. The torchlight bounces off the water, making it seem as if the sea itself is burning.

Nearing the shore, THE HORNED ONE stops and raises his hands.

Like wheat under a scythe, all the tribes fall to their knees, face down. MARCUS hits the ground.

The drums halt.

A stunning silence, broken only the "hush" of the sea.

Moving his gaze from one side of the shore to the other, THE HORNED ONE takes them all in. Torchlight fires the tips of his antlers. Everything about him radiates God-spirit. He brings his hands down and the drums begin again, even louder than before. Manic thunder.

MARCUS feels the earth pounding under him. Helpless, he lifts his head to see...

Drawn slowly from beneath his feathered cloak, THE HORNED ONE holds up a great shaft.

Catching the moonlight - proud wings rising skyward - are the battered remains of the Eagle of the Ninth.

FLASHBACK TO:

EXT. FOREST - CALEDONIA - DAY.

The third angle - the final angle - right on the shoulder of MARCUS'S FATHER sprinting for his life through the forest. Fear is etched in his eyes. Mud spatters his cheeks, spittle flecks his lips. In panic, he hurls away the Eagle.

CUT TO:

EXT. THE SHORELINE TO THE HOLY ISLAND - NIGHT.

The drums roar. The YOUNG SPEARS thrash their weapons. Once more, MARCUS searches for Esca.

MARCUS

Esca...?!

Nothing. Only the Eagle, mocking him from the across the sea and his father, mocking him with imagined cowardice.

Shocked and numbed by a sense of defeat, MARCUS slumps back on the sand. At his side lies a discarded gourd, half-full of the narcotic. He stares at it a moment, then grabs the gourd and drinks it down.

EXT. THE SHORELINE TO THE HOLY ISLAND - NIGHT.

Hours later.

From high and wide, we look down on the beach. Embers of fires dot the shoreline, remnants of last night's party. The place resembles a battlefield, with bodies strewn across the beach, under blankets, or curled beside the embers. Everywhere, gourds of narcotic lie abandoned on the ground.

Gradually, as we look down on this scene, we become aware of a solitary FIGURE racing silently across the body-strewn beach. The FIGURE darts between the sleeping WARRIORS, making no sound.

EXT. THE SHORELINE TO THE HOLY ISLAND - NIGHT.

MARCUS lies asleep on the shore. Suddenly, ESCA is leaning over him, shaking him awake.

ESCA
(whispering)
Wake up! It's time!

MARCUS opens his eyes, still bleary from the narcotic. ESCA splashes his face with water. He splutters awake.

ESCA (CONT'D)
We have to go tonight. It's our only chance. While they're all asleep.

MARCUS frowns.

MARCUS
I thought I'd lost you to them.

ESCA
(beat)
Come. Let's go.

CUT TO:

EXT. CAUSEWAY TO THE HOLY ISLAND - NIGHT.

MARCUS and ESCA race across the causeway in the moonlight. Like birds in flight, they fly across the water's skin.

EXT. CAUSEWAY TO THE HOLY ISLAND/CAVE ENTRANCE - NIGHT.

Nearing the island, MARCUS and ESCA slow.

Facing them is a wall of jagged rocks. The black mass of it rears up above them, silhouetted against the stars. On the threshold, MARCUS holds up his hand. He listens.

Under the thick silence - almost imperceptible - comes the sound of exhalation, like a great beast breathing.

ESCA
Just the wind.

MARCUS nods. Neither looks at the other.

MARCUS
You have the flint?

ESCA nods. He steps up to a sealskin curtain hanging across an opening in the cliff wall. The edges are decorated with heavy bronze discs, each etched with complex curlicues. MARCUS prepares himself to step inside. Softly, he addresses the dark.

MARCUS (CONT'D)
In the name of Mithras, the Father.

He pulls back the thick animal skin and slips inside.

INT. CAVE ENTRANCE - NIGHT.

ESCA steps in behind MARCUS. The curtain falls back.

Total blackness.

Only the sound of their breathing, low, fast.

MARCUS
(whispered)
Light, quick.

A scuffle in the dark. A moment, then a spark. In the sparklight, we glimpse ESCA's nervous face lowered over the fire-pot and wick. Nothing. Another spark. This time it catches. Slowly, ESCA's bent face grows out of the dark, nursing the tiny flame. As it steadies, he hands it to MARCUS who raises it above his head.

In the blur of the swinging lamp, the passageway is revealed. What is immediately startling, is its absolute rawness. It is simply a fissure in the rock. As far as the light will travel, there is no clear path, only a meandering, pot-holed crevice leading sharply downward. No decoration. No sign of man.

MARCUS and ESCA step forward.

INT. PASSAGEWAY - NIGHT.

As MARCUS and ESCA walk further in, the passageway narrows to the point where they have to crawl on hands and knees. The sense of claustrophobia is intense. The tiny lamp swings wildly as they struggle across the uneven surface.

INT. CENTRAL CAVE - NIGHT.

Finally, the passageway opens out into a huge underground cave. Around the sides run cracks, rock-splits, tiny caverns and false passageways. It's like the chamber of a heart, fed by myriad veins.

MARCUS drops to a crouch and starts clambering down.

The cave is almost totally empty. No altar. No skulls. Just a single raised flagstone, in the very centre, on top of which rests a shallow amber cup filled to the brim with blood.

ESCA tenses nervously.

ESCA
Don't touch it.

MARCUS
I'm not about to.
(beat)
The Eagle's somewhere in here.

They begin moving round the edge of the cave, searching the crevices. Nothing. Finally, they come to another anonymous cleft in the rock wall, and there it is.

MARCUS holds up the light.

Blotted dark against the stones, propped a little drunkenly, stands the staff and head of the Eagle of the Ninth.

MARCUS hands ESCA the light. He hesitates, hand poised above the shaft. Running his hands softly over the dented wood, he seeks the soldier's double grip, then pulls it clear of the wall.

In the shadow-light, MARCUS holds up the Eagle of the Ninth.

ESCA
Let's go.

MARCUS
Not the shaft. Only the Eagle.

ESCA
We can break the shaft when we're out of here.

MARCUS
No.

ESCA
Why?!

MARCUS
The Eagle will fly.
(beat)
I want them to know it.

MARCUS pulls out a dagger, positions the shaft over his knee and begins levering at the first of four bronze pegs securing the talons to the wooden shaft. Each one has become corroded into its hole. He digs out the first, then pockets the peg. The second, the same. The third won't budge. He tries levering again. His hand slips and he cuts himself. Blood trickles in tiny rivulets along his finger-grip. He blinks at the peg, forcing himself to concentrate over the pain.

MARCUS (CONT'D)
Slowly...

At last, the third peg comes out. As he turns to the final peg, the light from the fire-pot suddenly flickers out in a breeze.

MARCUS (CONT'D)
(whispers)
What was that?!

Torchlight flickers towards them down the tunnel. MARCUS and ESCA freeze. The lights come nearer. They draw their swords.

Keeping his eyes on the approaching enemy, MARCUS whispers...

MARCUS (CONT'D)
Wherever your faith went, we need it now.

Two YOUNG WARRIORS appear across the cave, holding torches. Between them stands THE HORNED ONE, masked and robed.

Before they can raise their swords, ESCA leaps forward, killing the nearest YOUNG WARRIOR instantly. His torch smacks to the ground, still burning.

The second YOUNG WARRIOR steps in front of his master, who turns to run.

While ESCA and the YOUNG WARRIOR fight, MARCUS races to block off any escape route. He just manages to reach the tunnel and turn, as THE HORNED ONE draws a sword from inside his cloak and stabs wildly at him. MARCUS parries. They fight on.

Against an onslaught of blows, MARCUS is caught off balance and bangs sideways into the cave wall. A shock of pain roars up his leg. He forces himself up, only just avoiding another blow. All the time, he can see the emerald ring flashing against the hilt of his opponent's sword.

Again, THE HORNED ONE lunges forward. MARCUS spins aside.

Carried by his own momentum, his opponent bangs up against the far side of the cave wall, smashing into the rock. The mask clatters to the ground.

Silence.

MARCUS stares at the other man's back. The ring on his sword hand glitters.

A pause.

MARCUS (CONT'D)

Father...?

Slowly, the other man turns his face to reveal...

The CHIEFTAIN.

MARCUS feels anger rising inside him like a torrent. Letting out a cry of disappointment, he stabs wildly into the folds of the feathered cloak. The CHIEFTAIN drops to his knees. MARCUS bends forward, breathing hard. He pushes the CHIEFTAIN up against the cave wall, grabs his ring-hand and presses the emerald up to his face.

MARCUS (CONT'D)

This is my father's ring. Where did you get it?

The CHIEFTAIN lifts his head and spits a gob of blood at MARCUS. MARCUS smacks him across the face.

MARCUS (CONT'D)

WHAT HAPPENED TO MY FATHER?!!

The old man blinks indifferently.

CHIEFTAIN

(celtic)
How should I know? It was just another dead Roman.

The CHIEFTAIN dies.

MARCUS hangs there a moment, everything colliding. Finally, he pulls off the ring. He turns to ESCA.

MARCUS

What did he say?

ESCA

Nothing.

MARCUS

He said something-

ESCA
 Go. We have to go.
 (beat)
 Go!

MARCUS turns back, yanks the last peg out of it's socket and grabs the Eagle.

EXT. CAVE ENTRANCE - DAWN.

MARCUS and ESCA lurch out of the barrow, bloodied and dazed. In the distance, the first streak of dawn-light fringes the horizon. ESCA grimaces.

ESCA
 We took too long.
 (beat)
 Can't risk the causeway. They may
 be awake.

MARCUS
 Where are the horses?

ESCA
 Far side of the beach.

ESCA races into the sea. MARCUS slips the emerald ring on his finger, then plunges after him.

EXT. SHORELINE - DAWN.

MARCUS and ESCA gallop along the mainland shore. Behind them, the holy island gradually diminishes.

EXT. WESTERN ISLETS - DAWN.

Racing along the shoreline, MARCUS and ESCA suddenly pull up.

Running towards them, over the crest of a hill, comes the Chieftain's daughter, MOYRA. She's still in her nightclothes, a cloak billowing out around her.

MARCUS
 What's she doing there?

ESCA
 I don't know.

MARCUS
 It could be a trap.

ESCA
 No. Wait here.

ESCA rides up to meet her. She stops a few paces off, staring at him with strange intent.

MOYRA
(celtic)
I knew I'd meet you again.

ESCA
(celtic)
How did you know we were gone?

MOYRA
(celtic)
My heart woke me.

ESCA
(celtic)
Is anyone with you?

She shakes her head. MOYRA stares up at him, perplexed.

MOYRA
(celtic)
I thought you felt for me.

ESCA
(beat, celtic)
I'm sorry.

She gives a little blink of hurt, keeping herself still. A beat.

MOYRA
(celtic)
Are you afraid I'm going to tell?

ESCA stares. No move.

Behind him MARCUS rides up, voice low.

MARCUS
We have to do something. We can't
risk her raising the alarm.

ESCA refuses to look at him.

ESCA
Don't even think it.

MARCUS
Remember the Eagle.

ESCA
You do not touch her.

MARCUS
Esca-

MARCUS puts a hand to his arm. ESCA snatches it away.

MARCUS (CONT'D)

Think what you like about me, but you know I'm right. If she raises the alarm, we're dead. Our only chance of survival is if they don't find the bodies until sunlight.

ESCA

Do you trust me?

MARCUS

She has no reason to protect us.

ESCA

(harder)

Do you trust me?

A long pause. Eye to eye.

MARCUS

(no)

Yes.

ESCA

She won't betray us.

MARCUS and ESCA stare at each other. MARCUS kicks his horse on.

CUT TO:

EXT. WESTERN HIGHLANDS - DAWN.

MARCUS and ESCA ride like the wind.

EXT. WESTERN HIGHLANDS - LOCH - DAY.

Galloping around the edge of a loch, they sweep on.

EXT. WESTERN HIGHLANDS - MOUNTAINS - DAY.

MARCUS and ESCA reach the beginning of the mountain pass.

EXT. WESTERN HIGHLANDS - MOUNTAINS - DAY.

The horses slip on the trail, now climbing steeply.

EXT. WESTERN HIGHLANDS - MOUNTAINS - EVENING.

Reaching the top of the pass, ESCA and MARCUS survey the sweep of forested land lying far ahead.

ESCA

Our best chance is to head for the forest, keep the coast to our right.

MARCUS

How many days to the wall?

ESCA

If we ride hard, four, maybe five.

MARCUS stares off. Silence.

ESCA (CONT'D)

Why didn't you tell me you were wounded?

MARCUS

It's just a fall.

ESCA

Let me look at it.

MARCUS

We should-

ESCA

The horses need to rest.

ESCA dismounts. Reluctantly, MARCUS climbs down. Even the slightest weight on his wounded leg is incredibly painful.

ESCA (CONT'D)

Here.

MARCUS lays himself on the ground. ESCA pulls back the folds of MARCUS's cloak to reveal a bloody cut running the length of his thigh. Immediately, he begins washing it with water, applying a salve.

ESCA (CONT'D)

When did this happen?

MARCUS

In the cave, coming out.

ESCA

It's not deep, but the skin's still tender there. Can you walk on it?

MARCUS

No.

ESCA
 (avoiding his eye)
 As long as the horses hold out,
 we'll be fine. With luck, we can
 steal more.

He continues cleaning the wound. MARCUS watches him.

MARCUS
 In the cave...the old man...what
 did he say?

ESCA
 Does it matter?

MARCUS
 To me. Yes.

A pause.

ESCA
 He said he wore the ring to honour the
 man who died defending the Eagle.

MARCUS stares down at the side of ESCA's face. Even though,
 in his heart, he knows this to be a lie, the deeper meaning
 of the moment - the act of kindness - eclipses it.

MARCUS
 Thank you.

ESCA carries on working.

EXT. MOORLAND - EVENING.

ESCA and MARCUS ride fast across open moorland. In the
 distance lies a line of thick forest, stretching the length
 of the horizon, like an inviting curtain.

Gradually, above the pounding of hooves, they hear it.

The faintest bray of hunting dogs, carried across the wind.

ESCA turns in his saddle. Head slanted, he listens.

ESCA
 They're coming.

MARCUS
 How far?

ESCA
 Two passes back, at least. The wind
 always lies.

MARCUS

How could they be so quick?

ESCA

(avoiding his eye)

They're half a day's march away. As long as we keep ahead...

MARCUS

The dogs can still track us.

ESCA

Even they can't run forever. Hya!!

ESCA kicks on his horse, flying forward. MARCUS reins round and gallops after him.

EXT. MOORLAND - EVENING.

Close-up on MARCUS, riding at full gallop. The sweep of the horse's head in the wind, the reins held high, the sky-skimming past - like a dark re-playing of the first glorious chariot ride.

EXT. EDGE OF THE FOREST - DUSK.

Bursting from light into dark, ESCA and MARCUS crash into the safety of the forest. MARCUS lets out a cry of relief. They gallop on.

EXT. FOREST - NIGHT.

Cantering through the dark, MARCUS and ESCA weave in and out of vision, between the moonlit trees.

EXT. FOREST - NIGHT.

Hours later, they are still riding.

MARCUS starts to fall asleep in the saddle. Slipping slightly, he jerks awake. ESCA rides alongside. He hands MARCUS some smoked meat.

Eating on the hoof, they ride on.

EXT. LEAF - DAWN.

Extreme close-up on a veined leaf, glistening with rainwater. MARCUS leans in and licks the moisture away. He's kneeling under the trees, like a supplicant, licking at the leaves.

EXT. FOREST - DAWN.

ESCA empties his sack of the last of their dried meat and throws half to MARCUS. They eat quickly, in silence.

ESCA
We'll rest here.

ESCA drops to the ground where he's standing. MARCUS simply curls on the ground. Both, instantly asleep.

EXT. FOREST - NIGHT.

Darkness. MARCUS wakes with a start. His hand snaps to the Eagle. ESCA is leaning over him, sword in hand. For a split-second, MARCUS thinks he's going to kill him. ESCA sees the fear and frowns.

ESCA
Time to go.

MARCUS pulls himself up. He winces involuntarily, his wounded leg is stiff from sleep. Without a word, ESCA helps him onto the horse.

EXT. HIGHLANDS - NIGHT/DAY/NIGHT.

A series of angles on MARCUS and ESCA's long ride south. At every point, the pace is brutal, the landscape unforgiving.

Faintly, in the distance - just like the low drumbeat at the opening - the braying of hounds drifts to the sound-surface.

CUT TO:

EXT. HIGHLANDS - DAWN.

A few days later.

A rustle of leaves. HANDS scuttle along the ground. Suddenly, ESCA'S FACE fills the screen, low to the ground. He freezes, then darts forward, both hands outstretched. A second later he sits back, holding a wood vole.

EXT. HIGHLANDS - DAY.

Hidden in a thicket of thorn trees, MARCUS and ESCA crouch over the skinned rodent, staring at the meagre flesh. Both look increasingly wrecked with hunger and exhaustion.

Without moving, MARCUS starts collecting bits of firewood.

ESCA
No fires. Too risky.

MARCUS
I can't eat it raw.

ESCA
You don't have a choice.

MARCUS
I'm not a savage!

ESCA
Then die a Roman, I don't care!

ESCA snatches up the raw meat and bites into it. MARCUS stares, appalled, yet achingly hungry.

Furious, he turns away to sleep. Remembering the nervous tick that lets him sleep, he pulls the Eagle from its sack and buries it inside his cloak.

ESCA (CONT'D)
(contemptuously)
What are you afraid of? That I'll steal it?

MARCUS
(without turning)
We should never have let that girl go.

ESCA glares at his back, refusing to answer. Both of them, never further apart than now.

EXT. HIGHLANDS - DAWN.

MARCUS and ESCA are nearing the end of another exhausting night's riding. Starved and sleep-deprived, they seem to be disintegrating slowly into the land around them.

ESCA
It'll be light soon. We'll look for a place to rest.

MARCUS
How many more days to the wall?

ESCA is about to answer, when suddenly, his head jerks up. He stares at the hills behind them. MARCUS turns to look.

As he does so, the horizon begins to wriggle with the shapes of riders - dozens of them - heading straight towards us.

ESCA
(berating himself)
The wind's changed. No sound. Hya!!

MARCUS

Hya!!

Two cries and they're away, flying across the moorland - so sudden and undisguised that a flock of plover startle into an explosion of wings, scudding skyward in all directions.

EXT. THE HIGHLANDS - DAWN.

Tight on MARCUS's shoulder. The dark heather streaking backwards. The horse's mane spraying over his wrists. The spittle in his mouth. The backward glance. And the fear. Deep fear. Of being hunted.

EXT. RIVERBANK - DAWN.

Cresting another ridge, ESCA and MARCUS pull up. Below them, a river meanders through heavy copse. Half-hidden amid the trees, a stag drinks.

ESCA

Down to the stream.

Neck and neck, they hurtle down the hillside, sending the stag running.

EXT. RIVER - DAWN.

Flying through coppice, the horses crash into the river. It surges around them, pouring downstream.

Immediately, ESCA dismounts and begins dragging both horses towards the far bank. As he reaches the end, he yells above the roar of water.

ESCA

The sack!

MARCUS scrambles for his sack. He dismounts. Pain shoots up his leg. He grits his teeth.

ESCA beats at the horses backsides, yelling furiously at them. The terrified animals scramble up the bank and gallop away.

ESCA (CONT'D)

Take my arm!

Wincing against the pain, MARCUS hesitates.

ESCA (CONT'D)

TAKE MY ARM!!

Finally, furiously, MARCUS takes ESCA's arm.

Locked together, they stumble downstream.

EXT. RIVER - MORNING.

With the braying of the dogs growing louder all the time, MARCUS and ESCA continue wading downstream. ESCA searches the bankside for a hiding place. At last, he sees a rocky overhang covered in alder scrub and moss.

ESCA

In here.

They push in under the curtain of vegetation.

EXT. OVERHANG - MORNING.

MARCUS and ESCA cling to the edge of the bank, water swirling and bubbling against their clothes. The curtain of vegetation hangs loosely in front of them. MARCUS sniffs.

MARCUS

What's that smell?

ESCA

The stag. Confuses the dogs.

(beat)

Stay as low as you can.

MARCUS grips the Eagle inside its drenched sack-skin. Lowering himself down, he lets the water rise up to his mouth.

They wait.

Close on MARCUS and ESCA as the hunters descend. Second by second, a terrifying cacophony envelopes them. The sound of barking, then the thunder of hooves, then the first splash-crash of the dogs hitting the water. The sudden yelp as they pick up the stag scent. A few beats later comes the smash of the horses hitting the river, the yell of the hunters urging on the dogs, the sound of hooves crashing past, only feet away. Everything rising to a crescendo of sound, then...

Like a dissolving nightmare, men, hounds and horses fly downstream. The crescendo of yelps and cries fades away, until...

The only sound is the water, lap-lapping against their lips.

Cautiously, they ease themselves back onto the bank. Drenched, shaken and exhausted, they catch their breath.

MARCUS

How long before they turn back?

ESCA

Depends how far our horses run. Once they track them down, they'll be onto us again. We'll follow the river upstream as far as we can. With luck, we may find some ponies.

Neither looks at the other.

ESCA slips back into the water. MARCUS eases himself down. Tentatively, he puts weight on his wounded leg. Another shot of pain slams into him. Immediately, ESCA steps up, one arm around his waist.

EXT. THE RIVER - DAY.

ESCA and MARCUS wade slowly upstream.

EXT/INT. THE RIVER - DAY.

The river narrows and the current gets stronger. MARCUS slips and crashes into the water. ESCA loses his grip.

Suddenly, MARCUS is under the water, his whole body streaming backwards with the current.

ESCA thrashes madly after him.

MARCUS is drowning. He can feel himself giving into it.

Suddenly, ESCA grabs his arm and hauls him back to the roaring surface. They stand there, drenched and shaking, clinging onto each other.

EXT. THE RIVER - DAY.

Hours later. Rain pours.

The further they wade against the run of the river, the weaker MARCUS becomes. He's breathing fast. Shallow gasps against the constant pain. ESCA stops.

ESCA

Rest.

MARCUS

No.

ESCA

Rest!

MARCUS

No!

ESCA has to fight MARCUS out of the river. He half-drags, half-carries him up the bank and into a moorland clearing between the trees.

EXT. HIGHLANDS - MOORLAND CLEARING - DAY.

MARCUS pulls free. He's shaking with exhaustion and rage. The rain is now so fierce, it drums down in a constant roar. They have to shout to be heard.

MARCUS

It's no good!

(beat)

I can't go on without a horse!

He pulls the Eagle out of his sack.

MARCUS (CONT'D)

Take it! If you find horses come back, if not keep south!

ESCA

I'm not leaving you here!

MARCUS

I order you!

Nothing. ESCA stares back.

MARCUS (CONT'D)

Do you hear me Esca! I order you!

MARCUS tries to hand him the Eagle. ESCA steps back, refusing to take it.

MARCUS (CONT'D)

Take it!

ESCA shakes his head, retreating from MARCUS's advance.

MARCUS (CONT'D)

Do not dishonour me!

ESCA

If I meant you to die, I could have killed you myself!

MARCUS

Take it!!

ESCA

I will not leave you!!

Furious, MARCUS strikes out with the Eagle and stumbles forward. He kneels there in the mud, rain pouring off his body, gripping the iron bird.

A long pause. The two of them, head to head under the storm. Everything, drawn down to this.

MARCUS

The dead are dead. The dead do not come back. I know that. In my heart, I've always known that. But if you could see this piece of metal as I see it. If it could speak to you as it speaks to me, you'd understand. To die for *this* is to die for something so much more than merely what we are.

(looks at Esca)

This is the best of us. This is what we dream of being. Can you not see that? Can you not grant me at least that much faith?

He stares up at ESCA. The Celt towers over him.

ESCA

Give me my freedom.

(beat)

All this time I've honoured you, and never once have you shown faith in me. You wish me to leave, then trust me to return.

(beat)

Give me my freedom!

Silence. The roar of the rain, drenching them both.

Finally, MARCUS slumps back. His shoulders drop and he lets it all go...his father, Esca, everything.

MARCUS

You're free.

Drained and exhausted, he holds out the Eagle.

But...ESCA shakes his head.

ESCA

I will return.

For a second their hands touch, then ESCA races away.

CUT TO:

EXT. HIGHLANDS - FOREST - DAY.

With the grace of a deer in flight, ESCA runs through the forest.

EXT. HIGHLANDS - MOORLAND CLEARING - DAY.

Limping across the clearing, MARCUS makes for the shelter of the trees.

EXT. HIGHLANDS - FOREST - DAY.

ESCA pauses in his run. Checking the snapped tendrils of some alder scrub, he changes direction.

EXT. HIGHLANDS - MOORLAND CLEARING - DAY.

MARCUS searches among the trees, hunting for something.

EXT. HIGHLANDS - FOREST - DAY.

ESCA leaps, bird-like, over a rock-fall, arms spread wide. He truly is flying.

EXT. HIGHLANDS - FOREST - DAY.

Breaking off the base of a small coppice branch, MARCUS begins whittling it smooth with his dagger.

EXT. HIGHLANDS - FOREST - DAY.

ESCA slows. Again - with the same purpose as before - he checks the ground and changes direction.

EXT. HIGHLANDS - MOORLAND CLEARING - DAY.

Twisting dry grass, MARCUS makes a crude rope.

EXT. HIGHLANDS - FOREST - DAY.

ESCA approaches a hut, hidden in a clearing.

He passes some horses, grazing in a fenced enclosure. Instead of stealing them, he walks straight on towards the hut.

EXT. HIGHLANDS - MOORLAND CLEARING - DAY.

MARCUS finishes tying the Eagle to the top of the whittled branch. The task complete, he raises the handmade standard.

The Eagle of the Ninth rises once more into the sky.

EXT. HIGHLANDS - HUT - DAY.

Out of the shadows of his hut doorway, steps GUERN.

Staring back at him across the clearing, breathing hard, stands a triumphant ESCA.

CUT TO:

EXT. HIGHLANDS - MOORLAND CLEARING - EVENING.

Hours later. Evening light slants down in low shadows.

MARCUS has fallen asleep over the Eagle. He wakes to the first faint bray of hounds.

EXT. HIGHLANDS - MOORLAND CLEARING - EVENING.

With the sound of the hounds growing gradually louder, MARCUS limps as fast as he can towards higher ground. In his hand, he carries the handmade standard.

EXT. HIGHLANDS - MOORLAND CLEARING - DAY.

Reaching the high ground, MARCUS draws his sword and turns to face his attackers. The pain in his leg is agony, but he bites it back, planting the standard firmly into the ground.

The CELT WARRIORS do not come at him in a rush. His stillness makes them wary. Instead, they emerge out of the darkness of the forest, in one terrifying line of dogs and horsebacked riders.

There are about a hundred of them in all. At their head rides the SEAL PRINCE, eyes fixed on MARCUS. Slowly, he raises his spear and his men close in.

MARCUS grips the standard, holding his courage.

Then, the most amazing sight.

Emerging through the trees, on either side of MARCUS, come thirty wild-haired, tattooed ghost-men, their Roman swords and shields held in perfect formation.

Led by GUERN, the THIRTY LEGIONARIES OF THE NINTH march into a two sided triangle, forming a wall of shields in front of the Eagle.

Stunned by the sight of Celtish Legionaries - like their own parodies turned in on themselves - the CELT WARRIORS halt.

ESCA rides up behind MARCUS, shepherding a spare horse, shields and swords. MARCUS stares in amazement at the LEGIONARIES gathered round him.

MARCUS

These men...

ESCA

Your father's Legionaries. They've come to defend the Eagle.

(beat)

You were wrong. The dead can live.

ESCA hands MARCUS a sword and shield, then prepares to fight.

GUERN approaches MARCUS. A look between them. GUERN salutes, fist to his chest. A beat.

GUERN

The order, sir.

MARCUS hesitates, then the command forms in his mouth.

MARCUS

Prepare to form Testudo.

GUERN and the LEGIONARIES close in around him.

MARCUS (CONT'D)

FORM TESTUDO!

MARCUS raises his shield to the sky.

Instantly, the LEGIONARIES bunch close and their shields shoot up. Again, the kiss and click of metal completes and the motley cohort is locked under the shield-wall.

Standing, side by side, MARCUS and ESCA prepare to charge. The sound of thirty men, taking one breath.

MARCUS (CONT'D)

Steady, boys. Wait for them to advance.

Raising his feathered spear, the SEAL PRINCE shouts the command and ONE HUNDRED CELT WARRIORS roar up the hill.

MARCUS (CONT'D)

NOW!

Led by MARCUS, under the shadow of their Eagle, the LEGIONARIES OF THE NINTH charge forward.

From high and wide, we look down, once more, on a fist of metal slamming into a line of Celts.

MARCUS (CONT'D)
BREAK TESTUDO!

The LEGIONARIES burst out of formation.

MARCUS (CONT'D)
OUT SWORDS!
(drawing his sword)
CAESAR! CAESAR!

LEGIONARIES
CAESAR! CAESAR!

Shoulder to shoulder, MARCUS and ESCA fight. Beside them, GUERN and his LEGIONARIES battle with preternatural courage to defend the standard they once abandoned. Even as they fall in its protection, their faces carry the mask of absolute certainty. This is what they were destined to do.

They may die, but they will not lose.

CUT TO:

EXT. HIGHLANDS - MOORLAND CLEARING - DAY.

MARCUS and ESCA stand, back to back, on top of the hill, exhausted, blood-spattered, but victorious. Around them - some on their knees from exhaustion - stand a few surviving LEGIONARIES. Bodies are strewn everywhere. GUERN lies among the dead, along with scores of CELTS.

In his fist, MARCUS still grips the handmade standard of the Eagle of the Ninth. On a look from ESCA, he raises it to the sky and a ragged, heartfelt cheer goes up.

CUT TO:

EXT. LOWLANDS - DAY.

From high and wide, we look down on MARCUS and ESCA, riding back across a great expanse of lowland hills. In the distance, Hadrian's Wall appears, snaking across the countryside.

EXT. LOWLANDS - DAY.

MARCUS and ESCA ride across a high ridge. The great wall looms close. The end of their journey.

MARCUS
Wait.

MARCUS pulls up and dismounts. Crouching on the ground, he begins cutting out a large square of turf with his dagger.

He lays the turf beside the hole, then pulls the Eagle out of its sack.

ESCA

What are you doing?

MARCUS

I don't need to hold it to know it's there. It should remain with the men who died defending it. It belongs to them, not Rome.

MARCUS lays the Eagle in the hole, then covers it carefully with the square of turf, until it's impossible to tell the ground was ever disturbed.

Pulling out the jar from his bag, he murmurs his blessing over it, then pours a cupful of water into his hand and sprinkles the holy water over the resting place.

MARCUS (CONT'D)

Here lies the Eagle of the Ninth.
The last of the Lost Legion.

(beat)

May their souls rest in peace and honour follow them, from here and forever.

The sound of a breath drawn out.

ESCA stands above his friend, both hands to his forehead. Slowly, he opens them out, palms upward, offering the spirits his blessing and the return of his faith.

As he exhales, his breath lifts into the sky, becoming its own music.

EXT. LOWLANDS - DAY.

MARCUS and ESCA ride side-by-side, heading south. There's a new lightness now, as if the weight of their story has finally lifted.

MARCUS

I forgot to give this back to you.

MARCUS holds out the dagger. ESCA takes it without comment.

They ride for a while in silence.

MARCUS (CONT'D)

Where will you go now?

ESCA

Go?

MARCUS
You're a free man. You could stay.

ESCA
I've nothing to keep me here.

A pause.

ESCA (CONT'D)
What about you?

MARCUS
I'll need to settle things with my
uncle. After that, I might look for
some land of my own. A farm perhaps.

ESCA
(distastefully)
Farming?

MARCUS
What's wrong with that?

They begin riding away from us, their voices fading.

ESCA
Hunting maybe.

MARCUS
I can't hunt all my life.

ESCA
Horse breeding's an honourable
profession.

MARCUS
(laughs)
Horse breeding?! I never want to see
another horse as long as I live.

ESCA
There's good money in it.

MARCUS
What about Spain? A farm in Spain.

ESCA
A farm, with horses, in Spain.

They ride on, the huge sky above.

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