

## A.D. 209

Brude stopped when he saw the Wall. He had half expected that it would disappoint him, seeing it again for the first time in more than twelve years. Back then he had been young, hurt and frightened and to his inexperienced eyes it had seemed a wonder of construction, immense and strong. Now, he was older and, having seen the marvels of Rome, he had thought the Wall would not match his memories of it.

It did. He saw now that it was just as impressive as he remembered it. From the hilltop he looked across the valley, down at the fort, laid out in the familiar rectangular pattern, teeming with soldiers, travellers and traders. Outside the fort was the long, straight road, which ran parallel to the Wall, and the great ditch with its high banks of turf. Clustered along the south side of the ditch were the scattered and rather bedraggled dwellings of the local inhabitants, those who depended on the fort for their livelihood. No doubt some huts were the homes of the soldiers' unofficial families.

His gaze travelled upwards, to the top of the opposite slope. There he saw the Wall itself. He could make out the small figures of the patrolling sentries, idly walking up and down on the wide pathway at the top of the Wall. And he saw the gateway with its square towers dominating even the vast fort.

Beyond the gate was home.

To get there he had to go down the hill, through the fort and talk his way past the gate. He tugged on the halter rope he was holding, clicking his tongue to encourage the mule to follow him. Laden with his personal belongings and a variety of trade goods, the mule picked its way carefully down the slope after him.

His feet sank into the spongy grass and bracken of the hillside as he made his way down to the road. He made no effort to conceal himself but walked slowly and casually, just another itinerant trader. There was no point in concealment anyway, he knew. The gaps where the mighty ditch was bridged were few, and each one led directly to a fort. The only way to cross through the Wall was with the permission of the Romans.

There was a small queue at the fort's south gate. Some locals were hassling the guards, trying to gain an audience with the garrison commander about a grievance, which seemed to involve the actions of some off-duty soldiers. Brude stayed back a little, standing behind a large wagon laden with sacks of grain, waiting patiently while the centurion who had been summoned by the guards took some notes and eventually persuaded the aggrieved locals to leave the matter with him. He told them to come back the following day. They departed reluctantly, still muttering about the injustice done them, but in their own language, not in the broken dog Latin they had been speaking to the centurion. Brude could make out a fair bit of what they were saying. He had no interest in their problems but even having walked the length of the province he still enjoyed being able to listen to the British tongues after so many years of hearing little except Latin and Greek.

He watched the next man, the owner of the wagon, being waved through with the guards taking little more than a cursory interest in the contents of his wagon. They exchanged some friendly banter with the man who was obviously a regular visitor.

Then it was Brude's turn. He smiled as he walked up to the guards, hoping a friendly approach would ease his passage but the soldiers dropped the amicable faces they had worn for the wagon owner and eyed him with suspicion.

There were four of them, though Brude knew that the fort was probably home to at least one cohort of around five hundred men. One of the sentries barred his way now, his large, oval shield held ready and his javelin held at an angle, which, while not overtly threatening, indicated that it could quite easily become so.

"What's your purpose?" he demanded brusquely. His accent was quite harsh, one that Brude vaguely recognised as being from the eastern parts of the empire.

"I wish to go north," Brude replied calmly, making sure that the man could see he was holding no weapon, but also that he had a sword at his right hip.

"North? Across the Wall?"

"That's right."

"You need special permission for that," the guard told him. The man studied Brude carefully. Brude was dressed in long woollen trousers and a linen shirt with a woollen topcoat and cloak. The clothes looked more British than Roman but were of good quality, if slightly worn. On his feet he had soft leather undershoes and old army sandals with thick soles and hobnails. His hair was straggly, in need of cutting, but was styled in the Roman fashion, not the long hair of a native Briton. The gladius slung at his right hip suggested he was an ex-soldier while the heavily laden mule was typical of a trader.

Brude hid his amusement at the confusion the guard was suffering from the mixed messages of his appearance. Keeping his voice even, he asked, "So who do I need to see to get permission?"

The guard turned, walked back through the gate and had a brief discussion with the centurion who shot Brude a dark look. The two of them came back, watched by the other guards who looked as though they were anticipating some fun at Brude's expense.

The centurion was a grizzled veteran in his forties, who carried a vine staff indicating his rank with the easy nonchalance of many years' service. When he spoke he did not have the same accent as the guard. Brude reckoned the man was probably a time-served legionary ranker who had been promoted to a command in the auxiliaries. The centurions were the backbone of the Roman army and Brude knew nobody attained that rank without being a very competent, and very tough, soldier. "You want to go north?" the centurion asked.

"That's right, Centurion." Brude let him know he knew his status.

"Not many people are allowed to pass through the Wall these days," the centurion said in his gravelly voice. Brude recognised the tone of someone sensing an opportunity for a bribe. "What's your name and what's your purpose?" the centurion wanted to know.

"Marcus Septimius Brutus, freedman in the service of Gnaeus Vipsanius Aquila. I have goods to trade and my employer wants some examples of native art

for his collection.” It was a poor lie, and Brude knew it, but it was better than telling the truth.

The centurion eyed him warily. Brude had announced he was a freedman, an ex-slave. Using the *nomen* Septimius meant that he had probably been given his freedom by decree of the emperor, whose family name that was. Brude could practically see the thoughts going through the centurion’s mind. He also recognised that the centurion was canny enough to know that Brude could have traded his goods for trinkets and artefacts from any number of British tribes south of the Wall and passed them off as pieces from beyond the borders of the empire. The centurion decided to try another tack. “Do you know why this Wall is here?” he asked, giving a slight backward jerk of his head to indicate the great barrier behind him.

Brude decided to let the centurion have his say. “To guard the frontier, Centurion?”

The centurion barked what obviously passed for a laugh. “To guard the frontier? Oh no, my lad! We don’t have enough men to stop an army crossing it if they want to, and anyone in a boat can sail or row round the ends of the Wall any time they like. The imperial fleet’s supposed to stop them doing that of course, but they’re usually as much use as a eunuch in a brothel, if you take my meaning.” He shook his head as if exasperated at Brude’s ignorance. Brude grinned at the centurion’s weak joke. “No, the Wall is here to stop people going north in case they are supplying weapons or money to the enemies of Rome, or planning some sort of rebellion.” He held Brude’s gaze. “You’re not planning some sort of rebellion, are you, laddie?”

“I’m a Roman citizen,” answered Brude, holding the centurion’s gaze firmly.

Brude’s expression let the centurion know that he would not be intimidated easily. The centurion nodded thoughtfully. “Search the baggage!” he snapped to the guards. He watched as two of the soldiers laid down their shields and javelins then began unstrapping the bags and packs from the mule. Brude made no protest but watched as they laid out the assortment of pots, cooking utensils, cloths, brooches, beads and rings that made up his stock, scattering them across the roadway while the centurion studied him as much as the baggage. One of the men found the small pouch of copper and silver coins that Brude had carefully stashed at the bottom of one of the sacks. The soldier tossed it to the centurion who caught it deftly, untied the drawstring and tipped out some of the coins into his palm. He raised a quizzical eyebrow.

“My emergency stash,” explained Brude.

“That all you’ve got?”

“If you can find any more, you can keep it,” Brude told him in a tone which he hoped conveyed that the small bag contained all his wealth. He was about to suggest that the centurion might want to keep the money in exchange for letting him pass but one of the soldiers unpacking his bedroll gave an exclamation of surprise.

“What is it?” the centurion demanded.

The man pulled out a short, wooden sword that had been wrapped in Brude’s blanket, together with a small leather package. He handed them over to the centurion.

The centurion hefted the wooden sword, feeling its weight. When he looked at Brude there was some respect in his eyes. "Is this what I think it is?"

Brude nodded. "Given to me by the emperor himself."

"And this?" He indicated the small leather case.

"My papers of manumission."

The centurion nodded. "All right, lads. Pack it all up again." He handed the case and the wooden sword to Brude. "I expect you won't bother too much about any warnings of how the Picti treat strangers?"

"I can take care of myself," Brude assured him. He picked up his blanket, carefully wrapping the wooden sword and leather case in it. These were the symbols of his freedom, the proof that he was no longer a slave but a free man, a Roman citizen.

It took the soldiers a few minutes to re-pack the mule. Brude fastened his bedroll onto the beast, grabbed the halter rope and gave the centurion a questioning look. The soldier nodded. "Follow me. I'll see you through." He led Brude to a small building just inside the gate where a scribe etched out details of who Brude was and what he was carrying. "There's a tax of six sesterces on the goods," he said in a disinterested tone.

The centurion counted out the coins from Brude's small bag then handed the rest back to Brude who counted out another twenty sesterces which he gave back to the centurion. That left him with only a few coppers but he doubted he would have much need for them where he was going. "For your trouble," he told the soldier.

The centurion nodded his thanks then led Brude through the fort, one of the guards falling in behind. Brude did not pay much attention to his surroundings; he had seen army camps before and could probably find his way round this one blindfolded. All of his attention was on the northern gate. He found his heart was beating fast at the thought of getting through. He knew he was the subject of some curious looks from the soldiers he was passing but he ignored them.

The centurion said softly, "You'll need the tribune to agree to open the gate."

"I'm sure you'll be able to persuade him," Brude replied.

"You've still got time to change your mind. They're a troublesome lot, the Picti. Been raiding down here for years, ever since that fool Albinus took the legions off to fight the emperor." Brude nodded. Decimus Clodius Albinus had been governor of Britannia when Brude was a boy. He had stripped the province of most of its soldiers to support his attempt to become emperor. He had lost the war and so, by definition, was a fool. Ever since, the fractious British tribes had been rising in sporadic revolt, with the Picts and tribes from Hibernia raiding the coasts and sallying across the Wall while the outnumbered Roman troops marched from one part of the country to another, quashing resistance where they found it. The Romans were still in control, but only just, and whenever they stamped on the locals in one part of the province, trouble broke out somewhere else. Brude listened with interest as the centurion went on, "Still it'll all be sorted now the emperor is on his way here."

That nearly stopped Brude in his tracks. He had deliberately kept away from the main roads and settlements on his way north. It had made the journey longer but it meant he had been able to avoid trouble. By cutting across country, he had

avoided confrontations with any tribesmen seeking to liberate his possessions and do away with another Roman. But it also meant he had heard little news of what was going on. "The emperor is here?"

"Not yet, but he will be soon," the soldier told him with grim satisfaction. "He came over with three legions at the end of last year. Going to sort the locals out and make sure they stay sorted. About bloody time, if you ask me. Bloody Brigantes have always been uppity." The Brigantes, Brude knew, were the major tribe in this part of the province, holding sway over the mountainous country south of the Wall, all the way to Eboracum. While the tribes in the far south of Britannia were almost thoroughly Romanised, the Brigantes, along with the fierce tribes of the western fringes of the province, were constantly causing trouble. In the years since the province had been stripped of much of its army, they had become bolder, raiding Roman settlements, burning homes, stealing cattle, goods and women, and ambushing any Roman traders who dared to travel without a sizeable armed guard. Despite Britannia having been a province of the empire for a hundred and fifty years, some of the locals seemed determined not to become civilised. But if the emperor was really coming here, the Brigantes were likely to find themselves well and truly under the Roman heel before long. Britannia, a tiny and relatively poor province on the fringes of the empire, had always needed at least three legions to keep the populace in order. Brude took a perverse pride in that. Rome only had around thirty legions to control its entire empire and no fewer than three of them were needed to keep this province in line. The Britons had had it easy for the past thirteen years but now the soldiers were back and the emperor would no doubt make a show of imposing order again. It made Brude even more determined to escape the confines of the empire.

They reached the gate at last. The centurion told Brude to wait while he went to speak to the tribune. Brude stood beneath the immense gateway, its two square towers flanking the huge oak doors, which were barred firmly shut. Behind him, the guard shuffled idly while on the towers another guard, javelin resting on his shoulder, looked down with interest to see what was going on.

The tribune, a young man, barely into his twenties, walked down to meet Brude, the centurion accompanying him a pace behind. The tribune, Brude knew, would be the son of a wealthy family doing a stint of military service as a prelude to a life in politics. Technically the centurion's superior officer, he would be inexperienced and would almost always look to the more experienced man for guidance. With his sculpted breastplate and crested helmet, he looked every inch the martial hero until Brude looked at his face and saw how young he was. "You want to go north?" the tribune asked him in a puzzled tone.

"That's right, sir. Trading trip, sir. I've paid the toll." Brude tried to sound as if he expected to be allowed through with no arguments.

"The northern tribes are really not very friendly," the tribune said. "For a Roman citizen to go there is very dangerous. Especially just now."

"Cut your balls off as soon as look at you," the centurion added cheerily, bringing stifled laughs from the nearby soldiers.

"I can take care of myself," Brude said evenly, trying to stare the young tribune down.

“The centurion says you won the rudis?”

“Four summers past,” Brude confirmed.

“Then I expect you can take care of yourself,” the tribune conceded.

Brude just gazed at him calmly, daring him to refuse permission. After a moment the tribune backed down. He signalled to the soldiers manning the gate. “Let him through!”

Brude exchanged a nod of mutual respect with the centurion, tugged on the halter rope and walked steadily forwards as one of the huge wooden gates was pulled inwards. He passed through the shadows of the gateway. Heart pounding, half expecting the tribune to change his mind, he made his way out to the other side. He had made it. He was going home.

