Summary

When Esca is captured by the Romans, his owners break him and use him until he is a perfect slave.

When Marcus leads his men into battle, he is wounded, but not enough to be discharged. His men, completely loyal and grateful, buy him a body slave to help him while he recovers.

Notes

Based on a prompt for The Eagle kink meme, this story will have references to past rape, but nothing explicit.

This story is also AU, and combines elements from both the movie and the book. Also, I don't claim to be an expert in ancient roman history, so forgive me for any historical inaccuracies (which hopefully won't be too glaring). I will do my best to avoid anachronisms.
Chapter 1

Marcus looks at Esca, and sees.

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The memories from the battle were a violent, chaotic swirl of sights and sounds and smells to Marcus’s pain-adepted mind. In between the shouts and cries of men fighting, he remembered his own actions, the mad, courageous, foolhardy plan that he hoped would save his men, and it was his concern for them that drove him to push away the fog clouding his mind and struggle toward consciousness.

He awoke with a groan, another escaping his lips as he pushed himself up on one elbow to look around with bleary eyes. He was in his own room, nearly swaddled on the bed with a heap of blankets and furs. His left leg was a mass of fire and agony, and he pushed back the coverings, half afraid of what sight would greet his eyes.

Bandages were wrapped around the length of his thigh, from nearly knee to hip, and he could see where blood had soaked through, though not as much as he had expected, not given the amount of pain he felt. He was just about to peek under the wrappings when the sound of sandals quickly scraping over the floor caught his attention.

Aulus bustled into the room, his face revealing surprise for but a moment before he grinned broadly at his commander, despite the tired, haggard look of his face, and the rumpled and stained tunic he wore.

“Sir, you’re awake! Good, good, I was hoping you would rouse soon.”

Marcus nodded and closed his eyes when the motion made his head swim. “Aulus, what—” He broke off, his voice raspy and hoarse.

“Ah, don’t try to talk just yet, sir,” Aulus admonished, coming over to help Marcus sit up and holding a cup against his lips. “Drink.”

The cup held very watered, strangely bitter wine, and from the first touch of the liquid against his parched mouth, Marcus was suddenly terribly and desperately thirsty. He drank greedily, draining the cup and letting out a sound of frustration when it was empty.

“That’s enough for now, sir,” Aulus said gently, putting the cup away to set on a table. “It has some herbs in it to help you sleep, but I think you’ve very nearly over the worst of it now.”

The herbs began their work quickly, and Marcus fought against their effects long enough to mumble, “My men? What of my men?”

“Saved, sir,” Aulus said, his voice inordinately proud. “Saved because of you.”

Marcus smiled, muttered his thanks, and knew no more.

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The next time Marcus awoke, Lutorius was there, as well as Aulus. The centurion was able to give a far more complete report than the surgeon had been able to, and he answered all of Marcus’s
questions completely and patiently. Marcus took a moment to bow his head in prayer over those of his men who had died, and asked Lutorius to give the men both his compliments on this valor and skill and his sorrow over the friends they had lost.

“The men are asking after you, sir. They’re eager to thank you themselves.”

Marcus smiled. “And I eager to see them. I am hopeful that I won’t be confined to this bed too much longer.” The last was directed as a sort of question to the surgeon, who hovered off to the side, waiting with his supplies to change the dressings on Marcus’s leg.

Aulus’s face grew serious. “You’re healing quickly, sir, as quickly as can be expected. But your wound is still very serious.”

The first flutter of fear ghosted down Marcus’s spine to coil low in his belly. “But I will heal.”

“Yes, sir, though it make take some time. You were very fortunate that the injury was clean, for all that is was also quite deep. The wreck of the chariot could have quite easily driven debris into your leg, and that would have likely lamed you.”

The fear tightened its grip, and for a moment he couldn’t breathe. To be lamed, so young, so quickly into his first command. To be forced from the army he loved and from the service of Rome. No, such a thing was unthinkable. He still had so much to do.

“Tell me I will not be lame, Aulus.”

The surgeon smiled. “No, you won’t. I didn’t mean to worry you about that, sir. But your recovery will be long, and not without its own trials.”

Marcus looked to Lutorius. “Do you think I will be allowed to keep my command, as injured as I am?”

Lutorius nodded. “When I wrote my report, I added that the men would follow you anywhere now, and that your injury means nothing to them when it comes to following orders. That should be enough to leave you in charge, though you may find your duty here extended to compensate for the time you cannot actually lead your men.”

Sagging back onto the bed, Marcus sighed in relief, the coil of fear slipping away like a snake through the grass.

Aulus came forward with another cup, but Lutorius held out a hand for him to stop. “A moment. Commander, what would you have us do about the village? The men stand ready to raze it.”

“The village,” Marcus murmured, shaking his head slightly to clear it. He needed to be careful here. “Did they lose many men?”

The centurion hesitated only a moment before nodding. “Yes, sir. Nearly all.”

“Then I think that punishment enough. Survival will be hard enough for them as it is. They will not be a threat again, and perhaps this will show some of Rome’s mercy.”

Lutorius’s lips tightened, but he only nodded. “As you wish, sir.”

“Thank you, Lutorius.” He held out his hand for the cup Aulus held and the surgeon bustled forward. Lutorius saluted and left, and Marcus returned to his dreamless sleep.
Marcus was able to go out to greet the men himself two weeks later. He could have gone sooner, but he had been too weak. And while leaning on both Lutorius’s strong shoulder and his crutch was difficult and shameful enough, having to be carried would have been intolerable.

Aulus changed his bandages just before he went, and helped him into a clean tunic and braccae. Marcus couldn’t hide his injury—in fact does not wish to, for it was gained honorably in defense of his men—but he could disguise the constant pain he was in and put on a brave face for those who serve him.

It was dinner when he chose to go, desiring the informal, relaxed atmosphere both for the camaraderie it provided, as well as the chair that would allow him to sit and the table that will hide the awkward angle his left leg stuck out at. The men cheered at his arrival, and the first few moments were spent simply in greetings. Eventually, Marcus waved them back to their meals and sat, allowing the conversation to flow around him. Many of the men wanted to discuss the battle, and Marcus was eager to hear their own takes on what had happened.

Long before the men had exhausted their words, Marcus’s cheeks were flushed with pride and embarrassment. To hear his men tell of it, what he had done had been a feat never before accomplished and would echo throughout history as a true testament to bravery. Marcus allowed them their exaggerations, false though they were. The men whose lives he had saved were grateful, and he wouldn’t deny them their need to express it.

At last, he had to take his leave, bidding the men good night and making his way back to his room, gritting his teeth against the pain of his stiff leg. He’d barely sunk down onto his bed when someone cleared their throat just beyond the doorway. Marcus looked up. “Yes, Paulus, what is it?”

“No to bother you, sir, but the men and I, well, we got something for you.”

“Oh?” Marcus eased himself back, raising an eyebrow, truly curious about what his men could have gotten him, especially out here at the fort.

“Well, sir, we know you’re going to…need some assistance while you recover,” Paulus said carefully, tiptoeing over such a sensitive subject. A man’s source of shame should never be brought up lightly, something Marcus already knew far too well.

He nodded for the soldier to continue.

“You’re a proud man, sir, we all know that, and you’ll want your independence and to not need to rely on one of us.”

“Get to the point, Paulus,” Marcus sighed, but not unkindly. His leg was paining him, and he truly did need to rest.

Paulus chuckled. “Yes, sir. We all contributed to get you this.” He turned and beckoned down the hall. There was the shuffle of feet, and a man stepped past Paulus to stand just barely inside the room.

The stranger was a Briton, that much was obvious. A mass of unevenly cut brownish hair topped his head, and his skin was pale. He was also on the shorter side, though well proportioned. He stood quietly, hands folded in front of him, head bowed demurely, eyes trained on the floor.

Marcus studied him for a moment longer, brows furrowed in confusion, and then looked at Paulus.
“A slave, sir,” the soldier offered quickly. “To help you with whatever you need.”

Marcus stared a moment longer, and then asked the first question that entered his mind. “Where did you find a slave to buy out here?”

Paulus laughed, though the slave didn’t so much as twitch. “A travelling trader owned him. Said he wasn’t intending on spending much more time in the north and was looking to get rid of him anyway, so we got him fairly cheap. Trader said he knows a bit about treating wounds, so he can help Aulus, and that he’s eager to please. We thought he’d be a good choice, especially here in the fort since he’s not a threat.”

A long moment hung in the room between the two of them. For all that three men were actually present, the slave’s attitude and posture made him seem more an ornament or piece of furniture than a person. Marcus realized, belatedly, that Paulus was waiting for a response and he forced a smile.

“I…thank you. Truly. And thank the men as well. This was very thoughtful of you.”

A wide grin creased Paulus’s face and he saluted sharply. “Yes, sir. Glad you like it. Good night.” With that, he turned and walked down the hall. Marcus waited until the sound of his footsteps had completely faded, and then turned his attention to his…slave.

The man hadn’t moved, not since he first stepped into the room. He waited, every line of his body alert for a command, yet submissive, not a threat in anyway as Paulus had said. Marcus took a deep breath and rubbed a tired hand across his face, considering his situation.

Paulus wasn’t wrong. He didn’t want to have to rely on his men while he recovered. Not only was there the shame of how much help he required to be considered, but he didn’t want his men to see him that weak and vulnerable. Bad enough that Aulus and Lutorius did, but it couldn’t go any further than that. With a slave, however…well, that concern would no longer be an issue.

The only other hesitancy Marcus had was that he’d never owned a slave, at least not personally. His family had, of course, so it wasn’t like he was unfamiliar with them—he just didn’t have any first hand experience with providing for one. Ah, well. If nothing else, he would simply treat the man like any other soldier, issuing commands and expecting them to be followed.

“What’s your name?” he asked, and for the first time, the slave moved, his head darting up slightly, his eyes rising, but his gaze going no higher than what Marcus judged was his chest.

“Esca, domine,” the slave—Esca—replied quietly.

“Esca,” Marcus repeated. “Right. Did anyone explain to you what I’ll need from you?”

“Yes, they did.”

Marcus sighed in relief. “Excellent. Then you can start now. I’ll need help getting out of my clothes, and my bandages might need to be changed.”

Esca came forward quickly and silently while Marcus pulled his own tunic off, setting it on the bed next to him. They worked together to tug his braccae off, Marcus hissing as the muscles in his leg were pulled and stretched painfully with the effort. While Marcus struggled to get his breath back, Esca folded his clothes and set them on top of a nearby chest. Then he stood, waiting quietly next to the bed until Marcus was ready.

As he’d feared, his exertions tonight had caused his wound to bleed more heavily than normal. He
told Esca where to get supplies, and then slumped back while the slave fetched what he would need to tend to Marcus’s wound. When everything had been gathered, Marcus braced himself for the pain and nodded for Esca to proceed.

Esca knelt, undoing the bandages with gentle hands and then carefully cleaning the wound. There was some pain at the touch of cloth and warm water, but far less than Marcus was used to. Esca did know how to care for wounds, and had a deft touch.

When the wound was clean, he picked up the pot of salve Aulus had left, and carefully spread it over the injury. Then he set the pot down, and instead of reaching for the bandages, he placed his hands on the hot, hard, knotted muscles of Marcus’s thigh. For a moment, he simply rested them there, his fingers probing ever so gently. And then without warning, he pressed harder, working his fingers deep into the muscle.

Marcus cried out and grabbed one of Esca’s wrists. “Stop!” he hissed. “What are you doing?”

Esca looked up, meeting Marcus’s gaze for the first time, and for the brief second they looked at each other, Marcus felt pierced by the iron gray eyes, sharp and keen like an unsheathed dagger. Just as quickly, Esca dropped his eyes again. “I meant no harm,” he said. “I can stop now, if you wish, but you will still be in the pain for the whole night. Or you can bear a bit more now, and have relief.”

Marcus didn’t respond immediately, and Esca licked his lips nervously. “I would not hurt you, domine,” he said earnestly. “I am only trying to serve you.”

Grimacing, Marcus let the slave go. “Relief would be nice,” he muttered. “Get on with it.”

Nodding once, Esca once again pressed his hands into Marcus’s legs, massaging the flesh and ignoring Marcus’s bitten off gasps of pain until—miraculously—the pain began to ease. Something loosened in Marcus’s leg and he groaned at the feeling. His wound still hurt, but the surrounding tissue suddenly felt so much better, the deep ache reduced, lessened to where it was bearable. And he felt suddenly tired, as if the relief of not longer having to fight against the pain was enough to sap the rest of his strength.

He pushed Esca’s hands away. “Enough. I wish to sleep.”

The hands—those wonderful, talented hands—drew away, but returned to wrap a bandage tightly around Marcus’s thigh. Then Esca drew back the blankets on Marcus’s bed and helped him slip beneath them. For a moment, Esca stood beside him. “Do you need anything else, domine?”

There was some inflection in the words, some inference that Esca was making but that Marcus was too tired to puzzle out. He shook his head sleepily. “No, thank you. Find Lutorius. Have him get you a cot.”

“A cot?” Esca sounded startled.

“Unless you want to sleep on the floor,” Marcus muttered in irritation. “Now go. Let me rest.”

A pause, and then sound of leather soles whispered across stone. “Yes, domine.”

Chapter End Notes
This short piece, starting with this line and going through the end of this section of the chapter, was added later for clarification. I realized as I got further into the story that I never explained why no other retribution was taken on the village for the uprising.
Chapter 2

Chapter Notes

Slight warning for one very oblique reference to rape.

Esca feels Marcus’s eyes upon him, and waits.

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Marcus Flavius Aquila.

In the darkness, laying on his cot set by the doorway, Esca turned the name of his new master over in his mind. It was Roman, every edge of it hard and sharp, cumbersome on the tongue. Not that Esca would ever use it. His new owner and master would always be domine, and should be, even in his thoughts. He’d learned that lesson well enough.

But still, in the dim stillness and with sleep elusive, he couldn’t help but wonder at the gracelessness of these Romans, even in their names.

There was a sleepy mumble from the bed set against the far wall, and he tensed, instantly alert for any sign that his master needed him. But no further sounds came and he allowed himself to relax again, settling back beneath the light blanket he’d been given to go along with the cot.

The cot. Esca frowned. When he’d been purchased earlier that day, suddenly and unexpectedly—though he’d learned long ago to never assume his situation would be the same when the sun went down as when it rose that morning—and told he would be the body slave of a centurion commander, sleeping in his own bed was not what he had expected, especially when he considered the talking to and threats he’d received from the soldiers who purchased him. He was very aware that he was to serve their commander in any and every way he demanded—and serve him well—and that he was to do whatever he could to help him recover. There was the unspoken condition that his own continued good health was largely dependant on the commander’s improving one.

So, naturally, he’d thought to pass his nights in his master’s bed or on the floor by his side.

What he hadn’t expected was just how wounded the Roman was. It had been difficult to keep the shock from his face when he’d unwrapped the dressing. The fort surgeon had told him that he expected the commander to make a full recovery, but Esca privately thought that was optimistic. The wound, even when fully healed, was likely to cause at least some pain and possibly some physical impediment. And right now it had to be pure agony. Esca had felt a sliver of respect, a tiny fragment, no matter how unwillingly given, that the Roman was no only able to bear it, but to do so without showing the face of his pain to the world.

Few men could do that. And fewer still would thank their slave for doing their duty.

Esca knew of none who would do both, and give said slave a bed. None save his master.

Marcus Flavius Aquila.

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With dawn came the true start of Esca’s new life in the fort.

He awakened at first light, used to doing as such for as long as he could remember. After rubbing the sleep from his eyes quickly, he folded the blanket he’d used and laid it atop the cot. Then he stretched, working out the kinks somehow developed from sleeping on something comfortable, and crouched by the doorway to wait.

He was not kept waiting long. It seemed he’d barely had time to settle comfortably before his master was stirring upon his bed. Esca rose to his feet, but didn’t come closer yet. Last night, he’d seen a glimpse of the pride the man had, and wasn’t yet sure if he was the type to wait and ask for help when he needed it or to expect it without asking. Esca suspected the former, and so he held his position.

His master awoke quickly, coming to alert and ready. There was no blatant sign of it, just a slight tensing of his frame, a quickly indrawn breath, a different stillness than the one of sleep—the marks of a soldier, a warrior. He lay still for a long moment before pushing himself to sit up, flexing his injured leg underneath his blankets and grimacing. Then he turned, swung his good leg down to touch his foot to the floor, rubbed his hands over his face and looked up at Esca.

He startled, visibly, eyes going wide, sucking in a sharp breath as his hand closed around a nonexistent hilt. Startled himself, Esca took a half step back, wondering what he’d done to upset his master. His wariness was not dispelled when the Roman huffed a shaky breath of laughter and pressed a hand against his eyes momentarily.

“Forgive me,” he said, voice rough and gravelly with sleep. “I’d forgotten you were here.”

“My apologies,” Esca said quickly, hating that he had to beg forgiveness for simply existing, hating that the first thing his master did was laugh at him.

His master waved off the apology, though. “Hardly your fault that I was too addled last night to remember.” After a careful touch to his injured thigh, he frowned. “I doubt Aulus is awake yet, but there should be more bandages in the sick-block.”

Recognizing the order for what it was, Esca nodded. “Yes, domine,” he said and slipped through the doorway to the building he’d been shown yesterday. It took some searching, and eventually he had to ask a soldier for directions, but the bandages were found, and Esca carried them back in a basket. He did make a brief stop to collect some clean water as well. After a night, he was fairly certain that the wound would need at least some cleansing.

By the time he returned, his master had pushed back the blankets entirely, and was sitting on the edge of the bed with both feet firmly planted on the floor. Esca set down his burden by the Roman’s feet and turned his attention to tending to the wound.

The bandages were damp with blood. Perhaps more than should have at this stage of healing, but less than he would have thought given how aggravated it looked last night. He peeled the wrappings off carefully, using the water to wet them when they stuck to the wound. Under his hands, he could feel the muscles in his master’s thigh tensing against the pain, though the man made no sound aside from a few deeply indrawn breaths. Once all the bandages were off, he used more clean water to rinse off the wound, inspecting it for any sign of infection. There was none that he could see. Dried blood was all that stained them, and the wound looked like it was healing well, aside from a little irritation.

Esca wrapped new bandages around the wound, and set the extra clean ones on top of a chest, dropping the soiled ones into the basket to be laundered later. He turned back to his master, noting
the way the Roman plucked at his tunic absentmindedly. “Do you have clean clothes, domine?”

His master blinked in surprise for a moment, and then pointed at another chest. Esca opened it and removed a fresh set of clothes, laying them on the bed beside the other man. Then he picked up the basket. “I will return these to the sick-block.” There was no response as he left his master to get changed in privacy.

When he returned, he carefully kept the surprise from his face—not at seeing his master dressed in clean clothes, but at seeing the dirty ones were folded neatly next to him. Esca quietly moved them and awaited his next order. As he expected, his master wanted to get up and move around. Esca refrained from saying that his leg probably wasn’t up to that yet, and simply slid his shoulder under one of the man’s arm, lending the Roman support while he tested the strength of his leg. When it became clear that it would hold him, at least for a little while, he grabbed his crutch, and with Esca’s help, hobbled from his room.

Their walk was not long, barely a circuit around the outside of the main building, but by the time it was done, his master was shaking, his tunic soaked in sweat, tight lines framing his eyes and mouth. Esca brutally squashed the tentative flare of sympathy he felt at the sight. The Roman had earned his wound killing those who merely wanted to be free of Rome’s yoke. He deserved no sympathy, no pity. If he hadn’t wanted to be injured, he should have stayed away.

Easing his master down to sit on the edge of the bed, he silently fetched a cup of watered wine and handed it to him. He drained it quickly, then merely sat, holding the cup with a grip so tight his knuckles shone white. Then he extended the cup, and Esca took it.

“Some food, I think.”

Esca nodded and hurried off. By now, the fort was coming alive, the bulk of the soldiers rising for the day. Many appeared to do their own cooking, but he’d seen the communal food for those who could not—like the injured—or those who should not—like the officers and surgeon.

Becoming unnoticed and slipping through the men wasn’t difficult. Years of practice meant that he was filling a platter before anyone truly noticed him. A heavy hand grasped the hand that was reaching for bread, and he went still, almost limp.

“This food isn’t for you, slave.”

Esca looked up, just high enough to see the angry face of a centurion he did not know, but not high enough to actually meet his gaze. “It’s not for me,” he said submissively. “The commander wishes to break his fast, and sent me to fetch his food.”

“Oh.” The hand released him just as quickly as it had grabbed him. “Well, in that case be quick!

Keeping his head down, Esca did as he was bid, filling the plate and hurrying back to his master’s room. During his absence, his master had managed to move himself to sit at the small table in his room, and Esca was filled with a sudden fury that the man was too stupid to wait. Had he fallen and injured himself, it was Esca who would receive the blame and consequently the punishment. Never mind that Roman law said a man could not punish another’s slave, these soldiers who see him pay if his master suffered.

But instead of voicing any of this, he set the platter carefully down on the table and slid it in front of the Roman, who lifted his head, his expression instantly brightening at the sight of food. He tucked in as soon as Esca pulled his hand back.
Esca busied himself with pouring from more of the watered wine and then stepped back, to await his master’s pleasure while he ate. The smell of the food made his nose twitch, reminding him that he hadn’t been able to eat last night, that his last meal had been breakfast the day before. Having never lived in a Roman fort, he was unsure if there was some sort of accepted protocol for getting food. He wondered if he should ask his master, but the thought of actually being so bold filled him with a nameless fear, the memory of pain given in response to even the most innocuously asked questions keeping his tongue still.

No, he would not ask. He’d endured hunger before, recalling the lean winters as a child and when his defiance as a slave had lost him meals. If his master or another soldier did not volunteer the information, then he would see if he could slip some scraps when getting his master’s food. It would not be hard. These Romans were remarkably blind to the actions of slaves.

Unfortunately, it seemed his belly was to betray him. As he stood silently at his master’s shoulder, a particularly good scent drifted past him and his stomach rumbled noisily. The commander stilled, a piece of bread held before his lips and he twisted, looking over his shoulder at Esca. He frowned slightly, and Esca’s gut clenched with more than hunger, waiting for some sort of reprimand for disturbing his master’s meal.

Instead, what he heard was, “Have you eaten?”

There was no answer but the truth. “No, domine.”

His master’s frown deepened and his pushed his plate to the side so that it wasn’t directly in front of him. “Here. Help yourself. There’s more here than I can eat, and right now you’ve more of a need for your strength than I do.”

It was on the tip of Esca’s tongue to protest, the ingrained thought to deny that he actually needed sustenance rising, but something in his master’s expression stopped him. So, instead, he slipped forward, taking a hunk of bread and a slice of meat from the plate and then sliding back to his place, murmuring, “Thank you, domine.” The Roman opened his mouth to say something, but then shook his head and turned back to his meal.

Esca waited until the other man had resumed eating before eating his own food as quickly as he could. His mouth was still full when his master said, “If you want more, take it. I’ll not have you going hungry.”

The mouthful of bread stuck in Esca’s throat, and he struggled to swallow it. By the time he managed, his master was deep in his own meal again, and he could do no more than rasp, “Yes, sir,” feeling inexplicably off balance.

A trick, he thought, a trick to deceive him into believing that his master was a kinder man than he thought, though at first glance he wouldn’t have thought the Roman capable of such cruelty. He had seen it before, men who used seeming kindness to wreak worse hurts than simple anger and pain. He fell for that once himself, and remembered well the sting of betrayal, of being hurt, of having what little pride he still had torn from him. Yes, he learned that lesson well.

He would not fall for it a second time.
Chapter 3

Chapter Notes

AN: I apologize for the delay! Things (read: other fics) had eaten my brain for awhile, but I'm better now, and return with more story! Things to know:

1) You'll see I've continued futzing with the timeline and refusing to state anything definitively. Pretty sure I'm going to keep it ambiguous, with the fall of Esca's tribe occurring more than two years ago, but less than seven, and their ages being between nineteen and twenty-six. (You'll never know for sure! Mwuahahahahaha!)

2) I've also altered Esca's tattoos a bit. They're not as extensive as they are in the book, but they're more than the fairly simple bands we see around his arm in the movie.

3) I've made a reference to something we see in the book, with Esca telling Marcus, "I am the Centurion's hound, to lie at the Centurion's feet." I also seem to recall reading somewhere that Cunoval, Esca's father, was the "Prince of Hounds," but I can't confirm if that's true, or just something my brain absorbed as fact from other stories. (Just go with it!)

4) Aulus is referred to as a man who likes his drink a bit too much in the book, and since I appreciated the shout out in the movie to that aspect of him, I added a touch of it here.

Marcus looks at Esca, and sees more than a slave.

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With someone now available to tend to Marcus's needs constantly, instead of the part time care Aulus was able to provide—care that Marcus could privately admit was earnest, but not always completely sober—his wound began to truly heal, though the process was slow.

Marcus’s pride and stubbornness to prove himself before his men had cost him what little progress he’d made, despite Esca tending to the strain the night before. Though he’d felt better in the morning, the relief passed quickly, and by early evening he was exhausted from battling the pain, and more than a little irritable. He barely touched the plate of food Esca brought before angrily shoving it away from him.

“Do you want me to leave the food for you, in case you’re hungry later?” Esca asked deferentially.

Marcus grunted. “I don’t want it. You can have it or take it back. I care not.”

“As you wish,” Esca murmured, but didn’t move the plate from where it was. “Should I attend to your leg now or would you prefer to wait?”

Marcus glowered at the Briton and idly pressed at the edge of the wound, hissing slightly at the pain. No, he did not want Esca to touch it, now or ever. It hurt too damn much.

But he was being irrational and he knew it. The wound needed tending to. “I suppose if I say no,
you’ll just nag me about it.”

“I am bound to serve you,” Esca said simply. “It is my duty to do as your command.”

Marcus didn’t respond, instead turning his head to look out his small window at the sliver of darkening sky he could see through it. He could feel Esca watching him, though it was certainly with that half-lowered gaze of his. Only once had the slave met his eyes. But at the same time, he seemed to have trouble keeping them turned to the floor, as if the action were unnatural to him, and instead often chose a point halfway in between.

The minutes passed, the weight of Esca’s gaze growing with each passing one. Sighing with defeat, Marcus threw up his hands and glared at Esca. “Fine! Get on with it! Mithras, even without speaking, you’re like a hound with a bone.”

Some fleeting, inscrutable expression crossed Esca’s face, too quickly for Marcus to determine what it was. It was something raw and unguarded, and from the speed with which Esca smoothed it back to his normal, placid expression, it wasn’t something Marcus was supposed to see.

Esca nodded, bowed and hurried to fetch his supplies and clean water, both hot and cool. Then he unwrapped Marcus’s leg and cleaned the wound carefully, laying a cloth soaked with the cool water on it to soothe the flesh irritated by the process. When the most immediate pain had passed, the cloth was removed and the wound allowed to dry in the air while Esca coaxed Marcus into eating at least some of his supper. Marcus managed about half before refusing any more.

Marcus lay back on his bed as Esca’s skilled fingers carefully worked the strain and tension from the knotted muscle of his thigh. It was like being a child again, when he’d caught a fever and lay on his bed for weeks, listless and lethargic. Days of lying on his bed with no strength, no energy, unable to remember when he had such and wondering if he ever would again. The same fear gripped him now. What if he never recovered? What if he were lame and crippled for life? He would be useless, an embarrassment, his career over before it ever really began.

All chances of reclaiming his family’s honor, of regaining what his father had lost, would be gone.

The thought made him want to leap from the bed, to prove to everyone—and himself—that that wasn’t true. But he couldn’t. All he could do was wait, impotent, while another tended to his needs. And he would have to do that until he healed enough to begin rebuilding his strength. Marcus groaned in frustration and beat his fist against the bed.

Esca instantly froze, gray eyes widening and snapping up to the vicinity of Marcus’s chin. “Does it hurt too much?” he asked nervously.

“Yes,” Marcus grated, knowing that Esca had misunderstood his behavior, but feeling disinclined to correct the misassumption.

He felt badly about it as soon as Esca sprang back, head and neck bowed, shoulders hunched. Every line of his body was tense as he scurried to put everything away and clean up. He spread the salve over Marcus’s wound and rewrapped it as quickly as he could, and then he stood waiting, hands clasped before him. Waiting, Marcus realized belatedly, to see if he would be punished for hurting his master.

Marcus bit back another groan. Gods, could nothing go right for him?

“I’m tired,” he said shortly, yanking a blanket over him and shifting slightly to face the wall. “You’re dismissed.”
There was a pause and then he heard Esca quickly shuffle out of the room.

Marcus prayed to heal swiftly.

If the gods didn’t see fit to grant his request immediately, they at least made things more bearable. Over the next week, he became more comfortable with Esca. Not entirely at ease, but less… awkward. It helped to think of and order him like any soldier—no matter how wildly inappropriate the thought was.

The skittishness Esca had displayed the night Marcus had been in such a foul mood had faded the next day, and had not returned since. And Marcus still couldn’t figure out what had caused it, for his other fits of pique hadn’t resulted in such behavior. For his part, Marcus tried to temper his irritability so that his anger, while intended to be directionless, wasn’t inadvertently focused on someone innocent of doing anything to incur it. It helped, and things settled into a tenable state.

One afternoon, as he sat looking over some reports for a lack of anything better to do, Aulus bustled in, followed by two soldiers carrying a large wooden tub between them. Marcus blinked and watched in silence as more followed, the first pair leaving to make room for a second carrying buckets of hot water. They emptied the buckets into the tub and left.

Raising an eyebrow, Marcus looked at Aulus. “What’s this?”

“A bath,” the surgeon said brightly. “Not a proper one, of course. No way to have that out in this wilderness. Ah, for a lack of civilization! It occurred to me that a good soak would do your leg good. This should be big enough, we just need some more hot water….” He glanced around as the two soldiers who’d carried the tub returned, more buckets in their hands. The soldiers went back and forth a few times, but eventually the tub was filled, a couple buckets of cool water next to them in case the water was too hot.

Aulus nodded in satisfaction. “Excellent.” He looked at Esca. “When the commander is done, slave, tell me and I’ll send some men to empty and remove it.”

Esca nodded, and both men watched as the surgeon bustled out of the room.

Marcus looked at the tub with undisguised longing. To have a true bath again, to bathe and be properly clean, sounded marvelous. Washing with a wet cloth got the job done, but as he was confined all day, that—or even oil and strigil, which he did, but less often because it was more effort than it was worth—didn’t leave him feeling clean. And to be able to soak his leg…. He remembered well how relaxing a caldarium could be after a long day, when the muscles were sore and aching. His leg could definitely benefit from it.

He pulled his tunic off himself, and without needing to be told, Esca came forward to help with his braccae. When he reached for his smalls, Esca turned to arrange a drying cloth and soap, having learned that there were certain needs Marcus refused to let anyone help him with unless he was unconscious or dying.

Then Esca came forward again and offered his arms for Marcus to grasp and lever himself up with. Marcus limped to the tub, clutched Esca’s arm tightly when he bore his full weight on his bad leg to step into the tub. There was a moment when he thought he was going to fall, when he could feel his left leg collapsing beneath him, but Esca shifted his grip and balance, taking Marcus’s weight so that they stayed upright. And then Marcus has sinking down gratefully into the hot water, not minding that it was a bit too hot. Without fired to keep the water warm, he knew it would cool all
too quickly.

For long minutes he merely sat, soaking, feeling the heat reach deep into his body until it felt like even his bones were being warmed. He groaned gratefully, stretching out as much as the tub would allow—which was a surprising amount—reveling in the relief the bath brought.

Once the water finally began to cool, he held out his hand to Esca. “Soap, please,” he said, and Esca placed a ball of it into his palm. He started with his arms, feeling the slick slide of the soap as he washed first one and then the other, and then moved on to his shoulders and chest. After rinsing with cupped hands, he dipped the soap underwater to wash his stomach and groin, and his thighs.

He went to reach for his calves and then flinched as the motion pulled on his bad leg. Even bent as they were, it was still too much and he blew an angry breath out through his nose.

“Allow me, domine,” Esca said quietly, holding out his hand. Marcus passed the soap over and watched as the slave knelt by the end of the tub. He considered the long, loose sleeves of his tunic for a moment before pulling it off and dipping his arms in the water to wash Marcus’s legs and feet.

With Esca’s head bent to the task, Marcus considered Esca’s form, bared as it was to the waist. He’d known the Briton was strong. He’d felt it when Esca helped him hobble around or supported him. But, still, the sight of corded muscle, standing out prominently on his arms as he worked, surprised him. His compact frame and baggy clothing belied the power of his body.

What intrigued Marcus even more, however, were the blue tattoos that curled around Esca’s upper right arm and then flowed over his shoulder. They were strong and bold, sinuous and curling. Marcus had seen their like before.

A warrior’s markings.

He should have known, he supposed. This close to the wall, it was unlikely that Esca could have been born into slavery, and he didn’t seem to be a criminal, though admittedly, Marcus probably wouldn’t have been able to tell. Until now, he’d thought it likely that Esca had been taken when he was younger, perhaps sold by one tribe after being captured, either by another clan or by Romans.

But that clearly wasn’t the case. Esca had been a man, at least judged one by his tribe, and old enough to have received his markings. Looking at Esca’s face, Marcus tried to determine his age. He guessed Esca was near his own age, perhaps a little younger. And given there’s been no recent fighting with the tribes—outside of the attack on the fort—Esca had to have been still fairly young when he was captured.

Too young, especially to end up like this.

He darted his eyes quickly away as Esca rinsed his legs and rose to his feet. “Your back, domine?” he asked.

“Please,” Marcus replied, sliding forward a bit. Esca knelt behind him and began to scrub his back, fingers kneading deep as he did so. Marcus let his head fall to his chest, enjoying the sensation, but moved at Esca’s murmured words so that the Briton could wash his hair as well, and then rinse everything away.

While the bath did its job of relaxing Marcus’s muscles, it did it a bit too well. He went to stand and found that none of them wanted to support his weight. His first attempt didn’t make it very far, and he thumped back down with his second, moving the tub a few inches, sloshing water on the
Esca moved quickly, crouching and placing one foot against the tub to brace himself, grabbing Marcus’s arms and pulling. Not too quickly, but a constant, steady support until Marcus stood carefully on one leg. Then Esca slid him shoulder under Marcus’s arm and braced him the same way he had when Marcus got in the tub. In short order, Marcus was out, sitting in a chair with a cloth wrapped around his waist while Esca went to get soldiers to empty and remove the tub.

Once the room was clear, he dried Marcus briskly, leaving his own tunic off as his arms and chest were still wet from bathing Marcus and helping him. Marcus dared a few more glances at the Briton’s tattoos, wondering again what had truly happened to Esca.

~*~

His curiosity ate at him for two more days before he finally gave in. He’d managed to coax Esca into eating some meals with him. Marcus knew he shouldn’t, that it wasn’t proper, and it had taken an express command to force Esca to do so. But he was tired of eating solitary meals, and another person at the table helped alleviate that, even if said person wouldn’t really talk or look him in the face.

They were finishing dinner one night, Marcus idly breaking off small bits of bread and chewing them. “The other night,” he began, sensing Esca focus his attention on him. “I saw your tattoos. You were a warrior, clearly. What happened?”

Esca set his spoon down beside his bowl, the motion careful and deliberate. He folded his hands in his lap and stared down stonily at the remains of his dinner, another rare emotion Marcus rarely saw from his slave. But Esca didn’t say anything.

“Esca?” Marcus asked carefully.

“My father was Cunoval, bearer of the blue war-shield of the Brigantes. Lord of five hundred spears.” His accent grew thicker and his eyes rose to meet Marcus’s briefly. Marcus could see the tension in the set of Esca’s jaw, in the terse line of his mouth. “Several years ago, you took our lands and we rose against you.” He looked back down. “My father and two brothers died. My mother, also. My father killed her before the legionaries broke through. He knew what they would do to her.”

Esca’s eyes cut back up again, hard and sharp. “She knelt in front of him and he slit her throat.”

His eyes fell again, and he seemed to slump in his seat. “After the battle was over, I was left lying in a ditch. I was taken. And now here I am.”

Marcus sat back in his chair. He knew what happened during and after battle. It was the way things were, and he shouldn’t be surprised or shocked. But he could not imagine losing so much, so quickly. In the space of no more than a few days, Esca had lost had family, his tribe and his freedom.

“Esca,” he began, but the other man halted him by standing quickly, his stool scraping across the stones of the floor.

“Are you finished, domine? Can I clear the table?”

Marcus looked at him helplessly a moment longer, noting how Esca was back to looking at the floor. “Yes,” he said quietly. “Yes. I’m finished.”
Chapter 4

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

Esca feels Marcus’s eyes upon him and waits for the inevitable that he knows is coming.

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Esca has hated every master who’s ever owned him.

The first—more captors than owners, in truth—because they had denied him a clean death with a sword through the neck or chest, and had instead condemned him to this life. The second, the man who’d spoken and acted with relative kindness, who’d tricked Esca into believing that maybe some Romans weren’t animals, that they had some semblance of honor…until he’d shown his true face—that he was kind because he preferred his slaves docile and didn’t like to struggle with them.

That master hadn’t kept him very long, and Esca still bore the faint whip scars of his displeasure.

The third he hated for breaking him, and Esca hated himself for allowing himself to be broken. Back then, he’d thought only of escape and freedom, and to the man he’d been then, death was a kind of freedom. He’d thought he could use his fighting abilities to his advantage, perhaps ending up in the arena like he’d heard could happen. At least there Esca would have been able to give himself a death by a blade, which was better than the death by inches he was dying. But he’d been wrong, and instead of a death with a thin veneer of honor, he’d been treated to the worst cruelties men could visit upon each other.

He learned to stop fighting at all then.

The fourth, the last master he’d had, he hated not for what he did to him, but for where he took Esca. To be so close to his home, to look out over landscapes so familiar every part of him ached…. It had been torture, each and every moment an utter agony.

But they all paled in comparison to his current master. This…this Roman, this centurion had done something none of the others had. None of his former masters had asked Esca about himself—they hadn’t cared. He was a slave, and what did it matter who his father was? What did it matter that his mother and brothers and everyone he’d ever known had met a death more honorable than any Roman ever would?

Oh, but this man asked. His domine. He’d taken the last part of Esca away, the last thing that had been Esca’s own, free from the dominion of Rome. Now Esca had nothing. His master had reached in, snatched away that last sliver of self, and left Esca hollow.

And Esca hated him for it.

He lay on his cot, looking across the darkened room toward the Roman’s slumbering form. It would be so easy to take the man’s sword—he kept it in the room, after all—creep up to the side of his bed and end the man’s miserable life with a quick thrust. Then he could take his own life, or simply wait for the other soldiers to find him in the morning.

But he continued to lay there. What would be the point? Death now would bring him no release. He’d shamed himself, dishonored his people. There would be no one to greet him if he died. This sick, twisted sense of duty he clung to, that kept him serving men he hated because it was the only
form of honor left to him, was the only thing he had now.

In battle, he’d failed. Whereas his father and brothers had been fierce enough to force the Romans to kill them to stop them, Esca had been weak, had been knocked out and fallen where he stood. Would they be there for him when he crossed? He thought not. Nor his mother, who’d gone to her death with more courage than Esca ever had, holding her husband’s steady gaze as his sword parted the flesh of her throat.

Esca thought of the noises his captors had wrung from him.

His mother hadn’t made a sound.

He curled up tighter on his side, fisting his hands in his blanket. Death would find him someday, and perhaps by then he would have earned his place with his people. Perhaps they would welcome him.

Perhaps he would be Esca again.

~*~

His days passed in monotonous toil—tending his crippled master’s wound, helping the man hobble around, fetching meals and other things for him. Other times he was sent to the drunken surgeon, to wash bandages or help him move a patient. Legionaries often ordered him to do other tasks as well, things they felt it was more fitting for a slave to do. And sometimes he merely waited for the Roman to awaken from a nap. That boredom was worse than when he was pressed into service. At least with his hands and mind busy, there was a surcease from his thoughts, a reprieve from the endless recriminations in his own head.

It was one of the days he’d been sent to help the surgeon, and Esca was crouched in a corner, to large woven baskets set before him, turning a jumbled pile of clean bandages into neatly rolled stacks. He could have sat, he supposed, but he didn’t feel comfortable doing that. The position was too vulnerable—it would take him too long to gain his feet in case of attack. Not that he thought that would ever happen, but the habit and instinct were too fully ingrained to ever leave him.

“Slave!”

He looked up at the call. There was only one of him in the fort, after all. A centurion stood in the doorway and beckoned him with an impatient wave of his hand. “The commander wants you.”

Esca rose to his feet smoothly, quickly, dropping the half-rolled bandage back onto the pile. If the commander called for him, then best not to keep the commander waiting. He slipped through the door and past the centurion, hearing the man fall into step behind him, wondering why the Roman would allow a slave to walk before him. Then he felt the hard shove to his shoulder that made him stumble as he centurion hissed, “Hurry up, slave.”

Ah, how predictable, he thought. Since he’d arrived, he’d seen how the legionaries loved their commander. And why shouldn’t they? With one well-aimed spear throw, the man had fouled several chariots. The rest of the charge had faltered, allowing the soldiers to regroup and mount an offensive, which had broken the back of the rebellion.

Esca couldn’t fault their devotion. After all, had his master been a Briton, Esca would have gladly followed such a man into battle, would have been his armor-bearer and shield-brother and driven his chariot, would have been honored to fight, bleed and die at his side.

But his master was not a Briton.
He was a Roman. And for that Esca hated him, his men loved him, and subsequently, as a Briton, Esca bore the brunt of their anger at their losses and their commander’s injury.

The centurion followed him right into the commander’s room, unnecessarily announcing, “Your slave, sir.”

His master looked up from where he sat at his table. “Ah, thank you, Galba.”

The centurion saluted sharply, and with a firm, “Sir!” exited the room.

“Have a seat, Esca,” he master said, gesturing to the stool set across from him. Hesitantly, Esca eased himself down, noting the lined wooden board and small piles of black and white stones set on the table. A game board and pieces, Esca realized, his last master having been fond of playing with other travelers when he got the chance.

When he was settled, his master pushed the small pile of white stones toward him, taking the black for himself. “I… borrowed these from one of the men,” the Roman explained. “I didn’t think to bring my own when I came, and I thought a few games a day might help me pass the time while I heal. If you’re willing to play with me, that is.” As he spoke, he began setting his pieces on the board. Esca made no move to touch his own.

“I’m sorry, I don’t know how to play,” Esca said carefully.

The centurion just chuckled and waved away his excuse. “I figured as much. Don’t worry. It’s really quite easy once you know the rules. Here, set your pieces up like mine.”

Esca looked at his master’s side of the board, and picking up a few of his own stones, began to lay them out. When he was done, his master began going over the rules, moving both of their pieces to show as he explained each one.

The purpose of the game, petteia, was fairly straightforward, as were the rules—though the game itself provided for a level of complexity that wasn’t at first apparent. His master often stopped to show a better move or explain why something was more advantageous, and by the time the centurion claimed to be too hungry and too tired for more, Esca was reasonably certain he understood it.

The next day, his master asked him to come back in the early afternoon, after Esca had finished helping Aulus, to play a few more games. Esca privately wondered why he bothered to ask, but simply murmured a deferential, “Yes, domine,” and returned to the commander’s quarters a couple of hours after he brought the man lunch.

They played petteia again, and switched off for a few rounds of calculi to keep things from getting dull. That game was easier, and Esca found he was able to switch between them with little trouble.

Playing the games was both welcome—for the chance to take a break and exercise his mind—and fraught with tension, fearful that he was going to do something to upset his master. At first, he lost every game, since he was still learning. But as he grew more competent, he was very careful, however, not to win, though there were games when he was sure he could have. Esca chose his “mistakes” carefully, picking moves that made it easy to mask what he was doing. His master wanted to play, and if he wanted a real challenge he surely would have asked one of his men. As he’d asked Esca, that meant he wanted to win.

Everything went fine for several days. Esca was even coming to enjoy these few hours each day, for the simple freedom it gave him, even if it was no more than moving stones about a board. He
could pretend that he had some choice, some control over his life.

They’d just finished another game of *petteia*, Esca losing of course, and he was about to collect the stones and ask his master if he wanted to play another round or if he wanted Esca to fetch his dinner when the Roman suddenly swept his arm out and across the board, sending the stones flying across the room.

Esca’s eyes snapped up, immediately fixing on the centurion’s face which was now clouded in anger. He froze, knowing he should look away, look down, begin picking up the pieces, apologizing, anything to fix what he’d somehow done wrong. But he didn’t know what he’d done wrong, why his master was angry at him, and it kept him transfixed where he was, in a kind of horrible limbo, waiting to find out what he’d done.

“Stop it!” his master barked. “Just… just *stop it!* Stop losing on purpose!”

Beneath the table, Esca’s hands curled into fists and he licked his lips nervously. “I’m not—” he began, but his master cut him off with a sharp, violent slash of his hand.

“And don’t lie to me!”

Esca finally dropped his gaze, hands still clenched on his lap. “Forgive me, domine,” he mumbled.

“And stop apologizing!” His master made a frustrated sound and Esca flicked his gaze up just enough to see him raking his hands through his hair, mussing the normally carefully combed strands.

“I don’t know what you want,” Esca choked out, feeling completely lost. Why didn’t this man act the way he was supposed to? Why did he make everything so much harder than it had to be? Why couldn’t he just treat Esca like the slave he was and stop making him want things he couldn’t have?

“I want you to stop coddling me,” his master grated. “Just because my body’s damaged doesn’t mean my mind is. All I want is the chance to forget that I’m stuck here. I just—”

He broke off, taking a deep breath. “I’m sorry, Esca. I shouldn’t be yelling at you. This isn’t your fault and you don’t deserve my anger.”

“I am your slave,” Esca said quietly.

“You’re still a man,” his master said firmly, and Esca looked up in surprise. “I thought you might enjoy the games like I do. And if I was wrong, and you don’t want to play, then tell me and I won’t force you to.” Then he offered Esca a crooked smile. “But if you do, then don’t treat me like a child. *Play.* Try to win. There’s no fun in it if there’s no challenge.”

Esca help his gaze for several moments, and then nodded tentatively, “Yes, domine.”

“Yes to the not wanting to play or yes to the stop losing deliberately?”

“To the losing, domine.”

“Good.” The Roman’s grin widened before his expression became chagrined. “I’m, ah, afraid you’ll have to get the stones, though. I don’t think my leg would like it if I tried to get them.”

Esca slid from the stool without a word, finding the scattered stones quickly and returned them to the table. A quick count revealed they were still missing a few, and Esca hunted in the corners and under the bed before locating all of them.
“Your stones, *domine,*,” he said, placing the last couple in front of his master.

“Thank you. And, Esca?” He waited until Esca looked up at him. “I’m a military man. If you have to, call me sir or something. Mithras, you can even call me Marcus when we’re alone if you want to, but the ‘*domine*’ doesn’t sit right with me.”

There was a long, long pause before Esca finally found his voice, and the whole time he wondered if it was some kind of twisted test. Finally, he was able to swallow. “Yes, sir.”

“Excellent!” And something in Esca slipped, lost its hold and shook free, and he realized he didn’t hate his master quite as much as he thought.

Then *Marcus* smiled happily at him, and flipped the board over to reveal a completely different set of black lines painted on to the board. “Now, let me teach you how to play *tabula*.”

Chapter End Notes

Information about the games comes from this site:
http://ablemedia.com/ctcweb/showcase/boardgames.html

Because the rules aren’t fully known or understood, I tried to leave descriptions vague enough that they get the point across without me sounding like an idiot.
Chapter 5

Marcus looks at Ecsa, and sees more than a slave. He sees a man.

As winter approached, Marcus was increasingly glad that he taught Esca how to play the games. His leg was healing, and healing correctly according to what Aulus and Esca both said. But it was slower than he liked or wanted. And with the colder weather setting it, he found that it bothered the wound. Since he couldn’t exercise and stretch it the way it needed to be, it often ached and felt tight. Marcus did as many of his duties as he could—which, admittedly, was still not much—but he was still left with far too much time on his hands. If not for Esca, he likely would have been driven mad by the boredom.

In the several weeks they had been playing, Esca had grown remarkably competent at each of the different games. Marcus still held a slim advantage, but virtue of having grown up with the games all his life, but he suspected that before long even that edge would be gone. That fact didn’t bother him. Esca’s mind was quick, and he made for a stimulating opponent, forcing Marcus to think and play more carefully.

It would be nice, though, if he talked more.

Marcus himself wasn’t particularly talkative if the situation didn’t call for it, though he enjoyed instructing his troops, or engaging in lively discussion and debate, and simply talking with friends and fellow soldiers. He’d thought with several hours each day of being alone in Esca’s presence he could also pass the time with some friendly conversation.

But Esca…didn’t talk.

He wasn’t mute, and he answered questions asked directly of him, but he never initiated dialogue. Out of sheer curiosity, Marcus had refrained from trying to engage him and waited to see how long it would take before Esca would say something beyond what was required of his duties. He gave up after three days because he could not keep his tongue still any longer.

The silence, though, gave Marcus the opportunity to observe. Since Esca was unwilling to talk, he took to looking for non-verbal clues as to what was going on inside his head. Stoic as the Briton was, there were subtle tells in his expression—a slight furrow between his brows, the corners of his mouth pulling down in an almost-frown, a minute squint. Nothing overt, nothing blatant, just small signs that one only saw if one knew what they were looking for.

And Marcus was never sure what would provoke those expressions. It seemed like the oddest things sometimes—a piece of cloth, a bit of twisted metal, the snatch of some soldier singing a song. Something that would make Esca pause for a moment, for a slip of emotion to show through before it was smoothed away behind the mask he usually wore. It was intriguing, fascinating. The more he watched his slave, the more curious Marcus became. He was aware that such preoccupation with a slave was inappropriate, but really, what else did he have to do and who would say anything about it? If he chose to try and find out more about the man who served him, then that was his choice.

So when they played each day, he simply talked, not specifically asking Esca things, but touching upon topics that he hoped would draw the other man out. He already knew the basics of how Esca came to be at the fort, and given his horrific blundering into that bit of information, he was
reluctant to mention anything too personal. Instead, he tried to find topics of common ground they shared. He talked about the weather and about the local area. He ruminated on horses and chariots, and the various methods and merits of how both their peoples used them. He related anecdotes from his childhood and training. And when each sentence was met with a blank stare or confused expression, he despaired just a little bit of having anyone in this fort to talk to.

Until one day, during a lull, Esca said very quietly, “If Rome’s armies are as relentless as your talking, I know how they conquered the world.”

Marcus couldn’t help the wide grin that crossed his face at finally having gotten a reaction out of the other man, even if it was a sort of backhanded compliment. “I was beginning to think you’d gone mute on me.”

There was the tiniest flicker of gray eyes at him as Esca selected a stone and placed it carefully. “My masters have never wanted me for my conversation before.”

Marcus’s smile faltered momentarily before he moved his own stone. Not all masters treated their slaves well, or even decently, especially ones bought cheaply, as Marcus suspected Esca had been. That Esca had suffered was evident, but Marcus couldn’t feel guilty for the actions of other men. Their honor and shame was their own, and he refused to bear any part of the latter when he knew he’d done nothing to warrant it. He treated Esca well, and would continue to do so because that was who he was.

“What can I say?” Marcus said lightly. “I’ve always been a little different. But, come, there must be something you want to discuss.”

Esca gave a tiny shrug. “Whatever you wish to discuss is fine. If you want my conversation, then you have it.”

Well, Marcus thought, it’s a start.

As the days passed, Marcus slowly drew Esca out. Talk between them was forced and stilted at first, and more than once Marcus stumbled across some topic that made Esca withdraw. Some of the topics Marcus understood, but others made no sense that he could tell, except for the explanation that they evoked some memory that was unpleasant for Esca. And over time, Marcus learned it was all right to discuss weapons, with the exception of daggers. It was fine to talk about life in general, but not to ask for details about family. And fighting techniques were fair game, but not specific battles they had been in, or the subject of honor. It was tough to avoid that sometimes, but Marcus did his best, and eventually Esca became willing to converse more freely, and even laugh quietly at an occasional joke.

Marcus was enjoying their time together for more than just the mental stimulation of the games and conversation. With Esca, Marcus felt no need to maintain the front of stoic commander that he did in front of his men—Lutorius and Aulus being the sole exceptions—and since he relied on Esca so much, he became more than a simple slave there to help him with everyday tasks. He occupied a shadowy, gray area for Marcus—not an equal, not even one of his men, but still close, someone Marcus opened up to. A friend…of sorts.

He was waiting for Esca one day, slightly annoyed that it was well past the time the other man usually arrived, rattling a few stones in one hand. Frowning thoughtfully, he put the stones down and tested his leg. He might as well go and see if he could find Esca. His leg was fairly sound today, and it could use a stretch. Grabbing his crutch, he slowly made his way from his quarters,
moving slowly in order to maintain a dignified gait, hoping Esca wouldn’t be far so he didn’t have to worry about overtaxing himself.

As it turned out, Esca wasn’t far at all. Marcus found him in the next wing, backed against a wall, one of his soldiers looming over him. Esca’s head was down, his shoulders hunched, his entire posture screaming subservience, and Marcus couldn’t figure out why either one of them was there or why his soldier appeared to be chastising his slave.

“What’s going on?” he asked, quietly but firmly.

Both men looked over at him surprised, and when Esca turned his head up, Marcus saw the red spot on his cheekbone. Frowning, he limped over, reaching out when he was close enough to grasp Esca’s jaw and turn his face so he could see the mark clearly, and Marcus felt himself flushing with anger.

“What’s your name, soldier?”

L-Licinius, sir,” the soldier stammered, only just seeming to realize that he was in trouble.

“What exactly are you doing, Licinius?”

“I…well, it’s your slave, sir.”

“I’m aware of who he his,” Marcus said, watching as Licinius struggled to meet his eyes. “I want to know what you’re doing with him and why.”

The soldier’s eyes dropped and he flushed. “He was supposed to finish oiling our armor, sir, and he hadn’t. I was…asking him why.”

“I see,” Marcus said coldly. “I was not aware that you asked questions with your hand instead of your mouth.” Licinius flushed darker. Beneath his hand, Marcus felt Esca tremble slightly and he dropped his hand quickly, only then realizing that he still held Esca’s face in his hand. Once released, Esca slid back a half step and stilled himself, waiting.

Marcus focused his attention back on Licinius. “Tell me, soldier, exactly why you have Esca polishing your armor. Are you somehow incapable of that task?”

“No, sir,” the man said quickly. “It’s just that, well, he’s a slave, and we thought he spends too much time lazing about as it is and that it couldn’t hurt if he made himself useful.”

“Esca is my slave,” Marcus snapped. “The only orders he receives are from me, not from anyone else.”

“Yes, sir.”

“And Licinius? You’ve no right to touch him. Raise a hand again to what belongs to me and you will suffer the consequences. Understood?”

“No, sir,” Licinius said shakily, now completely crimson, and he snapped out a salute before hastily turning on his heel. Marcus waited until the soldier was long gone before turning back to Esca, only to find the Briton watching him with a strange expression. Then Esca shook himself slightly.

“I’m sorry,” he said quietly.
“Don’t apologize,” Marcus said quickly. “But you should have told me, Esca. He had no right to do that.”

“But you do.” There was an odd timbre in Esca’s voice, something indefinable that Marcus couldn’t quite put his finger on.

“Yes…” he said slowly. “You are my slave, Esca.”

Esca paused for a brief moment, and then nodded, almost to himself. “Right,” he said softly. “Of course.” Then he stepped forward. “Can I help you back, sir? The walk must have tired your leg.”

Marcus let Esca help him, but he couldn’t help feeling that he’d missed something.

~*~

Just after the solstice, the weather turned brutally cold. The soldiers who’d been there the longest said it was the coldest winter they recalled, and the news they brought back from the village confirmed it. If it rained, there would be snow, but the dry weather was currently holding. The cold was a bane to Marcus. It left his leg tight and aching, and he was constantly freezing. He wore his heaviest clothing and kept his cloak wrapped around him, but he still felt the chill to his bones, and his hands and feet were always chilled. The small braziers they used only took the barest edge off of the cold in every room. Marcus longed briefly for the barracks, where the close quarters and number of bodies meant that aside from the kitchens, it was one of the warmest places in the fort.

One night, lying curled in his bed, beneath every fur and blanket, he shivered and looked miserably up at the ceiling, wondering why he’d ever thought it had been a good idea to come to Briton. Reclaimed honor was of little comfort when he was growing more convinced with every passing day that he would never be warm again.

He turned, shifting, trying to ease the pain in his leg. The blankets slipped slightly, gaping open slightly and allowing the frigid air to sneak in. He cursed under his breath and quickly tucked the edges back in. Then he settled again, looking across the darkened room. Along the wall near the doorway was Esca’s cot, and for several minutes Marcus watched the still form sleeping upon it. How could Esca possibly sleep with all this cold? And especially since he had fewer blankets than Marcus. Was it simply that as a Briton was used to such cold and that it didn’t bother him? If so, Marcus envied him. At that moment, he would have given much to simply be able to ignore the cold and sleep.

As he continued to lie there, an idea began to grow in his mind. It would make a great deal of sense if they shared their blankets and body heat. The warmth would ease the ache of Marcus’s injury and allow him to sleep and actually wake rested. Then he dismissed the idea almost at once. It didn’t seem…right, or wholly appropriate, to disturb the other man for such a reason. He was a soldier of Rome, he could weather this discomfort alone.

But it kept nagging at him. Marcus focused his attention on Esca. Why not? he asked himself. Surely the other man was at least a bit cold, and he would benefit from the shared warmth. Marcus worried his lower lip between his teeth. No one would fault him for it, or comment on it. And he was cold.

“Esca,” he called softly. There was no movement from the cot. “Esca,” he said, a bit louder, and there was an answering stir from beneath the blankets.

“Yes?” Esca asked, his voice rough and slurred from sleep.
“Come here,” Marcus said. “And bring your blankets.”

There was a long pause, and Esca made no move to do what Marcus bid him. “My blankets?” he said slowly.

“Yes.”

Another long pause, and then the cot creaked as Esca shifted, blankets rustling as he gathered them in his arms. When he approached the side of Marcus’s bed, his face was tight, his expression unreadable. “Cold, sir?” he asked as he began draping them over Marcus without needing to be told.

“Yes,” Marcus answered, reveling in the weight of more blankets. When Esca had set the last one down, Marcus lifted the edge and said, “Now, climb in, quickly, before all the heat escapes.”

For a moment, Esca’s face blanched, his eyes going wide in what Marcus would have said was shock. Then he ducked his head and the angle and fall of his hair obscured anything else Marcus might have seen. “You want me to share your blankets?”

“Yes,” Marcus said impatiently, mourning every bit of heat that was escaping. “Surely your people do this? Share the warmth of a bedroll on cold nights?”

“Yes, of course,” Esca murmured and then finally eased himself down and beneath the blankets. He settled onto his side, showing his back to Marcus, and dragged the blankets over his shoulder.

Marcus sighed gratefully, both from the extra blankets and the heat he could feel radiating off of Esca and already trapped in the air between them. Almost without thinking, he slid his bad leg forward and pressed it against Esca’s, wanting the heat of the other man’s body against it, even if it was separated by their braccae. It felt better nearly instantly, and finally feeling warm again, he drifted to sleep.

~*~

That night, Marcus dreamed of strange things. Not so much strange, really, simply dreams he hadn’t had in awhile, his body and mind too distracted by his injury. Dreams of hot nights, lustful sounds, and the feel of flesh on flesh.

He was back in Isca Silurium, his last post before coming here, and he stood in a small, dark room, alone save for the dark-haired, dark-eyed girl he’d been intimate with. She lit a lamp, allowing him to see more clearly the blush of her cheek, the pale column of her throat. Marcus tried vainly tried to remember his name, but could not. It didn’t seem to matter to her. She shh ed him, placing one finger over his lips before moving to slip her dress off her shoulders, revealing more pale skin, small, high breasts, a narrow waist that flared into gently rounded hips.

Marcus felt his blood pool in his groin, his cock growing thick and heavy at the sight, as well as the feel of her fingers trailing down over his chest and stomach. She smiled as she looked down, watching his cock rise between them, and then reached down to gently grasp him. Marcus groaned at the contact, his hips stuttering forward as she stroked him slowly. He reached up, grabbed her shoulders and held on, closing his eyes and just letting her pleasure him.

Her grip tightened slightly, and was suddenly rougher, as if she bore calluses instead of the smooth, soft skin he knew she had. He opened his eyes, looking down into her gray ones as she watched him. Wait. He blinked. Gray eyes? Marcus shook his head. The girl had brown eyes, he was sure of it. He shook his head again, but it was for naught. Her eyes remained stubbornly gray,
and so familiar to Marcus.

She kept stroking, and Marcus thrust into her hand. For all the strangeness—the hardened, callused hand and gray eyes—it felt good. It had been a long time, too long, since he’d had the pleasure of another’s touch upon him, and no inconsistencies were going to disrupt this. He pulled her closer, holding her body against his and wrapped his arms around her shoulder.

One particularly pleasurable swipe of her thumb over the head of his cock had him squeezing her tightly, forcing a slight grunt from her. A rougher, deeper grunt than any sound Marcus had ever heard from the girl before. He pulled back to look at her and found Esca standing in front of him, head down, shoulders rigid and a talented hand working upon him.

A tiny voice began to scream a warning in Marcus’s mind, and he struggled back toward wakefulness, shaking off the dream. The room and Esca vanished, replaced by his own dark commander’s quarters, cold air of the room welcome on his flushed face.

But the pleasure didn’t stop, nor the feel of a hand working on his cock, and Marcus went stiff with shock and looked down.

Esca was facing him now, slightly curled, his head tucked under Marcus’s chin, face hidden. One of his hands was inside Marcus’s braccae, closed tight upon his rigid length and stroking. His other hand was between them, simply resting on Marcus’s chest. Marcus, for his part, had an arm wrapped around Esca’s shoulders, his legs slightly parted and thrusting unconsciously into Esca’s hand.

Reality snapping him brutally awake, he jerked his arm away and did his best to still his hips. Esca’s motions stuttered for a moment, but didn’t cease, and in fact, sped up. Marcus bit back a moan, realizing how very close he was, and clamped a hand down on Esca’s wrist.

“Esca,” he hissed, horrified, “what are you doing?!”
Chapter 6

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

Esca feels Marcus’s eyes upon him and waits for the inevitable that he knows is coming. And when it doesn’t come, it hits him harder than any blow ever could.

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“Esca, what are you doing?!”

Esca hunched his shoulders, curling his back and tucking his head further under Marcus’s chin as his owner clamped down on his wrist with an iron grip. In his hand, he could feel Marcus’s erection, hot and throbbing. He knew his master was close and couldn’t understand why the man had stopped him, only that something was wrong. Esca didn’t move, stricken with the realization that he’d erred somehow.

“Let go.” Marcus probably meant his voice to be firm, but it came out hoarse and fractured. He cleared his throat, the noise loud in the sudden stillness of the room. “Esca, let go.”

Esca did, carefully, hearing the tiny whimper as he released Marcus. Once he’d withdrawn his hand from Marcus’s braccae, Marcus moved over, putting some distance between them. Only then did Marcus release his wrist, letting out a relieved sigh. Silence lay between them, heavy like the blankets that covered them. Esca was glad for the dark, glad that it hid him and his shame from anyone who would see it, even though Marcus was his only audience.

Marcus was the first to break the silence. “Why did you do that?” he asked in a low voice.

“I am your slave.” The words were rote by now, delivered as numb as Esca felt.

“That’s…that’s not—” Marcus cursed, and Esca felt the thump as he banged his fist on the bed in frustration. “Why?” he asked.

Esca licked his lips and swallowed nervously. One wrong word, and the relative peace he had here could be shattered in a heartbeat. “You ordered me into your bed,” he said quietly.

“Yes, but not for that. I said I was cold and I meant it.”

“I felt your need,” Esca said simply, “when you pressed yourself against me, so I saw to it.”

“Felt me…when I pressed…oh. Oh, Mithras.” Marcus cleared his throat and fidgeted, and Esca suspected that if there were light in the room, and if he were actually looking at him, that Marcus’s face would be burning in embarrassment.

“I-I didn’t mean it,” Marcus stuttered. “I was… I was having a, uh, dream, and it’s been… awhile since I’ve shared my bed, and so I…I wasn’t trying to do anything to you, Esca. It’s….”

He trailed off, but Esca didn’t need him to speak anymore in order to piece together what had happened. His master had been dreaming and had sought out the warm body next to him. Without a reason to doubt his words, Esca was forced to accept them for what they were. But even so, he couldn’t entirely erase the feel of Marcus against him, thrusting into his hand and emitting small, pleased sounds. Whatever his master had been dreaming of, he’d found Esca’s actions pleasurable,
and Esca knew that it was likely only a matter of time before his proud owner availed himself of what was his.

“Then I apologize,” Esca said quietly. “Experience has taught me to except certain things and I didn’t mean to take advantage.”

“You didn’t take advantage!” Marcus assured him hastily. “If anything, it’s my fault. I’m sorry for not being more…clear…on what I wanted.”

Esca nodded. “Do you want me to return to my pallet?”

There was silence from the man next to him, and Esca could practically feel him thinking. “I don’t suppose it’s any warmer now?” he asked.

“Not that I can tell, sir.”

“Oh. Then stay.”

“Yes, sir.” Esca resettled himself under the blankets, holding himself very still as Marcus did the same. They stayed apart, each lying stiffly, separated by no more than a handbreadth, and carefully not touching or speaking as the minutes crawled by.

Eventually, Marcus fell asleep, but Esca forced himself to stay alert. He wondered if Marcus’s oddly innocent ramblings were actually a subtle way of forcing Esca to come to him. The claims of a dream and that his groping of Esca was neither intended nor wanted…were they lies? So far, he hadn’t seen anything to make him believe his master would do that, but Romans were strange, his master in particular. None of his other masters had any trouble lying with their slaves, but he wondered if his master found shame in lying with another man, and pondered the possibility that Marcus was using it as an excuse to take him. After all, if a slave threw himself at his master, then the master could hardly be looked down on for taking what was so freely offered. And for a man with such a strange code of honor, it seemed quite possible.

He shuddered, now certain that as soon as he was asleep he would again feel Marcus wrapping an arm around him, again pressing his arousal against him, and this time he would expect Esca to finish what he started.

Esca lay awake a long time, waiting.

~*~

The next morning, Esca slipped free of Marcus’s bed as soon as it was light. During the night, his master had closed the distance between them again and pressed their bodies together, but had done nothing else. Still, Esca had woken at the contact and slept poorly thereafter. He was tired and sore from holding himself so rigid, and with the excuse of duties to be attended, he fled from Marcus’s side.

Setting to his tasks kept him busy and away from Marcus for most of the morning, save for having to bring the man his breakfast. When he did, Marcus was up and dressed already, seemingly engrossed in some reports on the table before him. He didn’t look up when Esca set the tray down, and only muttered a quiet thanks.

The hours crawled by as Esca waited for some sort of summons—summons that never came. As he busied himself around the fort, Esca caught glimpses of Marcus limping about with his stick, talking to commanders and his men. He was sure Marcus has seen him about, but made no move to call or beckon him over. As the afternoon and the traditional time for games approached, Esca
debated going or not. He decided not to. He had no desire to see Marcus at the moment, and besides, Marcus could always order him to his quarters.

Yet, evening fell with no word from his master, not even a comment that Esca hadn’t been around to attend to him. Not even when Esca brought Marcus his dinner did the other man say or do anything, and Esca hesitated on the threshold, wondering if he should say something.

_No,_ he told himself firmly. _Don’t fall into that trap. Don’t give him anything you don’t absolutely have to._

When night truly fell and the fort began to settle, the first sentries taking their places, Esca made his way slowly to Marcus’s quarters. Marcus sat at the table, turning the small wooden eagle he wore around his neck over and over in his hands, and he said nothing as Esca began to douse the lamps and turned down the covers on the bed. He’d never removed his blankets, so the bed was still set for both of them. He paused, debating whether or not to take his blankets and go to his pallet, but in the end, he merely slipped his shoes off and eased onto the bed. He would not show weakness now.

Marcus’s chair scraped against the floor as he stood, and Esca heard his uneven footsteps as he made his way to the bed, pausing much the same way Esca had, before he, too, got in. Though why he should hesitate, Esca didn’t know. It wasn’t as if Marcus had anywhere else he could go.

As they had before, both men lay there stiffly. Esca could feel the slight tremors from Marcus as the man shivered. He waited for Marcus to close to distance between them again, but he didn’t, and Esca struggled against his weariness, fighting to stay awake. After what seemed like an eternity, Marcus rolled over, presenting his back to Esca, and his breathing gradually deepened and evened out. Esca allowed himself to relax minutely, relieved that whatever Marcus was planning, he didn’t seem intent on doing it right now.

He, too, rolled onto his side, so that they were back to back, and let sleep claim him.

~*~

The routine repeated itself each day, things growing increasingly tense between them. No matter how they fell asleep, each morning, Esca woke to find Marcus had shifted during the night, closing the space between them. He almost wished Marcus _had_ taken him that first night, if only to put an end to the terrible anxiety of waiting he was left in. At least then he’d know what was expected of him and wouldn’t have to guess at what to say and do. And he could go back to hating his master instead of trying to reconcile the sliver of true honor he saw in the man with what Marcus was.

Each morning Esca managed to escape without waking him. Until the morning, Esca woke once again to Marcus pressed against him, an arm thrown over his waist and unmistakable hardness pressing into the cleft of his buttocks. He swallowed thickly and let himself go limp, just waiting.

Marcus woke slowly, his arm tightening around Esca as he rubbed his face into the back of Esca’s neck. He murmured something unintelligible and shifted, stretching as he came around. And then he froze, going rigid against Esca. “Oh, _gods_!” Marcus gasped and jerked away. “I’m sorry. Sorry! I don’t know why…I didn’t—”

Esca said nothing, and simply rolled over onto his back and stared at the ceiling, not caring that the movement put him closer to Marcus. “How do you want me?” he asked, voice expressionless.

“What?”
“On my back or on my stomach?” Esca clarified. And then after a moment’s pause, added, “Or on my knees?”

“Esca, I don’t want you at all,” Marcus whispered, horrified. In response, Esca merely flicked his gaze over and down to Marcus’s groin and the bulge barely concealed there. Marcus jerked the blankets back over himself and scooted as far away as he could.

“Esca,” he said sharply, “stop. I don’t know why you’re doing this, but stop.”

Esca looked at Marcus full in the face, past caring, already welcoming the pain to come. “Why should you be any different than the others?” he asked. “Why shouldn’t I expect you to do what those before you have done?”

“The others…?” Marcus repeated, green eyes wide and he suddenly seemed so very, very young to be in command of this fort, to be a hero and a gravely-injured one at that. “Your other masters…. Esca, what did they do to you?”

It wasn’t sympathy or pity Esca heard in his voice because it couldn’t be. He should stop now, just…just go, but something drove him on. How naïve could Marcus truly be?

“What do you want to know?” he asked, jaw tight and soul empty. “How many of my masters raped me? How many others they allowed to fuck me to teach me my place? Shall I give an account of the skills I was taught, or would you just rather a demonstration?”

Marcus had no response to that. He just continued to stare at Esca until Esca was forced to avert his gaze. Once they were no longer looking at each other, it was like whatever madness had possessed Esca to speak fled, and he felt ill, his gut roiling in shame at what he’d said, what he’d allowed his master to learn. Why bother trying to protect his weaknesses when he showed his belly with so little provocation?

Moving quickly, he rolled out of the bed and jammed his feet into his shoes. For the first time in years, he ignored his master’s call of, “Esca, wait!” and slipped out of the door.

~*~

Esca ran and hid like a frightened animal. He sought out a small, dark corner, hidden amongst the Romans’ supplies, and crouched there, listening fearfully for the sound of soldiers looking for him. Hiding would do him no good, only delay the inevitable. He should face his fate like a man, with some semblance of honor, but he couldn’t bring himself to uncurl from his spot.

All the old hurts welled up in him, every cruelty, every indignity, pressing against him, until he struggled to merely draw breath. To admit aloud, before his enemy, what had been done to him…to admit to himself the truth of his life was too much and he found himself fighting back the sting of shameful tears.

For so long he’d been able to…not forget about it, but to ignore it, to not feel the constant ache, to cut that part of himself off so that it didn’t destroy him. And then came this.

Damn Marcus. Damn his every kindness, every consideration. Damn his strange honor and the way he looked at Esca as a man and not a slave. Damn his Roman master for making Esca remember, for forcing Esca to feel for the first time in years. The armor that had protected his heart and soul lay shattered at his feet, useless, and Esca was laid bare, unable to shield himself.

He couldn’t do this anymore. Already he was so close to losing the last of himself, so close to forgetting who and what he was. If he kept this up, kept serving under the pretense of honor, then
what would be left of him when he did die? The spirits of his family would never recognize him, even if he did find his way to them. Better to die now, better to take the coward’s way and take his own life, than this.

Better to die on a Roman sword, even if his hand were the one to hold it.

Sheer necessity forced him from his hiding place, and he scurried along, head down and shoulders hunched. Loath to attend Marcus—and, perversely, somewhat ashamed that he’d left the man to fend for himself all week—he helped Aulus instead. He expected some comment, or someone to come fetch him…but nothing came. The surgeon merely set him to a task as he normally did, and the day passed.

Esca wondered if he should end this tonight. Marcus wasn’t the heaviest sleeper, but deep enough that Esca could probably slip free, steal his sword and fall upon it without alerting the other man. And certainly before the lame man could do anything about it.

Resolved, his heart felt lighter as he went about his tasks. He felt almost at peace, realizing his death was so close, following him like a shadow. It had been much the same way before that last battle, standing beside his father and brothers, knowing that they couldn’t survive, but that at least their death had been their choice. Not even being ordered to bring Marcus his dinner as usual dampened his growing anticipation.

Marcus sat at his table once again, and he didn’t look up as Esca slipped the tray in front of him. Stepping back, Esca turned to go, but froze when he felt a hand close around his wrist.

“Tá brón orm.” The words were quiet, the accent and inflection not quite right, but Esca understood them nevertheless, and whipped his head around to stare down at Marcus in shock.

“I’m sorry.”

How long since someone had spoken Esca’s language to him? He’d heard it, spoken by other slaves, or by the people his last master had traded with, but never with him. And now, to have it spoken to him by his master, and for it to be an apology…. His heart constricted painfully within his chest.

“You speak my language?” he couldn’t stop himself from asking in disbelief.

Marcus’s eyes remained solemnly dark, but his lips lifted in the tiniest quirk of a smile. “Did I say it wrong? I learned when I came here, but I haven’t had much chance to practice.”

“Why?”

Marcus looked down. “I thought…I thought maybe if I could speak the language, I might understand the people better. That I might avoid some problems that way.” He gave a quiet, humorless chuckle. “For all the good it did.”

His had tightened on Esca’s wrist. “I meant what I said. I am sorry. I should not have…prodded into something so personal. A man’s life should not be entertainment for others. I meant nothing by it.” Then he looked back up. “But, Esca…I’m not those men. What they did…they should not have done. All I can ask is that you not judge me by their actions, but by my own. If I ever gave the impression that I was like them, then, again, I am sorry.”

It took Esca several long moments to catch his breath, and several more to find his voice. “You are a very strange master, to apologize so frequently to a slave.”
A more genuine smile turned up the corners of Marcus’s mouth. “Honor demands that if an offense is given, an apology be offered, no matter who the man giving it or receiving it is.”

“Then your form of honor is unique among all the Romans I have met.”

Marcus’s smile faltered. “I’m beginning to think that myself,” he said quietly. Gently, he released Esca’s wrist. “If you wouldn’t mind, then I should like to resume our games tomorrow?” he asked hopefully.

Esca weighed the request—for that’s what it was—carefully in his mind. Prepared for death, and yet…it suddenly seemed so much less appealing. It was a cold, dark end beside a newly kindled flame that Esca realized was hope. For the first time since he’d awoke bound and headed for auction, things seemed like they could get better.

He cursed himself for a fool. It was too little, far too little and far too late. Yet when he opened his mouth to give Marcus some sort of placating answer, he found himself saying, “Yes, I would like that.”

Chapter End Notes

A couple things I wanted to note here:

1) I added a very small section to the first chapter when I realized I forgotten about it, and that it will be fairly critical later on. It’s marked in the chapter.

2) “Tá brón orm.” is Gaelic. And though I believe Esca would have spoken Pictish, as the language is dead, I went with what the movie did and used Gaelic in its place. This is specifically Irish Gaelic, as it was easiest for me to find with Google. I will, however, be more than happy to accept any help from someone who knows more than I and has a better alternative. I’m well aware of my deficiencies in certain areas.

3) Esca’s suicide ideation isn't intended to come from any place of deep depression, more of a "this is enough, time to find another way" sort of mindset, which is why he seems to let it go so easily. He doesn't view death and suicide in quite the same way as people today tend to, and I don't want anyone to think I'm marginalizing the actual struggles a suicidal person goes through.
Marcus looks at Esca, and sees more than a slave. He sees a man, who, despite Rome's best efforts, still has his pride.

\[\text{~*~} \]

The first few days after they reached their tentative agreement were extremely awkward, but that eased gradually as time passed. Marcus and Esca settled back into the routine they'd had before—though with a careful distance between them—with Esca helping others as needed after attending him in the morning, and then returning in the afternoon. This time around, though, Marcus found himself watching his slave with a more diligent eye, like tonight, over their last game for the evening.

Now that he knew what Esca had suffered—at least the basics, for Esca had offered no details and he wasn't about to ask—it was easy to see the careful way Esca tracked the movements of those around him, the way he kept his attention on them even if his gaze was focused elsewhere, the way he held himself so very still whenever someone came too close. The behavior reminded Marcus of a hound that had been beaten too often and now only expected pain when someone drew near. Marcus wondered how hard it was for Esca not to snap like such an animal, how he could keep his sanity after so long.

It was hard to watch with his new understanding, to see how Esca trusted no one, not even Marcus, how he always seemed to wait for the worst to happen, and Marcus was determined to change that, at least when it came to him. He wasn't stupid. Esca was a slave and no soldier in the fort would ever see him differently, but Marcus had seen the good in Esca, the moments when he cared for Marcus's injury and tended to him with a gentleness he hadn't expected. It would have been so easy for Esca to use his injury against him, to give only enough care to see Marcus healed, but he went beyond that, and Marcus was grateful.

Perhaps, come spring, Marcus could convince him to spar and wrestle, to help build up the strength in his leg again. The soldiers under his command would, if ordered, but Marcus had no desire to do that. Bad enough that they saw him like this now, saw the weakness he couldn't hide, but it would be far worse if they witnessed and were a party to his first, fumbling attempts at training again. Marcus knew he couldn't bear that shame, and if he had to reveal it to anyone, best it be the person who had already seen him at his worst, the person who wouldn't breathe a word of it. Though whether that was because he was simply Marcus's slave or because he might actually want to help keep Marcus's honor was something he didn't know.

That thought made him pause, hand hovering over the board, stone held in his fingers. Esca looked up, his own hand stilling where he was rolling a pair of stones in it, and raised one eyebrow very slightly before dropping his gaze again. Marcus shook his head and placed the stone down, sitting back to wait while Esca played his turn.
As they played, Marcus realized that he didn’t want Esca to keep his silence simply because it was his duty as a slave to his master. He wanted Esca to do it because Esca wanted to.

He wanted Esca to be his friend.

It wasn't unheard of. Men and women freed their slaves all the time. Sometimes it was nothing more than allowing a slave to purchase their freedom. Sometimes they freed them as a reward for years of faithful service or for some noble and self-sacrificing act. They freed them to be friends and advisors. They freed them to marry them. There were laws and rules and ceremony surrounding such things. Marcus could free Esca and no one would bat an eye, though some would wonder privately what the slave had done to earn it.

And Marcus wanted to free Esca, if only to help make amends for what had been done to him.

But here, at the edge of the world, already so cut off from his home, Marcus had no one else to rely on. Oh, he trusted his men with his life, unconditionally, but he couldn't rely on them the way he did on Esca. If he freed Esca now, Esca would leave and Marcus couldn't afford that. More than that, Marcus would miss him, and these quiet moments they shared.

But, he resolved, he would free Esca someday. When his injuries were healed, when he was fit and whole and could stand as his own man again, then Esca would have his freedom. And until then, Marcus had time to make Esca a friend, to leave him with the sentiment that not all Romans were cruel.

That Esca met his eyes, like he just did, without fear or trepidation, was something of a relief. It was a welcome change from when Esca refused to look at him and helped ease Marcus's guilt over his own contribution to Esca's torments. Esca didn't seem to fear him as much, though he still remained a bit wary when Marcus's frustrations got the best of him.

Had Esca been born in Rome, he would have done well in whatever course his life took. Despite that he had been captured in battle, Marcus had seen the strength of his body, the sure way he moved. He had no doubt that if a sword was put in Esca hands, he would wield it with skill. And his mind.... Some in Rome often saw those from the edges of the empire as barbarians, crude, dumb peoples who rejected the glory of Rome because they were too stubborn to leave their ways for better ones. But only a fool would call Esca stupid or slow. From simply playing their games, it was obvious his mind was frighteningly quick, more so than Marcus's, and had he been educated as a proper Roman, Marcus doubted there would have been any door barred to him. He was a man than any would be proud to call his friend, though whether he would return the sentiment to Marcus was doubtful.

When their game ended, with Esca victorious—an outcome that came all too often these days—Marcus reluctantly snuffed the lamp and allowed Esca help him into bed. He rolled himself tight into his blankets, longing for the return of spring for entirely different reasons than strengthening his leg, and listened to Esca putter about, putting things away.

With a start of surprise, Marcus felt something draped on top of him, and opened his eyes to see Esca adding his blankets and then sit on the edge of the bed. "Esca, what are you doing?" he asked. "I've told you, you don't have to."

Esca snorted. "Your chattering teeth have kept me awake for half the night for the past week. You might not want a full night's sleep, but I do. Move over."

Somewhat stunned by Esca's boldness, Marcus bit his lip and slid over, giving Esca room to slip beneath the blankets. "Esca, if I...if I...."
"I know." Esca turned his head to look over his shoulder, gray eyes glinting in the faint light. "Marcus, I know. Just go to sleep." Then he turned back around, curled up on the edge of the bed and pulled the blankets over his shoulder. Marcus watched his still form for a moment and then did the same, putting his back to Esca in an attempt to prevent any more misunderstandings.

~*~

There wasn’t much travel in the winter beyond what was necessary. Aside from some supplies, or occasional communications, messages to and from Rome were rare. So a messenger, coming from the city of Rome itself, was notable.

Marcus greeted the messenger, and then took the satchel. There were the usual dispatches, but what caught Marcus’s eye were a small wooden box and an official sealed letter that accompanied it. After handing the messages to Lutorius, he broke the seal on the letter and read it with increasingly wide eyes.

“Sir?” he heard Lutorius ask quietly.

Marcus began to speak, but that had to clear his throat before his voice was clear. “For holding the fort under extreme duress, the Fourth Cohort of Gauls has been awarded the gilded laurel. From today, their standard will carry its first wreath.”

Lutorius smiled brilliantly. “That’s excellent news, sir!”

“The men will have to be told,” Marcus said, returning the smile with one of his own.

“Do you want me to gather them?”

“I…” Marcus faltered, looking down at his leg. “No, Lutorius. You tell them. I will join them tonight for the meal.”

“Yes, sir. If you’re sure.”

Marcus fingered the thick bandage beneath his braccae. “I am. Tell them I could not be more proud.”

“I will. Was there anything else?”

Looking back down, Marcus scanned the rest of the missive quietly, and then uttered a quiet exclamation of surprise. He grabbed for the wooden box and fumbled it open. Inside, wrapped in cloth, was an armilla.

“A military armilla,” he said quietly. “For conspicuous gallantry.” He raced the words etched into its surface. “Honor and faithfulness.”

“Then let me be the first to offer my congratulations,” Lutorius said. “I will let the men know of that as well.”

“You don’t have to.”

“The men will be quite pleased, sir.”

Marcus flushed and ducked his head. “Thank you, Lutorius.”

“Sir!” With a brief salute, the other centurion swept from the room. Marcus held the
Armilla for a long moment, before opening it and then clasping it around his wrist. He looked up to see Esca watching him oddly before he turned his gaze away.

“Congratulations,” he murmured, the sound barely drifting across the space between then.

Marcus nodded. “Thank you, Esca.”

~*~

“Why Britain?”

The question startled Marcus and he looked over the table at Esca, who sat hunched over the wax tablet with his stylus, slowly copying the letters Marcus had made for him to practice with. For a moment, he was too startled by the question to answer. He’d worked so hard on subtly encouraging Esca to engage in conversation, to ask questions or talk about what he felt like, that each time Esca actually did, he had to push down a little rush of pleasure.

Then he remembered himself. “Why?”

Esca didn’t look up, keep his focus on the tablet, but he frowned. “I’ve heard your men talk. You were allowed to choose your first post. You could have gone anywhere. So why Britain?”

Marcus set the report he was reading down on the table, and then stared at his hands. “A fair question,” he said quietly, “and one that I’ve never answered for another. They already know why.”

There was a long silence from Esca. “Fine,” he said, voice even, but Marcus could hear the tinge of tightness behind the words. “After all, you have no reason to tell your slave.”

Biting back a groan, Marcus shook his head. “No, that’s not it. I….” He sighed in frustration. “It’s not you or what you are. It’s something I’ve struggled with ever since my….”

There was a slight creak as Esca shifted on his stool, and Marcus looked up to see Esca looking at him, tablet forgotten for the moment. For a moment, he was ashamed. Esca had already revealed secrets of his past, secrets far darker and more painful, and Marcus, who claimed to want to be his friend, couldn’t bring himself to tell the other man of his own.

“I came to Britain,” he began slowly, “to try and regain my family’s honor. Well, to try and begin. I doubt I’ll succeed for many years yet.”

Esca’s gaze flickered to the armilla around his wrist, the one that had come a few weeks ago along with Marcus’s commendation. “Is that not enough?”

Marcus thumbed the flesh-warmed band of metal around his wrist. “It’s a start. I have a lot more to accomplish yet before my family’s name is spoken without scorn and shame, let alone praised.”

Brows furrowed, Esca frowned. “Why?”

Looking away, Marcus hesitated. “You asked why Britain?” Esca nodded. “I chose Britain because this is where it began. Where the name Aquila lost its honor. Where my father…died.”

There was a quick indrawn breath from Esca, but nothing more, and Marcus was profoundly glad. Eventually, Esca softly asked, “What happened?”

“My father was the commander of the First Cohort of a legion, the Ninth Hispana. It was a great
honor. Not only was he second in command of the legion, but he had charge of their standard, the golden Eagle. And they were sent north, here to Britain, to deal with a rebellion.

He paused, took a deal breath. “None of those 5,000 men returned. And the Eagle, along with my family’s honor, was lost.”

“Your family’s honor was lost because of a piece of metal?”

Raking his hand through his hair, Marcus made a frustrated sound. He shoved himself backward and to his feet. For a moment, he stumbled, his leg twinging and nearly giving out beneath him before he managed to right himself. Esca had half-gotten to his feet to help, but Marcus waved him back down, impatient with his own inability and with the accumulated years of frustration. “You don’t understand! To any Roman, it is clear as day! The Eagle is Rome. Wherever it goes, so goes Rome, and all her glory. If it’s lost... when it was lost, so was Rome’s honor, and all else with it.”

“Like your family’s honor.”

“Yes,” Marcus ground out. “I spent years listening to people piss on my family’s name. No matter where I went, or what I did, as soon as someone heard ‘Aquila’ all they saw was the lost legion, the lost Eagle.”

“So you came here.”

“Yes.” With a long sigh, Marcus sagged back into his seat. “As soon as we learned what had happened, I knew I would come here someday. I will restore honor to my name, and it had to start here, begin where it ended before.” He paused and then scrubbed both his hands over his face. “When I was younger, I used to think maybe I would find him somewhere out here.”

“You think he might be alive?” Esca asked, surprise coloring his tone.

“No.” Marcus shook his head. “No, I.... Those were the imaginings of a child. My father is dead, I know that.”

Esca was silent for a very long time, and when Marcus looked up, it was to see Esca staring at him, his gaze inscrutable. Marcus shifted, uncomfortable with the regard as the minutes passed, until Esca finally dropped his eyes and focused on the tablet again.

“Do you think me a fool?” Marcus asked quietly.

“Why should you care what I think?”

“Esca....”

“No.” Esca didn’t look up, but Marcus saw the muscle that ticked in his jaw. “I can’t pretend to understand exactly what it was like for you—I’m not Roman—but no, I don’t think you are a fool.” He tipped his head slightly. “Though why you care what a slave thinks, I’ll never know.”

“Maybe not a slave,” Marcus retorted quickly, “but a friend, always.”

Esca went curiously still, and gave Marcus an unfathomable look. Then he looked down, touched his stylus to the wax once more, and said nothing further.
I'm not dead! Though my body attempted to convince me otherwise.

Much thanks to my wonderful beta AccursedSpatula!

Esca feels Marcus’s eyes upon him and waits for the inevitable that he knows is coming. And when it doesn’t come, it hits him harder than any blow ever could. And now he must decide what course he wants to take.

~*~

As surreptitiously as he could—which, being a slave, was quite so—Esca watched Marcus, weighing his options. When Marcus had begun telling the story of what happened to his father, the tale had been familiar to Esca, if in a slightly different way. He knew what had happened to Marcus’s father and the lost legion, knew he could answer at least some of the questions the man might have, though they would surely bring him little peace, if any.

But did he want to?

What would it have been like to grow up not knowing? To have everyone look at you and see only the shame and dishonor of a man who had failed when all you could remember was the father you loved? To never be judged by your own merits, but by the ghost of a man dead and gone? To shape your life into an endless quest to regain something you hadn’t lost?

Would Marcus’s father even be proud of what his son was trying to accomplish? Esca didn’t know much about Romans and where their souls went after they died, but what he had heard didn’t seem very encouraging. Whether he had died with honor—and thus sat with the gods, feasting—or in shame—and thus toiled away in misery—would he be glad to know that his child had nearly crippled himself in his name? Regaining one’s honor was important, but Marcus had never lost his, and Esca struggled to imagine a father who would be happy with what had happened.

Esca should hold his tongue. There was no reason for Marcus to suspect that he knew anything, else he would have questioned him long ago. He could leave things as they were, let the bones of the past lay undisturbed. But….

But try as he might, he could not forget Marcus’s face when he called Esca “friend.” The honesty, the respect he treated Esca with, slave though he may be, gnawed at Esca’s conscience, made him feel ashamed that he would consider keeping this from Marcus. Esca hadn’t had someone treat him so amiably, call him friend since the night his tribe died, and he didn’t expect to again. And while a Roman was the last person he ever expected to find that sense of brotherhood in, he found himself wanting to return the favor. He wanted to call Marcus his friend as well, and if he were being true to himself, then in the spirit of friendship, Esca could not deny Marcus this.

His opening came a few days later. It was fairly warm out, the sun shining brightly, and while there were no other changes, Esca could feel the shift in the air. Spring was close, not quite there, but winter’s hold on the land was beginning to break. Marcus could feel it, too, sitting in a patch of
sunlight where he could watch the goings on of the fort, face tipped up to the sky, a slight smile on his face.

Esca approached him quietly, settling himself on the floor next to Marcus’s chair. Marcus glanced down at him, but said nothing, and they sat side by side in contented silence before Esca made himself speak.

“When I was a boy,” he said quietly, taking care that his words wouldn’t be overhead should anyone walk by, “there came word that the Romans were coming, a great host of them.” He heard Marcus’s breath catch, could feel tension that made his frame taut in the chair. “I did not see them myself, but I heard the stories the others told, of a great serpent of men, of endless red cloaks and crests.”

“The Ninth,” Marcus breathed.

“Aye, the Ninth,” Esca replied, “Though I did not know it at the time. I only pieced that together once I entered Roman lands and heard the tales.”

The chair creaked as Marcus tightened his hands upon the arms. “What happened?”

“Some say they vanished into the mists, marching from one world into another, in their endless rows. They say they took their eagle god with them, and that it haunts the mists to this day.”

“Esca, please,” Marcus said, voice raw, “if you know what happened, then tell me. Do not speak to me of children’s stories. If you know what happened to the Ninth, if you know what happened to my father, tell me.”

Esca looked over, and flinched at the raw pain on Marcus’s face. Even at his most injured, when his wound plagued him the most, he had never looked quite like this. This was what he lived with everyday. This was what drove him.

“My people banded together,” he said, looking down. “All the northern tribes.” He fell silent, knowing what was too come, and too reluctant to continue for the moment.

“Including your tribe?”

Drawing a deep breath, Esca forced himself to look up and meet Marcus’s gaze. “Yes, including my tribe. As I said, I was too young to go, still a child. But the warriors of my tribe…my father, my eldest brother… they went. They went. They and the others went and destroyed the Roman serpent, wiped it out to a man.”

Marcus looked away first, uttering a noise like a wounded animal. He curled in his seat, one hand closed in a fist and pressed against his mouth, eyes shut tight. Esca looked away, unwilling to watch Marcus suffer through his grief. It was a surprise to find that it hurt, that there was no satisfaction at all in ripping open those old wounds. He hadn’t expected to feel pleasure at the telling, but he hadn’t anticipated the pain it would cause him.

“I don’t know what happened to the Eagle.” he went on, continuing so he could break the awful silence. “None of my tribe saw it either before or after the battle. There were…rumors. That it was destroyed. That it was offered as tribute to our own gods. That it is kept as a relic somewhere, a symbol of victory. No one that I know knows, and in a way, the tales of it haunting the mist are still true, for my people still speak of it.”

“I wish that you could tell me,” Marcus muttered hoarsely after a moment.
“I’m glad that I cannot.” Esca looked over and met Marcus’s troubled eyes. “Because then I know that my father did not kill yours, and that your father did not kill anyone of my tribe.”

Marcus nodded once, shortly, and turned his gaze back out to the open grounds. He wasn’t truly seeing what was before him, merely giving the appearance of it while he digested what Esca had said. For his part, Esca waited, unsure if he should just go or wait for Marcus to dismiss him. It felt wrong to intrude with even his presence, yet it felt equally wrong to simply leave Marcus alone.

“Thank you,” Marcus finally said, and his voice sounded steady.

“I don’t know how much it helped, but I thought you should know.”

“It does help. It cannot answer all my questions, but it does help. I can’t report what happened to those men—I have no proof to offer—but it’s right that someone should know. And at least now I know what likely happened to my father.”

“Likely?” Esca’s brows furrowed.

Marcus shrugged slightly. “I’ve always believed that my father died defending the Eagle, but I cannot know that. What if…what if he ran, abandoned his duty and his honor?”

“He did not,” Esca stated firmly. “If he was anything like you, then he did not.”

There was a soft huff of laughter from Marcus. “You think too much of me.”

“Hardly,” Esca snorted. “Look around this garrison, look at the way your men look at you, look at that armilla around your wrist. You are a man of honor, and I do not think you would be your father’s son if you were so very different from him.”

Marcus shook his head, but a small smile tugged at the corners of his mouth. Almost absently, his hand went to the small wooden eagle hanging about his neck and he held it tightly. “Thank you,” he said again after a moment. “Esca, thank you, but I think I’d like to be alone right now.”

Esca nodded, getting smoothly to his feet. “I will come back to fetch you later, unless you call for me first.”

Nodding, Marcus held his gaze for a moment and then held out his hand. Esca stared at it for a moment, and then clasped their arms together. Then he released Marcus’s arm and slipped back inside to find something to do, leaving Marcus with his thoughts.

~*~

“You’re not serious.” Marcus looked down dubiously at his leg, then down the long hallway, and then at Esca, who stood holding Marcus’s crutch firmly, just out of reach.

“Quite,” Esca replied, and then gestured down the hall with the crutch. “Your wound is healed, now it is time to rebuild your strength. You will walk—on your own—there and back.”

Again, Marcus looked doubtfully at the distance Esca had indicated. “It’s too far,” he finally said. “I cannot manage that on my own, Esca. Maybe to the end, but I won’t be able to walk back.”

“Then you’ll just have to crawl,” Esca said coolly, taking a calculated risk. Marcus was strong, but unsure. His months of convalescence had left him doubting his strengths, and the remembered pain made him fearful of further aggravating the wound. Like a stubborn bull, he would need to be pushed—despite his desire to be whole again—and Esca was fairly certain that Marcus would not
punish him for this. Something had altered between them since he’d told Marcus of the Ninth’s fate —nothing big, nothing overt, but there was a sense of easiness now that had been lacking, however kind and polite Marcus had been before.

Anger crossed Marcus’s face, a dull flush coloring his cheeks. “I will not crawl.”

“Then you shall simply have to walk back then, won’t you?”

“I told you, it’s too far.”

“You’ve not even tried!” Esca glared at him. “Where is the soldier of Rome now? Where is the centurion who stood before a charging chariot and did not falter? I do not see him. All I see is a man too afraid of failing to even try.”

“You…” Marcus took a lurching step toward him, and Esca took an easy step back. For a moment he was afraid he’d gone too far, but Marcus’s actions seemed more reflexive than anything born of true anger. For now, he would continue.

“Ah-ah,” he tutted. “Wrong way. And even if you chased me, I’m faster than you.”

“For now,” Marcus grumbled.

“Oh, you think you’ll be faster than me? You who won’t even walk down a hallway? Hardly.”

Marcus’s face tightened again, his jaw setting and his lips thinning into a hard line. Esca took pity on him. “Walk, Marcus,” he said gently. “You can do it.”

Blowing his breath out loudly, Marcus turned back to look down the hallway, nodded, and set off. His gait was uneven as he limped along, clearly doing his best to keep as much weight as possible off his injured leg. Esca frowned. That would have to change eventually. Marcus couldn’t expect to rebuild his strength if he babied the leg, but Esca would save that lesson for later. Best to simply get him moving, for now.

The hallway was not all that long. Esca could sprint down it in a matter of seconds, and a healthy Marcus would have been able to do the same. But now, with no crutch, no supporting shoulder under his arm, and a body weakened through inactivity, it took Marcus long, painful minutes just to reach the end. By the time he reached the end and turned around, Esca could see the paleness in his face, the sweat beading his brow, and he almost caved and went to Marcus’s aid when he stood at the other end, bracing himself on the wall and making no effort to walk the length again.

But he pushed himself upright, set his shoulders and began the walk back. By the time he was almost to Esca again, his limp was more pronounced, and he was dragging his left leg slightly. He stumbled on the last few steps and Esca darted forward to catch him before he fell. He slipped the crutch into Marcus’s hand so the man could brace himself further, and then waited for Marcus to collect himself, feeling the way his body trembled with the exertion and the way his chest heaved.

Perhaps he had pushed Marcus too hard after all.

They made their way back to Marcus’s quarters and Esca eased the Roman into his chair and then busied himself wetting a cloth with cool water to wipe his brow and fetching him a cup of wine. Marcus stared into the depths of the cup, but didn’t drink. The muscles of his jaw worked as Esca carefully probed at the injury, checking to make sure nothing was wrong. Aside from a slight grunt of pain from Marcus as Esca applied pressure, he could find nothing wrong. No reopening of wounds, no cramped or knotted muscles. What Marcus felt was just the honest pain of working his damaged leg into better condition.
He stood, stepping back. “Do you need anything else?”

“I think you’ve done enough,” Marcus said shortly.

Esca blinked, taken aback by the anger. “Fine,” he said in a clipped tone. “Call for me if you need me.” And without looking back, he strode from the room. If Marcus wanted to act like a petulant child, he could do it by himself.

~*~

“I’m sorry.”

Esca looked up from where he was setting Marcus’s breakfast on the table. Marcus met his gaze, his face open and honest. Refusing to simply accept the apology—and wanting to see just how far Marcus would let him push—he nodded for the other man to continue.

“I wasn’t angry at you,” Marcus said. “I was frustrated with myself, with this damn leg. It’s….” He sighed. “It is a hard thing for me to be reminded how much less I am now, and I shouldn’t have taken it out on you.”

Esca tipped his head in acknowledgement. “I understand,” he said quietly, and he did. They were both warriors, and to not be able to be one anymore was galling. That they were crippled in different ways made no difference. “I’m not trying to hurt or humiliate you, you know. You wish to be the man you were before, and you can be, but it will be painful.”

“I know, I know,” Marcus sighed again, scrubbing at his face with both hands before staring at the food before him. “It’s still hard.”

Unable the help the chuckle that escaped him, Esca settled onto his stool across the table from Marcus. “Eat,” he said. “And then we will try again. By the solstice you will be walking and running again, as fit—or nearly so—as you were before.”

“Perhaps,” Marcus said and began to eat his food. Esca picked up the tablet to practice his letters again, forming them carefully in the soft wax, to keep himself busy while Marcus ate. It was strange to have been given such knowledge, and he still wasn’t sure why Marcus had done it. None of the other slaves Esca had known could read. But Marcus had seemed eager to teach, had been a patient with Esca, and his pleasure at doing so had been more than evident.

Still, it was an invaluable gift. If Esca ever gained his freedom some day, it would give him opportunities that others lacked. Even if he returned north to be among his people, being able to read the Roman tongue could only help them.

Marcus pushed his empty platter away and Esca slid off his stool, setting the tablet down. “The hallway again?” Marcus asked and Esca nodded. Marcus pulled a face.

Esca laughed again. “It’s not so bad,” he said. “When the weather warms, we will go outside, and you can enjoy the change of scenery.”

“And the mud and the bugs,” Marcus muttered, but he bumped Esca’s shoulder with his own as he passed by, and the friendly gesture belied the grumpiness of his words. Shaking his head, Esca let Marcus lead the way.
Chapter 9

Chapter Notes

Again, I've taken something from book canon, mixed it with something from movie canon, and added my own twist to make it my own. Hopefully not too jarring for anyone.

I also want to thank everyone for all the comment, kudos and clicks. Quite frankly, the response has been more than I ever expected. If I've done my figuring correctly, we're just past the halfway point here. I anticipate sixteen chapters, perhaps with an epilogue after that, but we'll see how it unfolds.

See the end of the chapter for more notes

Marcus looks at Ecsa, and sees more than a slave. He sees a man, who, despite Rome's best efforts, still has his pride. And he sees a man that he loves.

~*~

As Esca promised, as soon as the weather warmed—and stayed warm—they went outside to train, abandoning the plain buildings with their wonderfully level floors for the rugged terrain of the outdoors. At first, Esca kept Marcus to the yard where the soldiers sparred and trained, choosing times when there were the fewest of them around. While Marcus was still getting used to bearing his weight fully on the leg, Esca only had him walk, longer stretches than they had inside, and around corners, routes that forced him to turn and twist his beyond what was comfortable.

And when he could walk as Esca directed without grimacing or wincing, without having to stop and let a sharp stab of pain pass, Esca took him out of the gates. The field surrounding the fort may have appeared smooth, but it wasn’t, not like the packed earth of the fort. The grass hid dips and bumps in the land, and Marcus struggled to find even footing, cursing when he stumbled, or when an unexpected rise or fall caused his leg to jar painfully. Esca was never far, not like he had been in the hallway, never more than a few steps away, ready to catch Marcus should he stumble.

Marcus didn’t miss the way the men on the walls kept a close eye on the pair of them, or the way they fingered their bows, arrows held loosely against the strings. Marcus knew why they were there and understood his men’s caution, even if he didn’t agree with it. During the last several months, Esca had had opportunity to harm Marcus countless times, and it made no sense for him to start now. Esca had been nothing but loyal, proving himself at every turn. Of course, Marcus’s men hadn’t seen that, and knew Esca as only a British slave, native born, and therefore always suspect. No matter how docile he appeared, they would never fully trust him, especially not when Marcus and Esca were beyond the pretense of the safety the walls of the fort gave.

He knew that Esca saw it, too. Marcus suspected that the Esca by his side now—much more outspoken than the silent and servile slave that had been first brought to him—was closer to Esca’s true self, and he eyed soldiers with concealed disdain. After watching Esca stare at the guards impassively before ignoring them completely, Marcus found himself wishing he could have known Esca before his slavery, before the uprising and the slaughter of his tribe. They might have tried to kill each other, he thought ruefully, but at least then he could have seen Esca before he was broken.
“What’s so funny?” Esca asked suspiciously.

Hurriedly, Marcus wiped the smile from his face and pushed himself up from the ground where he’d been resting. “Nothing, I was just thinking.”

“I see.”

Marcus laughed and swatted at Esca’s arm, and then laughed again when Esca neatly stepped back out of range. It helped, that Esca did things like that, things he never would have done in the first few months. “Come,” Marcus said. “Let’s get on with whatever new tortures you’ve devised for me.”

He regretted the words nearly as soon as he said them. Esca’s face tightened momentarily before smoothing out into a blank facade. It was something he meant in jest, something Marcus would have said to a friend or comrade without a second thought. But to Esca, to someone Marcus knew had actually been tortured, it seemed unbelievably crass. “Esca,” Marcus began. “I didn’t mean—”

“It’s fine.”

“You know I would never—”

“Marcus.” Esca cut him off with a roll of his eyes and a wry fondness in his voice. “I know. If you want to apologize, don’t treat me as if I’m fragile. I’m not.”

Marcus took a moment to stifle the little thrill that came when Esca used his name, and swept his eyes over Esca’s compact frame, wiry muscles corded on his bare arms and calves, the proud, stubborn set of his shoulders and head. “I know.”

“Good. Then let’s continue. I think in another week or two, we might try wrestling.”

That earned a laughed from Marcus. “I’ll have you know I was quite good at it.”

“Maybe for a Roman,” Esca scoffed. “Wait until you tussle with a Briton, and a Brigantes at that.”

~*~

Esca’s prowess at what he called wrestling was well earned. Marcus hadn’t been lying when he said that he’d been good, but the way he had learned, the holds and grips that Romans used bore little resemblance to the style Esca used. Instead, his focus seemed to lie in putting Marcus on his back as humiliatingly fast as possible, using any and all methods he could, and then springing to his feet so he could do it again. In the two weeks since they had added this to Marcus’s regimen, Marcus had yet to pin him. His leg was still weak to some degree and he didn’t have quite the speed he needed. In time, yes, when he was restored to full strength, but for now....

He waited until Esca released him once more, stepping away smoothly, and Marcus slowly sat up. Then he hissed suddenly, grabbing at and collapsing over his wounded leg.

“Marcus?” Esca asked, worry in his voice. “Marcus, what is it? Are you hurt? Was I too rough?”

A hand touched his shoulder, pushing slightly urging him back so that Esca could see. Marcus took the opportunity as soon as it presented itself, swiftly wrapping one hand around Esca’s wrist and pulling. The sudden motion sent Esca, unguarded against such a ploy, sprawling to the ground. He landed with an oof, and before he could move, Marcus flung himself across Esca’s body to pin him.

~*~
“You cheat!” Esca cried, laughing as he squirmed, trying to buck Marcus off.

Marcus flexed, tightened his grip, one arm across Esca’s chest, pinning his shoulders down, the other holding one of his legs while Marcus’s body weight trapped the other. “How else am I supposed to get you where I want you?” he panted.

They both froze, chests heaving, as they realized their state, stripped down to just their braccae, sweaty and flushed. Vigorous physical activity had always left Marcus slightly hard, but with the loose braccae he wore it had never been a problem. But now, pressed against Esca, he was very aware of it, as he had been those embarrassing nights he’d been unable to control himself with Esca in his bed. He shifted, meaning to push himself up and off Esca, when his thigh brushed against Esca’s groin.

And Marcus realized the problem wasn’t solely his.

Esca sucked in a short, sharp breath and went very still, looking up at the sky with unblinking eyes. Marcus stayed where he was for a moment longer and then hastily scrambled off Esca, breathing hard. “I-I think...I think that’s enough for today. I find myself tired.”

Esca simply lay on the ground, exactly as he was for a minute more before sighing and slowly getting to his feet. “Good idea,” he said quietly. Marcus threw him a quick look as he pulled his tunic on, watching Esca do the same, worried slightly at the subdued tone in Esca’s voice. Did he think Marcus was going to go back on his word? That he misunderstood the effects of their training for true desire? That he would force Esca? He hoped not.

For a moment, he considered apologizing and then discarded the idea. He hadn’t done anything wrong, nothing that he was ashamed of. And if he wasn’t to treat Esca like something breakable, then he couldn’t apologize for every little misunderstanding or awkward situation. It wasn’t fair to either of them.

They didn’t say anything as they made their way back inside the walls of the fort. The men didn’t give them any odd looks, so Marcus knew that whatever they had observed appeared to be perfectly ordinary. And as long as Marcus continued to behave normally—and Esca always did—then he had nothing to worry about.

He wondered if Esca would say something that night, perhaps as they ate, or later as Esca massaged the aches and strain from Marcus’s thigh. He’d grown bolder in the last several weeks, risking comments and daring actions that Marcus had no qualms with—and, in fact, preferred, as they allowed Marcus to think that maybe they were growing to be friends—but that other masters certainly would not approve of. It had to be nerve-wracking for Esca, to never know if he were going to cross a line, but willing to risk it anyway.

Marcus would make sure he didn’t regret it.

~*~

The days got longer and warmer, and with Esca’s help, Marcus was soon able to walk and march and run for increasingly long periods of time. His leg still pained him after he pushed himself, aching or knotting up with cramps, and he was beginning to suspect that it always would, at least a bit. It didn’t anger or upset him. Things could have been far worse than they were, and he thanked Mithras that he was able to be a centurion, still able to serve Rome. Everything else was merely a sacrifice to be endured.

When he could do all of the things any soldier would be expected to do, Marcus kept pushing
himself. It wasn’t enough for him to just be good enough. He was a leader, meant to serve as an example. Until he could best all of his men, like he had once been able to, he would keep training, keep on bettering himself.

Esca seemed to realize the same thing without needing to be told. He drove Marcus just hard enough to force him to the edges of his endurance every day, and then helped him with his leg every night so that the pain didn’t cripple him the next.

It was also, Marcus suspected, the reason he headed outside the one morning to find Esca waiting with two saddled horses, the soldiers around the fort giving him suspicious, hard-eyed looks.

“What’s this?” Marcus asked.

“Riding is different than marching or running or wrestling. You need practice with this as well.”

“And the second horse?” Marcus teased.

“It’ll be easier to catch up to you when you fall off,” Esca replied blandly.

From the corner of his eye, Marcus saw one of the soldiers startle and then frown with anger at the implied insult—in both words and tone—to his commander. So Marcus made sure to laugh just loudly enough that it would carry to the man, and then swung himself up onto the horse, taking a moment to settle himself. It had been a long time since he’d ridden, and if he was to fall off as Esca suggested he would, he didn’t want to do it in front of all his men.

They started slow, walking their horses around the outside perimeter of the fort, and Marcus could feel his thigh beginning to cramp after too short a time, the motion of gripping the horse with his legs putting a different kind of strain on his injury. Esca asked several times if he wanted to stop, but Marcus gritted his teeth and said no. By the time they were done, Marcus’s leg felt like it was on fire and when it came time to dismount, he remained seated on his horse, staring at the ground, knowing his leg wasn’t going to hold him.

“Idiot,” Esca muttered, coming forward to take the reins of Marcus’s horse, making a pretense of holding the animal still for his master. “Go slow,” he said under his breath. “I won’t let you fall.”

Marcus took a deep breath and swung down, feeling his leg buckle, and Esca could a step over to that he could place a hand on his shoulder for support. Oh, his leg hurt. He really, really should have stopped when Esca first asked.

“Please don’t say ‘I told you so,’” he whispered as he stood getting his breath back.

“Would I do that?” Esca drawled.

“You would and you know it.”

“Perhaps,” Esca allowed. “I’ll help you back, if you can get one of your men to take care of the horses.”

Marcus lifted his head and called out to the closest soldier, who came hurrying over. Esca handed over the reins as Marcus ordered the man to stable the horses, and then slid his shoulder beneath Marcus’s arm to help him back. Esca hadn’t had help carry him as often as of late, and Marcus found that he had missed it, having the other man pressed against his side.

Suddenly, and with a start, Marcus realized the direction his thoughts were heading and stopped them firmly. It would be a lie to say he had never been attracted to men, and Esca had been the
closest person to him for months. To feel some desire and attraction was perhaps a given, but he
didn’t want to put himself in a position where he thought of Esca that way. He was only a man, and
he wasn’t sure that he trusted himself enough not to take advantage.

Back in his quarters, Esca arranged for a hot bath, to both wash away the smell of horse and to try
and prevent Marcus’s leg from stiffening up too much. After that, Esca laid Marcus out on the bed,
fingers digging deep into the muscle of his thigh while Marcus hissed and winced. He kept at for
so long that Marcus couldn’t understand how his hands and arms weren’t knotted themselves.

“It will be better tomorrow,” Esca said, wiping the oil off his hands with a piece of cloth.

“Tomorrow?” Marcus groaned, one arm flung over his eyes.

“Tomorrow.”

~*~

Like everything else, the riding got easier. They took to riding in the woods that surrounded the
fort, and even raced each other a few times, laughing and whooping as they traded off besting each
other. Once he was confident that his leg would support him for the whole journey, they made
their way to what was left of the village. The soldiers had continued to visit, so there was still
profit to be made, and the village had begun to slowly rebuild itself.

Though, Marcus thought darkly, he was sure a good deal of those profits were made by women
widowed by those same soldiers.

“Do you hunt?” he asked Esca abruptly during one of their trips back him from the village.

“What?”

“No do you hunt?”

“I did, back in my village. I’ve...not had much opportunity since then. Why?”

Marcus thought of Cradoc’s home, now dark and empty whenever they passed. He thought of
Cradoc’s wife, Guinhumara, and their child, wondering what had happened to them, if they still
lived somewhere.

He realized he had fallen silent, lost in his thoughts, but Esca just watched him, his head tilted to
the side in curiosity.

“When I first came here,” Marcus began, “a local man from the village took me hunting. His name
was Cradoc and we understood each other well. He was an honorable man. We even had a friendly
wager and I won his father’s war spear from him.”

“What happened?” Esca asked after a moment’s pause.

“He was one of the men who attacked when we went to rescue the captured soldiers. He drove the
war-chariot that the druid who led the uprising was in.” Esca sucked in a sharp breath. “I killed the
man who had been my friend, whose horses I had driven. I killed him with his father’s own war
spear as he tried to run me down.”

He smiled grimly. “I haven’t been hunting since, obviously, but I found I haven’t wanted to.”

There was a long silence before Esca finally spoke. “I didn’t know him,” he said slowly, “but I’ve
spent my whole life around men like him. If you were the same man then as you are now—and I cannot see how you would be different—and if he allowed you to drive his horses and take his father’s spear, then I cannot believe he acted from any malice toward you, merely toward what you stand for. And if that’s the case, then I can’t see him wanting you to give up something you both enjoyed simply because you each stood for what you believed.”

Marcus nodded.

“Are you asking me because you want to see if you can enjoy it again?”

“I suppose I am, yes. But I thought you should know what happened to the last man who took me hunting.”

“Well,” said Esca, “as I don’t have a war-chariot or a war spear or an entire village full of men willing to back me up, I’m fairly certain I won’t be attacking the fort and you won’t have to put a spear through my chest.”

“That’s...not very reassuring, actually.”

Esca laughed. “Our fate is our fate, Marcus. You did what you had to and so did Cradoc, and in the end it is for the gods to judge. I will take you hunting.”

Marcus nodded his head again. “Thank you.”

~*~

None of the soldiers or officers said anything to him outright, but from the whispers he overheard in the fort, Marcus knew that most thought him mad for giving his slave a weapon. Not just allowing him to be around them, or care for Marcus’s, but giving him a bow and arrow and knife of his very own. Neither one of them was particularly efficient their first few trips into the forest in search of game, but Esca recovered his skills far more quickly.

They managed to bring down the occasional deer, but most of their time was spent talking and joking, or finding secluded spots and merely sprawling out and being lazy. Marcus knew he was taking advantage of his position and his injury. He should not be taking such ease, but when he considered that soon he would be alone again, without Esca’s constant companionship, he couldn’t begrudge himself this time.

Nor could he begrudge himself the chance to watch Esca. His mind and his heart knew it was wrong to take advantage, but it hadn’t been so easy to convince his body of that. Though he knew it was wrong, he still wanted. So he struck a compromise with his conscience. He allowed himself to look and to fantasize, drinking in the sight of Esca’s pale flesh, the dark tattoos that stood out starkly as they swirled over and down his right shoulder and arm, admiring the way the muscles stood out beneath the skin that seemed so thin stretched over them. He looked when Esca removed his tunic to dress one of their kills, watched when Esca stripped off his clothes to wade into pond or stream. Esca was well-formed, and should be proud of his body, and Marcus refused to be ashamed of his private desires.

Even if he did wait until he was sure Esca was asleep before taking himself in hand at night.

A few times Esca caught him watching, throwing him quizzical gazes, and once startling him when he asked, “What is it that has the centurion’s attention so focused?”

“Nothing,” Marcus said quickly. “Nothing. Just...just thinking.”
“I see,” Esca replied, and Marcus hoped that he truly didn’t.

~*~

Marcus’s return to full duty was heralded by his men with a great deal of enthusiasm.

He probably could have returned earlier than he did, and it wasn’t as if they hadn’t seen his long, painful journey back to being whole, but there was something about doing it formally, about delineating that moment between “I was gone” and “I am back” that he wanted. And he wanted to come back to them without any sign of his weakness, without any limp or hitch in his gait.

They were all glad to see him back, and Lutorius, Paulus, Galba, Aulus and all the others made sure the evening was enjoyable. The men drank a little too much wine, stayed up far too late, and most would have sore heads in the morning when the centurions roused them mercilessly from their beds. The men on duty tonight, who had to bow out of the festivities early, or miss them entirely, would thank their good fortune when their brothers were suffering the next day.

Marcus smiled. It was nice to be the one in charge.

He stumbled back to his room late, surprised to see Esca still up, waiting for him at the table, absently doodling something in the wax of his tablet. “Esca,” Marcus said, determined not to slur his words. “You didn’t have to wait up. I can manage myself.”

Esca smiled wryly. “You forget I have lived among your Romans for some time. You’re barely capable of managing yourselves when you’re sober, let alone when you’ve been drinking.”

Then he slid his body beneath Marcus’s shoulder and helped him to his bed, though he didn’t take any special care in stripping Marcus of his tunic and braccae and pushing him to lie back before flipping a light sheet over his body.

“Thank you, Esca.”

“You’re welcome, Marcus.”

“Are we still going hunting tomorrow?”

“If your head doesn’t threaten to fall off your shoulders, yes.”

Marcus chuckled and let his heavy eyelids fall shut. “Good.” Soon, very soon, he would have to keep the promise he’d made to himself and let Esca go. He thought of the knife he’d purchased in secret on their last trip to the village, small and wickedly sharp, the way Marcus saw Esca. It was going to be a gift for Esca’s manumission, something far more appropriate and useful than the pileus usually given to slaves upon their freedom. Had they been in proper Roman society, Marcus would have given him that, too, and would have laughed at Esca’s look of scorn. But, were they closer to Rome, Esca wouldn’t see that being any kind of freedom. He was glad they were here, then, on the outskirts of the empire, in the wild, barely tamed land of Briton. Here, Esca could truly be free once more.

And until then, he would enjoy Esca’s company and friendship for one last hunt.

~*~

They left early the next morning. Marcus had spoken to Lutorius—who knew of what Marcus was planning—before that to let him know that today would be the last day he was venturing out like
this, so he planned to take all of it. After that, he would return to being the model commander.

Lutorius just smiled faintly. “Take care, sir. It would devastate the men to lose you now.”

“I’ll be fine, Lutorius. Besides, I’ll have Esca with me.”

The older centurion nodded. “Does he know yet?”

Marcus shook his head. “No, I wished to surprise him.”

“Then I’ll make sure not to say anything until then. If I may, sir, he’s been good for you.”

Reaching down, Marcus felt the lines of the scar through his braccae. “It’s hard to know how I would have managed without him. I’ll see you this afternoon, Lutorius.”

“Good hunting.”

“Thank you.”

Despite Lutorius’s wishes, Esca and Marcus saw little game worth taking. They rode for a bit, scouted some game trails that might be more fruitful come autumn and winter, and then stopped to eat an early lunch.

“Shall we return to the fort since there’s nothing worth taking today?” Esca asked.

“No. I’d like to stay out. Lutorius knows not to expect our return until at least this afternoon.”

“Well,” Esca wondered, brushing crumbs from his hands, “then what shall we do?”

“Hmm.” Marcus pondered that. “It has been some time since we tested ourselves against each other. I’m much stronger than I was the last time we wrestled. Think you could still take me?”

“Easily,” Esca laughed, already getting to his feet and toeing his shoes off while he shucked his tunic. Then he dropped into a slight crouch. “Come on, then.”

Marcus shrugged, getting to his feet and mimicking Esca’s actions. “You’ve been warned.”

Marcus was stronger, and they grappled back and forth, neither quite able to gain enough of an upper hand to force the other to the ground. There were a few occasional slips as they slid on loose soil, but both knew that was due to chance and not any skill. They each wanted a clean victory.

The opening, when it came, was so small as to almost be missed. In twisting away, Esca left himself slightly off balance. Marcus sprang, throwing his weight and tipping Esca even further to the side. Esca struggled to right himself, but Marcus’s greater weight gave him the advantage, and he bore Esca to the ground, crowing his victory.

Esca let his head thump back on the group, gasping for breath and laughing. “All right, all right, you win.”

“I told you,” Marcus said smugly.

“You did, you did.” Esca drew a deeper breath and his tongue swiped out to wet his lips. Marcus’s eyes followed the motion, were fixed on the lips that were flushed from their exertions, and now damp from Esca’s tongue. Lying over Esca, being so close, able to smell the sweat and musk of him, able to see the color high on his cheeks and tousled hair, Marcus couldn’t help himself. Esca would be gone soon. Memories were all Marcus would have, and surely, surely he could take this
one small thing for himself.

Beneath him, Esca had gone very still. “Marcus?” he asked cautiously.

Marcus didn’t let himself think, didn’t let his mind talk him out of this, and bent his head down, capturing Esca’s mouth in a hard, fierce kiss. It wasn’t long, and Esca didn’t move under him, didn’t respond in any way, not to jerk his head away or push Marcus off, but neither to open his mouth and let Marcus in. Marcus swiped his tongue across those thin, soft lips once, didn’t even try pushing past them, and then pulled back, shame and regret already curdling in his stomach.

He shouldn’t have done that. Some small, hidden part of himself had hoped that maybe Esca might respond, might show some tiny sign that Marcus’s desire was reciprocated. But Marcus should have known better. He felt sick and his chest felt tight. It would have been better not to know.

Taking a deep breath, he started to push himself farther away, sitting up on his knees. “I’m sorry,” he said, forcing himself to look Esca in the face. Esca stared back, expression tight and distant, brows drawn together. He didn’t look upset, not exactly, but Marcus couldn’t decipher what it was that he saw on Esca’s face and it simply drove the pain deeper.

Esca moved suddenly, sitting up, forcing Marcus back further. His gray eyes flitted back and forth, searching Marcus’s face for something, and Marcus saw when he made his decision. One of Esca’s hands snaked out, wrapped around the back of Marcus’s neck, and then he was pressing his lips to Marcus’s.

The sound Marcus made was low and raw and undignified, but he didn’t care. Clumsily, he reached up, cupped a hand to Esca’s cheek, and kissed him like he’d wanted to for so long. His tongue swiped out again and Esca didn’t resist, yielding to the gentle, probing pressure, and sighed into Marcus’s mouth as his tongue slid in.

Chapter End Notes

As a quick fyi, because I realize passage of time isn't exactly clear, I put Marcus's injury sometime in October, and I'd say it's now about July for them. Or close to. Basically, the two have been together for eight or nine months.

Also, I shamelessly used wiki for the links I had in the chapter, and will be touching more upon what Marcus intends to do in Chapter 11.

Note: Beginning line of this was added, as I forgot when I posted and just realized it now.
Chapter 10

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes.

Esca feels Marcus’s eyes upon him and waits for the inevitable that he knows is coming. And when it doesn’t come, it hits him harder than any blow ever could. And now he must decide what course he wants to take. He is not surprised when it leads to Marcus.

~*~

Esca wasn’t expecting the kiss, but it didn’t take him by surprise, not really. Marcus was many things—brave, strong, honorable—but cunning he was not. Despite his best efforts, it was impossible for him to conceal how he really felt to someone who was truly looking. He’d been aware of Marcus’s attentions for weeks now, the way his gaze was nakedly appraising and pleased when he watched Esca. And more than once at night, he’d been roused by the whisper of his name carrying across the still air of a darkened room.

So, no, he wasn’t surprised when Marcus kissed him, unless he counted his surprise that it had taken so long to happen. He’d thought it would have come much sooner, nearly as soon as he noticed Marcus’s regard. And despite what Marcus had vowed, despite the genuine friendship that he could admit had grown between them, he hadn’t expected to Roman to truly honor his promises. In the end, he thought if Marcus wanted badly enough, then Marcus would take.

And when Marcus had leaned down and kissed him, Esca braced himself, already walling off the hurt that came with being proved right. He went still beneath Marcus because if this had to happen, he couldn’t bear for it to be the act of pain and violence he was accustomed to.

But Marcus hadn’t forced him. There was the brief pressure of his mouth against Esca’s, the soft, fleeting touch of a tongue, and then that was it. Marcus pulled back. In the blink of an eye, his expression had gone from longing and determined to ashamed and guilty. His apology, so quiet and earnest and tinged with regret, had pulled Esca out of his daze. At this point, he’d been with Marcus so long that he could practically hear the thoughts crawling through Marcus’s head, that he was apologizing for not only taking liberties with Esca, but for causing him to doubt his sincerity, his oath to never hurt or force him.

Before Esca had lost everything, his family, his friends, his freedom, his self, back when his tribe was all he knew, he’d never really considered lying with another man. He knew that shield brothers sometimes sought comfort with one another, but it was never something he’d done himself. As son of Cunoval, he’d not wanted for female companionship and he’d had no shield brother close enough to even consider that way. Before the end of everything, Esca had never thought to find himself lying with another man.

The Romans had changed that. In seeking to sate their cruel and perverse desires, they’d taken something Esca had always known as the closest bond between two men—short of blood ties—and twisted it, twisted him. He hated the things done to him, but he no longer knew if he hated the acts themselves or if it was just impetus behind them. If he had once thought of another man with idle curiosity, it had long ago been torn from him, leaving him with nothing more than wounds he suspected might never heal and a desire to never have more inflicted on him. And then this had happened.

Marcus.
For the first time since his capture, he suspected he was wanted for who he was and not just another body to be broken and used. And the look in Marcus’s green eyes was so open and raw that Esca knew he could never convince himself that Marcus’s desire was driven simply by base lust. Half of him wanted to flee, to push Marcus away—and he knew Marcus would go—and forget what had just happened. The other half of him wanted to risk it and pull the other man close, taking something for himself and taking back little bits of him that had been lost. With Marcus, he thought he might have found the closeness of a shield brother. It wasn’t quite right, not with Esca still his slave, but it was close, and if he could have nothing else, he could have this opportunity to prove to Rome that he wasn’t as broken as they’d tried to make him.

He reached out and grabbed the back of Marcus’s neck, and clinging to him like a lifeline, leaned forward and kissed him. There was one endless moment where Marcus didn’t move, and then he moaned and shifted, wrapping an arm around Esca, one hard, broad palm covering his cheek. When the pressure of Marcus’s tongue against his lips came once more, he parted them, letting the other man in. Marcus took immediate action, his hold tightening on Esca. He moaned again, a broken, needy sound that had Esca pulling away to suck in harsh, rasping breaths, eyes squeezing shut as he was overwhelmed with the intensity of the desire he could feel radiating from Marcus.

“Esca?” Gentle fingertips touched his jaw, but didn’t try to turn his head. “Esca, are you well? You don’t—” Marcus broke off, swallowing hard, gathering himself to speak. “You don’t have to do this. Please don’t do this, not if you don’t truly wish it. Don’t...don’t let me hurt you.”

Esca just shook his head and took a deep, steadying breath. He was afraid, he could admit that much to himself, but he would never tell Marcus. Nor could he ever bring himself to ask for what he wanted, not like this. He could...give, and take for himself what was offered. But ask? No. He must have been silent too long, because Marcus’s fingers brushed his cheek. “What do you want?” Marcus asked, clutching at Esca’s shoulders. “Whatever you want, you can have it.”

For a brief, shining moment, Esca thought, my freedom. Give me my freedom. Every fiber of his being yearned for it so strongly that until the thought passed, there was nothing else to him. But he should as soon ask for the moon, for all the good it would do him. He could not ask for the impossible.¹

So instead he brought his head back up and kissed Marcus again, let himself go loose and pliant in the Roman’s arms, went willingly when Marcus gently pushed him down to the ground and covered him with his body. For a time, Marcus seemed content to just kiss him, stretched out on the ground, running his hands over Esca, tracing the lines of his body while his tongue explored the inside of his mouth. Esca felt like he should be more afraid than he was. Marcus was larger than him, a warrior, and Esca had already been hurt by men far less powerful. Yet he could feel the restraint in Marcus’s frame, the way he held back and kept his touches light, though Esca could feel the desire thrumming beneath his skin.

Eventually Marcus pulled back, eyes dark with lust. His hands sought the hem of Esca’s tunic and began to push it up, his eyes never leaving Esca’s face. Esca lifted his torso up slightly, allowing Marcus to pull the garment off him entirely before tossing it somewhere to the side. Now that Esca was bare from the waist up, Marcus paused, eyes widening and nostrils flaring slightly. He reached out, hesitating for a moment before he ghosted his fingertips across one of the tattoos that wound over Esca’s shoulders and down onto his chest. Esca shivered and felt his cheeks heat at the unexpected regard.

“Beautiful,” Marcus murmured and then bent his head, caressing the line his fingers had just traced with his tongue. Esca couldn’t help his gasp, and he clenched his hands into fists at his sides to keep from grabbing at Marcus. There had been occasions when he was taken that his body had
responded, but those times were infrequent and always left him feeling wretched and ashamed. The times that he had responded to Marcus, he had attributed as the same unwanted responses. Even this time, he hadn’t expected anything other than letting Marcus seek and find his pleasure, and taking simple satisfaction in that for himself.

But now? Gods, he could feel the spark of desire in him, feel his cock thickening where it was still trapped in his braccae. And he couldn’t escape the sensations causing it. Marcus’s hands were now firmly on his hips, his mouth moving across Esca’s skin—his shoulder, his neck, his collarbone, then down over his chest until his lips brushed one pink nipple before drawing it gently into his mouth.

“Ah!” he cried, startled, and Marcus immediately drew back.

“What do you want me to stop?” he asked. Esca still couldn’t find the right words, so he just shook his head, one hand reaching shakily up to nudge Marcus’s head back down. Marcus laughed softly, but bent his head once more, sucking and licking at Esca’s nipple with the occasional hint of teeth. Esca closed his eyes, letting Marcus do as he willed, and enjoyed it.

Somewhere between Marcus leaving on nipple reddened and swollen and switching his attentions to the other, Esca shifted himself beneath him, allowing his legs to fall open and Marcus to slot himself between his thighs. In that new, closer position, he could feel the hot, hard weight of Marcus’s cock pushing against his hip, feel Marcus’s weight pressing against his own erection. It didn’t take long for Marcus—head still buried against Esca’s chest, hands still kneading and gripping his flesh—to begin rutting against him, lazy rolls of his hips that gave delicious friction, but still wasn’t quite enough.

Swallowing down his nervousness, Esca brought his hands to Marcus’s back and tugged at his tunic. Marcus paused long enough to sit up, strip the tunic away, kiss Esca once more, and then bent back down, lapping at the beads of sweat that had begun to form along Esca’s bare, flushed skin. Esca moved his hands to Marcus’s shoulders and placed his palms across the impressive breadth. When he dug his fingers in slightly, exploring the expanse of olive-toned skin, Marcus hummed in pleasure. Emboldened by the response, Esca swept his hands down Marcus’s arms, across his ribs, over his back and along his waist, until his fingers came to the ties of their braccae and he began to undo them.

He finished with Marcus’s first, reaching in to draw him out while Marcus shuddered. He’d held Marcus in his hand once before, in the early winter when he’d thought Marcus had meant to use him. Back then, he had blanked his mind, separated himself from his actions in an attempt to protect himself, and he hadn’t paid much attention. Now, he levered himself up slightly, looking down the length of their bodies as he slowly stroked Marcus’s cock.

It was built like the rest of the man, thick and sturdy, dark, especially with all the blood beneath the surface. Esca has been taught skills for this, been forced to learn all the tricks so that he might better please his masters. He closed his eyes, flinching away from the comparison, hating himself just a little bit because at this moment he wanted to use them to please his master. But he couldn’t think of that, not right now, or it would ruin this for both of them. So he thumbed the head delicately, wetting his thumb in the moisture that gathered there. His fingers traced the line of a fat vein up and down, and then further down still to cup the heavy weight of Marcus’s balls.

“Esca,” Marcus moaned, thrusting into the tight circle of Esca’s hand once it was wrapped around him again. Esca released him quickly. They had no oil, nothing to ease the glide of flesh on flesh, so Esca brought his hand up to his mouth, meaning to use his own spit to help. But Marcus stopped him, catching his wrist. “No,” he panted. “No, Esca, wait.”
He released Esca to reach between them, to work at the ties to Esca’s braccæ, fingers clumsy where they pulled at the knot. Esca gasped, muscles tightening as Marcus brushed against him. After so long without having anyone seek to actually pleasure him, the touch was almost too much, even through the fabric. And it only intensified once Marcus managed to pull his braccæ down, exposing Esca the same way he was.

There weren’t as many differences between then as he might have suspected. Esca was a bit slimmer, perhaps, pale where Marcus was dark, straight where Marcus’s cock had curved gently against his palm, but that was it. Here, Marcus’s size seemed less intimidating because they were nearly the same.

Braccæ out of the way, Marcus pressed them together again, their cocks sliding past each other when Esca couldn’t help the buck of his hips. “Yes,” Marcus hissed and settled his weight onto his elbows, hanging his head to look between them as Esca had done. For several minutes, they simply rutted against each other, and Esca knew that too much longer would see him finishing. But he knew better, even now, to mindlessly seek his own pleasure first. So he reached up again, bringing his hand to his mouth.

And again, Marcus stopped him.

Esca groaned, vexed that Marcus would not simply let him get on with it. He was ready to plead with the other man to just let him finish it, when Marcus turned his wrist, brought Esca’s hand to his own mouth, and sucked the first two fingers in, wetting them thoroughly. Esca went rigid, breathless with shock, and offered not a word of protest. Of all the things he had expected, of all the surprises thus far, this was the greatest of them.

Above him, watching with careful eyes, Marcus continued working. There was the slightest of frowns between his brows, as if he wasn’t quite sure of what he was doing, but soldiering on nonetheless. Beneath the lust, beneath the surprise, Esca felt a sudden, unexpected surge of affection, more than what he would feel for a friend. Never had he expected a Roman to do this, and that Marcus had, and for him, left him reeling.

To cover his sudden confusion, he reached for one of Marcus’s hands, bringing it before him like Marcus had done, and licking a broad stripe across the palm. Around his fingers, Marcus gasped, and Esca would have smiled if he could. Instead, he paid the same attention to Marcus’s hand that Marcus was paying to his own, and then drew it out, catching Marcus’s hand in his and guiding it between their bodies to grasp their cocks together.

It was a little awkward before they found a rhythm. Working together was a different experience that simply trying to pleasure someone else and their different motions took a few moments before they settled into something they both enjoyed. They stroked together and every few passes, Marcus would swipe his thumb across the heads of their cocks while Esca shuddered and clutched at his back. They both gasped and panted, their breath filling the space between them with groans and soft murmurs of satisfaction.

Unused to such stimulation, Esca came first, biting off a sharp cry, his head thrown back. His climax overwhelmed him, left him dazed and unable to focus. When he came back to himself, he became aware that Marcus was still above him, their fingers entwined. His cock was rigid where it was pressed to Esca’s slightly softer one. Esca closed his eyes and let his head thump back against the ground, waiting for Marcus to finish. When Marcus didn’t move, he cracked one eye open to find Marcus watching him, waiting.

He swallowed, his throat dry. “Go on, Marcus,” he finally murmured, earning a brilliant smile in return. Marcus loosened their hands and reached for Esca’s belly and the seed cooling on it.
Swiping his fingers through the mess, he gripped his cock once more, working himself at a furious pace until he came with a long, drawn out groan, his seed spurting to mix with the remnants of Esca’s. Then he slowly lowered himself on shaky arms and pulled Esca close.

For a long time, they simply laid in the clearing. Marcus was a heavy weight on top of him, but when he squirmed slightly, Marcus eased over enough so that he could breathe. Esca knew he should move, should clean himself up and put himself back together as best he could, and make sure Marcus did the same, but he couldn’t summon the strength to do so. He felt wrung out, thin and frayed at the edges like an over-used rag. Freeing the arm that was pinned beneath Marcus, he covered his face with his hands, taking a moment to simply be before gathering his strength.

“Hey.” Marcus stirred beside him. “Are you all right?”

Esca nodded wordlessly, but that didn’t seem to reassure Marcus.

Carefully, Marcus pried one of Esca’s hands off of his face. “Don’t lie to me, Esca.”

“I’m not lying!” Esca snapped, feeling like himself after such a long time of not. “I’m not,” he said more gently. “I just....”

Whatever he meant to say couldn’t force its way past his lips, but Marcus nodded anyway, his face smoothing in understanding. He couldn’t possibly understand all of what Esca was going through, but he obviously understood enough to not push, to not try and force Esca to speak what was going through his mind. Marcus just moved off of Esca entirely, stretching out on the ground by his side.

Eventually, Esca sat up, feeling calm. The dried seed on his stomach pulled at his skin, and he made a face as he looked down at it. Getting to his feet, he looked around, reorienting himself with his surroundings. “We should clean up,” he said. “Come, there’s a stream not far from here.”

Marcus got up after him, if slower, and tugged his braccae back over his hips, tying the laces loosely like Esca had. He took his tunic, which Esca held out to him and untied the horses’ reins from the low branch that had kept them from wandering off. Esca swung up onto his own horse, tucking his tunic into the waist of his braccae. They didn’t speak as they guided their horses through the trees to the stream, and cleaned up one at a time, Marcus first.

Marcus sat on the bank, letting the sun dry his skin while Esca washed up, using a handful of sand from the stream’s bottom to scrub the leavings on his belly. Then he, too, sat in the sun until he was dry before pulling his clothing on.

The whole time, he watched Marcus from the corner of his eye. Had his master been any other Roman, he would guess that this new development would continue, that he would be expected to share his master’s bed from now on. But with Marcus...he wasn’t sure. The Roman didn’t seem embarrassed, and each time he looked at Esca, there was a soft, happy cast to his gaze. But he seemed...distant, not regretful, but wistful, and Esca wasn’t sure what to make of it.

Resolving not to ask and just see how it played out, wanting to see what Marcus would decide without any prompting, they returned to the fort in silence where they parted ways. The rest of the day passed slowly, with Esca growing increasingly curious about what Marcus was going to do. He was nearly positive Marcus would ask—not order—Esca to join him tonight. But when evening fell and Marcus returned to his quarters, he merely bade Esca good night, slipping beneath the light sheet on his bed.
“Marcus?” Esca asked softly, waiting for the man to shift and look at him. “You won’t have me join you?”

Marcus sat up, propping himself on one arm. He looked torn, and his voice was hesitant when he replied, “Would you like to join me?”

Esca considered the question. The choice was his after all. He stood and Marcus wordlessly lifted a corner of the sheet until he joined him beneath it. He waited for Marcus to renew their activities from that afternoon, yet as time went by, the only move Marcus made was to draw him closer with one arm.

“Marcus—” Esca began, but Marcus stopped him with a quick, light kiss.

“Sleep, Esca,” he said, and Esca wondered at the sorrow he heard in his voice.

Chapter End Notes

I admit, I was a little unsure of what I did with Esca in this chapter, but I think he’s entitled to a little breakdown now and again. Fret not, he'll return to being fierce soon enough!

¹ - I added a very small segment here that I had forgotten, as well as the opening sentence.
Chapter 11

Chapter Notes

I apologize for the delay! I finally finished and posted my Avengers Big Bang, so now I'm set to catch up on my other fics, and this one was first on my list.

As always, much thanks to my beta, AccursedSpatula.

Marcus looks at Esca, and sees more than a slave. He sees a man, who, despite Rome's best efforts, still has his pride. And he sees a man that he loves. So he sets him free.

~*~

In the morning, Marcus woke alone, which didn’t surprise him. Even when he had returned to his commander’s schedule and risen early, Esca had always been up before him, usually already gone from his quarters, cot made up neatly on the floor. Marcus didn’t get up that very minute, instead just lying in his bed, pretending for a moment that he wasn’t at a fort, that Esca was really his, and that he would return shortly to their bed.

The rough shout of one legionnaire calling to another outside shattered that fantasy neatly, and Marcus sat up, swinging his legs over the side of his bed with a sigh, hunching over and rubbing his face tiredly. Though his heart ached at the coming separation from Esca, he would not regret what had passed between them. That he had been able to love Esca—even for that short a time—was enough, and he would always be able to look back at this day with pride.

He washed and dressed and ate, preparing himself for the day. There were reports to go over, men to oversee, schedules to approve, and various other sundry tasks that were the domain of a fort commander. He fished Esca’s dagger out of his chest, wrapping it in a scrap of cloth, trying to think of when the best time to give Esca his manumission would be. Perhaps around noon. With the men eating, he would have some time to himself, and it would give Esca the rest of the day to decide what he wanted to, and plenty of time to travel if he did leave.

If. Marcus shook his head at his wishful thoughts. Esca would have plenty of time to travel when he wanted to leave. It would be foolish of him to expect Esca to stay. Closer to Rome, he would have been expected to. As Marcus’s freedman, he would have been required of him to stay close by and offer his former master his services. But here, so close to the border, Esca wouldn’t have to worry about any of that. He would be able to slip away, back into the wilds or whenever he wanted to go, and no one would be the wiser to his former status.

Lips curled into a smile, Marcus placed the wrapped dagger on the table with his reports—hidden in plain sight—and went to see to his men.

His day passed all too quickly, and he grabbed a hasty meal before going to find Lutorius. With no other record, he wanted at least one witness to Esca’s manumission, just in case. The other centurion was the closest thing he had to friend or family out here, and Marcus trusted him completely.

Finding Esca took a little longer, but one of the legionnaires reported having seen grooming some
of the horses. Marcus sent to man to tell Esca he wished to see them, and then he returned to his quarters to wait. Lutorius said nothing as Marcus rocked back on his heels, impatient to be done with this.

Esca finally appeared, tiny bits of straw clinging to his tunic, a few more caught in his hair. He raised an eyebrow in question, a half smile on his lips, though both fell away rapidly when he saw Lutorius was also in the room. “You asked to see me, sir?” he asked respectfully.

Marcus nodded. “I did.” He turned, grabbing the wrapped dagger off the table, and faced Esca again, who was looking more than a little puzzled. “This isn’t quite the usual way to do this, but there seems to be little point in asking you to shave your head and wear a pileus.” Esca’s brows rose in incredulity, and he looked on the verge of asking a question, but Marcus quickly freed the dagger from the cloth and held it out to him. “I thought this would be more appropriate.”

Esca hesitantly reached out and took the dagger. “What?” he asked as his fingers closed around the proffered hilt.

“You’re free.” Marcus smiled. “You’re free, my friend.”

There was a long silence while Marcus waited for Esca’s reaction. He wasn’t sure, exactly, what he expected from Esca, but he had been certain that Esca’s response would be happiness or relief, surprise or shock. But he found himself at a loss when, instead of any of those, Esca frowned, deep furrows lining his brow as he stared first at the dagger and then up at Marcus. Disbelief, then anger clouded his face, and the contentment and satisfaction Marcus had had at doing this faded.

Movement off to his side caught Marcus’s attention, and he twisted slightly to look at Lutorius. The other centurion nodded and said, “I will return to my duties now, sir, if that’s all right with you.”

“Yes. My apologies for keeping you.”

“Sir.” Lutorius nodded once more and smoothly exited the room, leaving Marcus and Esca alone.

Marcus turned back toward Esca, and the terrible look of loathing on his face hit him like a blow to the chest.

“Was this a game to you?” Esca asked.

“A game? What? Esca, no—”

“Did you wait,” Esca interrupted, “to see how long it would take me to give myself to you? Was that all you were waiting for? To let me humiliate myself just that last little bit before you decided to be so generous?”

He threw the dagger to the ground at Marcus’s feet. “If I had known that that was the price of my freedom, I’d have spread my legs and let you fuck me months ago.”

With wide eyes, Marcus stared down at the dagger and then back up at Esca, who was standing with his muscles tense and hands clenched into fists. “Esca, no,” he breathed. “No, that’s not it at all. You—”

“I almost feel like you’ve been cheated,” Esca continued with a bitter laugh. “After all, you didn’t get much from me yesterday.” He laughed again, the sound wrenching and broken in the air. “You had me fooled. You should be one of your actors that Rome so loves. For a while, I thought you might actually have some small semblance of honor.”
Marcus shook his head dumbly. No, no, this was all wrong. This was not the way it was supposed to go. Mithras, but he was a fool. How else was Esca supposed to have viewed his actions, in light of what had passed between them yesterday? Esca turned on the balls of his feet, making to leave, and without stopping to think, Marcus stepped forward and wrapped his hand around Esca’s wrist. Whatever happened, he couldn’t let Esca leave like this, believing the worst of Marcus.

“Let go of me, Roman,” Esca hissed. “I’ve earned my freedom and I intend to use it.”

“Wait!” Marcus tightened his grip, preventing Esca from leaving so easily, though he strained against Marcus’s hold. “Esca, wait, please! I have...I have made a mess of this, but please, before you leave—and know that I will not stop you once I’ve said my piece—please just listen to me for a moment.”

There was a further few moments of struggle, but Esca finally subsided, going still and fixing Marcus with a glare that would strip rust from a sword. “Speak quickly,” he spat. “I would have everything about this place at my back as soon as possible.”

Marcus swallowed back his disappoint at Esca’s words, hoping only that once he’d explained, Esca might not hate him quite so much. “It’s not what you think,” he said, speaking quickly as Esca had bade him. “I had always planned to free you. I have for months, ever since the beginning. What happened yesterday...I had not intended that.”

“Do not lie to me.” The words were cold, hard. “I have seen your eyes upon me, I have heard you at night.”

Heat rising in his face, Marcus nodded. “I don’t deny that, that I looked at you with desire, that I...thought of you. But I meant what I said months ago. I would never have taken you against your will.”

“No, you just manipulated me into thinking it was something I was free to give! You made yourself seem like a friend, like someone I could trust—!”

“Damn you, Esca, listen to me!” Marcus grabbed Esca’s shoulders, shaking him a bit. “Just listen!” He forced himself to let go, to step back, to stop looming over the other man like a threat. “You can ask Lutorius if you don’t believe me, but freeing you once I was well has long been my intention. I probably could have done it sooner, but I was selfish. You are a friend and I enjoyed your company and I did not want to be parted from you any sooner than I had to be. What happened yesterday...” he sighed, rubbing his face tiredly. “I don’t deny that I wanted that, that I enjoyed that, that if I thought there were any chance of you willing to stay by my side, I might ask you of you.

“But I know better than that. I’m not a fool. I purchased the dagger for that reason, as a token of my thanks. You deserve to live your life, free of Rome. And by freeing you the way I have, there are no records of your manumission, but nor are there likely to be any records of you as a slave, not out here. Once you leave this fort, you need never bow your head to Rome again.”

He stepped back, reaching down to pluck the dagger off the floor and hold it out to Esca again. “Please take it. Even if you hate me, if you throw it away or sell it, or even if you intend to use it to spill Roman blood—though I would ask you not to—I want you to have it.”

Esca looked at him for several heartbeats, then dropped his gaze to the dagger, and raised it back to Marcus’s face. Marcus wasn’t sure what he was looking for as Esca’s gray eyes searched for something, but he eventually reached out and took the dagger again, bouncing it in his hand slightly as if testing its weight. He slid back a step, watching Marcus warily, and then another, until he was at the doorway. Only then did he turn, slipping away without a word.
Marcus tried to pretend that that didn’t hurt as much as it did.

~*~

The rest of the day passed even more slowly than the beginning. Marcus felt strangely bereft, adrift, like a boat loosed from its moorings. As the afternoon waned, he idly fingered the game stones in their leather pouch while he read a scroll, now realizing how much he had come to depend on Esca’s company in the evenings to relax and alleviate boredom. He forced himself not to dwell too much on it. Regardless of how they parted, he would not regret the time he spent with Esca, nor the friendship they shared. Esca might be gone, but he was free, and that was enough for Marcus.

So it was a shock when he glanced up from his reading to see Esca standing in the doorway, leaning on one shoulder, his arms folded across his chest. “Esca!” he exclaimed, rising. “But...why? I thought you had left.”

Esca stepped away from the door and into his quarters, shrugging slightly. “That had been my intention, to just leave.”

“No. Instead, I did as you suggested and sought out Lutorius.” He took a deep breath. “My words earlier...may have been unfair.”

Marcus allowed a very small smile to creep across his face. “You don’t have to apologize.”

“I’m not!” Esca snapped, and then looked slightly abashed. “I... You frustrate me, do you know that?” Marcus’s smile grew wider, and Esca waved a hand at him in dismissal. “Never mind. I just wanted to say that I know better now, and you didn’t deserve what I said. You have been too honest with me to have so easily thrown aside all your previous actions. Though it probably means little coming from me, you do have honor. And I suppose I consider you a friend as well.”

Marcus gestured to the seat across from him, and Esca dropped onto it without ceremony. “Have you eaten?”

“Yes.” Esca’s lips twitched. “No one looked twice when I helped myself.”

“I didn’t tell anyone aside from Lutorius. I didn’t want anyone to think that you were vulnerable now that you weren’t under my protection.” He paused, choosing his next words carefully. “It is late to be setting out.”

“It is,” Esca nodded. He paused as well. “I would...ask to remain here one more night, so that I may leave in the morning.”

“Of course.” He hesitated. “Placing you in the barracks would not be a good idea.”

“I still have my cot.” Esca gestured to the side where the cot was still set, Marcus not having yet had it removed. “One more night will hardly be a burden.”

“You are no longer my slave; you shouldn’t have to sleep as you once did.”

One of Esca’s brows rose. “And what would you have me do? Trade with you, with I on the bed and you on the cot? Or perhaps it would be like last night again?”

Marcus flushed, cheeks warming with the guilt because, yes, he did want that and knew he
“Peace, Marcus,” Esca said gently. “I shouldn’t tease like that; you’ve done nothing to deserve it. I slept in far worse places even when I was a free man. One more night on the cot will do me no harm.”

Nodding, Marcus agreed, and then eyed the game board. “One last game, then?”

Esca grinned—it transformed his face, like he was a different man from the one Marcus had known for nearly a year—and took his own black stones, laying them out. Marcus grabbed his own white stones, and quickly fell back into the routine he’d become so accustomed to.

~*~

The next morning, Marcus woke, expecting to already see Esca gone, and was pleasantly surprised to find the man still there. He was dressed and his cot neated, but he sat cross-legged upon it, scrawling something on the wax tablet that he had used to learn to write.

“You’re awake,” he said, without looking up.

“I am. And you’re...still here.”

“I would not leave without saying goodbye.” He got to his feet and set the tablet and stylus down on the table while Marcus threw his tunic on. Then he turned and held out his hand. Marcus didn’t hesitate in clasping his arm.

“Do you know where you will go?”

Esca shook his head. “No. Not yet, at least. I have no tribe to return to, nor do I know who among our allies is left. I may travel for a time, but I haven’t decided.”

Marcus nodded. It was no less than he’d expected. After all, were he in Esca’s place, he, too, would want to leave everything behind and go out and find himself again. He looked at Esca, noting his clothing, the dagger carefully tucked into his belt. Esca was capable, but he had nothing except what he wore. Marcus didn’t doubt that he could provide for himself, but to send him out with so little would be unfair. “A moment,” he said, turning and kneeling to open his trunk. There was a second gift he’d had in mind, only waiting until he knew what Esca intended before giving it.

Esca took the leather pouch he held out, frowning as he hefted it and listened to the clink of coin within. “Marcus....”

“Take it.” Marcus smiled. “You need it more than I, and you’ve earned it, for all that you’ve done for me.”

“I didn’t do that much.”

“You saved my life.”

Esca scoffed. “Your wound would hardly have killed you.”

“No, it wouldn’t have, but without your help, I doubt I would have recovered so well. If I hadn’t, my career with the Legions would have been cut short. Thus, you have saved my life.”

Silence hung between them while Esca frowned. He considered the pouch in his hand for a long moment. “I have no way to repay you.”
“There’s no need,” Marcus insisted. “I don’t need it, you do, and I give it gladly.”

Another long moment passed before Esca nodded and tied the pouch to his belt. “Very well then.” He fell silent for a minute and then spoke again. “Thank you,” he said quietly.

Marcus nodded. “Be well, Esca.”

Esca nodded. “And you as well.” Then his lips twitched. “And watch yourself. Should you be injured again, you won’t have me to help you.”

With a soft huff of laughter, Marcus nodded. “I will. Farewell, my friend.”

“Farewell.” Esca looked at him one last time, nodded, almost to himself, and then slipped from the door, his feet making as little noise walking from Marcus’s quarters as they had the first time he’d ever entered them.
Chapter 12

Chapter Notes

A few things:

I’m aware I have historical inaccuracies in here. Let’s just pretend everything fits right in, shall we?

This chapter didn't progress the way I was intending, but given how easily it came, I can only feel that it's right. And now looking at it, I think it improves the general flow of the story, even if it feels like we're getting a bit off course. Stay with me!

Esca feels Marcus’s eyes upon him and waits for the inevitable that he knows is coming. And when it doesn’t come, it hits him harder than any blow ever could. Now he must decide what course he wants to take. He is not surprised when it leads to Marcus. Nor is he surprised that freedom has bound him with thicker chains than slavery ever did.

~*~

When he left, Esca only had one immediate destination in mind. There was only one place he could go to now, really, and that was the village closest to the fort. With Marcus’s coin, he could simply buy supplies and head wherever he wished, but his words to Marcus had been true—he didn’t know where to go. He had no desire to return to his home and see if anyone remained, or had returned. To be known and seen by his people as the failed son of Cunoval would be too much. The same was true for seeking out any allies his tribe had had. They would give him a place, but the looks...the whispers.... He shuddered. No. Better to not return to that. That left someplace new, and the village was an option.

It might be hard. He’d been there many times with Marcus. The people knew him for a slave, and that might color their view of him, but he also knew that they had seen Marcus as a fair man—at least, as fair as he could be—and he had never belittled or shamed Esca in their eyes. It would be unlikely that they would hold it against him. Beside, the village was still struggling, and Esca couldn’t seem them turning away a capable man unless he were truly a monster.

It took him a little more than a half day to make the journey on foot, and he’d passed no one as he walked. His presence as the houses grew more numerous didn’t attract any particular attention until he’d nearly reached the heart of the village. A few women tending to chores outside gave him odd looks, eyes instinctively seeking out the location of their children as he passed by. Esca ignored them and continued on in search of the person who could help him.

He finally paused by an old woman sitting outside her house, a basket of mending at her feet. “Where is your chief?” he asked.

She looked him up and down. “Rotting in a grave, as he has been for almost a year now.”

“No one else ever claimed the title?”

“No.”
Esca tried to not let his impatience show. “Then who speaks for you village?”

“Why do you want to know?”

“That’s my business. Who do I speak to?”

She snorted. “You’re looking for Berach. He’s in the big house. Can’t miss it.” She nodded to indicate the direction Esca had been walking in and then went back to her mending, dismissing him without a word.

“Thank you.” She acknowledge his thanks with a jerk of her head, but didn’t look up again. Esca resettled his small bag on his shoulder and walked on.

As the old woman had said, there was no mistaking the big house. Clearly, the former chief had lived here, and Berach had claimed it, even if he didn’t claim the accompanying title. Outside the large roundhouse, a young woman sat, playing with a child on her lap. Esca tried to place her from his trips to the village with Marcus, but she was unfamiliar. She looked up at his approach, and stood swiftly, clutching the child to her breast. Without a word, she went inside, shutting the door firmly behind her. Esca didn’t bother to knock; instead, he simply waited. She had seen him, and had undoubtedly told whoever was inside that someone had come. If she didn’t, he would knock, or if no one else was inside, he would go looking elsewhere. Regardless, a few more minutes of his time would cost nothing.

The door opened, though, and an older man came out. His hair and beard were gray and he limped slightly as he walked. “What do you want?”

“Are you Berach?”

“Aye. What’s it to you?” Then he frowned. “You’re the commander’s slave, aren’t you?”

“Was. He freed me.”

“Did he now? Well, what are you doing here, then? I’d expect you’d want to go home.”

“I don’t have one,” Esca said tightly. “I have a proposition for you, if you’re willing to listen.”

Berach narrowed his eyes, turning his head to spit on the ground. “Go on.”

“Give me a dwelling, a small one, and I’ll help the village as I can.”

The old man snorted. “Not much of an offer. We don’t want outsiders here, especially not Roman ones. They’ve done enough damage.”

“I’m no Roman,” Esca ground out, keeping a tight hold on his anger lest it ruin what he was trying to accomplish here.

“Close enough,” Berach said dismissively. “Be on your way. There’s nothing for you here.”

“Oh?” Esca’s own eyes narrowed. He would not allow this foolish old man to run him off so easily. “Are you sure? It would cost you nothing. We both know that a number of these houses stand empty.”

“True,” Berach said grudgingly. “But how would you help us?”

Shaking his head at the man’s blindness, Esca sighed. “Do you really have that many young, able-bodied men that you would turn any away? If nothing else, I can hunt. I would sell what I catch to
others at a more than fair price.” A curtain at one of the windows twitched, revealing a sliver of a pale face. Esca nodded to it. “Your wife and son?”

“Daughter and grandson, not that it’s any of your business.”

Esca nodded. “Fair enough. And in return for your…generosity, I would give you a portion of what I kill. Would you deny your grandson a steady supply of fresh meat when it would cost you nothing?”

Berach opened his mouth again, most likely to deny Esca again, when a hissed “Father” from the window had him turning. He gave Esca a hard look, and went to the door, which cracked open. A low, tense conversation between Berach and his daughter followed, but he was too far to make out exactly what was said. He didn’t need to, though. If Berach’s daughter had any sense, she would know to argue for Esca’s offer. Too many children died young for her not to give her son every opportunity for survival that she could.

Finally, Berach turned back and stomped over to Esca, clearly unhappy. “I’d tell you to thank Sadb, but I want you to stay away from my daughter, do you hear me?”

“I do.”

“Good. See that it stays that way. Follow me.”

Without another word, he walked quickly toward through the village, his limp not slowing him at all, and Esca followed. Berach stopped before a small wattle and daub roundhouse set at the very edge of the village. “Belonged to a couple of brothers,” he muttered. “Damn fools got themselves killed. It’s yours if you want it.”

“Thank you,” Esca said quietly, meaning it.

Berach spat again. “You owe my daughter, don’t forget that.”

“I won’t.”

The old man jerked his head in a nod and stomped back off, Esca watched him go until he was out of sight, and then moved toward the small house. The door opened fairly easily, but Esca could already tell he would have to replace the leather hinges. That could wait, though; it was summer now and he would rarely need to keep it shut tight against the cold.

Inside the roundhouse, the air was musty, and he wrinkled his nose against the smells of wood rot and mold. The damp had gotten into something, and he would need to find what it was and remove it before airing the house out would do any good. To start with, however, he opened the door all the way and pulled the boards free that blocked the two small windows in the walls, setting them just outside the door, leaning against the outside walls. Then he turned his attention to taking an inventory of the contents of the roundhouse.

It wasn’t much. A table was shoved against one wall and a bench tucked underneath it. Both appeared to be in good shape. The wood was solid and whatever moisture had gotten inside hadn’t warped them. Turning, he saw a small room, little more than alcove, holding only a bed frame. The elder had probably slept there, he surmised, leaving the younger to make a pallet in the main room. Inspecting the frame, he saw the source of the wood rot was coming from one of the slats. Esca grabbed it and tossed it out the door as well. If nothing else, he could use it for a fire. The lone chest in the dwelling proved to be empty, as did the hooks in the walls and hanging from the ceiling.
There wasn’t much else. The hearth would need to be swept clean, and though someone had removed the rushes from the floor, there were still bits of them about. They, too, would need to be swept clear. He had the very basic furnishings, but that was it. No furs or blankets. No cooking pots or bowls. Not even a single knife. Esca’s hand went to the pouch tied at his waist. If he were going to hunt, he would need a good bow, a couple of spears, and a larger knife to butcher with. Arrows he could make for himself, and the knife Marcus had given him would suffice for smaller game. The rest…. He’d either have to pay for in coin, or hope someone would lend it to him now in return for payment later.

Esca laughed at the extremes of his life. In less than a day, he’d been given his freedom and a home, and yet he didn’t even have a spare tunic.

“Hello?”

Esca turned to see a young woman peering into the hut. She was short and slender, pretty, with light brown hair pulled back into a braid that fell down her back. Esca could recall seeing her a few times in the village but didn’t know her name. “Yes?”

She stepped inside. “Esca, right?” He nodded. “I’m Aisling. Will you be living here?”

“Yes. Berach was kind enough to give it to me.”

She laughed. “Knowing Berach, kindness had nothing to do with it.” She looked around. “Not much left, is there?”

“I had noticed that.”

“Hm. Let me see what I can find.”

“I can’t accept your charity.” Esca needed to be firm on that point. “What I need I will pay for.”

Aisling shook her head. “No, no, that’s not what I meant. After the...battle, there was so many gone that we went through the empty houses and took what was good. No sense in letting it go to waste. We’ve sold some, but most of us have goods that simply sit unused. I will see what I have and ask others as well.”

Such unasked for aid was unexpected, and Esca wondered if there was some other motive behind her offer. “Only if you have enough.”

With a blush, Aisling laughed softly. “We have enough, don’t worry. There’s plenty to share. I can get you what you need.”

“That would be very...kind.”

Aisling nodded and began looking around, much as Esca had done. She frowned as she dragged a fingers over the table and it came away black with dust. “It’ll need a thorough cleaning. I can do that the first time you’re out for the day.”

“You don’t have to—” he began, but she cut him off with a laugh.

“You’re more use to us out in the woods than doing a woman’s work keeping house. I’ll send my boy Ciardha over with things as I get them.” She paused, and then watching him carefully, said, “If you want, I could cook for you as well, and wash your clothes when you need it.”

Esca understood the deal she was offering. She would cook and clean for him, and in return he
would give her a portion of his take. It was a tempting offer. Esca would have to be careful how much he promised to others, or he’d have nothing left to sell for himself, but he nodded. This was a fair trade and would undoubtedly receive the better end of the bargain. “I could give you something for your pot,” he offered.

Aisling smiled. “That would be most appreciated.” She wiped her hand off on her dress. “I’ll see about getting you what you need.”

“Wait!” he called as she stepped through the open door. “Do you know where I could get a bow? Or some hunting spears?”

Tilting her head, she frowned as she thought. “I know there were some left behind, but who has them now....” She tapped her chin. “Let me ask. I’m sure I can find something.”

“All right. Again, you have my thanks.”

Once she’d given him a smile and a wave, she left, and Esca decided to see what condition the roof was in. It would do him no good to acquire belongings only to have them drenched during the first rain. He grasped the edge and hauled himself up, settling in for a long afternoon.

~*~

The thatch was in surprisingly good shape. A couple of areas would need fixing eventually, but the roof was sound for now. He dropped down from the roof, landing lightly on his feet, brushing his hands off on his tunic.

“You the one my ma sent me to help?”

Esca turned and was momentarily stunned. The boy was about eight and had a bundle of furs and blankets clutched in his arms and a small sack slung over one shoulder, and he certainly wasn’t what Esca was expecting. His hair was black and his eyes so dark as to nearly be so. His skin was dark, too, a golden hue that Esca had grown very familiar with from his time serving Marcus. The boy’s mother might be a Briton, but the stamp of his father’s Roman blood was obvious.

The boy glared at him, eyes narrowing in what Esca recognized as a preparation to defend himself by attacking. “Ciardha, right?” he asked, hoping not to alienate the child. He reached out to take the bundle and bag. “I’m Esca.”

A suspicious glare was still leveled at him, but the boy shrugged. “That’s my name.” He kicked at the dirt. “Ma says I’m to help you with anything you need.”

“I don’t think I need anything else at the moment, but thank you.”

Ciardha shrugged again. “Not like I have anything else to do.”

“You could go play?” Esca suggested.

The boy snorted. “Not many my age around. Most left. And those that’re still here...they don’t wanna play with me because of who my father was.”

“He was a Roman,” Esca said gently.

“Yeah. Soldier up at the fort. Ma says he left and she never heard from him again.”

“I’m sorry.” And he was. It had to be hard for the child to see so many of the people he knew and
loved killed or driven off by his father’s people. It was a hard position for anyone to be in, let alone a boy.

“I’m not. He’s probably dead. I hope he’s dead.”

There was no good answer to that, so Esca jerked his head toward the hut. “Let me go set these down.” He quickly set the sack down on the table and dumped the load of blankets and furs on his bed—they could be sorted out later—and headed back outside. Ciardha was still there, glowering down at the ground as if it had done him some wrong. He frowned at the boy. He’d only been here a couple of hours, with still no means to provide for himself yet, and he really shouldn’t be contemplating picking up an additional responsibility. But befriending the boy could be useful, both in terms of getting Esca settled in and making his life easier.

Esca sighed, and the sound was enough to get the boy to look up. “Do you know if your mother had any luck finding weapons for me to hunt with.”

“Said she was gonna ask Berach. He has a lot and he can’t use ‘em, just keeps them to sell to traders. Ma says she’ll just tell him he won’t be seeing any meat if he doesn’t give you some.”

“That’s good.” He paused. “Have you ever been hunting?”

“No, I’m too young.”

“Would you like to learn?”

Ciardha was back to eyeing him suspiciously. “Why would you do that?”

“Call it a trade. I’ll teach you how to set snares and traps, and how to clean your catches, and you keep me supplied with firewood and fresh water, and do any tasks I might have for you. Sound fair?”

“Why?”

“Why not? I don’t know anyone here, and if Berach is any judge, I’m hardly welcome. You help me, I help you. It’s as simple as that.”

The boy bit his lip, clearly weighing his options. “All right.” He backed up a couple of steps. “Ma said to tell you she’ll send over something to eat tonight.”

“All right.”

The boy didn’t say another word, just turned and bolted back toward another dwelling not that far away. So Aisling and her son were relegated to edge of the village as well, an outcast just like he was. Well, that was probably for the best. Esca watched until the boy was inside and then ducked back into his own house.

The sack Aisling had sent with her son contained a pot, a few bowls of varying sizes, a shallow platter, and a couple of carved wooden spoons. Esca left them in the sack so that they wouldn’t get dirty, and turned his attention to pile on material on his bed. There were a few furs, which he piled on top of the slats as a base, and then layered the two blankets on top of them. The result was fairly comfortable bedding, perhaps even more so than he cot at the fort had been.

Wrapped up in the last blanket was a spare tunic and pair of bracchae, clearly worn and much patched, but still whole, and the stitches were strong. Besides, Esca wasn’t about to turn away anything that cost him nothing.
With nothing else to do, and with some daylight still left, Esca left to explore outside. The treeline wasn’t that far from his roundhouse, and it would be fairly easy for him to slip in and out to go hunting. The undergrowth provided plenty of places to set snares, and as he walked, footsteps silent as he goes, he saw the darts of movement that indicated game. Good. That would make it easier to live up to his promises. He would have to watch for animals following him back for his kills, though, but if he did the rough butchering in the woods, it shouldn’t be too bad. There would undoubtedly be a more secure place in the village to store his catch once he brought it back.

By the time he returned, the sun was setting and he was damp with sweat. He’d been on his feet all day, and he wanted nothing more than go to his house—he was still half in disbelief that his plan had worked—and sleep until dawn. Esca stopped short when he entered. His table had been wiped down and on it was a unlit lamp and a small, covered pot. Next to it was a something small wrapped in cloth.

The pot proved to hold a stew, and the cloth a piece of bread. Esca looked at the lamp for a moment before deciding he didn’t need that much light, and ate quickly, using the last piece of the bread to sop up any traces of stew in the pot since he couldn’t rinse it. Then he dropped the cover back on top, stripped his clothes off, and fell onto his bed.

~*~

When he awoke in the morning, dawn was just creeping over the horizon. He laid where he was for a moment, shivering slightly in the morning chill. Habit demanded that he rise and get to whatever duties awaited him. But...there was nothing for him to do. If he rose, he would be left sitting on his heels. With a slight smile, he slipped beneath the topmost blanket, wrapped it tight over his shoulders and went back to sleep.

The next time he woke, the sun had risen fairly high, and he felt almost lethargic from all the extra sleep. That would pass, he knew, and he couldn’t indulge in this often, but it was a pleasant change. He dragged on the clean clothes Aisling had provided and went outside, the fullness of his bladder urging him on. As he stepped out of his doorway, he almost tripped over Ciardha sitting on the single stone step.

“You sleep late,” the boy accused.

“For the first time in several years, yes.” He ignored the boy as he made his way to the treeline to relieve himself. When he returned, Ciardha was still sitting where he had been, and Esca noticed the pouch in his lap and the bucket of water at his side. Wordlessly, the boy handed him the pouch, and Esca thanked him with a grunt as he grabbed the bucket of and went back inside. The pouch contained more bread and a wedge of cheese, and Esca quickly before drinking some water and washing his hands and face.

“Ma said Berach said you could have some spears, and a bow and arrows. They’re at our house.”

“Good. Lead the way.”

Ciardha ran off, pushing open his door and calling for his mother while Esca followed. Aisling gave him an exasperated smile when Esca leaned his head in. She was kneading dough and had a few streaks of flour up her arms and across her cheek. She nodded her head to where her son was struggling to lift the two spears laid on the floor.

“I’ll take those,” Esca said, taking the shafts from the boy. Catching the dark expression that crossed his face, he asked, “Can you carry the bow and quiver?” Ciardha nodded and he and Esca carried the weapons back to Esca’s roundhouse to inspect.
The weapons were in fair shape. The points would need to be sharpened and affixed more firmly to the spears, the bow needed to be restrung, and some of the fletching on the arrows would have to be redone, but it should take no more than a day or two. He looked at the boy who was watching him avidly. “Come,” he said, “I’ll show you the most important part of hunting—making sure your weapons don’t fail you.”

They spent the day outside, Esca showing Ciardha how to sharpen edges and removing bad fletching so that new could be tied on. At one point, Ciardha ran off to cadge a new bowstring from a neighbor, and then Esca showed him how to take them on and off, explaining the importance of keeping the strings dry and unstringing the bow if it was not to be used for a while.

While they worked, Aisling came and went, keeping an eye on her son while she cleaned out Esca’s house, even stopping by with some more bread and cheese for their midday meal. By the time sunset came, Esca was reasonably confident he could begin hunting the next day, something he told Ciardha when the boy again brought over a portion of soup that evening for his supper.

That night when he was alone, now that he wasn’t quite so tired, Esca found himself at odds. He wasn’t weary enough for sleep, and he was bored with nothing to do. Suddenly, he found himself missing Marcus, and the conversation and games they shared in the evening. It angered him partly, that he should long for aspects of his slavery now that he was free. Rome should have no hold over him any longer, yet here he was, still bowing his head to the empire, even if only in his own mind.

A smaller part of him whispered that it was all right to miss a friend, no matter the circumstances in which they met and parted.

The next day, he rose with the sun, gathering his bow and quiver, and his knife, and slipped into the woods. He didn’t have much luck until the afternoon, when he managed to bring down a small deer. He carried it to a small creek and gutted it there, throwing the entrails into the brush for animals to eat and then carrying the carcass home. There was enough daylight left that he could skin it and divide the pieces up before it got too dark.

He grinned to himself as he walked out of the woods, the deer over his shoulders. It seemed like this might work out after all.

~*~

Esca’s life began to fall into a rhythm. He would hunt every few days, sometimes returning empty-handed, but more often than not managing to bring back at least some small game. Other days, he took Ciardha out with him, showing him how to set traps and fish, and then how to clean what he caught. Esca had to admit the boy was a good listener, stern and serious as he followed Esca’s orders—thought Esca didn’t miss the wide smile on his face the day he ran home to give his mother a fat trout he’d caught and cleaned on his own.

The villagers, wary of his presence—though not so much as Berach had been—warmed to him quickly when he proved he could provide a valuable resource. Aisling continued to cook and clean for him, and slowly, he began to acquire more belongings as she either found more spares for him or when he purchased and traded for necessities.

And though he still found he missed Marcus in the evenings, or sometimes during the day when he yearned to spar with someone, his life was good. The routine was comfortable, and he had enough companionship in the friendly Aisling and in her solemn, quiet son. Though, lately, the boy had become less quiet, asking Esca questions when a thought crossed his mind.

He and Ciardha had been to visit a trader one day when the boy turned to him. “Esca? They say
you used to be a slave at the fort. Is that true?”

Esca slowed his steps. He knew “they” could only mean other villagers. “Yes, that’s true,” he replied, wondering what the boy would ask next. Ciardha stopped completely. “Is that why that soldier is looking at you like that?”

He was looking past Esca, so Esca turned to see what had caught his attention. His breath caught in his throat, for standing no more than ten feet away was Marcus, looking at him in open shock.

“Marcus,” he managed to say.

Marcus blinked and shook his head. “Esca...” he said. “I...you’re here.” He seemed at a loss as to what to say.

Esca could understand that feeling, because he felt like there should be some words exchanged between them, but nothing came to his tongue. “Yes,” he finally said for want of anything else. “I am.”

“I didn’t know,” Marcus said after a few moments of silence.

Esca looked around. There weren’t many people about, but this was not a conversation to be held in the open. He nudged Ciardha’s shoulder. “Go home.”

The boy glared at Marcus—Esca found the silent defense touching—and hurried off. Esca looked back at Marcus and waved him forward with one hand. “Follow me. We’ll talk.” And without looking back to see if Marcus followed, led him back to his house.
Chapter 13

Chapter Notes

I'm sorry about the horribly long wait. I will try not to let it happen again.

Marcus looks at Esca, and sees more than a slave. He sees a man, who, despite Rome's best efforts, still has his pride. And he sees a man that he loves. So he sets him free. He finds it impossible to let him go.

~*~

After hurriedly telling Lutorius that he would meet him in time to return to the fort, Marcus hastened after Esca, barely restraining himself from scrambling to keep up. He hadn’t expected to see Esca again, and certainly not so close, though after a few moments of thought, he wasn’t sure why. The village was nearby and clearly friendly to one of their own. Where else would Esca have gone to get himself started? But he was glad that Esca was here, his heart beating wildly with joy despite efforts to calm himself. Marcus had resigned himself to never seeing him again, and to have this opportunity was a gift.

They passed villagers as they walked, Esca nodding to a few as they greeted him. The civilians mostly ignored Marcus, but for a few who directed hard-eyed stares at him. He couldn’t blame them for that, and only hoped that associating with him wouldn’t cause Esca any trouble. Their path led to a small roundhouse at the edge of the village. Esca opened the door and gestured for Marcus to enter.

Inside, Marcus glanced about, noting the furnishings, sparse, but well-kept. Everything was neat and orderly, no signs of clutter or disarray. “You live here?” he asked as Esca followed him inside, leaving the door open so that the house could catch as much of the breeze as possible.

“No, I have very accommodating neighbors.”

Marcus looked up, startled, then his own lips twitched at Esca’s dry sarcasm. “Sorry, stupid question,” he said, scratching the back of his head.

“It’s all right. Sometimes I have trouble believing it myself. Sit.”

Marcus dropped down into the sole chair in the house, while Esca fetched a clay bottle and two small cups. Pulling out the bench tucked under the table and straddling it, he poured a small amount of amber liquid into each and then handed Marcus one of the cups.

The drunk was fiery and blazed down Marcus’s gullet like liquid fire. He managed to avoid choking, but just barely. It was a native drink, one he’d had before, but rarely, and he’d never had the chance or inclination to develop a taste for it. Esca watched him with slightly raised brows, drinking from his own cup as if it held water.

“How’s your leg?” Esca asked after a few moments of silence.

Marcus rubbed the scar running along his thigh in an almost absent manner. “It’s fine. Aches when it rains, but it probably always will. And you?” He met Esca’s eyes with own clear, green ones.
“How have you been?”

“I am well.”

“That’s good.” Silence fell between them, and Marcus drained his cup for a lack of anything else to do. Then he toyed with it for a minute before standing. “I...shouldn’t keep you. It was good to see you again, Esca.” He placed his cup on the table next to Esca.

“So eager to leave,” Esca muttered. “You were far more comfortable in my presence when I was a slave.”

“That’s not....” Marcus faltered, unsure of what to say before deciding that honesty was best between them. “What do you want me to say, Esca? That I miss you?” He shrugged. “I do. You were a better friend than I deserved, and I regret that it wasn’t under better circumstances, but I don’t want my presence to force you to keep reliving memories.”

“Would I have invited you back to my home if that were the case?” Esca huffed, shaking his head faintly.

“I suppose not.”

“Sit, Marcus,” Esca commanded. “And stop apologizing for what wasn’t your fault, with both words and actions. It doesn’t suit you. You’ve already done more for me than any other Roman ever has.”

Marcus went to object, but then shook his head, smiling ruefully. “It still does not seem enough, sometimes. But you are right. To continue apologizing lessens us both.”

“Good.” Esca refilled his cup, then reached out to refill Marcus’s. “You seemed surprised to see me. Is my being here really so shocking?”

“In a way. I had thought you would have gone as far away from here as quickly as possible. It’s what I would have likely done. I thought you’d be north of the wall by now.”

Esca nodded. “That had been my thought, too, but I needed to start somewhere, to have something to build on. The village was both familiar enough and far enough removed from the fort to offer that. As for being north of the wall?” He shrugged. “Perhaps one day, but not now.”

“Is it wrong that I’m glad of that?” Marcus asked quietly.

“No, for I find that I have missed you as well.” Esca’s voice was just as quiet as Marcus’s. “Never would I have believed it, but here we are.”

Warmth bloomed in Marcus’s chest at Esca’s words, and he let his mouth split into a wide grin. It was good to know that he hadn’t lost a friend. “Come,” he said, draining his cup and proud that he didn’t cough, “tell me about what you’ve done here.”

Esca gave him a slightly incredulous look, but drained his cup anyway and rose. “Follow me, then.”

~*~

The minutiae of Esca’s life wasn’t anything shocking or deeply interesting, but it served as a bridge, a way to ease them both back into the odd friendship they’d had before. Esca talked and explained, Marcus asked questions, and gradually the conversation moved to how Marcus was
doing at the fort and what was going on there. It was easy, familiar, and Marcus found himself feeling calmer and happier than he had since Esca left. There was a deeper meaning behind those feelings, but he carefully ignored them. It would do no good to admit them now, not even to himself.

And it was good to see Esca, relaxed and happy, in his own element, comfortable with his life and the people around him. There was a certain tension missing from the line of his shoulders and back that had always been present at the fort. Marcus hadn’t even realized it until he noticed its absence here. And though he should not think it, as a free man, Esca was more beautiful to Marcus than he ever had been before.

And if Marcus acted on that again, he risked losing Esca altogether.

Too soon, the sun began to dip toward the horizon, and Marcus knew that his men would be waiting for him. He held out a hand to Esca, grinning when the other man clasped his arm. “It was good to see you again. I am glad to know that you are well.”

Esca nodded. “I as well. Be safe.”

“You, too.” Marcus hesitated. “If I were to return, another day....”

“I would be glad to see you, Marcus.” The corners of his mouth lifted in a brief grin.

“Next time, then.” Marcus headed for the road that led to the fort, turning back once to lift his hand in a final goodbye to Esca, who stood by his roundhouse, watching Marcus go, lifting his own arm in response.

~*~

Before the revolt, Marcus had only been able to head to the village once a month or so. He had gone primarily to keep an eye on things and the test the mood of the local people—though that had failed abysmally in the end—and to do the occasional hunting. There had never been any personal and immediate reason to go, and though he had one now, that didn’t mean he was able to go any more often. Adding to that was the fact that after so long of being unable to lead his men, he had to set a better example to them now, and so it was more than another month before he was able to make the trip.

Esca wasn’t at his house when Marcus arrived, though he saw the same boy from before lingering near it, watching him suspiciously. “Hello!” Marcus called as he drew closer. “Can you tell me where Esca is?”

The boy was silent as Marcus nudged his horse toward him. “You’re the commander up at the fort, aren’t you?”

“Yes, I am.”

“What do you want with Esca?”

“I had hoped to spend some time with him today, if he’s free.”

“Why?”

Marcus raised his brows at the blatant question. The child was clearly unafraid of him, yet wary of his presence, especially when it came to Esca. Marcus could tell the boy off for his impertinence, but that would likely bode ill with both Esca and the other villagers. Besides, Marcus couldn’t fault
his suspicions.

“That is between Esca and myself, but he knows to expect my arrival.”

The boy narrowed his eyes and opened his mouth, but was cut off by Esca’s voice calling out, “Ciardha!”

Marcus and Ciardha both turned to see Esca coming around another dwelling, a small pack slung over his shoulder. He jogged over to Ciardha, ruffling his hair, though the boy tried to push his arm away. Esca frowned slightly, then dropped to one knee, speaking to the sullen-looking boy in quiet tones, touching his arm to catch his attention when Ciardha turned his face away. When they finished, the boy still appeared disgruntled, but he went on his way without another word.

“I apologize for Ciardha,” Esca said, walking toward Marcus as Marcus swung down from his saddle.

“No need. He’s concerned about you, and protective, for which I can hardly blame him.”

“He’s angry as well, and disinclined to trust Romans.”

“Something else for which I cannot blame him. I would have felt much the same toward Britons at his age.”

“True enough. Give him time.” He pursed his lips slightly. “What do you want to do today?”

“Hunting?” Marcus offered. “We’ve not been in some time.”

Esca frowned, rubbing his chin. “I would say yes, but I do not have a horse, so I fear it would be far more boring than the hunts you are used to.” He tapped a curled finger against his lower lip for a moment as he thought, and Marcus found himself momentarily entranced by the unfamiliar gesture. Never before had Marcus seen Esca being so demonstrative, like the easy touches and gestures he had bestowed on the boy, or the way he gesticulated as he thought and talked. Was that another aspect his freedom had released? That he now felt comfortable enough to not watch his every move?

“Marcus?” Esca asked.

“I’m sorry, what?” Marcus replied, realized he had missed what Esca had just said.

“I did not think the sun was hot enough to addle your brains,” he murmured and Marcus couldn’t help a small grin. “I asked if fishing would be all right for today.”

“That would be fine. Perhaps next time I’ll see about bringing an extra horse with me?”

“That would be most appreciated, if you don’t think it would frowned upon.”

“I think I can get away with it.”

“Fine, upstanding model of a legionnaire you are,” Esca murmured with a small smile. “Come, the river’s not far. You can bring your horse or tie it here.”

“I’ll bring him and hobble him near the bank so he can drink.” Esca nodded and turned, leading the way. “Uh, Esca?” Marcus asked after a moment. “Don’t we need something to fish with?”

This time Esca outright grinned at him. “We do have something to fish with.” He held up his hands and wiggled his fingers. “Hope you don’t mind getting wet.”
The fishing went well for Esca, with a handful of large, gleaming fish set out on the bank waiting to be cleaned. Marcus, glowering darkly down at the water, hadn’t had nearly so much luck. None at all, in fact.

“Is this revenge?” he grumbled, giving up and wading out of the water. He’d been wise enough to leave his tunic and braccae folded on a rock, so only his subligaculum had gotten damp.

“If it were revenge, Marcus, you’d know,” Esca chuckled quietly from the river, still bent over and waiting for a fish to swim between his hands.

Marcus muttered to himself under his breath, working at the knot of his subligaculum so that he could take the garment off and leave it to dry in the sun. It came free at last, and he unwound the material, laying it next to his clothes. He was bending to wipe the water from his legs so he could pull his braccae on when there was a splash behind him and Esca gave a triumphant cry, and he turned instinctively toward the sound.

Esca was wading out of the river, holding another wriggling fish tightly. He tossed it onto the bank beside the others and then shook the water from his hands. Grinning he looked at Marcus. For a moment, his expression faltered, and then turned sly. “I don’t think you’re going to catch more fish that way.”

Confused, Marcus blinked and looked down, face growing hot when he realised he was still naked. Whirling back around, he yanked his tunic on hastily, followed by his braccae, which clung unpleasantly where his legs were still damp. “Sorry,” he muttered.

Behind him, Esca sighed. “I didn’t...” he muttered. “Marcus, I only meant it as a joke. Surely I can do that without giving offense?”

“I...yes, of course.” Marcus looked back and froze at the sight of Esca stripping his own braccae off, the clean, pale lines of his body beautifully shown in the sun before he dropped his tunic over his head, hiding most of them. He took a deep breath, forcing away the beginning twitches of desire with effort. He had promised himself he would not do that, would not look up Esca as an object of desire and put him in the position of feeling like he had to reciprocate again. The guilt would be too much to bear.

“Here, let’s get these fish cleaned and then we can take them back.”

They knelt side by side on the bank of the river, working quickly with small knives to gut the fish, tossing the innards away to be picked at by birds and animals later. Then they carried Esca’s catch back to the village, where Esca gave one of the fish to Berach’s daughter and another to his neighbor Aisling. That done, they returned to Esca’s house, where Esca started a small fire in the hearth to cook their remaining fish with. When that had been tended to, Esca wiped his hands on a rag and gave Marcus a considering look. “We need to talk about this,” he said after a long moment.

“About what?” Marcus asked cautiously.

“Us. You and me.” Esca gestured between them. “You are so worried about behaving correctly that it makes you...” He trailed off. “Had I been one of your men, or a Roman friend, would you have been that mortified at the river?”

Marcus pressed his lips together in a thin line. “No.”

“Then why with me?”
“You know why.”

“Marcus....”

“Because of what I did,” Marcus finally grunted, looking away. He did not need to bring this up, and he couldn’t help but be annoyed at Esca for forcing the issue.

“Because of what you did?” Esca asked, incredulity coloring his voice. “I recall doing more than simply laying back.”

“You had no choice,” Marcus retorted, finally admitting the shame that had weighed upon him since that day.

“Stubborn Roman,” Esca muttered, raking his hands through his hair. “If I had said no, would you have forced me?”

“Of course not!”

“Do you think I didn’t know that?” Esca’s expression, which was annoyed, softened slightly. “We fucked, Marcus, and I wasn’t unwilling. You didn’t force me. If I hadn’t wanted to lay with you, I wouldn’t have. There’s no reason to feel any guilt for it.”

“There is when I want to again,” Marcus said lowly. If Esca wanted honesty, then he could have it. That gave Esca pause. “You still desire me?”

Marcus nodded. “I do. And the wanting has not lessened in your absence. Does that surprise you?”

“Perhaps.” Esca clearly chose his words carefully. “I had thought perhaps your curiosity might have been sated.”

That coaxed a small laugh out of Marcus. “Hardly, and I was driven by more than simply curiosity.” He tilted his head slightly as he looked at Esca. “Did you truly not realize that?”

“Then why didn’t you bring me into your bed until I asked? Why didn’t you take me again when you could have?”

“I couldn’t, not when you weren’t free, when you truly couldn’t choose for yourself,” Marcus replied simply, shrugging one shoulder. “I couldn’t...I didn’t...I wouldn’t have been able to live with myself if I had taken from you again like that.”

Expression somber, Esca sank down onto the bench, Marcus turning in his seat so that they continued to face each other. He was quiet for a long time, and Marcus forced himself to be still, to wait patiently until Esca had ordered his thoughts. Finally, he spoke.

“I don’t think I can give you that, Marcus.”

“I know.” His heart clenched, the pain of wanting but not being wanted in return sharp in his breast. “I never wanted you to think I expected otherwise. That’s why I did what I did in the forest, because I knew that I would not have another chance, that once you were free you wouldn’t choose me.”

“It’s not that.” Esca shook his head. “It’s not you, Marcus.” He drummed his fingers on his thigh. “I don’t know what I want anymore. The way I used to feel, the way I feel now.... In many ways it was easier when I was a slave because then I didn’t have to worry about wants desires, for things or
people. And now?” A long sigh preceded a head shake. “I would be lying if I said I didn’t want you at all, but I cannot be sure it’s what I really want.”

“Esca, it’s fine. I never thought to ask that of you.” Marcus forced the hurt away, because truly, what was his loss? A lover that never was, never could be? He was already fortunate that Esca was still here. “I would ask that we remain friends.”

“Can you accept that?” Esca asked, gaze searching Marcus’s face.

“Yes.”

“Then yes, we can be friends, and I’m glad of it.”

Marcus sighed, relieved, and smiled. He’d been half afraid Esca would tell him to go, that even knowing how Marcus felt would be too uncomfortable. Now those fears had been laid to rest and he could at least have this. The choice between ignoring how he wanted Esca and not being near Esca at all was an easy one.

~*~

The next month, when Marcus managed to get to the village, there was no hint of the discomfort that had marred his last visit. And since he brought an extra horse, he and Esca avoided the previous embarrassment they’d experienced by the river. They spent the day in the woods, eventually bringing down a deer, which they brought back to Esca’s roundhouse to skin and parcel out. They talked of many, mostly inconsequential things, careful to keep clear of any pitfalls.

The next months, Marcus brought his latrunculi board and held it up hopefully to Esca. “I thought perhaps while we eat?”

“You and your games,” Esca muttered good naturedly. “Very well. I suppose a game or two would not be amiss.”

Marcus grinned.

Harvest time brought an extra few visits, as soldiers from the fort sought a few extra things before the cold weather forced them to remain close to the fort, either small items for personal comfort or a few hours with a woman to see them through the winter. Marcus used the time to spend with Esca, as he’d be lucky to even get in a couple of visits before the spring.

Marcus was well aware of what his men thought he went to the village for. Lutorius was still the only one who knew Marcus had actually freed Esca; everyone else simply assumed that Marcus had sent him away when he recovered, the fort not being a good place to keep a slave. He supposed that when he transferred, his men would assume Esca would go with him or Marcus would sell him. Either way, they would soon forget about Esca and the last ties binding the freed slave to his former life would be gone.

It was difficult, sometimes, to have to keep his hands to himself when all he wanted was to touch, to keep his eyes from staring overlong when they longed to linger. He contented himself with quick glances, the occasional brush of hands and arms as they worked, and counted himself lucky to have even that much. There was some small shame at the thought of how he pined like a lovesick youth, but no one save himself would ever know the depths to which his feelings had reached. Instead, he contented himself with Esca’s friendship, reveling in the way the man flourished, drinking up freedom like crops did rain, and growing into the man he was always meant to become.
Though, sometimes, it felt as if Esca were testing him. There were moments when Esca caught him looking, his own gaze inscrutable. Marcus kept waiting for Esca to tell him to stop, that to stare without invitation was unwelcome, but it never came. There were a few times when Marcus hoped that Esca had changed his mind, but Esca never said anything nor made any moves toward him, and he was forced to hold back his disappointment.

~*~

According to the locals, this winter was milder than the last, though Marcus couldn’t tell. It still felt like he couldn’t get warm, and he found himself fiercely missing the extra warmth Esca has provided last winter. He wondered if Esca’s small roundhouse was warm enough, though the other man had never seemed affected by the cold the Marcus was. The only time he’d made it to the village once winter had set in it had been chilly, but Esca said it would be plenty warm when he wanted it to be.

He would have a chance to find out, though. The men were bored and antsy, so when there was a break in the weather, Marcus allowed a group to go. He had offered Lutorius the chance to go with them, so that he could get away as well, but the older centurion had turned him down, saying that he would go next time, if there was another chance to go before the spring. Marcus was selfish enough not to try to further convince Lutorius to go.

The ride was cold, and though Esca’s dwelling wasn’t exactly warm when he let himself in, it was warm enough, and provided a welcome break from the bite of the wind.

“Marcus.” Esca looked up from where he sat on the floor, mending a torn tunic. “I’m surprised to see you here. I didn’t think to see you until the spring.”

Setting his weapons down, Marcus shrugged. “I was not looking forward to another few months of being stuck inside those walls.”

“You’re chosen the wrong career then,” Esca chuckled.

“You know what I mean.” Marcus eased himself into the chair with a low groan, absently kneading his left thigh.

“It pains you?” Esca gestured to his leg.

“It’s stiff.” Marcus grimaced. “The cold makes it worse, and the ride here did it no favors.”

Esca frowned. “Let me finish this and then I’ll take a look at it.”

“You don’t have to.”

“I know that, but I do not like to see you in pain. I would not have offered if I didn’t want to.”

Esca bent his back down to his mending. After tying off the last knot, he cut the thread, slipped the needle through a scrap of cloth, and see everything aside in a small basket. Then he built the fire up a bit more and turned toward Marcus. “Boots and braccae off,” he ordered, moving to a chest and withdrawing a small pot of salve and a clean rag.

Wordlessly, Marcus removed his boots, setting them aside, then untied his braccae, slipping them off and folding them casually before setting them on the table. Esca frowned at him for a moment before dragging the bench in front of his chair. “Put your foot up on that,” he said, sitting down next to Marcus’s foot and setting the pot rag on the other side of himself.
He probed at Marcus’s leg for moment, feeling along the muscle and the knot of scar tissue. “With the wound you suffered, the leg’s likely to cramp. Is it often stiff in the morning?”

“A bit.”

Nodding, Esca dipped two fingers into the pot. “You should work the muscle before you go to bed, it’ll help when you wake. And before you’re going to do any extended riding. If that’s not possible, after if you can. It’ll help keep the muscle from tightening so much.”

Marcus hissed as Esca’s fingers dug in. It hurt in the beginning like always, and he knew the discomfort would pass, leaving relief in its wake, but for the moment, the pain was sharp and biting. “That’s not always possible.”

“It’s your leg,” Esca snorted. “The wound is as much healed as it ever will be. This is the way it is now, and you need to take precautions.”

Marcus grunted again as Esca’s fingers found a new spot to work on. Eventually, the ache smoothed out, disappearing under Esca’s skilled hands. Letting his head loll back, Marcus simply sat and enjoyed the sensation. Esca was silent as he worked, and it was peaceful. The small dwelling was quickly warming from the larger fire, and it made Marcus slightly drowsy. He thought nothing of it until he heard Esca calling his name.

He roused slightly, faintly embarrassed that he’d nodded off. He blinked the sleep from his eyes and looked at Esca, who was looking at him curiously, hands still resting on his thigh, fingers scant inches from the hem of his tunic. It would be such a small movement for Esca to slip a hand beneath, to—

No. Marcus forced his gaze up, forced his voice to be level. “That feels much better, Esca. Thank you.”

Esca looked at him for a moment longer and then nodded, wiping his hands off on the rag before handing Marcus his braccae.

“No hunting today,” Esca said, putting his things away. “A game or two, perhaps?”

“Yes,” Marcus said, pulling his boots on.

Esca frowned. “You might wish to stay the night. That looks to get worse before it passes.”

“Esca, my men are here as well.”

“And no doubt several already have warm bed waiting for them. We can shelter the others in some of the unused houses. Come.” With that, Esca was pulling his cloak on and slipping out the door, Marcus cursing again as he hastened to follow.

His men, not surprisingly, were more than amenable to the idea of not riding back to the fort through the storm. Some slipped away, saying they knew where they could stay and the rest were hastily bundled into empty homes, fires quickly started and blankets quickly found so they would
be warm enough through the night. By the time they were done, Marcus was wet soaked through with melted snow and freezing cold. Sleep that night would be unpleasant, if it came at all. He was watching his men settle down when he felt a touch on his arm. “Come on,” Esca said, gesturing back toward the driving snow beyond the door.

He began to object, but Esca just gave him a tight-lipped stare, brows raised in challenge, and Marcus let his protest die unspoken. As it stood, his men already had their own opinions of what he sought Esca out for; staying with them tonight wouldn’t change their minds. So he just nodded and followed Esca back to his roundhouse.

Once inside, Esca placed a couple more chunks of wood on the fire. “Get out of those clothes,” he muttered, rolling his eyes when he saw Marcus standing there, trying not to shiver.

Marcus removed his armor, then stripped off his sodden tunis and braccae. Esca dropped a blanket across his shoulders and then Marcus unwrapped his subligaculum, setting the thin linen material near the fire to dry while Esca hung his clothing on hooks and wiped his armor dry with a piece of cloth. Then esca handed him a small cup filled with the fiery spirit he preferred.

“Thank you,” Marcus said, taking the cup and swallowing a mouthful, feeling the heat crawl its way down his gullet.

“It’s late, and you’ll probably want an early morning. Take the bed.”

“Esca, I can’t—” The hard look in Esca’s eyes was enough to snap his jaw shut. He nodded.

“Thank you.”

That earned him a smile and a chuckle. He set the cup on the table and keeping the blanket wrapped firmly around him, slipped beneath the blankets on Esca’s bed. He watched Esca for a few minutes, arranging a few furs before the hearth. That close to the fire and with the thick furs, he would be plenty warm, alleviating Marcus’s concern that Esca would suffer for hosting him. Once Esca was settled, Marcus turned over, pulled the blankets tight beneath his chin, and sought sleep.

~*~

He came awake with a start, momentarily disoriented by his surroundings and unsure of what had awoken him. Memory returned and he relaxed, knowing he was safe. He sought what had pulled him from sleep, and saw Esca sitting on the very edge of the bed, watching him. “Esca?” he asked cautiously. The fire had dimmed to little more than coals, and Esca’s figure was little more than a vague shape in the low light.

“You’re not going to ask, are you?” Esca’s voice was low, so quiet Marcus almost didn’t catch the words.

“What do you mean?”

“You watch and you want, yet you won’t ask for what you want.”

Marcus swallowed. “You said—”

“I know what I said.” An edge of frustration crept in Esca’s voice. “But I thought that you would ask again, at least once.”

“And if I had?” Marcus ventured, the dark making it easier to be brave, somehow. “If I had...would you have told me no again?”
He watched Esca’s hand come up to rake through his hair. “I wanted you at the fort, and I told myself that it was just because you were kind, that what I was feeling was the result of not being mistreated. And then I wanted you after I left, and I told myself it was because I was grateful, that I would have felt the same for any man who freed me. And I wanted you once I came here, and I told myself that it was just because yours was the only affection I had known in so long, that once I found others what I felt for you would fade.”

“And has it?” Marcus asked after a silence.

“No,” Esca breathed. “When I told you I could not give you what you wanted, I meant it. At the time, it would have felt like giving in, like I was clinging to what was was familiar instead of doing what I really wanted, what I needed to. But the feelings did not pass, and the more time I spent with you, the more I felt sure that what I felt was real, that I wanted you and not some fantasy I had constructed out of relief and gratitude.” He sighed. “I don’t know what this is. You’re my friend and I am proud to call you that, but I cannot deny that when I look at you, it is also with desire. I want, Marcus, but I don’t know that I can give you all that you want.”

Marcus reached out, fingers skating over bare skin at he touched Esca’s arms, shuddering at the thought of Esca bare and the reason why he was. How many times had this fantasy haunted his dreams? To have Esca saying that Marcus’ desires were returned was overwhelming. His tongue felt thick when he spoke. “Whatever you are willing to give, that’s what I want. Nothing that you don’t.”

“And if I only want this one night? If come the morning I’ve changed my mind?”

“It changes nothing. Whatever you are willing to give. If it’s just this one night...then I will take it.”

“Fool,” Esca muttered, but fondly, and then he was pushing the blankets off Marcus, replacing them with his own body. “If you want something, fight for it.”

And Marcus couldn’t tell him that he couldn’t fight Esca for an affection he would not or could not give, that the thought that what Esca gave was not completely free and of his own volition was abhorrent to him, because Esca’s mouth was over his, lips and tongue teasing, asking Marcus to let him in.

Marcus did, gladly, a small, wounded sound leaving him when he clutched at Esca, hands roaming greedily over flesh he hadn’t touched in so long, squeezing and rubbing and desperate the keep Esca close. He moved to turn them over, to lay Esca beneath him, but the other man pulled back. “No,” he murmured. “Like this. Stay like this. I lay back for you once, do the same for me now.”

A shiver ran through Marcus, part pleasure and part fear. He knew Esca wouldn’t hurt him, would do nothing Marcus asked him not to, but in all the times he had lain with someone else, he had never surrendered control.

“You can touch,” Esca laughed, lips against Marcus’s jaw as he worked his way down, and Marcus breathed a sigh of relief, bringing his hands to Esca’s back once more.

They spent a long time simply doing that, caressing and kissing and taking the time to learn each other’s bodies in a way their one frantic coupling had not allowed. Marcus learned that Esca was ticklish high along his ribs and that he liked it when Esca worried bites along his collarbone. Despite being smaller, Esca covered him, surrounded him until all he could see and hear and smell and taste and touch was Esca, and there was no other place in the entire Empire he would have rather been at that moment than in Esca’s small dwelling, on a bed too small for the both of them.
Esca left him only once, returning with a hand slicked with oil. He worked the slippery liquid over both of their cocks, and then rolled his hips so that they slid past each other, coating the flat planes of their bellies. Marcus held him tighter, pulling them together so their cocks were trapped between them and then settled his hands on Esca’s ass, kneading the flesh for a moment before he began to move with Esca.

Their skin was damp with sweat, small trails running down their flesh as they panted and groaned, bodies moving together as they chased ecstasy. Marcus came first, pleasure overwhelming him as he cried out, hands gripping Esca hard enough to bruise while the other man kept moving, his eyes squeezed shut and head hanging down as he kept rocking his body against Marcus. Esca came with almost no sound, teeth clenched against the cry that caught in his throat. He collapsed against Marcus almost immediately, his body a warm, heavy, pleasant weight.

“Esca?” Marcus asked, when some time had passed and Esca had made neither sound nor movement.

“‘m all right,” Esca slurred, shuffling to the side, letting Marcus wrap an around around him to keep them together on the narrow bed. “Was just....”

“Yeah,” Marcus agreed, feeling exhaustion settle into his bones. It was a release in more ways than one, and if Esca had carried even half the tension that Marcus had, the absence of it had to be a lot to accept. He felt like he should say more, but with Esca already going lax beside him, there was nothing to say. He clumsily brushed his lips over Esca’s forehead and let his eyelids drift shut.
Chapter 14

Short chapter is short!

Esca feels Marcus’s eyes upon him and waits for the inevitable that he knows is coming. And when it doesn’t come, it hits him harder than any blow ever could. Now he must decide what course he wants to take. He isn’t surprised when it leads to Marcus. Nor is he surprised that freedom has bound him with thicker chains than slavery ever did. And now? He does not mind their weight.

~*~

When he woke, Esca was momentarily disoriented. Why was he so warm, and why wasn’t there enough room in his bed? He opened his eyes and found himself looking up at Marcus’s smooth, relaxed features. Ah, yes. Esca couldn’t help but grin. He’d been fairly certainly Marcus wouldn’t reject him, but after he had rebuffed the other man months ago, there was always the chance that Marcus’s pride would prevent him from taking what was offered.

But that hadn’t happened. Esca lay where he was, settled against Marcus’s side with the bigger man’s arm a heavy weight keeping him in place, wondering at the twists and turns his life had taken. That he should have gone from a child of his tribe, a warrior of the Brigantes, to a captured slave and gladiator, to the friend and lover of a Roman centurion was a tale not easily believed except by those who had lived it. Esca wished that is had not been his life—that his family, his clan, his people might have been spared their grim fate, but it was not so, and there was no way to undo the past. And even though he had spent years longing for his death, the gods had not seen fit to grant that either. Perhaps this was why. Perhaps in saving Marcus, Esca had been given the chance to save himself, and now this, his life as it was now, was his reward.

All in all, Esca preferred it to a clean death.

Marcus stirred beside him, his eyelids fluttering open. He’d slept more deeply than Esca had ever seen, at least since his injury had begun to heal. Marcus’s gaze focused on him, confused before his lips spread in a slow, warm smile. “Good morning,” he murmured. “Have I slept overlong?”

“All in all, Esca preferred it to a clean death.

Marcus stirred beside him, his eyelids fluttering open. He’d slept more deeply than Esca had ever seen, at least since his injury had begun to heal. Marcus’s gaze focused on him, confused before his lips spread in a slow, warm smile. “Good morning,” he murmured. “Have I slept overlong?”

“Good morning, and no. It’s barely past dawn. You’ve time yet before you must rouse your men and go back to the fort.”

“Excellent.” Marcus turned over on his side, freeing up a bit more room on the bed, which Esca promptly took advantage of. The movement, though, recalled the fact that they had not washed themselves before going to sleep. The oil and seed spilled between was tacky and dried now, sticking and pulling at their skin. Esca made a face and grunt of disgust. That would need to be taken care of.

Mindful of his bedmate, Esca didn’t throw the covers back and allow the cold to rush in, but rather slipped free of the blankets and furs and went to the fire. He’d taken care the night before to build the fire properly, so the roundhouse was not as cold as it could have been—though it was still chilly—and some coals remained among the ashes. He took a few minutes to build the fire back
up, and then reached for the bucket of water nearby. Being close to the fire, it hadn’t frozen, and was pleasantly tepid when he dunked a rag into it, scrubbing his skin until it was clean.

Then he wetted another rag and brought it to Marcus, who sat up, easing the blankets back only a little so most of the accumulated body heat would remain trapped beneath them. He waited until Marcus had finished, and then took the cloth back, tossing it down next to his beside the fire. Finished, he slid back into bed beneath the covers, he and Marcus arranging themselves until they were comfortable.

Marcus was silent, but Esca could almost feel him thinking, body tense with the question he wants to ask. So he turned slightly, angling himself to look at Marcus better, and when Marcus looked at him, Esca raised an inquiring brow.

“Last night,” Marcus began, “you asked what I would do if you only wanted one night.”

“You want to know if that was it, if we return to what we had before.”

“Yes.” Marcus meets his gaze, firmly and unwavering.

“And if it is?”

Marcus drew a quick breath and his eyes flicked away. “I will abide by what I said.”

Esca sat up, moving into Marcus’s space so that the other man was forced to look at him. “Tell me what you want,” he demanded. Because while he knew what Marcus would, he would have the truth from the man’s own mouth.

“I want you,” Marcus replied evenly. “In whatever way I can, though admittedly,” he grinned slightly, “I would much prefer to pass our time like this.” His hand swept over their bodies bundled beneath the covering.

“Good.” Esca settled back down against him. “I as well.”

They didn’t do anything else that morning, just lazed about, warm and content under the blankets until the fire took the last of the bite from the air, and then they rose and dressed. Esca scrounged up a bit of slightly stale bread and some dried meat for a simple breakfast. Eventually, Marcus donned his armor and weapons. “I need to collect my men and get them back to the fort.”

“Safe journey,” Esca said, nodding.

Marcus pulled his cloak a bit tighter around himself to ward against the cold. “I will see you again?” There was a hint of question, but just a bit, sounding more like a statement.

Esca smiled. “I will be here.”

It was Marcus’s turn to nod, and then he ducked out of the door.

~*~

After that, Marcus’s visits to the village—more frequent once spring came—remained largely the same, save for for the fact that in the evening they inevitably wound up in bed. At first, things stayed fairly simple, rutting and rubbing against one another, using hands the press of the bodies to bring each other off. Then Esca began to use his mouth on Marcus—after a long conversation convincing Marcus it wasn’t shameful or unpleasant for him—and things went from there. Marcus showed him how the Greeks lay with each other, and that was something new for Esca. It was
pleasant and easy, the simple slide and friction of Marcus pressing between his thighs enjoyable. And from there, it was a small step to coaxing Marcus into taking him, showing him how prepare, and how much better things were like that.

Esca had no real complaints, save one. As attentive as Marcus was, as affectionate and careful as he was—and he would prepare Esca with a focus and gentleness that had Esca wondering how he even for once thought Marcus was capable of using this act to hurt him—he wouldn’t reciprocate. Esca had tried a few times, urged Marcus lower when he trailed kisses and bites across Esca’s chest and belly, but Marcus would always falter and refuse, though he did so apologetically. And when Esca fondled him, if he slipped his hand lower, past Marcus’s balls, Marcus would always tense until Esca’s hand moved back into safer territory.

It annoyed Esca, though he couldn’t truly be angry. Marcus had shown time and again that he would be appalled to force anything upon Esca, so how could Esca ponder the reverse? It might have been nice to have Marcus take him in his mouth, or slide between his thighs or into his ass, but if Marcus was that set against it, it was something Esca could overlook, especially since his time with the other man was limited and finite.

That was a thought that occurred to Esca with increasing frequency as winter once again approached. Marcus had been able to visit fairly often during the warmer months, but one trip to the village every two or three weeks—longer if Marcus’s duties kept him busy—did not make for a lot of time together. And while it was never mentioned or discussed between them, Esca knew that eventually orders would come and Marcus would leave for a new post. Whatever dissatisfaction Esca had about their current arrangement, he would soon be free enough to find pursuits more fitting.

The thought brought a decided lack of enthusiasm.

~*~

Esca’s second winter in the village proved to be a mild one, and he enjoyed it as much for the better weather as he did Marcus’s ability to travel to the village almost once a month. They had settled into an easy pattern, and though the village had grown and Esca was now on good terms with most of the inhabitants—Berach still didn’t like him, and Aisling clearly wanted more from him than just friendship—he still looked forward to seeing Marcus. He felt...comfortable with the other man. There was an easiness with him that Esca hadn’t found anywhere else, not even with Ciardha, who was now more of a little brother than anything else.

And from what he could see, Marcus felt the same way. There was a way his face would relax when he caught sight of Esca, and the way he would grow quiet when he had to leave. But he still said nothing, for there was no point in dwelling on the inevitable.

~*~

“What is this?” They were sitting at the table one day as winter waned and spring approached, each applying themselves to the task of sharpening daggers, and the question came from out of nowhere, and seemingly at random, but Esca had no trouble understanding the meaning of Marcus’s words, nor did he need to think long about his answer.

“It is what we want it to be,” he said simply.

“What about you, Esca?” Marcus looks at him. “What do you want this to be?”

This time, Esca’s response was slower in coming. “You are the man who set me free, and my
friend. You are the brother I no longer have.” Esca cocked his head. “And you, Marcus? What is this to you?”

“I don’t know,” Marcus said slowly, setting his tools down and worrying at the carved eagle around his neck with one hand. “I know that I want to be with you, that I look forward to coming to the village, that returning to the fort without you leaves me unsettled.” There was the slightest of edges to his voice—worry. Still, after all this time, he was unsure that he continued attentions were welcome.

“I do not lie with you because you are convenient,” Esca said, allowing a trace of exasperation into his tone. “Indeed, of all whom I could be with, you are perhaps the least convenient. You worry unnecessarily. I would not invite you into my bed one day and then turn you away the next time you came to my door. For as long as we are able, I want you here.”

“It cannot last,” Marcus said quietly. This was the first time Marcus had uttered the truth aloud and Esca wasn’t about to insult Marcus by denying what they both knew.

“No,” Esca sighed. “It cannot. You are of Rome, and Rome will not let you go and neither will you abandon her. Eventually, your orders will come and you will leave here.” Esca set down the whetstone and dagger and stepped up before Marcus. “But you are not gone yet.”

“No,” Marcus said, and smiled. “I am not.” He reached out to grasp Esca’s hips with his hands, pulling him close until he could rest his head on Esca’s belly, his breath warming the cloth of Esca’s braccae. Then he brought up one hand to tug at the laces, pulling them just loose enough that he could tug Esca’s braccae down and expose his cock.

Esca couldn’t help quirking a brow up. Surely Marcus wasn’t offering what it looked like? For all that he had proved to be an attentive and generous lover in seeing Esca satisfied, he still refused to allow Esca to penetrate him in any way. “Marcus? This would be more comfortable on the bed.”

Marcus looked up, almost challenging. “Allow me to do this.”

“Why?” Esca was genuinely curious about the answer. Running his fingers down Marcus’s cheek, he voiced what they both knew to be true. “You have never wanted to before.”

“Oh, I have wanted. I’ve just been too much of a coward and fool to let myself have it.”

“Are you sure?”

Marcus sighed in exasperation. “Do you want your cock sucked or not?”

“Well, if the price of that is my silence—”

“It is.”

“—then I’ll shut up now.”

Eventually, he did coax Marcus to the bed, knowing this would go better when they were both comfortable in a familiar spot. And though Marcus was inexperienced, he was determined and had clearly been paying attention to Esca when he did this for him. He started with a simple, hesitant kiss on the head and then trailed them down the shaft to the root of Esca’s cock, growing in confidence as he went, licking and finally parting his lips to slide his mouth down on Esca’s cock. Marcus couldn’t take Esca very deep, but his hand covered the rest, and when he began to suck lightly, Esca wasn’t ashamed of the needy sounds it drew from him.
He did tug Marcus’s head away when he felt himself getting close, ignoring Marcus’s slightly affronted look. That he could and did swallow Marcus’s release with no issue didn’t mean that Marcus was ready to do the same. There was time yet for that. Instead, he pulled Marcus closer, wrapped one of Marcus’s hands around his cock, laid his own hand atop that, and together they finished Esca with a few strokes.

After he’d regained his breath, Esca touched a finger to Marcus’s swollen lips. “That was not so bad, was it?”

“No,” Marcus agreed, somewhat bemused. “In my head...it seemed quite different.” He looked at his hand, curiously studying Esca’s seed covering it. Tentatively, he raised it to his lips and poked his tongue out to touch the tip to his finger. He instantly made a face as the taste and Esca laughed, handing his tunic to Marcus to wipe his hand off with.

“I would not ask you to do that. Not all enjoy it. And if you wish to try again, we’ve time enough for later later. But for now...” He pushed Marcus back, unlacing and tugging his braccae down before straddling him and reaching for the oil.
Chapter 15

Marcus looks at Ecsa, and sees more than a slave. He sees a man, who, despite Rome's best efforts, still has his pride. And he sees a man that he loves. So he sets him free. He finds it impossible to let him go. Even when he must leave.

~*~

Marcus read the scroll and then read it again before letting it fall and curl up on the table in front of him. He shouldn’t be surprised by his new orders, or, rather, he should be surprised by how long they’d taken to come. Nearly three years he’d been here at Isca Dumeniorum, far longer than his original one-year commission; the subsequent years had been granted because of his injury. Once, he would have rejoiced at these orders, at the chance to prove himself again. But all he could focus on now was the fact that he was leaving, and that he’d only had just over a year with Esca.

His eyes burned and he blinked furiously, chastising himself. It wasn’t as if one of them were dying. He was a soldier. He’d always known this day would come and so had Esca. It was to be expected and they both understood that.

“Sir?” Lutorius’s quiet voice in the doorway broke him from his reverie and he looked up at his centurion. Marcus swallowed back his emotions and settled his face into a calm mask.

“New orders, sir?” Lutorius asked.

“Yes.”

“Ah. Somewhere suitably distant, I suppose.”

“Gaul,” Marcus answered.

Lutorius just nodded. “You will be missed, sir,” he said gravely. “Serving under you has been an honor.”

“The honor has been mine,” Marcus replied just as gravely, thumbing the armilla around his wrist. “I could not have asked for finer men than the 4th Cohort, and the centurions who lead them.” The other man smiled faintly and gave a self-deprecating chuckle, as was his custom when praised. Then his face grew serious.

“You’ll want to go to the village, I imagine.”

Marcus sucked in a quick breath and gave Lutorius a sharp look. Out of all his men, Lutorius was the only one who knew for a certainty about Esca. Almost all knew that the two were friends, but few—if any, aside from Lutorius—realized just how close their commander was to his former slave. The knowledge could have ruined him, but Lutorius kept his silence, and subsequently kept Marcus’s honor and the respect his men had for him intact.

“I shouldn’t—” Marcus began, but Lutorius took a step into the room, cutting him off.

“Forgive me for being forward, sir, but you should go. None of the men will mind or say anything.”

“I have too much to prepare for to go now.”
“Marcus.” The older man stepped forward, dropping the demeanor of subordinate in favor of comrade and friend. “Go. We’ll take care of things here, but you’ll be gone for many years. This is all the time you have left now. Go.”

He nodded once. “Thank you, Lutorius.”

Marcus didn’t remember much of the ride, and when he arrived, he tied his gelding to the post outside as quickly as possible. Then he was rushing into the tiny wattle and daub hut, shutting the door firmly behind him.

Esca was seated cross-legged before the cold hearth, sharpening spear points for them to use on their next hunt. A hunt, Marcus realized, that they were never going to get to take, and his heart squeezing painfully in his chest.

At his entry, Esca looked up and smiled, the wide, easy grin that Marcus had come to know was only for him and only when they were alone. “Marcus,” he said, putting aside the spear points and wiping his oily hands on a rag while he got to his feet. “I wasn’t expecting to see you for several days yet.” And then he noticed Marcus’s face and stance, and the happy expression was wiped from his face in an instant.

“What is it? What’s wrong?”

It took Marcus a few tries before he managed, “I received my orders.”

Esca went very, very still, face blanking in that eerie way that only he could manage. “You’re leaving.” It wasn’t a question.

“Yes.”

“When?”

“Whenever the relief troops arrive. A week, maybe two.”

Saying the words made their situation suddenly real and Marcus found his throat tightening. For long moments, Esca stared into the distance and Marcus gave him the time he needed to absorb this new twist. But just standing there, on opposite sides of the hut, the short distance between them feeling like an uncrossable chasm, was too much. He needed to hold Esca, to feel the other man in his arms, his skin beneath his hands. Marcus reached out, beseeching. “Esca,” he said, and even he could hear how broken that one word sounded as it slipped past his lips.

The sound of his name seemed to snap Esca back into the present. He shook his head, almost angrily, as if to dismiss his thoughts. He mouth settled into a thin, grim line and his eyes burned fiercely. Then he was moving swiftly across the hut and catching Marcus in a hard embrace, more sharp teeth than the soft press of lips and tongue. Marcus responded eagerly, pulling the smaller man closer to him.

They didn’t speak, the only sounds between them moans or gasps that might have been names. Clothes were shed frantically as they fumbled their way across the short distance to the only other room in the hut, a tiny sleeping area that was mostly bed. By the time they tumbled onto the blankets, they were both naked, hard and straining for each other. Esca’s hands clawed at him while Marcus kissed every inch of skin he could reach as he settled between Esca’s thighs. Marcus paused only long enough to grab the flask of oil set on the floor by the wall. He coated his fingers and reached for Esca, but the other man pushed his hand away and toward Marcus’s cock.

“Esca?” Marcus asked, pulling away from the sucking heat of Esca’s mouth.
“Just take me,” Esca muttered, grabbing Marcus’s hand in his own, wrapping both around Marcus’s cock and stroking. Marcus groaned and let his head fall into the crook of Esca’s neck.

“Don’t want to hurt you,” he gasped.

“You can’t hurt me,” Esca said savagely, hooking his legs around Marcus’s hips and trying to pull him closer. “You can’t hurt me,” he repeated, and Marcus could hear the lie and the pain in his words.

Grasping Esca’s hips as gently as he could, Marcus lined himself up and pushed, feeling the resistance, the pull and burn and friction of skin against skin. It took three thrusts, three slow, careful thrusts, before Marcus could seat himself completely, and when he did, Esca let out a torn, broken sound that Marcus had never heard before. Then he was grasping his shoulders, urging Marcus on with tiny, stuttering thrusts of his hips. “Move,” he gasped. “Marcus, please, move!”

And Marcus did, withdrawing and thrusting back in with a grunt, and then again, until enough of the oil on his cock has slicked Esca so that their movements took on a familiar, better burn. They gasped and cried out names against sweaty skin. They clung and tore at each other in turns, and Marcus knew that in the morning they would both be bruised and scratched.

Esca came first, jerking up and spilling between them, and the feel of his muscles clenching pulled Marcus over the edge with him. They laid there, breathless, Marcus collapsed onto Esca. Marcus knew he should move, that he was too heavy, but when he went to move, Esca wound his arms and legs around him and uttered a quiet, “Stay.”

It was early yet, but eventually, they slept, an uneasy rest. When Marcus woke, he was on his side, Esca still wrapped around him and watching him with solemn gray eyes.

“The hour?” Marcus mumbled.

“The sun has barely set. We have time yet,” Esca answered quietly.

“Good.” Marcus kissed Esca softly, feeling the twitch between their bodies as both men responded. He threaded a hand into Esca’s hair, cupping the back of his head and felt Esca’s hand slide over his side and across his back.

“Do something for me?” he murmured against Esca’s lips.

“Anything.” The response was little more than a whisper of breath into his mouth.

Marcus broke away, shifted and grabbed the flask of oil. He shoved down the brief flurry of doubt and shame that roiled his stomach, and pushed the flask into Esca’s hands. “Take me.”

In the dim light, he saw Esca’s eyes go wide. They seemed enormous in his face, pupils large and the gray just a narrow silver band. His brow furrowed as he searched Marcus’s face.

“You’ve never wanted me to before.” The words were quiet, the question evident in Esca’s tone.

“I always thought we’d have more time,” Marcus chuckled, but stopped when the last laugh caught on a sob. “Esca, please,” he said, pressing his burning face into the other man’s neck. “I…I want to. I would have nothing left undone between us.”

There was a soft press of lips to the top of his head and then Esca moved. “Turn over,” he said gently. “It’ll be easier to prepare you when you’re on your knees.”
Marcus did as he was bid, obeying the guiding touches Esca gave him; hips up, shoulders down, his weight braced on bent arms to ease any strain on his knees. Gentle touches to the inside of his thighs to get him to spread his legs. And despite his embarrassment and the flush heating his skin, Marcus felt himself respond, his cock growing thick and hard, hanging heavy between his legs.

Esca did nothing else for a few moments, stroking his back and flanks, murmuring nonsense sounds, soothing him like he would a skittish horse. Strangely, the comparison didn’t bother him, and he finally reached back to catch Esca’s hand and squeeze it in a signal to keep going.

The first touch against his entrance was little more than a brush of slick fingertips, but he still startled. It wasn’t like he’d never been touched there. Esca often had wandering hands when he fondled and pleased Marcus, but this was the first time he knew it would lead to more. And though his flinch was small, Esca stopped, returning to the reassuring touches and a kisses until he could rub and stroke and press, and by then Marcus was pushing into his hand instead of away from it.

Only then did Esca begin to open him up. “Oh, Marcus,” he breathed as he slid the first finger in. “So beautiful. You’re so beautiful.” He kept whispering endearments and praise as he worked, and it helped give Marcus something to focus on, to distract him from the discomfort.

By the time Esca was working three fingers in and out of him, the burn had mostly passed and Marcus was pushing backward to meet his thrusts. He wanted more, wanted Esca closer, wanted to feel his body against him. “Please, Esca,” he gasped. “More. Please. I need…I need….” He wasn’t sure what he needed, only knew that this wasn’t enough.

Esca withdrew his hand and Marcus cried out, frustrated at the loss. Then Esca was back, gentle hands easing Marcus down onto his side, drawing his top leg up and urging him to hold it there. The he pressed himself against Marcus, pressing his chest to Marcus’s back. Hands stroked and rubbed his arms and waist, and there was a brush of something hot, hard and slick against the curve of his ass.

“Esca!”

“Shh, Marcus,” Esca soothed him. “It’s all right.” Marcus felt him move, felt him shift a hand down between their bodies, the other going to where Marcus’s hand was cupped behind his knee. “I’m here. I’m here. I’m right…here.”

During the pause, something nudged and bumped against Marcus’s entrance, and he knew it was Esca’s cock this time. He shivered and then held himself still, waiting. On the last word, that last broken “here,” Esca breached him. There was nothing for Marcus then but the smooth slick slide of flesh within flesh. Esca took him slowly, his cock feeling impossibly wide, impossibly deep within Marcus, every inch adding to the sensation of being full, until finally Esca’s hips pushed against his ass and he still, leaving Marcus to buck and writhe and pant as he adjusted.

“Marcus,” Esca ground out, and Marcus nodded dumbly, understanding how Esca felt, knowing intimately the desire to move, the instinct and imperative to withdraw and then thrust back home.

He gripped his leg more firmly to hold himself open. “Oh, Mithras, Esca, move!”

“Insatiable,” Esca chuckled breathlessly.

“Only for you,” Marcus panted, struggling to get the words out as Esca began thrusting. “Only for you, my love. Only ever for you.”
A shudder rippled through Esca and his hold on Marcus’s thigh tightened painfully, his other hand coming up to slide into Marcus’s hair, gripping tightly. There would be bruises on his leg in the morning, Marcus thought, and for the first time he didn’t care how Esca marked him or who saw. This might be his last time with Esca, and he wanted these marks, wanted something visible etched on his flesh to show that he belonged to Esca. A reminder that would last forever, like the small brand of Mithras between his brows or the swirling lines of ink on Esca’s skin. A tribute to them and what they shared that Rome couldn’t take from them, even if it took him from Esca.

Esca’s hand on his thigh slid around, between his legs, and wrapped around his swollen cock in a firm grip. Marcus grunted and surged forward into the tight, callused circle of Esca’s hand. It took a few minutes of erratic movement before they found their rhythm, Esca thrusting into Marcus and Marcus into Esca’s fist.

They couldn’t maintain it for long. Marcus was so hard, his balls drawn up so tight they hurt, and it was talking every shred of control he had not to come right then. He uttered strangled whimpers, hands knotting in the blankets as he teetered on the edge of climax, fighting it off. And then Esca shoved into him a little harder and his hand twisted upon Marcus’s cock.

“Come with me,” he gasped. “Marcus, come with me!”

Marcus’s control shattered as Esca choked out his name, and with a loud, broken cry, he spilled in Esca’s hand. His vision sheeted white and all he could hear was his ragged breath and heartbeat thundering in his ears. He felt himself clench down on Esca’s cock, his body trying to hold the other man in place. Felt the final, stuttered thrusts of Esca’s hips before he, too, spilled, deep within Marcus, the warm rush an unusual, but not unpleasant, sensation.

Esca clung to Marcus, their sweat-soaked skin sticking together. Carefully, Marcus left go of his leg and let it slide back down, not wanting to dislodge Esca, but seeking a more comfortable position.

“Sorry,” Esca murmured sleepily, and pulled out of Marcus slowly, his softened cock slipping free with little resistance. Marcus shuddered at the sensation, feeling how open he was, the wet, warm trickle of Esca’s seed as a bit leaked from him. There was a distant, muted thought that he should be ashamed, but he ignored it in favor of turning over and pulling Esca close, nuzzling into his hair as sleep claimed him again.

He next awoke, rather abruptly, to the feel of a cloth running between the cheeks of his ass. His quick levering up was met with a soft laugh from Esca. “Easy,” he said, folding the cloth. “I’ve warmed some water. Let’s get you cleaned up.”

Esca turned and padded naked from the room, leaving Marcus to admire the smooth expanse of pale skin, the easy slide of hard muscle beneath it, and the firm clench of his ass. With a grin, Marcus pushed himself off the bed, wincing just a little as he moved, and followed.

In the main room, a wide bowl filled with steaming water was set next to the small fire, a pile of rags set beside it. He picked one up, dipping it in the water and wringing it out before washing his face. He scrubbed every inch of his skin, removing every trace of sweat, oil and seed that lingered. When he was done, Esca took the cloths and bowls, and handed Marcus a cup of wine. Then they sat quietly, munching on a bit of bread and some boar that Esca had heated.

“Do you think you will be able to return before you leave?” Esca asked, breaking the silence.

Marcus looked down at his hands, turning the crust of bread over in them. “I don’t know,” he said quietly. “I hope so.”
Esca nodded, then reached over and tapped Marcus’s hand. “Marcus, look at me.” He waited until Marcus did, green eyes fixed on gray, his eyes flitting over Marcus’s face, as if searching for something.

“I cannot,” Esca began, voice uncharacteristically thick, “be glad for the death of my family and the destruction of my tribe. There was no happiness to be found in my years as a slave or in anything that was inflicted upon me. And I cannot,” and here he reached out to touch Marcus’s scarred thigh, “find any joy in the injury you took, no matter how much I hate the Romans.”

Marcus stared at Esca, unsure of what he was trying to say. Marcus had learned long ago to tread lightly around Esca’s past, knowing the pain it brought him. Not that Marcus thought Esca should think upon any of those horrific events with any degree of pleasure, but he didn’t know what point Esca was trying to make in bringing it up now.

“But,” Esca continued, face softening, “I will be forever thankful to the gods that they sent you to me after, and grateful for the time we have shared. I will never regret you, Marcus.”

Overcome, Marcus closed his eyes. “I don’t want to go.”

“But you can’t stay,” Esca replied gently.

“I could.”

There came the sound of Esca’s bench scraping backwards. Then Marcus’s arms and lap were full of warm, naked flesh. “No, you couldn’t.” Hands cupped his face, thumbs stroking his cheekbones. “Marcus, look at me.”

An unhappy visage greeted him when he did. Esca slid his hands around Marcus’s head, gripping lightly at his hair. “You wouldn’t be happy.”

Marcus snorted in disbelief. “You would say that now, like this? Esca, I have never been happier than when I’m with you.”

Esca’s face twisted in pain for a moment before he composed himself, managing a smile. “True. You might be happy for a while. But what about in a year? In two? How long before you begin to resent giving up your life, your dreams, your honor? How long before you begin to resent me?”

“I would never—” Marcus began, but Esca cut him off.

“Don’t!” he snapped harshly. “Don’t,” he repeated more gently. “Don’t swear things we both know aren’t true.”

With a sigh, Marcus wrapped his arms around Esca, pulling the other man close and burying his face against his neck. “What do I do?”

Esca rubbed circles into his back. “You go and be what you were born to be. You are a soldier, Marcus. A Roman, a centurion. This is what you were meant for.”

Marcus drew back so that he could look Esca full in the face. “And what if I am meant to be with you?”

There was a long pause, silence stretching between them. “Then,” Esca finally said, “when you’ve finished, when you’ve restored your family’s name and Rome no longer has need of your service, then come back to me. I will be waiting.”
For a moment, Marcus couldn’t breathe, overwhelmed by the significance of Esca’s words, of the hidden meaning beneath them. His mind found purchase again as the full weight of what Esca said settled on him. No matter how much he loved Esca—and, oh, how he loved Esca, the depth of his feelings only being revealed now, at the end—he couldn’t let him do that. He would be gone for years, long empty years that suddenly rolled out before him, as vast and endless as the sea. He might...he might never come back at all. He couldn’t ask Esca to do that, to give up his life for a ghost.

“No,” he said, and flinched at the hurt and disbelief that sprang to Esca’s features. “Let me…. Please, Esca, I can’t ask you to wait for a man who might never come back. I couldn’t bear the thought of going and leaving you here with what might turn out to be nothing more than false hope.”

Frowning, Esca shifted on his lap, beautiful mouth pursed as he thought. When he spoke, it was slow and careful. “When you freed me, you said that I should have always been free, and that to you I always would be. Did you mean that?”

“Of course!”

“Then this is my life. What I choose is my choice and you cannot gainsay it.”

“That’s not—I don’t…Esca, I don’t mean—”

“My choice,” Esca said softly, curling his fingers into the hair above the nape of Marcus’s neck. “And if I choose to wait for you, my Marcus, then that’s my decision.” He leaned forward and pressed a gentle kiss to the Mithras brand between Marcus’s brows.

“I don’t want you to waste your life,” Marcus said miserably. It wasn’t right for both of them to suffer.

“Waiting for you would never be a waste.” The words were firm and decisive, full of conviction, and Marcus felt a warm curl of pleasure that anyone, but especially Esca, would think he was worth so much.

“But I know what you mean. Look at me, Marcus.” Esca tightened his grip, forcing Marcus to look up into his face. “I swear to you that I will live and live well. Whatever joy there is to be found in this life, I will take it. But I will always wait for you, right here. And if you don’t return, for whatever reason, then this last year of being able to love you and be loved by you, this night…it is enough.”

Esca fell silent for a moment, closing his eyes and breathing deeply. When he opened them, the gray orbs were firm with resolve. “But you must promise me the same thing. Wherever you go, whatever corner of the empire Rome sends you to, you must live. Do not return to me a shadow. Come back with tales of what you’ve seen, battles you’ve fought...stories and memories of the women and men you have loved.”

A shudder shook Marcus’s body. “You ask a hard thing.”

“I know.” Nimble hands carded through his hair. “I know.”

Marcus drew a deep breath to steady himself. “All right,” he breathed. “All right, you have my word.”

“Good.” Esca shifted off Marcus’s lap, standing before him and holding out a hand. “Now come to bed.” He led them across the hut to the sleeping room and drew Marcus down onto the bed. There
were a few moments of shuffling as blankets and bodies were arranged and then they were settled, Esca curled into Marcus, back to chest, the two of them pressed together at every possible point. Marcus wrapped his arms around Esca, burying his face in his hair, breathing deeply of the clean male scent that was solely Esca.

True sleep beckoned to him, but he resisted. With so little time left, he didn’t want to waste any of it in slumber. But Esca shifted in his arms and murmured, “Sleep, Marcus.”

And Marcus, holding the man he loved, did.
Chapter 16

Esca feels Marcus’s eyes upon him and waits for the inevitable that he knows is coming. And when it doesn’t come, it hits him harder than any blow ever could. Now he must decide what course he wants to take. He isn’t surprised when it leads to Marcus. Nor is he surprised that freedom has bound him with thicker chains than slavery ever did. And now? He does not mind their weight. He will miss them when Marcus has gone.

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It didn’t take Esca long to decide upon a course of action. He knew that he might not see Marcus again before he left, that duties at the fort and with his men would take precedence. Already, Marcus had spent more time in the village and with Esca than a commander should have, and it would not have been possible were his men not so loyal. So while Esca could not bring himself to be upset that Marcus’s visits were over, that didn’t mean he was resigned to never seeing him again.

His plan, such as it was, required very little preparation, save one thing. One night, after seeing Ciardha home, Esca lingered by Aisling’s door. “I favor to ask,” he said in response to her curious look. “Would you watch over my home?”

“You’re leaving?” she asked, frowning.

“For a short while, yes.”

Understanding lit up her features. “You’re going with your Roman.”

Esca opened his mouth and then closed it in chagrin. There was no way anyone in the village could have missed how close he and Marcus were, and while many may have suspected they were simply good friends, Aisling knew better. “In a way, yes. I only intend to travel with him for a short while.”

“I am surprised that you’re letting him go.”

“I don’t have a choice.” Esca sighed. “Aisling, please. I will ask another if I must, but I trust you.”

She also sighed, shaking her head faintly. “It does no good to love Romans; they always leave. But by the time we met, it was already too late to tell you that, if you would have even listened. Yes, Esca, I will watch your home, though I doubt anyone would be foolish enough to steal from it.”

“Thank you,” he said, and meant it. He, too, doubted anyone would be brazen enough to steal from him during his absence, and it wasn’t as if he couldn’t easily replace anything that was taken, but he felt more secure knowing there would be someone looking out for his belongings. He ducked his head in thanks, and turned to go.

“Did he ask you to go with him?”

The soft question stopped Esca in place, and he looked back over his shoulder. Aisling stood in the doorway, her expression not cruel but curious, with a touch of some other emotion he couldn’t quite place.

“No,” he said after a moment. “He could not. It would be too difficult to explain my presence at every post he takes.”
“But if he had?”

Esca’s pressed his lips together in a thin line. “I would have said no. To follow him like that, to always be a stranger, to not know the land and the people...no. It would kill what we have, and I would hate him for it.”

Aisling just nodded her head. “Good luck on your journey,” she said quietly, and then ducked back through her doorway, leaving the door open so the cooler evening air could flow in. Esca watched the darkened doorway a moment longer before he also turned back to his home, wondering what her answer would have been to her Roman.

~*~

He did not see Marcus again before he left. Little more than a week after Marcus’s last visit, the relief troops he’d spoken of came through the village, a new commander at their head. Esca watched them pass through with a blank expression on his face, and as soon as they were out of sight, he went back to his house to begin throwing belongings in a bag. He didn’t need much—a spare set of clothes, a blanket, food, and a water skin. It fit easily over his shoulder in a neat bundle, and his bow would hardly take up much more space. All that was left to do now was wait until Marcus came through, and then shadow the soldiers as they made their journey.

Marcus left the fort with his men the second day after the new commander’s arrival. Esca stayed out of sight until the Romans had passed through, then gathered his things and slipped out after them, keeping to the woods that ran alongside the road. It wasn’t hard to keep up with the small column of men; though his terrain wasn’t near as even as the road, he knew it better, and as a man alone, he could travel much more quickly than the larger group of men.

As he watched them set up camp for the night, Esca knew his plan had little chance of succeeding. He couldn’t approach Marcus on the road. Camped with his men, Esca’s arrival would be suspicious, and with no privacy, he and Marcus would be restricted to casual interaction. Ironically, his best chance for one more night with Marcus would be as they got closer to more populated areas. There was a chance that Marcus and a few of the officers might stay the night at an inn. If so, Esca could, with any luck, slip in unnoticed. All he could do now was wait and follow.

~*~

Esca didn’t get his chance until the legionnaires were almost too far south for him to feel comfortable following any farther. Marcus, dutiful commander that he was, chose to stay with his men, even when they stopped just outside the walls of a town. Esca silently cursed him. Just this once, Marcus could relax a little, indulge in the comforts his rank afford him, but he remained stubbornly proper.

The Romans had stopped once more outside a town, and Esca knew he could only follow another day or two. He sat hidden in the trees, watching as the soldiers set up their camp in neat, orderly rows. And then he observed a handful of the senior men—not all, it would be foolish to leave any soldier without supervision—head into the town, their personal belongings with them. Obviously, the others had convinced Marcus to relent for just the one night, and Esca silently thanked his gods that Marcus wasn’t so stubborn as to remain behind.

In a flash, Esca darted down and circled around, following at a distance. Marcus and the others headed into an inn, large enough that it should have accommodations for all of them. He waited a while, and then headed in, keeping his head ducked low as he looked around the common area. It was full of men, noisy and crowded, but even here, the Romans had their own place, tucked away in a corner where they could eat mostly undisturbed by the common rabble.
Keeping his head down, Esca settled onto a bench across the room, ordering a drink and nursing it while he watched Marcus and the others. They eat and talked for what seemed like an age before finally getting to their feet and heading for the rooms upstairs. Esca waited a moment, and then followed as unobtrusively as he could. With the tavern so busy, there was no one watching to see that someone who hadn’t paid for a room was sneaking up to the second floor.

His moment of doubt came when he made it to the top of the stairs and saw that the doors were all closed and that he had no idea which room was Marcus’s. He drummed his fingers on his thigh as he considered his situation. He could try each door, but that would almost certainly lead to getting caught. Perhaps he could listen at the doors, see if he could figure out who was within?

Without warning, one of the doors opened and Esca dropped, pretending to be checking his boot. From the corner of his eye, he saw one legionnaire slip out, shut his door silently, and rap quietly on the door next to his. One of the others answered and he nodded, emerging into the hallway as well, shutting his door just as silently. “Have to be quiet,” one of them murmured, nodding toward the door at the end of the hall. “He’d likely take us back out to camp if he catches us.”

“Too true,” the other whispered back, and together they slipped down the stairs.

Esca grinned at his good fortune. The two men, likely looking for more wine and women, had almost certainly given away which room was Marcus’s. Getting to his feet, Esca crept down the hall and placed his ear against the rough wood of the door. From within, he heard the sounds of someone walking around, the clink of metal as armor was removed. Knowing that he had to move quickly to remain undetected, and hoping that Marcus had not yet latched the door, he placed his hand on the handle and pushed.

The door swung open with a slight creaking of hinges. Standing next to the bed, Marcus dropped his armor, fumbling for the sword that wasn’t at his side. Then he blinked and saw who was standing in the doorway. “Esca?” he asked incredulously.

“Yes.” Esca stepped all the way inside the room, using the latch to make sure no one else would slip in unannounced.

“What are you doing here?”

“I followed you,” Esca replied, setting his pack and bow down on the floor next to the wall.

“All the way from Isca Dumoniorum?”

“Well, the village is a bit closer, but yes.”

“Why?”

Esca blinked, his brows rising. “Are you really going to ask?”

Marcus opened his mouth, and then shook his head. Before Esca knew it, Marcus was crossing the room to him, crushing him against his chest as he slanted their mouths together. Esca moved into the kiss, and let Marcus continue to hold him when it ended. “I thought I had seen you for the last time,” Marcus mumbled into his hair. “I wanted to come back once more, but I couldn’t.”

“It matters not,” Esca said. “I knew you would have come if you could. But I couldn’t let you go without at least trying to see you once more. Tell me, what do you have against staying at inns?”

Marcus chuckled. “Had I known of your plan, I would have made an effort stay at least a few more nights in more comfortable settings. That I have similar quarters to my men does not mean I like
sleeping on the ground.”

Esca allowed himself a small laugh and then pulled away from Marcus, only to take his hand and tug him toward the bed. “Come. Let’s not waste any more time with words.”

Grinning, Marcus followed easily, pausing only long enough to shed his clothing while Esca did the same, and then he bore Esca down on the small, narrow bed.

~*~

Though they may have wanted to do otherwise, both men knew Marcus needed to be relatively well-rested for the coming day, so they dozed, taking short naps before rousing and turning toward the other once more. It was during one of these rests that Marcus threw a heavy arm over Esca, pulling him close and curling around him.

“Esca?” Marcus’s sleepy voice kept him from slipping into sleep.

“Yes?”

“I love you.”

For a moment, Esca couldn’t breathe. That hadn’t been said between them before, though what else could it be? With the vows and promises between them, what emotion other than love could hold them to the course they’d set for themselves. In the silence that followed Marcus’s confession, Esca’s throat locked up. Marcus, for all that he was a stiff and proper Roman, was so much freer with his affections, both physically and verbally. It wasn’t that Esca didn’t feel the same way. He did. He loved Marcus with an intensity that frightened him sometimes. And he tried to show the other man how he felt, tried to tell him just what Marcus meant to him. But when it came to words, they died before they passed his lips, tiny, bitter things that reminded him of the fact that every other person he’d spoken such words to was now dead.

And somewhere in the back of his mind, he was afraid that should be speak them again, the same fate would befall Marcus.

Aware that the silence had gone on too long, he licked his dry lips. If Marcus needed the words….

“Marcus, I—”

“I know.”

“What?”

“I know,” Marcus repeated quietly, tipping Esca’s head to the side to press a gentle kiss to his neck. “You don’t have to say it.”

“You deserve to hear it,” Esca said in a rush, half-ashamed at his inability to utter such small words.

Marcus laughed softly, breath ruffling the hair at the back of Esca’s neck. “I might want to hear to words, but I don’t need to. What I need is simply to know that you feel the same.”

“I do,” Esca breathed, voice ragged.

“Then it’s enough.”

Marcus shifted behind him, seemingly content, but Esca could feel the slightest tension in his
“But?”

“You know me too well,” Marcus said ruefully. “But…when I return, if you…if you still feel the same way, could you say it then?”

Pushing himself away, Esca turned in Marcus’s arms and cupped the bigger man’s jaw in his hands. Gods, what had he done to deserve the love of a man who was willing to wait that long?

“I will, I swear it. The first words from my lips, Marcus, will be those.”

“Thank you.”

He pulled Esca tighter against him, and within moments, Esca felt the hold slacken as sleep claimed Marcus. He did his best to sleep, but it eluded him for a long time, restless. Finally he turned over to so that he faced Marcus. Then he nestled his face against the skin of Marcus’s neck and muttered, “Gráím thú.”

He felt a bit cowardly, saying it when Marcus couldn’t hear. But the fact that he had said it, that he had admitted it out loud, even just to himself, settled something nervous within him. Esca closed his eyes, allowing the steady rise and fall of Marcus’s chest as he breathed, and the even beat of his heart lull him to sleep.

~*~

The both woke at dawn and hurriedly dressed. Marcus had to be ready when his men finished breaking down their camp. Esca concealed a brief, vicious smile for the men who had stayed out carousing, and the headaches they would have this morning. He didn’t need to do more than pull his clothes on, and then he helped Marcus with his armor.

Once they had everything, Marcus paused, looking from the door the Esca. “You can’t follow us any farther south,” he said quietly.

“I know. I would have turned back in a day or two anyway.”

Marcus nodded, and then his resolve broke and he pulled Esca into an embrace. “I will miss you,” he said simply, breathing the words against Esca’s skin.

“And I, you”

Marcus pulled back, searching Esca’s eyes, his own green ones suspiciously bright, though no tears fell. “I will return.”

Esca just nodded, knowing that if he spoke he risked making a fool of himself.

With a sigh, Marcus turned away after one last brush of his lips across Esca’s mouth. He picked up the small pack he’d brought with him last night and unlatched the door, tugging it open. He paused once more, hand resting on the edge of the door, and he looked back. “Goodbye, Esca.”

“Goodbye, Marcus,” Esca replied, feeling the weight of the words settle on him, knowing full well that despite Marcus’s promises, despite his own hopes, this might be the very last time the would see each other.

Marcus nodded and then stepped through the door, footsteps sure and even. In the blink of an eye, he was gone, and Esca resisted the mad desire to chase after him and make sure he was really still there, that he hadn’t disappeared as soon as he was gone from his sight.
Esca lingered for a while in the room, giving Marcus enough time to gather his men, eat a quick breakfast, and head out. When he judged that it had been long enough, he slipped from the room and down the stairs, carefully avoiding anyone else. As soon as he was clear of the inn, he headed out of the town. There was nothing he needed here, and the sooner he returned home, the better.

~*~

His journey back to the village was accomplished much faster than his journey south had been. With nothing slowing him, he was free to go at his own pace, pushing on well into the evening and departing at the morning’s first light. He didn’t have to pace himself, and he could use the road without fear of alerting anyone to his presence.

It hurt, though, the knowledge that with every step that took him back home, Marcus was marching in the other direction, and the distance between them was growing greater, too great for Esca for close. He allowed himself the rest of the journey to feel miserable. Once he got back, there would be no time to indulge himself in melancholy, nor could he allow it to draw out for all the years Marcus would be gone. He had to do as he’d made Marcus promise and live his own life.

By the time he made it back, his emotions were once again under control, though he knew he would continue to miss Marcus. He took no care to hide his approach, unlike his departure, and Aisling spotted him as he crossed by her house. She came out, wiping her hands on her skirt. “Did you see your Roman?”

“Yes.”

She nodded. “Good.” Her expression was understanding, not pitying, for which Esca was grateful. She smiled. “If you’re not too tired, Ciardha said he was going to try his luck at fishing. You might join him.”

Esca gave her a small smile in return. The boy was an uncomplicated companion, who would not press Esca too hard on the reason for his absence or where he had been. It would be a welcome break from his own thoughts and the inquiries of others. “Let me put my things away and I’ll go find him,” he replied, and Aisling’s smile broadened. She nodded again and headed back into her house, leaving Esca to check his home and prepare himself for the pattern the rest of his days would follow.
Chapter 17

Marcus looks at Ecsa, and sees more than a slave. He sees a man, who, despite Rome's best efforts, still has his pride. And he sees a man that he loves. So he sets him free. Except he finds it impossible to let him go. Even when he must leave. Coming back is the only thing that allows him to go on.

~*~

Marcus first went to Gaul, and then further west to Germania. His next two posts took him south, to the lands south and west of Rome. They reminded him fiercely of home; hot and dry, the sun always brilliant and warm when it shone down on him. He had missed that, missed the sights, sounds, and smells of his youth, so familiar that he would have known them anywhere. And yet...yet they did not make him feel like he was home, like he had assumed they would. It wasn’t until he was sent back north that he felt like he belonged.

At each posting, he acquitted himself well, and if he wasn’t quite as beloved by his men as he was in his first command, he developed a reputation of being firm but fair, and always putting the welfare of his men before his own comforts. After his injury, he realized that he would never rise as high as he had dreamed when he first entered the legions. Though the chariot at Isca Dumoniorum had not taken his life, it had taken the chance he would have at securing the Egyptian appointment. It would have been harder to bear if he had not had something else to look forward to when he retired.

Though he could not become attain the position he had wanted, he did rise within the ranks, his reputation preceding him at each new command he took. Slowly, but surely, he began to wash away the stain his father’s loss had brought to their family name. No longer did the name Aquila incur looks and words of derision for the loss of the Eagle, but rather admiration and approval for the courage and valor shown in battle.

And at each posting, he made sure to do as Esca had bid him. It was hard, to seek out another when they wouldn’t be who he truly wanted, but he wouldn’t return to Esca having lived a lonely life, pining for the man he could not be with. Whenever he found a man or woman who caught his eye, who provided warmth and respite, Marcus made sure that he was not looking for Esca in their features, that he loved them, as best he could, for who they were and not who he wanted them to be. And he could only hope that Esca was doing the same, and pray that when he returned, Esca would not have replaced him entirely.

The years passed by, more quickly than they might have had he no one to share pleasures with, but still slower than he wanted. Some ten years after he left Britannia, he received word that his uncle, his brother’s father, had died, leaving his villa and all of his possessions to Marcus, his only living relative. Marcus could have requested time to go and attend to the matter personally, but he disliked the idea of going to Britannia and not being able to go to Esca. So instead he sent a letter back to Kaeso, his uncle’s friend who was handling the affair until Marcus decided what to do. Marcus asked him settle his uncle’s affairs, free the slaves he’d had, and then hire someone to look after his uncle’s villa and run his estate until he could go himself. If the former slaves wanted the job, so much the better, and to pay them out of the money the estate provided. Keeping the villa was a prudent decision until he returned to Esca. If Esca had moved on, then the villa would be an excellent place for Marcus to live. And with that settled, and a faint regret that he had not been able to meet the last of his family, he focused back on his duties.

Each time Marcus saw his reflection, it was impossible to miss the lines that had etched themselves
in his face and brow, gathering in the corners of his eyes, or the silver that began to peek through the black hair at his temples. He began to feel the years creep up on him, the way his muscles and bones—especially the muscle of his thigh—sometimes ached when he woke in the morning or in damp whether. Still, he was healthy, his body still strong, and as the end of his twenty-five years of service came closer, he began to look forward to retiring and heading back to Britannia.

It was, of course, only natural that he had less than a year to go when misfortune struck. The incident, what should have been no more than a simple disagreement—local people upset at the influx of Roman culture into their way of life—turned violent. It had started as little more than a drunken argument on the street, and Marcus had the luck to be there when it turned violent. He tried to keep the peace, to keep the two sides separate until more legionaries could arrive to get things under control. But someone had thrown a punch and that had been it. He was nearly certain no one had meant to attack him, but in the melee, he was just another Roman, and he took a knife to the thigh he’d injured so many years ago.

This time, when he awoke in his quarters with the surgeon frowning down at him, he knew better than to hope for a full recovery. The surgeon’s assessment was that he wouldn’t lose the use of his leg, but that he would likely have a limp for the rest of his life. If he was careful and did not strain himself, then he would be able to live a fairly normal life. Marcus thanked him and ghosted his fingers over the bandages, hoping that he was right.

Marcus was allowed to finish out his term of service, using the remaining months to heal and advise his replacement. Because he had risen so far within the ranks, with all the honors and commendations granted during his service, his discharge bonus was a significant sum. Whatever happened when he returned to Britannia, he would not have to worry about how to provide for himself if he were careful. Perhaps he could purchase some good land, maybe take up raising horses, away from large cities and towns, with enough wild places for hunting and for Esca to not be reminded of Rome. It was something to be considered.

Finally, everything was settled. Marcus had his bonus, supplies for traveling, and two good horses to carry him on the journey home. He bid goodbye to his men, his brothers-in-arms, and wished them good fortune in their own lives. And then he turned his eyes northeast, and headed towards home.

~*~

The trip was long and Marcus had to take care to rest whenever his leg began to ache. Eventually, though, he boarded a ship and soon he was setting foot in Britania for the first time in almost thirteen years. He wanted nothing more than to race north, to the village near Isca Dumoniorum, but he had business to attend to first. First he purchased new supplies for the journey and then headed to Calleva.

It was easy enough to find his late uncle’s estate—the watchtower in one of the corners of the villa was both unusual and familiar. Marcus couldn’t help but smile, knowing that the comfort he felt from seeing it was probably the same reason his uncle,—a lifelong military man himself—had had it built. Kaeso met him at the gates and offered Marcus the comforts of his own villa to rest, but Marcus demurred and asked to see his uncle’s...his villa.

Two of the former slaves had chosen to stay—Sasstica, the cook, and Marcipor—and they were thrilled to have Marcus there. They fussed about him, grumbling good naturedly at each other the whole time, Marcipor taking his things before going to see to the horses and Sasstica pressing a cup of wine into his hands.

After Marcus had some time to refresh himself, Marcipor showed him about while Sasstica
Marcus retreated to the kitchen to prepare. The buildings and grounds had been well maintained. Marcus admired his uncle’s planning as he examined everything. It was a very pleasant place to be, and he could see himself living there. By the time they returned to the villa, Marcus was determined to keep the estate, either as his primary residence or as a place to get away. 

He ate his meal alone that evening. He considered seeking out the two servants and eating with them, but they were strangers to each other and it would have too uncomfortable. Afterward, he went to his uncle’s private quarters, looking through the carefully preserved personal belongings. His writings were all collected, including the book of history he’d finished a few years before he died.

Marcus appreciated the glimpse into who his uncle had been, the feelings of regret growing stronger for he felt that he truly would have enjoyed knowing him. Someday, he would read through his uncle’s works and letters, to try and understand him as much as possible. For now, he didn’t have the time.

He left the next morning, giving the servants instructions to continue as they had been, and to hire others if they needed the help. He would try to send further instructions in several weeks, but not to worry if they did not hear from him for some time. Sasstica loaded him down with supplies and the two bid him farewell.

Marcus headed north once more.

~*~

The closer Marcus rode to the village, the more familiar things became. Even after having been gone for so long, he still remembered the lay of the land, a particular bend in the road or the twist of a nearby river. The more he recognized the area around him, the harder it was to keep hold of his excitement. He was so close, not more than a day away now, and it was so hard to make camp that night, to resist the urge to ride through the night to arrive that much sooner. But that would be foolhardy and reckless, and he did not want to go before Esca exhausted, craving only a bed to sleep in when he arrived. His dreams that night were full of what he hoped would happen when he saw Esca again.

He did break camp early, though, just before dawn, not even bothering to cook a meal, instead eating some dry bread as he rode. He made it to the village in the early afternoon and almost didn’t recognize it when he did.

The village had grown in the years he’d been away, even larger now than it had been when he first arrived, before the uprising had devastated it so much. There were more buildings, bigger houses, and people milled about this way and that. Some of the villagers spared him a few glances, but he was hardly the only man mounted, and there was nothing else about him to catch their interest. It was clear that no one recognized him, and for that, he was grateful. It was a refreshing change to not be glared at and silently cursed for doing his duty, and he enjoyed being overlooked, the anonymity he was granted. For himself, Marcus recognized no faces. It was doubtful that he would have remembered any of the villagers even if he’d only been gone a year.

Because the village had grown, it took Marcus longer than he anticipated to figure out where Esca’s house was. It looked much the same as it had when he left, though he could tell it had been well-tended. The doors and shutters were new and there was a smallish garden beside the house.

As he rode closer, looking at it, the door opened and a young woman stepped out, a small child balanced on her hip. Marcus froze. No matter that he’d told himself that it would make sense if Esca had married, that he should expect nothing else when he came back, he’d never been able to
bring himself to truly believe it. He was struck dumb, unable to move any further, and someone cursed as they nearly ran into the back of his horse.

But before he could gather himself to ride closer and find out for sure, a young man stepped out of the house from behind the woman, brushing his lips across the woman’s cheek before heading off. Marcus sagged in the saddle, heaving a sigh of relief. The man had not been Esca. The woman and the child were not his. Clearly, Esca didn’t live in the house anymore, and Marcus—flatly refusing to believe that it could mean that Esca no longer lived—would have to ask if anyone knew where he was now.

He nudged his horse forward toward the woman who had exited the small roundhouse. “Excuse me,” he called, raising his voice so he could be heard over the noise of the village.

Her brows rose momentarily before lowering in a small frown. “Yes?” she replied cautiously.

“I’m looking for a man who used to live here. Esca, son of Cunoval. Do you know where I might be able to find him?”

“Esca?” she repeated. “He-”

She was interrupted by a voice behind Marcus. “What do you want with Esca?”

Marcus half-turned in his saddle. A tall man, with black hair and eyes, and a thick black beard, with his arms crossed over his chest, stood there looking at him. For a moment, Marcus thought he was a Roman, his features revealing that he had more than British blood in him. But his stance, his unconcealed hostility, told Marcus that wasn’t the case. When he answered, he was careful to keep his tone neutral. “I’m looking for Esca. Do you know where I can find him?”

The man glowered at him for a moment longer before his stance relaxed. “I remember you,” he muttered. “Never did think you were coming back, but Esca seemed fairly certain.”

Marcus’s brows furrowed as he thought. From the man’s appearance, he had certainly been a child when Marcus was last in the village. He couldn’t remember any children, except.... “You’re the boy,” he said. “The one Esca was teaching.”

The man nodded shortly. “Ciardha,” he said, introducing himself.

“Marcus,” Marcus replied, and the man nodded again. “So do you know where Esca is?”

“He doesn’t live here anymore,” Ciardha said. “He left several years ago.” Marcus’s hopes sank in his breast. If Esca had gone elsewhere and not left word about where, then it might be nearly impossible to find him.

“He lives about an hour away by horse,” Ciardha went on. “If you head west out of the village, there will be a path that leads to where he lives. Look for a pair of antlers tied to a tree. It marks the path.”

An hour. Esca was no more than an hour away. Marcus tipped his head. “Thank you,” he said gravely.

Ciardha returned the gesture. “He’s the closest thing to father I ever had. It’s little enough to repay him for what he did for me.” His eyes darted up to look at the sky. “There’s still some daylight left. The area isn’t dangerous, but there’s no point in waiting.”

“Indeed. Again, thank you.”
Ciardha lifted one hand in a brief goodbye and then turned away, slipping back among the rest of the villagers and walking away without a backward glance. Marcus watched him for a moment and then straightened in the saddled, urging his horse forward once more.

The ride seemed long, though he knew it wasn’t, anticipation dragging each moment out. Finally, though, he spotted the antlers tied to a tree by a narrower path. They were an impressive set, the points long and sharp and wide. Marcus would wager all his coin that Esca had brought the buck down himself.

The path continued for a short way before widening out into a large clearing. In the center was set a house, obviously recently built—at least, new since Marcus had left—larger than most in the village and well constructed. A barn stood away from the house a bit, also of solid construction. Behind it was a large, fenced-in area extending all the way to the treeline, two horses inside idly cropping grass. There was no curl of smoke from the chimney, not surprising with the mild weather, and the shutters on the windows stood open against the earlier warmth of the day. Marcus considered just going to the door, but his horses had been walking for a long time. Even if he wasn’t to stay, it was unlikely Esca would turn him out for the night. He could take a few moments to relieve the horses of their burdens.

He rode toward the fence, finding the unsecured rails Esca used to get in and out of the paddock. He dismounted, slipping his saddle and packs free with easy, practiced movements. He urged each horse into the paddock, noted the trough of water, and, confident the horses could fend for themselves for a while longer, lifted the rails back into place. He picked up his things and set them just inside the barn door, keeping only the pack with his personal possessions, and headed for the house.

Marcus stepped up onto the doorstep, took a deep breath, lifted a hand and knocked firmly twice upon the door.
Chapter 18

Esca feels Marcus’s eyes upon him and waits for the inevitable that he knows is coming. And when it doesn’t come, it hits him harder than any blow ever could. Now he must decide what course he wants to take. He’s not surprised when it leads to Marcus. Nor is he surprised that freedom has bound him with thicker chains than slavery ever did. And now? He does not mind their weight. He will miss them when Marcus has gone. But he didn’t know how much until Marcus is returned to him.

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Esca held the feather up to the light coming in from the window and examined it closely. Then he nodded, satisfied, and set it off to the side with the other trimmed feathers. Selecting another, he looked at it carefully and laid it on the table, holding it still while he shifted his grip on the small, sharp knife in his hand. He paused, knife poised over the feather, at the sound of a rider approaching. He cocked his head, listening intently. Two horses, and louder than anyone from the village would have been. There was also no call of greeting. Perhaps a merchant, then, lured out by the villagers’ promise of a man who would pay good coin for certain goods. It happened often enough, though by now most merchants traveling to the village knew him.

He returned his attention to the feather, trimming it carefully as he waited. The expected knock came shortly after, and Esca called out, “A moment!” He finished shaping the feather, then set it and the knife down. Rising, he wiped his hands on his tunic and crossed the room to open the door to see who had come all the way out to see him.

Marcus stood at his his door.

At the sight of him, Esca was struck dumb. For a few wild heartbeats, he wondered if it was a trick, a vision conjured by his mind after so many years of waiting and wanting. But no, the Marcus standing before him now was not the same one who had ridden off all those years ago. He was older, silver at his temples, bronzed face lined with both weather and time. He seemed bigger, too, if that were possible; not taller, just thicker and heavier with muscle. Perhaps it was just the years apart, time and distance diminishing Esca’s memory of his stature.

“Esca?” Marcus asked quietly, breaking the silence. His voice was a little rougher, a little deeper than Esca remembered, but so familiar, so missed that it brought Esca back to himself. Without thought, he stepped forward and pulled Marcus into a hard embrace, one that was returned with just as much fervor a moment later. For long minutes, he simply enjoyed the feel of being in Marcus’s arms.

Eventually, he pulled back. Though he was loath to let Marcus go, they could not stand in front of his door, holding each other for the rest of the day. He was unashamed when he had to wipe a hand across his eyes before he could see clearly, especially when he saw that Marcus was just as affected. “Come,” he said, turning and leading Marcus inside. “You must be weary from your journey.”

He poured water for both of them, and set out some fresh bread and cheese, but neither of them paid much attention to it. Marcus wiped his hands and face with a damp cloth Esca gave him, scarfed a few mouthfuls of food and drained his cup, his eyes never leaving Esca. Just when Esca
thought he could take no more waiting, Marcus pushed his platter away and stood.

Esca met him halfway and their mouths came together so sharply that Esca tasted blood, his teeth catching Marcus’s lip. He licked it away, until there was just the taste of Marcus. When they paused to breathe, panting in the still air, Esca pulled them across across the room, to the doorway of his bedchamber, and then down onto the wide, low bed inside. Hands fumbled at clothing until they were both gloriously naked.

He’d wondered if he would have forgotten what Marcus liked, but as soon as he had his hands on him, the worry fled. Everything that Marcus liked, what he responded to best, came back to Esca immediately, as if he’d only been gone a short while. As much as he wanted Marcus, and could feel how much Marcus wanted him, Esca took his time. There were new things to explore on Marcus’s body, new definitions of muscle, new scars and calluses. Esca wanted to know the story behind them. And in the near future Esca would have Marcus tell him while he mapped them with lips and tongue, committing them to memory.

And as intrigued as Esca was with Marcus’s new body, he could tell Marcus was just as fascinated with Esca’s. Esca, too, had changed, more than Marcus, with muscle added to his lean frame and new scars dotting the landscape of his skin. But he’d also added more tattoos, the markings now flowing across the left side of his chest and down his arm. Marcus traced them with careful fingers, running callused fingertips along the whorls and swirls. As Marcus would tell the story of his scars, someday Esca would tell him the story of his tattoos.

Eventually, all the careful, light touches could not stand against their impatience. Esca fumbled for the small flask of oil he kept nearby, and pressed it into Marcus’s hands. Marcus wasted no time slicking his fingers with Esca parted his legs without hesitation. He had to grit his teeth to keep himself from telling Marcus to just get on with it; he intended to spent a great deal of time in bed over the next few days, and he didn’t want to be sore. For his part, Marcus seemed just as determined to do the same, and he prepared Esca as gently and as carefully as he could, without making both of them go mad from the waiting.

And then, finally, Marcus was easing between Esca’s thighs, cock already hard and glistening with oil. He paused, just at Esca’s entrance, and looked up. His green eyes were bright with desire and relief and pain and love—everything that Esca felt as well. Esca tightened his hold on Marcus, pulling him closer, urging him in, and with a single cry of, “Esca!” voice wrecked with need, Marcus thrust forward and in.

It was over too soon, both too desperate with need to draw it out. Marcus came first, and Esca bit back a groan of frustration until Marcus wrapped a thick hand around his cock and stroked him to completion. He slumped back, panting, listening to Marcus try to regain his breath as well. He had to grin when he heard Marcus’s breathing even out and deepen, and felt his body relax. Well, Marcus’s day had been no doubt more tiring than his. Esca could let him sleep. Burying one hand in Marcus’s black hair, he made himself as comfortable as he could beneath Marcus’s bulk and closed his eyes.

Esca woke after a short nap. Given the position of the sun—setting, but not much lower than it had been—only a little time had passed. Marcus still slumbered, but Esca had no real desire to wake him. Instead, he continued to lie quietly, his hand stroking through Marcus’s hair.

Until Marcus’s arms had closed around him on his doorstep, Esca hadn’t realized just how much he had missed his Roman. In order to prepare for the worst, he had told himself that Marcus hadn’t meant that much, that what they’d had could be found again with someone else, though he never
had. And he’d done a good job living by that, right until Marcus had returned. Now that Marcus was real again, present and in his arms, he could admit to himself that he’d never really expected to see his lover again, that he’d believed Marcus would be taken from him forever by an errant sword stroke, a pretty face, the promise of a family, or even just the honor of Rome. So many ways Marcus could have been lost to him, and yet here he was. He’d come back to Esca, and everything was suddenly vivid and bright, as if all the time spent waiting had been in shadow.

Eventually, Marcus began to shift, slowly coming back to wakefulness. Esca waited until he saw Marcus’s eyes blink open, and drowsily look up and focus on him. “Hello,” Esca said, when he saw that Marcus was truly awake.

“How long have I slept?”

“No, not too long.”

Marcus smiled, then carefully lifted himself and shifted himself off Esca, both of them hissing as their skin pulled apart. Esca made a face. They would need to bathe, but that could wait. Marcus settled himself next to Esca, and they both shifted until they were comfortably wrapped around each other. Neither spoke, content just to hold one another. Esca wanted to, wanted to ask Marcus about what his life had been like, wanted to tell him what he had done, but he didn’t know how to start, didn’t have the right words to begin.

The rumble of Marcus’s stomach interrupted his thoughts. Marcus laughed ruefully.

“Did you not eat during your travels?” Esca teased.

“I did,” Marcus replied, grinning. “But I was more concerned with traveling quickly than filling my belly.”

There was something painfully vulnerable in Marcus’s expression, and Esca realized that as much as he had never expected Marcus to return, Marcus must not have believed that Esca would still be waiting for him. He bent his head and brushed Marcus’s mouth with his. “Let’s see you fed then.” He slipped from the bed, pulling a face as he shifted and realized the more urgent need to wash.

He lit some lamps to push away the growing darkness, then set some water to heat over the fire and pulled some clean cloths from a chest. While they waited for the water to warm, Esca gathered together what prepared food he had, though it wasn’t much. Bread, cheese and dried meats were his staples in the warmer months when he didn’t wish to bother with cooking, though he had some smoked fish as well, and a few early fruits.

“I’m sorry it isn’t much,” he apologized as he set the food down on the table, fetching mugs of beer to wash it down.

Marcus shook his head. “It’s fine. I’ve had to get by on much worse.” He paused, looking down and focusing on his plate. “And I’d rather eat the simplest meal with you than any senator’s feast.”

Esca smiled and reached across to touch Marcus’s hand, Marcus turning it over to clasp their hands together. They ate in silence, looking up and catching the other staring before laughing ruefully. When they were done, the water was warm enough to wash with, and they scrubbed at their skin with the cloths and a lump of soap Esca brought out. They rinsed with cool water and dried themselves. Esca wondered if they should perhaps get dressed, but night was falling and he suspected they were only going to end up in bed anyway. Marcus seemed to feel the same way because he only glanced out the window and asked, “Will the horses be all right?”
“They should,” Esca replied.

“Good.” Without another word, Marcus reached out, took Esca’s hand, and led him back to bed.

This time, their lovemaking was lower, less frantic than their first time. Esca reached for the oil, but only to slick their cocks up. He was still loose from earlier, but right now he just wanted the feel of Marcus against him. He pushed Marcus onto his back and climbed atop, clinging tight to Marcus’s shoulders and sucking marks into his collarbones while Marcus grabbed his hips and moved them together.

Esca finished first, biting down on Marcus’s shoulder as he came. Marcus groaned and shuddered, coming soon after. He slipped Esca off of him and left the bed briefly to fetch a damp cloth. He cleaned them both up and then slipped back into bed, pulling Esca against him, back to chest, and curling around him.

Marcus sighed behind him, breath brushing across Esca’s ear “I have missed you,” Marcus said lowly, tightening his hold so that Esca couldn’t have gotten away unless he struggled, not that he wanted to. It was nice, tucked into bed, next to someone he cared so deeply for. Suddenly, he stiffened, remembering old words spoken in a promise. He shrugged off Marcus’s hold just enough to turn over and looked at him in the dim light.

“I made you a promise when you left.” Marcus’s brow furrowed and Esca wiggled a hand free to smooth it away. “I love you,” he said simply and Marcus gasped. “I wasn’t sure I could say it and mean it until you came back, but I have felt it every day you’ve been gone.”

“Esca,” was all Marcus managed to say before burying his face in Esca’s neck. Esca didn’t say anything else, just held Marcus close until they both fell asleep.

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The next morning, they woke leisurely, lingering in bed until Esca finally decided they had to rise. They ate a quick meal and pulled fresh clothes on. Marcus wrinkled his nose a bit at his, and Esca promised that they could all be laundered tomorrow.

Marcus looked around, clearly interested in Esca’s home. “Would you show me around?” he asked.

“Of course.” He gestured around them. “This is the main room; I spend most of my time here. And you’ve seen my bedchamber.” Marcus grinned. “There are a few more rooms, though. Come.” Esca led him back through a short hallway, showing the small pantry where he kept food, and then another small alcove for other sundries. There was another bedchamber, though it stood empty, and at the very back of the small house, a door led out to something that resembled the open porticos of Roman villas. There was no marble, of course, but wide flagstones had been laid down and smoothed with care. Wooden posts, some carved with British designs held up the roof, exposing all three sides to the open air. Against the wall of the house were two small benches. Marcus looked at Esca. The bedchambers in the home had seemed more Roman than British, but there was no mistaking this for other than what it was, a piece of Roman life within Esca’s home

Esca rubbed at the back of his neck, looking embarrassed. “I hoped,” he said simply. “I did not know if you would return, or if you would even stay here if you did. I thought that having a little something that reminded you of home might help, if you chose to stay.”

Marcus still looked a bit stunned, but then smiled, the lines on his face deepening. “Thank you.”
Shrugging, Esca turned. “I haven’t shown you the best parts yet. Come on.”

He led Marcus out to the field where the horses were, spending a good deal of time looking over Marcus’s two before showing him the rest of the small herd. “I breed them,” he explained. “I started about five years ago.”

“A most noble pursuit,” Marcus approved. “They look like fine animals.”

Esca grinned, combing his fingers through one of his mare’s manes and pulling some grass from it. “I bought a rather fine stallion from a merchant who didn’t quite know what he had.” He nodded to the chestnut stallion grazing at the other end of the pen. “There’s always a need for good, strong horses and there are always people who pay well for them.”

“They’re beautiful,” Marcus agreed.

Marcus helped Esca make sure there was water for the horses and then they left to continue exploring. Esca showed him the sheep and the goats, the lambs and kids gamboling about, explaining how far his land extended and what could be found on it. Marcus seemed impressed by what he saw, asking insightful questions, and they walked and talked for a long time, lost in the minutiae of raising animals and using the land.

By the time they returned to the house, the sun was high above their heads and they’d worked up a sweat and hunger. Esca frowned at his stores of food. He had plenty, but most was still preserved. He’d intended to go fishing today and hunting in the next few. He and Marcus could still go finishing in the afternoon, but he might put off the hunting for a few more days. So, bread and cheese it was for them and he chopped a few raw vegetables for some variety. While he readied the food, Marcus sluiced himself with a bucket of water. Esca took his turn as well and then joined Marcus at the table.

When they were done and cleaned up, he got his fishing supplies and handed some to Marcus. Then they headed out to the stream. It was a nice afternoon and they discussed the changes to the area and the village while they caught fish for their dinner. Marcus seemed interested in the minutiae of the area, which caught Esca by surprise. But he had lived in the area for nearly three years, had been concerned for the village after the uprising. That he wondered what had happened to it in his absence made of sense.

When they had caught four fish, silvery and fat, they pulled in their lines. They cleaned the fish at the riverbank and then carried them home. Once back, Esca built up a fire and set them to cooking in a pan along with some more vegetables. Marcus busied himself with his pack, keeping it hidden away from Esca, and Esca didn’t pry even though he was curious. When he stood up, he was holding a cloth wrapped bundle in his hands. It clattered slightly when Marcus set it on the table, but he didn’t say anything about it.

When their food was ready, they ate, and then wandered out to the small portico, Esca bringing a small flask for them to share. They settled themselves on a bench, passing the flask back and forth every so often, watching the run set in peace.

“I hadn’t thought to still find you here,” Marcus said suddenly. “I had expected you to have left.”

“And where would I go?” Esca asked.

“Anywhere. Back to your home. At least somewhere with better memories.”

Esca shook his head slowly. “My home is gone. Even if there are people living there again, all my
kin are dead, and I won’t live surrounded by their ghosts. And as for here?” He gestured to the lands surround them, drink swishing in the flask he still held in one hand. “I have only good memories of this place.”

“But the fort,” Marcus insisted. “And the soldiers in the village. Doesn’t it...?”

“Bother me?” Esca finished. “Why should it? I never see the fort and I encounter the soldiers so infrequently that they hardly are worth my notice.”

Marcus frowned and leaned against him. “I was a slave, Marcus. I have made peace with that and I’ll not allow Rome to have anything more of me. This place is good for me and I have fond memories of it as well.” He smiled up at Marcus and finally the troubled expression on Marcus’s face fled, replaced with his own smile.

“Still, I’d have at least thought to find you with a pretty wife and a half dozen fat children.”

Esca made a low, agreeing sound. “I’d thought that might have been a possibility as well.” Marcus deserved honesty, even if the truth might wound him a bit. “After you left, Aisling and I....” He shrugged. “We had an understanding. I think if there had been a child, we would have married. But there wasn’t. She found a good man who could give her more than I could a couple of years later.”

“I find it hard to believe you couldn’t provide for her.”

“I didn’t say I couldn’t provide, just that there was much I couldn’t give her. I could not give to her, not any of the others that followed, what I had already given to you.”

Marcus’s face turned soft and pleased, the faintest of blushes high on his cheekbones. “You were at least happy? Tell me that.”

“I was,” Esca agreed, lacing their fingers together. “Happier now, though.” They sat in silence for a while longer before Esca spoke up. “And you, Marcus? Were you happy?”

Tipping his head back to lean against the wall of the house, Marcus thought for a while before he answered. “I was...content,” he said eventually. “It wasn’t easy, to do as you asked. But it was better than being lonely, in stewing in my maudlin thoughts. “Speaking of which....”

Rising to his feet, he gently untangled their hands. “One moment,” he said and hurried back into their house. Esca watched him go, startled that Marcus had barely been here a full day and Esca was already considering the house theirs.

As he said, Marcus was back only moments later, holding the small bundle he’d removed from his pack. He set it on his lap, then bit his lip and looked at Esca. “Each place I went,” he began, “I always thought about you, even when I took a lover. And since I didn’t have anything to remember you buy, I bought gifts that reminded me of you.”

There were five objects within the bag: a pale white comb made of bone, a bracelet of carved wood so dark it was almost black, a necklace of bright glass beads, an arm cuff of hammered bronze, and a small dagger, no longer than his hand with a worn leather grip. There was a reason behind each one, of why Marcus had chosen that particular item, Esca knew, but now was not the time to ask. There were memories tied to them, of what Marcus had lived through and the people he had loved. They created a story for Marcus, to share when he was ready.

Esca tucked the items back into the bag carefully and handed it to Marcus, who looked relieved that Esca wasn’t asking any questions. Marcus set the bag by his feet and took Esca’s hand in his once again. There was a feeling of anticipation in the air; they were at the crossroads, where what
they did next would decide their future.

“So,” Esca said, squeezing Marcus’s hand, “will you stay?”

“For as long as you’ll have me.”

“Then you will stay forever, for I’m not letting you leave me again.”

Marcus smiled, as wide and bright as Esca had ever seen him and he swallowed hard against the thought that he would get to wake up to that smile for the rest of his life. He stood, tugged Marcus to his feet beside him, and led him inside their home.

Chapter End Notes

And so, we have come now to the end. Thank you all so, so much for sticking with this story! I am humbled by your response to it and am so thrilled that you enjoyed it so much.

Please drop by the archive and comment to let the author know if you enjoyed their work!