





Kidnapped!



A sharp sea wind blew into Patrick's eyes, making them water so he could hardly see the ship on the western horizon. Far below him, great white waves crashed into rocks that grew smaller and smoother as the coastline edged around into the silted mouth of the river. A little further, down the steeply sloping path he had just climbed, lay Patrick's villa. It was a bit crumbled at the edges; the mosaic floor and the old water pipes needed repairs that no one in Britain had the skills to do anymore, but it was still one of the finest houses in the area. Patrick's father Calpurnius was a *decurion*, a local government official, and a deacon, a leader in the church, so his family was pretty important. Calpurnius had gone into the local town that day on official business, taking his wife with him. That meant Patrick was supposed to be in charge of the villa and lands, but there were plenty of servants to take care of everything, so Patrick had decided to climb up the hill and look at the sea, instead. Later, he thought, he might go fishing in the river, or walk the mile or so to







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the little market village of Bannavem Taburniae, but for now he was content to feel the fresh, cold air on his face and gaze out at a ship that seemed to be on the edge of the world.





It wasn't literally the edge of the world, of course, but it was the edge of the only world that mattered—the Roman Empire. Britain was the furthest corner of the Empire, but it was still Roman. Patrick could speak and write decent Latin, and he knew a fair bit about the history and literature of Rome. True, Britain wasn't as civilized as it once was, or at least so older people said. Patrick was only sixteen, but his elders, with longer memories, said that once, it had been easier and more profitable to trade with the rest of the Empire, when the might of Rome had kept pirate raids away. Once, taxes had been collected like clockwork, and calculated to the last penny. People didn't mind that tax collection was a bit less regular these days. And of course, there must have been a time when there were world-class workmen and builders in Britain, who had made all the houses and technology that the citizens these days couldn't even find anybody to repair. Now, anyone with skill stayed in Italy, and Rome was too busy protecting itself from wandering armies of barbarians to worry about how its citizens in far-flung Britain were getting on.

But still, Britain was Roman. Those islands out there, impossible to see except on the very clearest days, were outside the Empire. The people who lived there were uncivilized, different and dangerous. They



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spoke a foreign language and knew no Latin. Patrick had never seen any of these wild people, but when he was a child, his father had told him stories of raids from across the sea.



“I remember when I was a younger man, Patrick, before you were born, when the general Maximus tried to become Emperor of Rome,” his father would say, as they huddled round the fire on a winter’s night. “He nearly succeeded too. He came very close. But in order to make yourself an emperor, you need an army. So Maximus marched out of Britain and took his army with him. It wasn’t long before the barbarians came calling, with their battle axes and their wild war cries.” Patrick’s eyes shone in the firelight as he listened to the familiar tale. “Right up the rivers they came, right into the heart of Britain, with no one to stop them! Here at the coast we tried to protect ourselves, fight them off. Further inland they were taken completely by surprise. Thousands of people taken away as slaves, carried to Ireland!” Patrick gave a little shiver.



“Tell me about the other time, that was even worse!” Calpurnius laughed gently at Patrick’s eagerness.

“I was only a child then myself, so I don’t remember clearly, but my father, Potitus, told me that it was the worst danger Britain had ever faced! On three sides they came: the Saxons from the east, the Picts from the north, and the Scots from Ireland. They made a pact to steal Britain from out of Rome’s hands. Even the soldiers on Hadrian’s Wall joined the conspiracy—





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those who were supposed to protect us! My father said there were piles of dead bodies in every town, every village—such scenes as he could never forget. I remember a little of it myself. I remember it gave me nightmares for years afterwards. But then the Roman army arrived, sent by the Emperor himself, and we were saved. Now, enough of this sombre stuff! Read to me from your Latin book!”





Patrick remembered many evenings like that when he was younger, but these days his father no longer spoke of those times. They didn’t seem so entertaining now that most of the Roman army had left Britain and the barbarian raids had started again. It was nothing like those terrible times, of course, Patrick thought, but still it was not impossible that the ship he was watching right now might be full of Irish raiders! He squinted at it, covering his eyes with his hands, and frowned. Actually, it was more than one ship. He could see others behind it, just coming into view. The wind was strong and they were traveling swiftly. They did seem to be coming this way. They could just be trading vessels, of course, but they didn’t look quite right to Patrick. He could see them a bit more clearly now and they were a different style to all the Roman ships he’d seen. Maybe they were fishing boats, or they were simply lost. But the ships kept coming straight toward him, not stopping to put down fishing nets.

Patrick started to get nervous. Keeping his eye on the ships, he started back down the hill. He didn’t want



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to look like a coward and go running home just because he had seen a few unfamiliar ships, but what if they really were raiders? He picked up his pace, the wind at his back, and started to jog carefully down the slippery grass. The ships were very close now. They were big. He could see the sails shifting as they started to turn into the mouth of the river. Patrick started to run. He couldn't reach the village before the ships, but surely he could manage to warn the villa. Patrick ran down the hill, and the ships rowed swiftly up the river. By now, he could see the people onboard, and they were not fishermen. He could see weapons lying next to the rowers, ready for use. The ships passed out of sight behind trees and Patrick put on a furious burst of speed to reach the villa. It was only five hundred meters away, four hundred, three hundred—but he could no longer see how close the raiders were, or whether they had landed. He dashed along the path and skidded round the corner into the courtyard.

“*Raiders!*” he wheezed to the female servant who was carrying water to the kitchen. He paused to take a few breaths. “*Raiders...*” he said again, “...from Ireland. Ships coming down the river now! We need ... to protect ourselves!” The servant opened her mouth to say something, but suddenly her hands flew up to her mouth and she dropped the big amphora of water, which smashed into pieces. Patrick didn't understand her reaction until a swift arm snaked round his neck, and held a long knife to his throat.


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“Stand still not get hurt,” said a man’s voice in terrible Latin next to Patrick’s ear. The man was breathing heavily; he had obviously sprinted all the way from the riverbank. The servant screamed, and ran into the villa. Over the sound of his own heavy breathing, Patrick could now hear pounding feet. More raiders! He tried to struggle, but the knife pressed more firmly against his neck, cutting him.

“Stand still not get hurt,” the voice repeated, and then shouted instructions in a language Patrick couldn’t understand. Twenty men flooded into the courtyard and entered the house. Strong hands yanked Patrick’s arms behind him and tied them together. Inside the villa Patrick could hear screams. Once again he tried to struggle, but this time he was shoved hard to the ground, jarring his elbow, and his feet were tied loosely together. He rolled over and saw a dark-eyed, heavily scarred face grinning at him.

“Let me go! I’m a Roman citizen! You can’t just kidnap me!” The only answer Patrick got was a hard smack on the side of his mouth. The raider stood up and called to his men in the villa, who shouted back. By now, they were returning to the courtyard, dragging servants with them, bound hand and foot like Patrick. The leader pulled Patrick to his feet.

“Go!” he said, pointing to the path that led to the river. He gave the boy a kick to get him started. He was still holding the long knife as if he didn’t need much excuse to use it. Reluctantly, Patrick started hobbling





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down the path, taking tiny steps with his bound legs, and trying not to stumble. Behind him he could hear the servants shouting and crying. There was the sound of a few punches or kicks, and then there was no shouting, only crying.

Down at the river they were marched up a gangplank onto a waiting ship. All the other ships, Patrick assumed, had continued down the river to raid the village. The servants from the villa, and their young master, were shoved into a deep hold at the centre of the ship. With hands and feet tied, there was nothing they could do but sit and watch as the raiders took up their positions at the oars again, and rowed to join the other ships further up the river. Before they even reached Bannavem Taburniae, Patrick could smell smoke. He could see nothing down in the hold, but he could tell from the smell and from the screaming and shouting that much of the village must be on fire. The ship ran aground with a jerk, and the raiders jumped out to join in the attack, leaving just a couple of men with axes to guard the handful of captives. It wasn't long before more people were being thrown into the hold, and more and more. One woman was clutching her sobbing child, who only looked about seven years old.

“What’s happening up there?” Patrick asked her.



“They’re burning the village,” she told him, her eyes wide and frightened. “Raiders came out of nowhere and started grabbing people and setting buildings alight. Some of the men tried to fight back, but it



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was hopeless. Everyone who fought back was killed, everyone else ...” Her voice tailed off as she looked at the now-crowded hold, into which more and more people were being thrown.


“How many?” asked Patrick.



“In the village? Maybe a thousand people. But I saw the ships going further upriver, too. Maybe they won’t go as far as the town, but ...” She trailed off, thinking. Patrick thought, too, about all the other little villages based near the river, so that people could get drinking water and wash their clothes and go fishing. Now the river was bringing them the danger of kidnap, or even worse. The raiders were moving far too quickly for anyone to get a warning to the villages further upstream. There was nothing anyone could do, and there was no one to rescue them. Many of the others in the hold were crying, some quietly and others without holding back. It was only because he was the son of a deacon and a *decurion* that Patrick forced himself not to cry, too.

After an hour or so, Patrick felt the ship start to move. He struggled to stand amidst all the people squeezed into the hold.

“Where are you taking us?” he shouted. Other people also shouted out questions. “You can’t do this!” added Patrick. “We’re Roman citizens! My father is an important man!” The raiders paid no attention to the people they had kidnapped. They laughed amongst themselves, and then one of them



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started up a song, and the others joined in. The raiders rowed to the beat of the song, down the river and out to sea, carrying their helpless passengers over the edge of the world.

The rain started somewhere in the middle of the sea, and by the time the ships had arrived at their destination, Patrick and the other captives were soaked through and shivering. He had a fair idea of what was going to happen next. After all, the raiders hadn't rowed all these people across the sea just to kill them. Patrick realized that they were going to sell the captives, along with any valuables they had stolen. Even so, it was a shock to be hauled in front of a crowd of people, along with dozens of other Britons, and see people placing bids for them, just like his father did for cattle. Patrick couldn't see the faces of the bidders, because they had covered their heads against the rain, and he couldn't understand the language, but it was easy to see what was going on. Men held up fingers to show the amount of money, pointed at the slaves they were interested in buying. It was all over before Patrick knew it. One of the men gestured at him, along with a few other young lads, and they were dragged off to the side where some burly men with clubs made sure they didn't try to run away. Patrick could see the man who had bought them handing over some money.

"You can't do this!" he shouted in Latin. "I'm a Roman citizen! I'm the son of a Roman official!" One of the raiders, who was standing nearby, understood



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what Patrick said, and laughed. He turned to the boy with a mocking smile.

“You see that man over there? He’s your new master, boy. It doesn’t matter what you were yesterday. You’re whatever he says you are now.”

