

CHAPTER ONE

When Austalis finally came within sight of Hadrian's Wall he was surprised to see that the gates of this northern barrier were open. To either side of him the small doorways of the milecastles made two points of light in the dark line of the Wall itself, but directly ahead, in line with the rough road that he had followed south from Gododdin, the great gateway of the fort of Vercovicium could be made out even at this distance, a small rectangular window giving Austalis his first glimpse of the Roman part of Britain. There was little to see from so far away, except for that alien, compelling slice of light itself.

The late summer wind blew from the east, carrying a warning hint of the woody smell of autumn.

As he came closer to the Wall he began to feel conspicuous, alone on the empty moorland and the deserted road. He could make out heads moving along the top of the Wall. The heads moved together into groups of two or three and coalesced into a phalanx of silhouetted helmets over the main gateway. They were watching him. They had to be; no other creature was there to be watched north of the Wall.

Now he could read the inscription mounted in huge gold letters along the Wall itself, a standing challenge to the northern peoples: AVE ROMAE DOMINA MUNDI. Austalis mentally translated it into British and Germanic, and found that the Germanic version was more impressive: Hail to Rome Mistress of the World. He wondered why the letters had not been pulled down during the Great Raid, six years earlier. Even if the illiterate warriors could not be provoked by words they could not read, he would have expected them to be greedy for the gold. Perhaps this part of the Wall had not been attacked. That might also explain why the gates of the fort were left open.

The road dipped as it was carried on an embankment over a steep-sided ditch and then rose again as it led over a sunken belt of mud and into the gateway.

Two Roman soldiers were waiting to meet him. They wore trousers and smocks, not the grand armoured splendour of a Roman soldier Austalis had always pictured. They barred his way. Behind them, Austalis could see buildings, paths, and the road continuing towards a second gate and wall, but the soldiers gave him no time to contemplate the scene.

"State your name and business."

"Austalis, son of Notfried," he replied in British, the language in which the soldier had

challenged him. "I want to visit the Empire."

"Search him," the first soldier told the other one. Austalis did not resist, and the soldiers showed no interest in any of his personal belongings until they found a small bronze tablet carefully inscribed in Latin letters.

"So you're a thief!" the first soldier exclaimed. "And you have the nerve to carry this into a Roman fort."

"Perhaps he doesn't know what it is," the second soldier suggested.

"I know very well what it is," Austalis told them. "It's a diploma. My father received it when he left the army after twenty-five years. See? There's his name, Hnaudifridus. That's how the Romans spelt it. He was in the auxiliaries, and he commanded a troop of Frisian cavalry. In fact, he served in this fort."

"That may be true," the first soldier replied, "but how do we know he was your father?"

"How does any man know who his father was?" the second soldier joked, but he stopped laughing abruptly when he realised that he was the only one who was amused.

"Look at me," Austalis answered. "Do I have the appearance of a Briton, or would you say that I was a German?"

The two soldiers examined him carefully, and Austalis was conscious that other eyes were judging his claim, behind and above him, looking down from the rampart of the Wall. He was confident that his blue eyes and curly blond hair would convince them that, son of Notfried or not, he was not the son of a Briton.

The first soldier glanced upwards, and seemed to nod slightly in response to a signal from someone up on the Wall.

"Come along, Austalis, son of Notfried or of somebody else."

He kept the bronze diploma, and Austalis followed him into the interior of the fort. Austalis was disappointed at what he saw: within its rectangle of stone wall, the fort seemed nearly empty. Only a few structures sat in the blank flatness. Two main roads crossed it, the first being the continuation of the road from the north, which led to a gateway in the southern wall, and another road running from the east wall to the west. Where they would have crossed each other, a large stone building sat in the middle of the fort, as if ready to pounce in any direction upon an enemy of Rome.

Austalis followed the soldier up the steps of the building. He had never been in a stone building before, and could not help being awed and apprehensive, but he was determined not to play the simple gaping barbarian tribesman in front of the soldiers.

“Wait here,” the soldier told him. Austalis obediently stayed under the porch. This stone building was cold. He wondered if he should have let the precious diploma out of his sight. It had aroused curiosity and suspicion. While nobody had harmed him yet, still he had not been granted free passage through the southern gateway, and he knew that the Romans normally allowed nearly anyone to pass through the Wall in either direction without hindrance.

“You! Come here,” the soldier’s voice called. He went in, and discovered why the fort looked empty. The building was full of men, walking about in gloomy passages lit by candles, or standing in groups, or sitting at tables in rooms that Austalis was hustled past.

The soldier halted him before a hanging curtain.

“Bring him in,” a deep voice called from within, in Latin. The soldier drew aside the curtain, and Austalis stepped through a doorway into a room furnished with a high table at which a man sat, with a flat piece of wood covered with writing lying in front of him, and more slabs of wood stacked on shelves lining the walls. The room was filled with a strange unnatural warmth. Austalis could not see any fire or brazier, and could not make out the source of the heat, which was evenly distributed throughout the room.

He waited for the Roman to speak, but the man said nothing. Austalis looked past him, and he was startled to see that the window was covered with pieces of glass set in a lead frame. The view of the yard outside was fascinatingly broken up and distorted by the bulges and concavities of the thick slices of glass. So simple an idea, to cover a window with glass without opening it to the wind and cold.

The Roman suddenly spoke, in British.

“You claim that this diploma belonged to your father.”

His attention shifted back to the man.

“That is so. He was Notfried, or Hnaudifridus, and when he left the service he was praepositus of a numerus of Frisian cavalry, stationed in this fort.”

The Roman took the bronze tablet out from under the table where he had been concealing it, and held it away from his eyes to study the lettering in the unstable light from the window.

“It is certainly a genuine diploma,” he said, changing from British into Latin. “What did your father do when he left the army?”

“He settled in the land of Gododdin, which is north of this wall, but south of the ancient turf wall.”

“I know perfectly well where Gododdin is. I am more interested in the irony of the situation. As soon as your father received Roman citizenship by this diploma, he left the Empire. Why?”

“He knew the country beyond the Wall very well. The Frisian cavalry used to patrol far north, checking on the loyalty of the treaty tribes. My father had been a barbarian among the Frisians and a soldier among the Romans. He wanted to make a third life for himself among the Picts.”

“The northern people don’t call themselves Picts.”

“It is because we are speaking in Latin that I use the term.”

“How did you learn Latin?”

“My father taught it to me, along with Germanic.”

“Take back your father’s diploma,” the Roman said, handing it to Austalis across the table. “Now I want to know why you want to pass through the Wall.”

“I want to visit the Roman Empire of which I’ve heard so much. My father was not born a Roman, but he came to respect and love the Empire. He found a place for himself. Among the Germans, there is no way for a foreigner to become a Saxon or a Frisian. You must be born into those peoples. The same is true of the British peoples north of the Wall, the so-called Picts. He told me that there was room for everyone in the Empire, that any man who obeyed the law could enter Roman society and take up all kinds of opportunities that he would otherwise never have.”

“What opportunity do you expect to find?”

“I don’t know. I’m looking for variety, for an education, and for a religion.”

“The law gives you no choice. Christianity has been the official religion of the Empire for more than fifty years. We recently had an Emperor who tried to overthrow Christianity, but he failed.”

“Is it compulsory to be a Christian?”

“Oh, not at all, but in the cities it is becoming uncomfortable to be anything else.”

Silence fell for a few moments, as though the Roman, like Austalis, could think of nothing to say. Somewhere outside, a man began shouting and figures of men passed by the window, compressed, twisted, and elongated, like demons.

The Roman clapped his hands together, and the soldier stepped smartly into the room.

“This man is to be kept within the fort until I give my decision on what is to be done with him,” he ordered, and then spoke directly to Austalis. “You will not be allowed to pass through either the southern or the northern gate.” He switched his remarks back to the soldier. “Digernus can look after him. You may leave.”

The soldier turned, and pulled the curtain aside. Austalis obediently went through.

The soldier led Austalis briskly to the entrance of the building.

“Digernus works at the bath-house. It’s over there.”

They had to walk around groups of men exercising with short swords and throwing-spears. None of them were wearing what Austalis thought of as the uniforms and accoutrements of a Roman soldier. They were dressed as men dressed in Gododdin, and although their orders were shouted at them in Latin, Austalis was sure that their own language was British, even if they might only speak it among themselves when their officers were out of hearing. The soldiers glanced curiously as Austalis was led past them, daring to move only their eyes.

He was stopped at a rectangular building built close to the east wall of the fort, but not so close that attackers could have jumped from the wall onto its roof.

The soldier ducked into the doorway.

“Digern! Are you there? Are you awake and earning your pay?” Such questions could apparently be put in British.

“All right, I’m coming,” a hoarse voice replied from within, and an old man emerged, wiping his hands on a rag.

“You can’t have a bath for hours yet. Don’t you ever learn how long it takes to heat up a bath of water? There won’t even be steam for an hour.”

“I didn’t come here for a bath, and this barbarian has never heard of a bath, never mind having one. You’re to keep him here until someone comes for him.” He gave a warning to Austalis. “Of course, old Digern can’t keep you here by force, but if you try to pass through the gates, it will look much worse for you.”

With that, the soldier walked away, back to the north gate. Austalis was left exchanging stares with Digern, and decided to break the silence.

“Since we’ve got to stay together, we might as well be friendly. I’m Austalis, son of Notfried, and I come from Gododdin.”

“I’m Digern, son of a mother, father unknown. Come in. Have you eaten yet?”

“Thank you, but I’m not hungry.”

“Come in anyway.”

Digern led Austalis into the bath-house. The air inside was cold; the morning sun of declining summer would warm the stone structure only slowly, if at all, but when they entered one of the interior rooms the air was warm. It did not fit with the cold of the floor and walls, like two flavours clashing with each other in the same dish of food.

Digern sat down on one of the stone benches built into the wall, next to a mysterious dark slot over which he held out his hand as though waiting for a coin to be dropped into it.

“Ah! The heat’s coming stronger now.”

“Where is it coming from?” Austalis asked, sitting down beside him.

Digern looked at him sympathetically.

“You’re a real barbarian, aren’t you? I suppose you wash yourself with ash soap instead of oil. The heat comes up from below, where the fires are. Soon the floor will begin to get warm.”

“I did come through the Wall to learn new ways,” Austalis said. “This is the first time I’ve come across anything that was completely different from our own homes in Gododdin. We barbarians always know where heat is coming from.”

Their voices echoed around the hard stone room. Austalis could make out cressets mounted on the walls, waiting to be lit, but the gloom in the unlit bath-house added to the strangeness. He had never heard echoes inside a building before. The effect was like being in a cave, and this primitive image was difficult to reconcile with the sophistication of a Roman bath-house. Warm and cold, primitive and civilised, an old man speaking British like his own, but acting as the spokesman for Roman civilisation. Austalis was already beginning to suspect that the Roman world was more complex than he had believed, and he had still not really entered it; he had not yet even passed out of the fort.

Digern coughed noisily into his rag towel.

“If Rome weren’t different, you might as well have stayed at home. Why are you here, anyway?”

“I wanted to see the Empire my father told me so much about.”

“Who is this father you keep brandishing in front of my face? I’ve never met a man who was so keen to tell perfect strangers about his father. Are you the illegitimate son of an emperor?”

“I told you, my father was called Notfried. He was the commander of a troop of Frisian cavalry, right in this fort. He came to the Empire of his own free will, as a young man, and I want to do the same.”

“Very inspiring,” Digern snorted. “Well, now I know what happened to Notfried.”

“You knew my father?”

“How could I not know him? I’ve worked here for more than forty years. Let me show you something.”

He rose from the bench, in a series of alarming clicks from all the joints of his body, and shuffled into another room.

“This is one of the storerooms. Not a fit place for such a relic to be kept, but it’s safe.”

He brushed away a cloud of dust from a stone slab propped up against the wall.

“Look at this. It’s a dedication to the four Alaisiagae.”

“The Frisian goddesses!” Austalis exclaimed.

“Right, and look who set it up. Numerus Hnaudifridi, Notfried’s troop. It’s an altar. There’s an old shrine in the fort, a hundred or two hundred years old, dedicated to the four goddesses. The Frisians were here for a long time.”

Austalis had never been taught the forms of worship of the four goddesses, but he wished he knew how to make appropriate reverence to the altar. The dust showed that nobody else had worshipped before it for a long time.

“Why is it kept here?”

“For a small and isolated place, this fort has many religions. The Mithraists would simply ignore it, but the Christians might get nasty.”

“Why should they care?”

“Well, the Christians don’t want anybody to practice any other religion. I think they hope to stamp out all the religions of the Empire. They’re even worse than the Jews. At least the Jews don’t try to convert you.”

“Don’t the Frisians worship the Alasiagae any more?”

“I couldn’t tell you. There haven’t been any Frisians stationed in this fort since the attacks six years ago. They all rode out one morning and were never heard of again. So much for loyalty to the Empire.”

Austalis noticed that the floor was definitely becoming warm, and he took off his cloak.

“Hot, eh?” Digern enquired. “Well, you’ll be hotter yet if we stay in this room. I’m an old man. I need warmth more now than I did when I was young. By the gods, whoever they are, I hate the winters, and now there’s only autumn between us and winter this year. Just like any other year. Excuse me. I’ve got to get back to my work.”

“I’ll help you,” Austalis offered. “It’ll pass the time for me.”

“You don’t know what the work is, but I’ll take you up on your offer before you change your mind. I don’t often get any companionship down in the stokingroom.”

He lifted a trapdoor in the floor, revealing a flight of rough stone steps leading down into a vague dimness which threw up a blast of hot air. A dull light flickered from the glow of unseen fires.

“And you thought Hades was cold, didn’t you! Come on down.”

Austalis followed Digern down the steps. He found himself in a kind of man-constructed cavern. Piles of firewood were neatly stacked everywhere in the shadows, and iron shovels stood near a pair of doors opening into a vertical shaft.

Digern pulled the doors open. A fire burnt inside.

“Pass me some wood, Austalis,” Digern commanded.

Austalis took a handful of chopped sticks over to the fire, and Digern carefully threw them in, one at a time.

“Not too many,” Digern remarked. “Slow heat, for a long time, that’s what’s needed.”

Austalis stripped to what he judged to be the Roman standard of decency, and set to work. The heat and exertion soon made him thirsty. He could do without food for many days if necessary, but he would need water before long. He had reached the point of wondering whether he would have to drink the water in the bath when Digern called a halt.

“That’ll do for a bathful,” he announced. “We only use the small bath nowadays. When I first worked here, we had to heat up the large bath, too, but that was when we had a much larger number of men stationed in this fort. Let’s take a break for lunch.”

“I didn’t bring any with me,” Austalis admitted. “How can I buy something? I’m not allowed out of the building.”

“I keep a stock of bread and sausages to sell to the soldiers when they come for their bath. My wife made a fresh batch. I’ve got some wine, too, and that’s fresh as well. It’s last year’s. The supply convoy from Eburacum came in two days ago, and I bought up most of the cheaper stock.”

“You seem to be operating quite a large enterprise out of this bath-house.”

“I also run gambling here too, but you won’t tell the Duke of the Northern Marches about that, will you?”

“I wouldn’t know him if I met him, which I never would, anyway. What’s his name?”

“Fullofaudes is the present commander in the northern provinces, and a good man, too, even if he is a Visigoth.”

Digern brought out baskets and clay jars and Austalis sat down with him to eat the sharp, spicy sausages and cool, thick bread. The wine was the same Austalis had known at home in Gododdin, which was a disappointment to him, but he assumed that the lands nearer to the heart of the Empire would serve a more luxurious product.

“How much do I owe you for this?” he asked Digern, fishing out a few Roman coins.

“It’s on me. Glad of your company. Oof, put that one away! A coin of the anti-Christian Emperor Julian!”

“It’s the newest-looking one I’ve got.”

“Don’t give that to a Christian, or he’ll throw it straight back at you, even if he’s starving. I’d take it, but for the fact that I’d have trouble passing it on myself. As I said, you’re my guest for lunch.”

When they had finished eating, the furnace needed more wood and more strenuous stoking, which Austalis supplied. As he banged the furnace doors shut, he thought he heard a voice call above. Both he and Digern paused.

“Digern! Bring up your barbarian, if you’ve still got him!”

“Come along,” Digern said, starting up the stairs. “Better put your tunic on in case you have to go somewhere.”

Austalis managed to slip the tunic on over his head while climbing the stairs and found himself confronting the soldier who had been escorting him from one place to another ever since they had met under the gateway through the Wall.

“The commander has made a decision about you,” the soldier informed him. Austalis had realised that the Roman who had interviewed him must be a person of rank, but he had not imagined that it was the commander of the fort in person.

The soldier was obviously enjoying stretching out the suspense.

“You’ve been passed. You can go through the southern gate and travel wherever you like within the Empire. I don’t know what story you told the commander, but it must have been a good one. There is one condition. You have to leave this fort at once.”

Digern interrupted at this point.

“How far away does he have to go?”

“What’s that got to do with you?”

“I want to invite him to stay with me tonight.”

“Well, since you live outside the fort, it must be all right,” the soldier decided, “but I’ll hold you responsible for seeing that he’s out of the fort before mid-afternoon”.

“He can go now. Austalis, you can take this empty basket to my wife. Tell her you’re staying with us until tomorrow.”

“That’s very kind of you, but I can start my journey now.”

“No, no, I’ll try to get you a ride with the supply convoy. It’s going back empty to Eburacum tomorrow. Here’s how to get to my house.”

After Austalis had memorised the directions Digern gave him, he let the soldier lead him to the southern gateway. It was a close copy of the northern one, in case the fort should be invested from all sides.

“Goodbye,” the soldier said. “I hope you find whatever you’re looking for in the Empire. I’ve never been more than half a day’s march south of here myself, and I’ve never been north at all.”

“This is the first time I’ve been away from home,” Austalis replied. “Perhaps I’ll see you again if I come back through here.”

“Barbarians never come back from the Empire,” the soldier answered, and he walked away without any further farewells.

Austalis, carrying Digern’s empty basket, went through the gateway, nearly tripping in a series of grooves that ran under it in an intricate parallel pattern. Standing in the shadow of the gateway, with the dank stone over his head like a threatening storm, Austalis puzzled over the grooves, until he realised that they had been made by the wheels of a cart. How many carts, in how many hundreds of years, must have passed that way in order wear grooves in stone?

On the other side of the sombre gateway, Austalis nearly laughed at the contrast. About fifty houses were built close to the Wall, as though they huddled around the gateway, clamouring to get in. Women, children, and dogs wandered about. Patches of brown earth had been gardens earlier in the year.

In the distance, beyond a shallow defensive ditch, a Roman road ran across the horizon. Austalis’ father had told him about the Military Road, built so that soldiers could move quickly from one part of the Wall to the other.

He strode into the civil settlement, picking out Digern’s house from the description. It might have been a village in Gododdin, except for the fact that some of the houses were rectangular rather than round. How these Romans went in for straight lines and sharp corners!

A group of children fled from him, and one of them ducked into a house. He heard the child’s voice softly giving some urgent news, and then an old woman emerged and waved a stick, twisted and thin like herself, towards Austalis.

“Keep to the road, barbarian! You’re not allowed in here.”

“I’m invited to the house of Digern and Brigid,” Austalis replied, switching to Latin.

“Uh,” the old woman said, retreating a pace, and Austalis had been correct in guessing that she did not understand Latin. “I’m no barbarian,” he told her, in British, as he walked by and continued to Digern’s house.

He knocked at the door, and another old woman, but warm-eyed and smiling, came out.

He held the empty basket out to her.

“Digern told me to give this to you. He told me to stay here.”

The woman took the basket, and he explained who he was and where he was bound.

“That’s something new,” the woman answered. “A citizen of Rome who’s never seen the Empire! I’ve seen little enough of it myself. Come in. I’m Brigid.”

Austalis sat down on a section of log in the house. The earth floor had been newly beaten down, and covered with fresh straw.

“Digern won’t be long,” she said. “The soldiers will be having their bath now, and then he has only to clean up afterwards.”

She plied him with questions about Gododdin, admitting that she had never been north of the Wall. Austalis noticed that she used a large number of Latin words in her speech, even for the most common items of the household. When he told her the native British words that were used in the north, she had never heard of them, so long had Roman influence weighed down on everyday life in the Imperial provinces.

While Brigid set to work on cooking the food to sell to the soldiers the next day, Austalis went to the door and surveyed the civil settlement again. It would have been safer to build the houses within the fort, but obviously the Romans would not permit a swarm of untidy houses to spoil the clean emptiness of their fort. The Wall stretched away to east and west. There was no golden inscription on its southern face like the challenge to the unconquered peoples on the northern side.

When the afternoon ended, Digern came home, carelessly tramping through other people’s vegetable gardens and ignoring the loud curses this behaviour elicited. Austalis suspected this was a daily ritual for him.

“I’ve set everything up for you, Austalis,” he puffed. “You’ve got a ride to Eburacum with the supply convoy that leaves tomorrow morning. You can’t go back into the fort, but you can join them when they come through the gate.”

“How was business this afternoon?” Austalis asked him.

“Quite good. The bread and sausages all sold, and I made a profit on the gambling.”

Austalis enjoyed sharing supper with Digern and Brigid, and confessed to them his shyness in the face of his first venture into the Empire.

“It’s a whole world that I don’t understand. I’m not even sure where I ought to go.”

Digern had a brisk suggestion.

“Go straight to the heart.”

“To Rome?”

“No, not that far, not yet! Go to Londinium. If you have a fortune to find in the Empire, you’d best start in the capital of the British provinces. From here to Eburacum is a good start.”

Brigid insisted on making a meal for Austalis to take with him, and Austalis insisted on paying for it with a bulbous copper coin that Digern identified as coming from the Greek lands in the east of the Empire. Austalis was heartened; if a little coin could travel from Constantinople to Hadrian’s Wall, he should be able to survive a journey to Eburacum.