

# UP THE WALL

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*Reading a story like this makes one want to toss out all the old history texts and let the fantasy and SF writing community have a go at redoing them for the secondary-school market. Guaranteed you'd have more students interested in history, and that they wouldn't be bored.*

*Roman history is particularly fascinating, but all too often shrunken and curdled into an endless litany of Latin names and places and dates. The history that's fun to read is history that lives and breathes. "Up the Wall" doesn't merely breathe, it fairly vibrates with life. Whether it would be allowed in history texts, it's contextual accuracy notwithstanding, is another matter entirely. Most such weighty tomes have perforce had all the life sucked out of them by "review committees," whose sole task in life it is to reduce all textbooks to the literary level of vanilla pudding.*

*"Up the Wall" adds some spice. It also leaves you wondering who you'd really like to have standing alongside you in a crisis.*

A GUST OF NORTHCOUNTRY air swept over the undulating hump of Hadrian's Wall, still bearing with it the chill of the sea. The northcountry was the hard country even the starveling sheep had the grim air of failed philosophers but worse land yet lay north of the wall, in wild Caledonia, if the word of tribal Celts and travelers could be believed. Two figures in the full finery of the Roman legions paced the earthworks as dusk came on. The last rays of the setting sun struck gold from the breast of the eagle standard jammed into the soil between them. In looks, in bearing, in the solemn silence folded in wings around them, they carried a taste of eternity.

It all would have been very heroic and poetical if the shorter man had not reached up under his tunic and pteruges, undone his braciae, and taken a long, reflective pee in the direction of Orkney. His comrade affected not to notice.

Rather by way of distraction than conversation, the taller fellow broke silence almost simultaneously with his mate's breaking wind. In a good, loud, carrying voice he declaimed, "Joy to the Ninth, Caius Lucius Piso! The days of the beast are numbered. It shall be today that the hero comes; I feel it. This morning all the omens were propitious." He had the educated voice and diction a senator's son might envy. His Latin was high and pure, preserved inviolate even here, at the northernmost outpost of the legions. He turned to his mate. "What news from the south?"

"News?" his companion echoed. Then he placed a stubby tongue between badly chapped lips and blew a sound that never issued from the wolf's-head bell of any bucina. "Sweet sodding Saturn, Junie, how the blazes would I have any more news from the friggin' south than you, stuck up here freezin' me cobblers off, waitin' on the relief see if them buggers ever show up, bleedin' arse-lickers the lot of 'em, and everyone knows Tullius Cato's old lady's been slippin' into the commander's bedroll, so he never pulls the shit-shift, wish my girl'd show half as much support for me career, but that's women for you only women ain't so much to your taste, now as I remember the barrack-room gab, are they, no offense taken, I hope?"

His Latin was somewhat less pure than that of his hawk-faced comrade-in-arms.

Junius Claudius Maro regarded the balding, podgy little man with a look fit to petrify absolutely that fellow's already chilled cobblers. "You presume too much upon our training days, Caius Lucius Piso. Were I to report the half of what you have just said, our beloved commander could order the flesh flayed from your bones." He settled the drape of his thick wool mantle more comfortably on his shoulders, then suffered a happy afterthought: "With a steel-tipped knout. However, for the love that is between us, I will say nothing." He looked inordinately pleased with himself.

"Right, then," said Caius Lucius Piso. His own after-thought bid him add: "Ta." He uprooted the Imperial eagle, hoisted it fishpole-wise over one shoulder, and casually commenced a westerly ramble. "I'll just be toddling on down the wall, eh? Have a bit of a lookabout? Keep one peeper peeled for this hero fella you say's coming, maybe kindle a light, start a little summat boiling on the guardroom fire, hot wine, the cup that cheers, just the thing what with a winter like we're like to have, judging by the misery as's crept into me bones. Bring you back a cuppa, Junie?" This last comment was flung back from a goodly distance down the wall, went unheard, and received no reply.

The nearest guardroom along that section of the wall where the ill-matched pair patrolled had once been a thing of pride, to judge by its size. It was large enough to have housed sheep for whatever purpose. Years and neglect had done their damndest to bring pride to a fall. Hares and foxes took it in turn to nest in the tumbledown sections of the derelict structure, but there was still a portion of the building with a make-do roof of old blankets and sod. In the lee of the October winds, surrounded by shadows, Caius Lucius Piso knelt to poke up the small peat fire in the pit.

The flame caught and flared, banishing darkness. Caius gasped as his small fire leaped in reflection on the iron helmet and drawn sword of the man hunkered on his hams in the dingy guardroom. The image of a slavering wild boar cresting his helmet seemed to leap out at the trembling Roman. Beneath the brim, two small, red, and nasty orbs glared. From porcine eyes to bristly snout, there was a striking family resemblance between boar crest and crest-wearer.

There was also the matter of the man's sword. Caius Lucius Piso's initial impression of that weapon had not been wrong. It was indeed as large, keen, and unsheathed as it had seemed at first glance. It was also leveled at the crouching Roman. The man snarled foreign words and raised the sword several degrees, sending ripples through his thickly-corded forearm muscles. Many of his teeth were broken, all were yellow as autumn crocus, and the stench emanating from him, body and bearskin, was enough to strike an unsuspecting passer-by senseless. He looked like a man to whom filth was not just a way of life, but a religious calling.

Caius Lucius Piso knew a hero when he saw one.

"Oh, shit" he said.

"That's him?" Goewin knotted her fists on her hips and studied the new arrival. "That's our precious hero?"

"Hush now, dear, he'll hear you." Caius Lucius Piso made small dampening motions with his hands, but the lady of his hearth and heart was undaunted. She had been the one who'd taught him how to make that obnoxious tongue-and-lips blatting sound, after all.

"Hush yerself, you great cowpat. Who cares does he hear me? Stupid clod don't speak [a speck] of honest Gaelic." She smiled sweetly at the visitor, who stood beside the oxhide-hung doorway, arms crossed. He appeared to disapprove of everything he saw within the humble hut, and, without a word, somehow conveyed the message that he had sheathed his fearsome sword under protest.

"Who'd like a bit of the old nip-and-tuck with any ewe he fancies,

then?" Goewin asked him, still smiling. "Whose Mum did it for kippers?"

"Goewin, for Mithra's sake, the man's a guest. And a hero! He's only biding under our roof until they're ready to receive him formally at headquarters."

"[Hindquarters], you mean, if it's the Commander yer speaking of."

"Epona's east tit, woman, mind your tongue! If word gets back to the commander that you've been rude to his chosen hero ..." Caius Lucius turned chalky at the thought.

"A hero?" Goewin cocked her head at the impassive presence guarding her doorway. "Him?" She clicked her tongue. "If that's the sort of labor we're down to bringing into Britain, just to take care of a piddling beast you lot could handle, weren't you such hermaphros, well "

"That's not fair and you know it, Goewin. You can't call a monster big enough to carry off five legionaries any sort of piddler."

"Oh, pooh. Tisn't as if it carried all five off in one go. I've not seen it anymore than you have, but I know different. You Romans always exaggerate, as many a poor girl's learned to her sorrow on the wedding night or 'round the Beltaine fires. Probably no more'n a newt with glanders, but straightaway you lot bawl 'Dragon!' and off for help you run. Bunch of babes. And if that piece propping up the doorpost's the best you could drum up on the Continent " She shrugged expressively. "This country's just going to ruin, Cai, that's all." She slouched over to grasp the stranger's impressive left bicep. "Look 'ee here. Shoddy goods, that is. Scrawnier than "

There was a flicker of cold steel. The man's dagger was smaller than his sword, lighter, far handier, with a clean line that would never go out of style. It was almost the size of a Roman legionary's shortsword, but he handled it with more address. Presently it addressed Goewin's windpipe.

"[Aye], all," said Junius, pulling back the oxhide and stepping unwittingly into the midst of this small domestic drama. "The commander is now prepared to greet our noble visitor with all due "

The noble visitor growled something unintelligible and dropped his dagger point from Goewin's throat. Caius Lucius rather supposed that his guest disliked interruptions. Junius stared as the blade turned its attention to him.

"Now just a moment " Junius objected in his flawless Latin.

A moment was all Caius Lucius wished. His wife was safe, but now his messmate was in danger. Dragon or no, and never mind that Junie Maro

was the biggest prig the Glorious Ninth had ever spawned, the bonds of the legion still stood for something. While trying to remember precisely what, he picked up a small wine jug and belted the noble visitor smack on top of his iron boar.

Junius Claudius Maro looked down at the crumpled heap of clay shards, fur, and badly-tanned leather at his feet, then gave Caius Lucius a filthy glare by way of thanks for his life. "You idiot," he said.

"You're welcome, I'm sure," Caius replied. Sullen and bitter, he added, "Didn't kill 'im. Didn't even snuff his wick."

That much was true. The man was not unconscious, just badly dazed and grinning like a squirrel. Caius Lucius watched, astounded, as old Junie knelt beside the stunned barbarian and spoke to him in a strange, harsh tongue. Still half loopy, the man responded haltingly in kind, and before long the two of them were deep in earnest conversation punctuated by bellowing laughter.

"You you speak that gibberish, Junie?" Caius Lucius ventured to ask when his comrade finally stood up.

"Goatish, not gibberish," Junius replied, wiping tears of hilarity from his eyes. "Gods, and to think I never believed the pater when he told me it's the only tongue on earth fit for telling a really elegant latrine joke! Later on, you must remind me to tell you the one about but no. The pun won't translate, and, in any case, Ursus here says he's going to kill you in a bit. If our commander doesn't have you crucified first, for nearly doing in our dragon-slayer."

Caius Lucius gaped. "Crucified?"

His wife sighed. "Didn't me Mum just warn me you'd come to a bad end. Now I'll have to listen to the old girl's bloody I-told-you-so's 'til Imbolc. Honestly, Cai !"

"Caius Lucius Piso, you are accused of damaging legion property." The Commander of the Ninth slurped an oyster and gave the accused the fish-eye. "This man has been brought into our service at great personal expense to deal with our ah little problem, and you make free with his cranial integrity." The commander grinned, never loath to let his audience know when he'd come up with an especially elegant turn of phrase. Marcus Septimus, the commander's secretary, toady, and emergency catamite, applauded dutifully and made a note of it.

"Bashed him one on the conk, he did," Goewin piped up from the doorway. "I saw 'im!"

Caius could not turn to give his wife the killing look she deserved. He was compelled to stand facing his commander, head bowed, and hear Goewin condemn him with one breath, then, with the second, titter, "Oooh, Maxentius, you keep your hands to yourself, you horrid goat! And me not even a widow yet!" Her pleased tone of voice belied her harsh words. Obviously, Goewin did not believe in waiting until the last minute to provide for her future.

Caius scuffed his already worn perones in the packed earthen floor of the commander's hut, and tried to think of something besides death. It didn't help to dwell on the thought of killing old Junie, for that specific fantasy always veered over to the general theme of thanatos, which by turns yanked his musings back to his own imminent fate.

The commander was not happy, and all the way back to the first generation, the Commanders of the Ninth had had a simple way of dealing with their discontent.

"Right. Guilty. Crucify him," said the commander.

Junius looked smug. He stood at the commander's left hand while the man he had dubbed Ursus sprawled on a bench to the right. He still wore the boar's head helm, but now the eyes beneath the brim no longer showed murderous rage. Instead they roved slowly around the hut, silently weighing the worth and transportability of every even vaguely valuable item they spied. They only paused in their mercantile circuit when Junius leaned around the back of the commander's chair to whisper a translation of Caius' sentence in the barbarian's shaggy ear.

Something like a flint-struck spark kindled in the depth of those tiny eyes. "NEVER!" Ursus bawled and then all Hades broke loose.

Afterwards, Caius could not say whether he was more shocked by the barbarian's reaction, or by the fact that he had understood the man's exclamation precisely.

He quickly shelved linguistic musings in favor of survival. It really was an impressive tantrum the barbarian was throwing; he also threw the bench. Everyone in the commander's hut who could reach an exit, did so, in short order. The commander and all members of the makeshift tribunal held their ground, but only because they were cut off from the sole escape route by the rampaging dragon-slayer himself.

Ursus was on his feet, each clenched fist the size of a toddler's skull. He gave a fierce kick, knocking over a little tabouret bearing a bowl of windfalls and a silver wine jug with matched goblets. He picked up the fallen objects one by one and flung them at the hut's curved walls. Though

his sword and dagger had perforce been laid aside before coming into the commander's presence, he still looked able to reduce the population barehanded ad libitum. Throughout this demonstration, he continued to chant, "Never, never, never!"

The commander's face resembled an adolescent cheese. His jowls shuddered as much as his voice when he inquired so very delicately of his guest, "What? Never?"

When Junius went to translate this into Geatish, the hero seized him by the throat and shook him until his kneecaps rattled. He pitched the Roman javelin-fashion at the open doorway of the commander's house. Unfortunately, he missed his aim by a handspan. Junius came up face-first against a doorpost and knocked one of the severed heads out of its niche. The commander's woman, a hutproud lady, fussed loudly as she dusted it off and tucked it back where it belonged.

Junius received no such attentions.

Ursus glowered at the fallen foe.

"Far though my fate has flung roe,  
Weary the whale-road wandering,  
Still shall I no stupidity stomach,  
Butt and baited of boobies!"

All this he spat at his retired translator. He used a sadly corrupt version of Latin, admixed higgledy-piggledy with a sprinkling of other tongues. Like most bastards, it had its charm, and was able to penetrate where purebreds could not follow. It took some concentration, but every man of the Ninth who heard Ursus speak so, understood him.

Caius took a tentative step towards his unexpected champion. "You haven't half got a bad accent, mate. For a bloody foreigner, I mean. Pick up the tongue from a trader, then?"

Ursus' eyes narrowed, making them nigh invisible. He motioned for Caius to approach, and when the little man complied, he grabbed him and hoisted him onto tip-toe by a knot of tunic.

"Hear me, o halfling halfblood,  
Lees of the legion's long lingering  
Here hard by Hadrian's human-reared hillock!  
Your lowly life I love not.  
Murder you might I meetly,

Yet you are young and useful.  
Wise is the woman-born warrior  
Dragons who dauntless dares;  
Smarter the soul who sword-smites serpents  
Carefully, in company of comrades."

Caius was still puzzling this out when Marcus Septimus inched up behind him and whispered, "I think he wants a sword-bearer or something to stand by while he does in the dragon for us."

"Want my opinion," Caius growled out of the corner of his mouth, "the bugger's just as scared as the rest of us. Sword-bearer, my arse! What he wants is bait!"

"We could still crucify you," Marcus suggested.

Caius got his hands up and delicately disengaged the barbarian's hold on his tunic. Once there was solid earth under his feet again, he said, "All right, Ursus. You've got me over the soddin' barrel. I'll go."

Everyone left in the hut smiled, including Junius, who had just rejoined the sentient.

Ursus clapped the little legionary on the shoulder and declaimed: "Victory welcomes the valiant!"

Marcus raised one carefully-plucked brow and clucked. " 'Welcomes?' Hmph. If they're going to come over here and take our coin, they might at least learn to speak our language properly!"

"Silly Geat," Junius agreed, rubbing his head.

Ursus was neither deaf nor amused, and his smattering of Latin was enough to parse personal remarks. He gathered up the two critics as lesser men might pick strawberries. Marcus cast an imploring glance at the commander, who was suddenly consumed by a passion to get to know his toenails better.

"Sagas they sing of swordsmen," Ursus informed them. "Hymn they the homicidal. Geats, though for glory greedy, Shame think it not to share. Wily, the Worm awaits us. Guides will I guard right gladly! And, should the shambler slay you, Sorrow shall I sincerely."

Caius leered at the two wriggling captives. "In other words, gents, we've all been bloody drafted."

"Oh, I hate this, hate this, hate this," Marcus whined as they trudged along Hadrian's Wall, fruitlessly trying to keep pace with Ursus.



"Put a caliga in it, you miserable cow! It's not like he'd tapped you to be his weapons bearer." Caius gave Marcus an encouraging jab with the bundle of spears that had been wished on him by his new boss. "All you've got to do is lead him to the fen where the monster's skulking and take off once the fun starts. Shouldn't be too hard for you."

"We're all going to die," Marcus moaned. "The dragon will be all stirred up, and it will slay that great brute before you can say hie ibat Simois, and then it will come after us. I can't outrun a dragon! Not in these shoes."

At the head of the line where he marched beside Ursus, a spare eagle standard jouncing along on his shoulder, Junius overheard and gave them a scornful backwards glance. He said something that Caius did not quite catch, but which caused Marcus to make an obscene gesture.

"Soddin' ears going on me," Caius complained. "What'd he say, then?"

"That " Marcus pursed his ungenerous mouth " was Greek"

"Greek to me, all right," Caius agreed. "Junie always was a bloody show-off."

"He said we were both slackers and cowards, and when we get back and he tells the Commander how badly we've disgraced the Glorious Ninth in front of the hired help, we'll both be crucified."

"Not that again." Caius shifted the spears. "I'm fucking sick and tired of Junie and his thrice-damned crucifixions. Mithra, it's like a bally religion with him. What's he need to get off, then? A handful of sesterce spikes and a mallet?"

"He also said that he was going to warn Arctos to keep a weather eye on us so we don't bolt."

Caius flung down his bundle, exasperated. "Wow who's been wished on us for this little deathmarch, eh? Bad enough we're to split two men's rations four ways sod the commander for a stone-arsed miser but who's this fifth wheel coming to join us?"

The clatter of falling spears made the rest of the party draw up short. Marcus was totally bewildered. "What fifth wheel?"

"This Arctos bastard who'll be baby-minding us, that's who!" Caius shouted.

Junius regarded the angry little man with disdain. "I will thank you to keep a civil tongue in your head when speaking of our pro tempore commander, Caius Lucius Piso." He then turned to the barbarian and added, "Do not kill him yet, o august Ursus. We still need him to carry the

spears."

"Arctos is Ursus, Cai, old boy," Marcus whispered. "Greek, Latin, same meaning, same name. So sorry if I confused you. The drawbacks of a really good classical education." He tittered behind his hand.

"Sod off," Caius growled, gathering up the armory.

It was some three days later that the little group finally stepped off on the northern side of the Wall and reached their goal. Gray and brown and thoroughly uninviting, the fen stretched out before them. Mist lay thick upon the quaking earth. A few scraggly bushes, their branches stripped of foliage, clung to the banks of the grim tam like the clutching hands of drowning men going under for the last time.

" and the best freshwater fishing for miles about." Caius sighed as he viewed the haunt of their watery Nemesis. "If the commander wasn't half such a great glutton, we could leave the fish to the dragon and eat good boiled mutton like honest folk. But no. Off he goes, filling our ears with endless, colicky speeches about the honor of the Ninth and all that Miles Gloriosus codswallop, when the truth is that he just fancies a sliver of stuffed pike now and again. So in he brings this hero fella, and now our lives aren't worth a tench's fart."

"I heard that!" Junius called. "And when the commander finds out "

"Junie, love, why don't you go nail your balls to a board?" Marcus Septimus remarked over-sweetly.

Caius patted the former secretary on the back. "You know. Marc, old dear, you're not a bad sort for a catamite."

The barbarian directed his helpers to pitch camp, which they did in swift, efficient, legion fashion. Despite their internal bickerings, proper training made them work well together. Even Marcus did not manage to get too badly underfoot. When the lone tent was pitched and dinner on the boil, Caius flopped down on the damp ground without further ceremony.

"Oh, me aching back! Mithra knows how many friggin' milia pasuum we've covered, and for what? Just so's we'd be on time to be ate tomorrow morning!"

A gaunt shadow fell across his closed eyes. "Get up, Caius Lucius Piso," Junius said, using the tip of his foot to put some muscle behind the order. "The food is ready and we can't find Ursus anywhere."

"Can't we now?" Caius did not bother to open his eyes. "Here's me heart, bleeding like a stuck pig over the news. Run off, has he? Jupiter, I never figured the big ox to have a fraction so much sense as that.

Commander shouldn't've paid him in advance."

"He was paid nothing." Junius' words were as dry as Goewin's onion tart. "Nor has he run off. Ursus is a hero."

"Says who? Himself?"

Junius tucked his hands tightly into the crooks of his elbows. "Our commander is not without his sources of information, nor would he engage such an important hireling blind. He heard nothing but the most sterling reports of our man's prowess at disposing of supernumerary monsters. Granted, the fellow's one of those Ultima Thule types who hails from where they've the better part of the year to work on polishing their lies for the spring trade, but even discounting a third of what they say he's done "

Caius made that blatting sound again.

"In any case, our noble commander is not the sort to make a bad bargain, and were he to hear you so much as implying that he might, he would "

"Yes, yes, I know, crucify me." Caius forced himself to stand. "I'll go fetch 'im, then, before you get yer hands all over calluses from nailing me up."

Caius didn't have far to go before he found his temporary leader. The barbarian squatted on a little hummock of high ground overlooking the fen, his sword jammed into a large, moldy-looking log some short distance away. His helmet was off, propped upside-down between his ankles, and his left hand kept dipping into it, then traveling to his mouth. Caius smelled a penetrating sweetness above the fetid reek of the marshland.

"Hail, heart-strong helper!" Ursus beamed at the little Roman. Viscous golden brown strands dripped from his beard and moustache.

"Hail yerself," Caius replied. He sauntered up the hummock and scrooched down beside the barbarian. "Got something good, have we?" He peered into the upended helm.

Ursus nodded cheerfully, his expression miraculously purged of any bloodlust. He jerked one thumb at the log, while with the other hand he shoved the helmet at Caius.

"Hollow this harvest's home,  
Fallen the forest friend  
Ages ago, several seasons spent.  
Rotten and rent, core and root,

Toppled to turf the tall tree.  
Gilded the gliding gladiators,  
Plying their pleasant pastime,  
Sweetness sun-gold instilling,  
Honey they heap in hives.  
Noisy their nest they name,  
Daring and daunting dastards,  
Stabbing with stings to startle  
Thieves that their treasure try taking.  
Came then the conquering caller,  
Scorning their scabrous squabbles,  
Their dire drones disdaining,  
Helping himself to honey.  
Right were the runes they wrought  
When saw he first the sunlight,  
Bidding the birthed boy Bee-wolf  
Never another name know."

"Boy? Who gave birth to what boy hereabouts?" Caius' eyes darted about suspiciously.

The barbarian struck his own chest a fearsome thump.

"Oh." Caius dipped into the honey. Through gummy lips he added, "Going on about yerself, then, were you?"

The barbarian bobbed his head eagerly.

"Nice bit o' puffery, that. Bee-wolf, eh? That'd be yer common or garden variety bear, ain't it? So that's why Junie stuck you with Ursus, leave it to him not to have more imagination than a badger's bottom. Kind of a circumlocutionariatory way to go about naming a sprat, don't ask me why you'd want yer kid associated in decent folks' minds with a horrid great smelly beast what hasn't the brains of a turnip, though it does make for a tasty stew, especially with a turnip or two, gods know I hope you didn't smell like one from the minute you were born a bear, I mean, not a turnip; nor a stew but you can't bloody tell about foreigners, now can you? Never one word where twenty'll do, no offense taken, I hope?"

Bee-wolf nodded, still grinning. His find of wild honey had sweetened

his temper amazingly well.

" 'Course, not that a name like that don't have its poetry to it, mate. A man needs a bit of poetry in his life now and again." Caius chewed up a fat hunk of waxy comb and spat dead bees into the fen with casual accuracy. " 'Mongst my Goewin's folk Goewin's the jabbery little woman you came near to filleting with yer dagger they keep a whole stable of bards plumped up just to natter on about how this chief slew that one and made off with his cattle. It's a wonder to me the poor beasties have a bit o' flesh left on their bones, the way those mad Celts keep peaching 'em back and forth, forth and back, always on the move. Savagery, I call it; not like us Romans. Compassionate, we are one of the refinements of civilization. Cruelty to dumb brutes makes me want to spew."

Caius leaned forward, encouraged to this intimacy by the barbarian's continued calm. "Now if it were up to me," he confided, "I'd leave this poor soddin' dragon alone, I would. Live and let live, I say that's the civilized way to go about it. It's not as though he's ate up more'n five of our men, after all, and we've just got guesses to go by even for that. Only one witness ever come back to tell us it were the dragon for certain as ate 'em, or even was they ate, and that man was our signifer Drusus Llyr, what no one knew his parents was first cousins 'til it was too late, and he died stark bonkers that very night. You want me considered opinion, them fellers went over the Wall, they did, fed up to their gizzards with the commander and the whole glorious Ninth fucking Legion." He drew a deep sigh. "Can't say as I blame 'em. Can't even rightly say as I wouldn't do the same."

Ursus looked puzzled.

"Came the commander's call.

Summoning my sword to serve him.

Nobly the Ninth he named,

Home and haven of heroes."

"Arr, that's just recruitment blabber." Caius waved it all aside. "Lot of fine talk, all of it slicker than goose shit, just to rope in the young men as are half stupid, half innocent, and t'other half ignorant, no offense meant. Once in a while he manages to gammon a few of the local brats into uniform, but mostly it's sons of the legion following in their Da's footsteps because a camp upbringing's ruined 'em for honest work stealing cattle. No, the Ninth's not what she used to be."

"When, I do wistful wonder,

Was this, thy lonesome legion

More than a muddle of men  
Prowling the piddling plowlands,  
Wandering the Wall's wide way?"

"Wozzat? Oh, I get yer. Well, truth to tell " Caius leaned in even closer and nearly rested his elbow in the honey " I haven't the foggiest. See, mate, used to be the Ninth was as fine a lot of pureblood Roman soldiers as ever you'd fancy and didn't our commander just! But then, well . . . you know as how things have this narsty way of just . . . happening, like?"

"Fate do I fear not.

Still, circumstances stun stalwarts.

Here, have more honey."

Caius did so. "Like I been saying, what with the wild upcountry folk the Ninth was first sent here to deal with, always on the march, camp here today, there tomorrow, try to keep the Celtic chieftains in line or even learn to tell 'em apart one from the other, and what with the odd carryings-on back home in dear old Roma Mater, inside the city, out in the provinces, up 'cross the German frontier with them as must be yer kissin' cousins, Saxons and Goths and that lot, well, in comes one rosy-fingered dawn and gooses our then-commander with the fact that there ain't no orders come through from Rome or even Londinium to tell us arse from elbow. No orders, mate! You know what that means to a professional soldier and bureaucrat like our commander?"

"No, that knowledge I know not."

"Small wonder you would, you being a hero and all.

Stand up for yerself, do what you like, go where the fancy takes you. But regular army? We don't dare take a shit without proper orders to wipe off with after. So when there wasn't none coming through, we dug in where we was, up by the Wall, took up with the local ladies, bred our boys to the Legion and our girls to bribe any tribes we couldn't beat in a fair fight, and we waited." Caius rested his face on one hand, forgetting it was the one he'd been using to dip into Ursus' helmet. "We're still waiting, man and boy, father to son, can't tell you how bloody long it's been."

The barbarian tilted his helmet and slurped out the last of the plundered honey. He wiped his gooey whiskers on the back of an equally hairy forearm, then said:

"Strangely this strikes me as scoop-skulled.

Why do you wait and wonder?

Beneath your brows lurk brains or bran?

Sit you thus centuries? Shitheads."

Caius made a hand-sign that translated across any number of cultures. "Look, mate, so long as our bleedin' commander, latest in a long line of Imperially appointed shit-heads, has got more than three like old Junie there to lick his tail and say please, sir, what's for afters? it's no use running off. There's precious little as is to keep the men occupied. Hunting down a deserter'd be a rare treat for any of 'em. And it's as much as me life's worth to speak up and say let's break camp and head south like sensible folk, try to scare up some news from Rome as isn't staler than week-old pig piss. See, so long as we're up here, our commander's the law. Go south, and he could find out that the only thing he's got a right to control is his own bladder, and not too strict a say over that. So if a man's fool enough to suggest a move off the Wall, 'Orders is orders,' he'd say, 'and traitors is traitors. And we of the Glorious Ninth know what to do with traitors, don't we, Junie, me proud beauty?'"

"Crudely crucify the creatures," Ursus supplied.

"You're not just talking through yer helmet there, mate," Caius agreed. "Speaking of which, it's in a proper mess.

Give 'er here to me, and you go fetch that boar-sticker of yours out of the log. We'll have a proper wash-up me for the helmet, you for the blade, before she rusts silly, doesn't anybody ever teach you barbarians respect for a good bit of steel? then we'll go back to camp and get some oil for the pair of 'em. Supper's ready, and if we let it go to the bad, Junie'll be off crucifying us left and right again."

"Dares he the deed to do,

Sooner my sword shall steep its steel,

Blood-drinker, blade and brother,

Entirely in his entrails."

Caius took up the helmet, beaming. "You're a decent sort. Bee-wolf, for a bleedin' hero." He toddled down the slope to rinse out the helmet.

As he squatted to his task in the shallows, a tuneless ditty on his lips, a loud, wet, crunch hard by his right foot made him start and keel over into the murky water. The helmet went flying out over the fenland, landing with an echoing \*plop\* in a nearby pool.

Junius Claudius Maro leaned hard on the eagle standard and observed the helm's trajectory with a critical eye. "Now you shall not escape

punishment, Caius Lucius Piso."

"Punishment?" Caius spluttered, scarcely feeling the cold water that seeped through his clothes. Rage kept him warm. "After you was the one as scared the braciae off me, sneaking up and chunking that whopping great standard into the sod like you was trying to spit me foot with it?" He picked himself up out of the shoreline muck and hailed the hummock. "Oi! Bee-wolf! You saw him do that, didn't you? You saw as it wasn't no fault of mine that your helmet "

But Bee-wolf was not paying attention to the angry little Roman. He stood on the high ground, honey still gumming his beard, and stared out across the fen to the spot where his boar-crest helmet had gone down. He made no move to yank his sword free of the fallen log where it still stood wedged in the heart of the ruined beehive. Something in the barbarian's sudden pallor and paralysis stilled Caius' own tongue. From the corner of one eye, he saw that Junie was likewise rapt with terror. He did not want to see what had frightened them so, but, at last, look he did.

The fen bubbled. The slimy surface heaved. Slowly, seemingly as slender as a maiden's arm, a "snakey form broke the face of the stagnant water. On and on it came, climbing every higher into the clear air, until Caius thought that there simply could not be any more to come without ripping reality wide open and sending all the world plunging down into the gods' own nightmares. He was only half aware of the eagle standard toppling over into the mud as Junie whirled and fled. This sudden movement galvanized the lazily rising length of serpentine flesh. The spade-shaped [head] darted within arm's length of Caius, ignoring the petrified little man as if he were part of the scenery. A maw lined with needlelike teeth gaped open, impossibly wide, and sharp jaws clamped shut around Junie, hauberk, shriek, and all.

"Oh, I say!" Caius exclaimed, as his comrade's scream knocked his own tongue free. Automatically, he stooped to retrieve the fallen standard, then turned to the hummock and bawled, "There's your bloody fen-monster. Bee-wolf, old boy! Do for 'er now while she's busy with poor Junie and you've got surprise on yer ..." His words dribbled away.

The high ground was bare, the hero nowhere to be seen.

"Coward!" came Marcus' angry shout from the direction of camp. "You pusilanimous, recreant, craven, dastardly, caitiff Ooooooh, you rabbit, come back with Cai's sword!" The commander's secretary came stomping into sight of the fen just as the monster commenced reeling in a struggling Junie.



Caius heard Marcus's yips of shock blend nicely with Junie's continued screaming and blubbing. The dragon was imperturbable, allowing the bulk of his still-submerged and leisurely sinking body to drag his prize into the fen.

Caius watched as span after span of sequentially decreasing neck slipped past him. It would not be long before Junie followed, down into the fen, without so much as a last vale for his old messmate.

"Bloody foreigners," Caius grumbled, and, raising the eagle standard high, he brought it crunching down as hard as he was able, just at the moment when the monster's head came by.

BONK.

The dragon froze, its wicked mouth falling open. Junius flopped out. He wasted no time in questioning deliverance, but hauled his body free. He was breathing hoarsely no doubt he had a rib or two the worse for wear but he was able to pull himself a little ways up the shore.

Caius smashed the beast in the head again with the eagle of the Ninth, putting all his weight in it. He and Junie looked at each other. "One bloody word out of you about damaging legion property, Junie," he shouted, "and it's back in the fen I'll toss you myself!"

"Not a word, not one!" Junie wheezed, pulling himself farther up the bank. Marcus came running down, holding his tunic well out of the mud, and tried to hoist the injured man without soiling himself. It was an impossible endeavor.

"Cai, leave that horrid creature alone and come here right now and help me with Junius!" he called. "Go on, let it be, it's had enough."

"Stop yer gob, will you?" Caius was panting with the effort of using the legion standard as a bludgeon, but he lofted it for a third blow anyhow. "If this bugger's just stunned, I'm nearest, and I'll be twigged if I'll be the tasty pud to tempt an invalid monster's palate when it comes to. Not just to keep your tunic clean. Missy Vestal!"

"Well, who died and made us Jupiter Capitolinus?" With a peeved sniff, Marcus slung Junie's arm around his neck, letting the mud slop where it would. "If you're still speaking to the plebs, Cai, we'll be back in camp." He hustled Junie out of sight without waiting to see the eagle descend for the third time.

The beast had been hissing weakly, but the final smash put paid to that. There was a sickening crunch that Caius felt all the way up his arms to his shoulders, and then it was no longer possible to tell where the monster's

skull ended and the bogland began. Caius wiped his sweating brow, getting honey all over his face. "That's done," he said, "and damned if anyone'll credit it. Goewin won't, for one; not without proof, and that means the head." He felt for his sword, then remembered that not only had he left it in camp, but the barbarian had made off with it.

"Vesta's smoking hole!" He thrust the standard deep into the sodden ground, cradling it in the crook of one arm as he raised cupped hands to lips and bellowed, "Oi! Marcus! Fetch me back Junie's sword when yer at a loose end, there's a dear!" He waited. Not even an echo returned.

Caius called again, then another time, until he felt a proper fool. He left the standard rooted where it was and trudged back to the camp, only to find that all of it tent, packs, gear, cookpots and dinner was gone. In the failing light, he spied two rapidly retreating figures headed in the direction of the Wall.

"Plague rot 'em, lights and liver," Caius muttered. "Look at the buggers run! I never saw Junie move that fast, even when he wasn't chawed over by a dragon." He patted his legion dagger, still firmly tucked into his belt. "Well, old girl, it'll be a long saw, but you and me, we'll have that bleeder's head off right enough, even does it take us all night. After all, it's my dragon."

Caius' chest inflated with pride as he realized the full measure of his deed. "Didn't even need a sword to kill 'im," he told the air. "And if there's any man likes to fancy that means I did for the monster barehanded, who's to tell the tale any different?" He was fairly swaggering by the time he returned to the scene of his triumph.

His mood of self-congratulation quickly soured to outrage when he beheld the tableau awaiting him at the fenside. The eagle had fallen again, knocked down by the hopeless struggle of a raggedy, gray-bearded relic who had the dragon by the narrowest bit of its neck and was obviously trying to yank the whole enormous carcass out of the water. hand over hand. The head, already pulpy, could not long stand such cavalier treatment. It squashed into splinters of bone and globs of unidentifiable tissue in the old man's grasp.

"Here, now!" Caius barked, rushing forward too late to preserve his trophy. He shouldered the gaffer aside, stared at what once might have been the full price of Goewin's respect to say nothing of that of the commander and the Ninth and burst into tears.

The old man cowered and wrung his hands, squeezing out little pips of blood and brain matter from between the palms. "Noble Chieftain, forgive

this worthless fool for having dared to presume you had abandoned your lawful kill!" He spoke Gaelic, a dialect slightly different from Goewin's folk.

"Oh, you pasty old fiend, you've bally ruined even thing!" Caius wailed, kicking the goo that had once been the dragon's head. "How am I ever going to prove I slew the beast without the head to show for it? I can't bloody well tow the whole fucking corpse down the Wall, can I now?"

"You might take a handful of the teeth with you, m) lord," the old man suggested timidly, awed by Cams' passion.

"Oh, yes!" Caius did not bother to trim his sarcasm. "Dragon's teeth'll do, won't they? When every peddler the length and breadth of Britain's got bags full of such trumpery grind 'em up and slip 'em in yer wine when yer woman wants cheering and you can't afford unicorn's horn on a legionary's pay each and all culled from the mouths of any great fish luckless enough to wash up dead on the seacoast?" He gulped for breath, then spat, "Think the commander don't know that much? He's one of their biggest customers. You stupid sod!"

"High Chief, do but calm your wrath against me." The old man pointed a palsied finger at the pool that still concealed the bulk of the beast. "Together we can surely pull the monster's body onto land, and then you have but to cut out its heart and eat it and then "

Caius stopped crying and frowned. "You off yer nut entire, or are you just senile? Eat a beastly dragon's heart, Whuffo?"

"Why, High Chief, then you shall be wiser than any wizard and understand the speech of all the birds of the air!" The old man flung his arms wide. He wore no more than a mantle of red deer hide, with a knot of anonymously colored cloth doing up his loins. His expansive gesture wafted the full power of his personal aroma right into Caius's face.

The legionary wiped his nose, then pinched it shut. "Is thad whad you was doing? Trying to beach this creature so as to ead id's heart and have yerself a chat with the birdies?" The old man nodded. Caius dropped his pinching fingers. "Mithra, what sort of cuckoo hatched you?"

The oldster hung his head. "My mother was a wise woman, my father I never knew. At my birth, the bards of our tribe tell that two dragons coupled in a field hereabouts and "

"Right, right." Caius waved him silent. "Serve me right, asking for the straight story from a Celt," he said to himself. Aloud he added, "You one of them wizard fellers yerself, then? Or can't you afford decent clothes, just?"

A sly glint came into the old man's eye. When he smiled, Caius beheld a mouthful of the memories of decent teeth. "King and lord, you are as all-seeing as you are all-valiant. I am indeed privy to the occult forces of nature."

"Well, I knew there was summat of the privy about you," Caius riposted. He chortled over his own sally until he caught the look the old man was giving him. He decided to return to his wrathful pose; folk treated you with more honor if they feared you were going to send their conks down the same route he'd shown the dragon.

Thoughts of the beast forced him to consider the ruined trophy and his present position. Although he glared doom at the old man, in his heart he knew that he would not be able to afford the luxury of such a killing look when he faced his commander again.

Junie and Marcus, they'll make camp before I do, what with the time I'm wasting on this geezer and the thought of what I've got to say, he reflected. Even with Junie banged up like he is, they'll stir their stumps to be first inline with the tale of what happened to the dragon. Think for a tick they'll make it truthful? Huh! That'd mean old Junie'd have to admit as he was near ate and saved by me. Me! He'd sooner Well, he'd sooner crucify hisself, given there was a way to see that stunt through.

Cams scraped his chin with fingers still sticky from the honey harvest and regarded the self-styled wizard thoughtfully. "Here," he said. "You called that great wallopin' beast me lawful kill, didn't yer?"

"Oh, aye, that I did, most awful lord."

"Saw the whole thing happen, did yer?"

The old man grinned like a death's head and nearly bobbed the head off his meager neck in agreement as he pointed to the paltry stand of scrub that had been his hiding place throughout the epic conflict.

"That's all right, then." Caius was better than satisfied. "You'll just nip along back to the legion camp with me and tell anyone as I points you at just exactly what happened here, how I stepped up bold to that 'ere dragon and "

The old man's eyes rolled back in his head and he sank cross-legged to the ground. A horrid gurgling welled out of his throat as he tilted his face skywards. "Bold came the high king, master of men, open-handed to the least of his servants, and the golden eagle flew before him, symbol of his might and fame. Fled they all three, the cowards who had served him, leaving him lone to fight the unwholesome beast of the bogland. Terrible

was his ire against the fainthearted. Cursing, he killed one man for his shameful act, striking him down like a dog "

"Now just a minute, you old rattlebrain, I never killed no one but the dragon!"

The old man opened his eyes so sharply that Caius thought he heard a whipcrack. "Now you've made me lose the sacred thread of creation, o High Chief." He managed to make the highflown title sound like a synonym for numbskull.

"Arr, that don't signify. There wasn't half the truth in what you were saying leave it to you Celts and if the commander's not drunker than Silenus when he hears you out, he'll rule as all of what you have to say is pure horseshit."

An uneasy inspiration creased Caius' brow. "Excepting for the part as where you says I killed someone. Bee-wolf, curse him, he's gone. Who's to say what's become of him? That Junie and Marcus, they're clever as a brace of seaport whores, the pair of 'em. Shouldn't take 'em long to club together and tell the commander that I murdered the hero while they did for the dragon. Nodens' nuts, Junie's got the battle scars to prove it! And what've I got? What in bloody Hades have I got?" The gristle of reality stuck in his throat and he crumpled down beside the old man, sniveling.

"Does this mean that my noble lord will not help his sworn servant to cut out the dragon's heart?" the graybeard asked by way of comfort.

"Oh, go help yerself to the soddin' heart, you old fool!" Caius sobbed. "Can't you see I've me own troubles?"

"The burden of rule falls heavy on the uncounseled," the old man intoned with due solemnity. "Yet, by my head, I swear never to give you ill-considered advice, nor to let aught but wise words pour from my lips into your ears."

"You try pouring anything into my ears, grizzlepate, and I'll cosh you a good one!" Caius raised his fists to the darkening sky. "Oh gods, not even a place to lay me head tonight, and odds are it won't be many days before the commander sends out a patrol to hunt me down!"

"Over the dead bodies of your guardsmen, my lord." The old man looked grim but determined.

"Over what?" Caius asked. '

Even allowing for oral decoration and a useless genealogical sidebar tracing the ancestry of the dragon's last-but-one-victim, it did not take the old man too long to inform Caius that the beast had caused the death of

his tribe's chieftain, a man of sterling character and many cattle. An upstart stripling named Llassar Llawr of the Lake Country had tried to avenge the chief's consumption, but he too had been dragged into the fen for his troubles.

"Is that why you were here, skulking about?" the Roman asked. "Waiting to see was anyone else fool enough to have a go at the monster, so's you could leap out and ask for a gob of heart did they succeed?"

"I was not skulking." The old man puffed up like an infected wound. "Wizards have no need to skulk. I was in trance, communing with the gods, awaiting a sign to foretell the coming of a hero to defeat the dragon and take the right of kingship over our tribe. Since the beast took the life of our lawful lord, it was only right that its death provide us with a replacement."

"So you were waiting for a hero?" Caius snorted. "Been there meself. Had one on me, I did, in fact, but he bolted." To himself he thought. Wonder what did become of old Bee-wolf? Nothing too bad, I hope. Can't judge him too harsh, getting the monster sprung on him like that. How was he to know the beast wouldn't bide quiet 'til morning, then come be slaughtered all polite and planned? Luck to you, mate, wherever you are! Could be as you'll still make a hero, some day. Mithra knows there's fens aplenty in this wicked world, and maybe a dragon or two to be getting on with.

To the old man he said, "I guess you'll have to make do with me, then. Kingship, eh? Well . . . it's bound to bring me no worse than the Glorious Ninth ever did, they can kiss me glorious bum goodbye, see if I care." He paused in his diatribe. "'Course, there's Goewin ..."

"This Goewin, is she your woman?" the old man asked.

Caius suddenly recalled Goewin's voice, alternately throwing him to the figurative lions during his trial and slyly encouraging Maxentius' advances. His mouth set hard. "Not any more she's not; not after all the slap-and-tickle she's no doubt been up to soon's as I got fairly out of sight. Just you tell me one thing: If I'm yer new chieftain, like you say, this don't mean I've got to be forever riding about, stealing other folks' cows, now does it? I'm strictly infantry, you know."

"You need lead no cattle-raids, my lord." The old man smiled beneficently, if a trifle smugly. "Not if you tell the tribesmen that your faithful servant and all-wise wizard has counseled you that the gods are against it." Softly he added, "I could be even more all-wise if you'd give me a hand with the dragon's heart. Noble Chief. Unless you'd like to eat it

yourself . . . ?"

Caius gagged.

By the light of a hastily kindled fire, the two men managed to haul a length of the dragon's dead body onto the shore a little after nightfall. Caius made some exploratory excavations with his dagger in the region of the beast's chest, but quickly saw that this was a futile game as well as a messy one.

"Like a field mouse trying to rape a lion," he complained. "This job wants a man-sized blade. Bugger all, if only that Bee-wolf bastard hadn't run off with "

Caius remembered something. He glanced up at the hummock, where the departed barbarian's sword still stood at attention in the rotten log. "Hang on a mo', Grandda," he told the wizard. "Won't be gone but a shake."

The old man watched him ascend the high ground. The years, and the diet that had cost him most of his teeth, had been even less charitable to his eyes. The night, the wizard's nearsightedness, and the uncertain firelight all conspired to obscure just what happened next. The wizard wiped a small bit of rheum from his eyes, blinked, and looked again just in time to see Caius' hands close around one end of a long, thickish object-standing upright in a second, far more massive, object. Just as the old man had mentally discounted a number of things those distant articles might be, Caius gave a heave and brandished something long and gleaming overhead with both hands.

There was only one possible object for a sane man to brandish in this fashion: a sword. As for what it had been sheathed in . . .

"A stone!" the wizard shouted. "He pulled the sword from a stone!"

By the time Caius came back down to the fire, the awe-smitten old man was groveling in the mud and gibbering about magical strength and miraculous proof of kingship.

"Say, o Highest of the High Chiefs," the wizard babbled, "Say what this, your humblest servant and counselor, shall name you before the tribe! Speak, and I shall fly swifter than the hunting merlin-hawk to spread your name among your waiting people!"

Caius rubbed his chin again. He was not sure what he had done to merit this, but he was not fool enough to question Fortuna's little pranks. "I am called Cai " he began, then stopped. It would not take much for word to reach the Commander of someone with a Roman name jumped

up to chieftancy of a native tribe not the way these Celts talked. It would take less time for the bastard to then dispatch the whole legion after him. The Glorious Ninth had gone to pot, true, but the strength of their old training still made them a bad enemy. Until Caius could give his new subjects the once-over and gauge their mettle as soldiers, he would do well to lay low.

"I mean, Cai, that's just me milk-name, as I was raised with," he said hastily. "What I'm really called is " he cudgled his brains for a moment, desperately trying to come up with a name that was not Roman and would not ring familiar in the Commander's ears.

He found one.

" Arctos."

He settled down to clean his sword, completely forgetting his promise to cut out the dragon's heart.

"Lord," the old man prompted. "Lord, if you do not remove the beast's heart soon, it will lose all virtue."

"Sod off," said Arctos.

The old man scowled. "Bloody foreigners," he grumbled.

Still, it would make a good story.

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*Administrivia*

*Version 1.0*

*Remaining OCR mysteries are surrounded in [brackets]*

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