# Prologue - Forgotten Islands



The small island lay near the top of the world, far to the north, surrounded by icy waters with white capped waves. It was here that magic saw its beginning, and nearly—its end.

Long before Rome carved its dominion across the world, before kings or councils claimed authority over nearby lands and people, there had been only the gift itself. It was not given to all, nor was it meant to be. It chose. And in choosing, it divided.

Some believed it was to be protected. Others believed it was to be controlled. Still others—like Rufius—believed it was to be taken.

"Fools," Rufius muttered as he waded into the water and climbed into a small rowboat bound for the galley anchored just offshore.

*They could have had everything.*

He looked back toward the island. The sun hung low above the western sea, casting a narrowing ribbon of gold across the water. Its fading light touched only a handful of gray knolls rising from the desolate shore.

The rowboat cut through the short waves as it glided toward the larger vessel.

Rufius sighed, casting his deep gray eyes along the short rock walls and the empty shoreline he had just departed. *And now, there was nothing.*

This was the second time he had scoured the entirety of the Northern Isles, again coming back empty-handed.

*For now,* he thought, *I will have to make do with the wand I had been given—the wand I had not earned.*

He took a deep breath, letting it out slowly. While keeping his eyes trained on the island, he nonchalantly worked his hand to his waist.

*This,* he thought, feeling the whittled shape concealed beneath his thick woolen cloak, *is secondhand; an imitation.*

The rowboat reached the galley. “Make ready for Rome,” Rufius commanded as he climbed briskly up the galley's midship ladder.

Upon reaching the top, he swung his short, stocky body over the rail, only to land awkwardly on his feet. Brushing small specks of sand off his angular cheeks, along with a single bead of sweat forming on his forehead, he shouted for the Roman ship’s captain, “Where is the Centurion?”

The nearby crew were silent.

Rufius swung around, stopping so abruptly that two nearby sailors flinched. He pointed his half-crooked nose toward the officers gathered near the centerline and

barked, “Inform the Centurion that we are to weigh anchor and head south.”

“Did you find what you were looking for, sir?” asked the galley’s Optio and First Officer, stepping forward as Rufius began stomping toward his own cabin.

“Not that it’s your concern, but I did not,” Rufius replied, looking back out over the largest of Orkney’s islands.

Short cliffs buffered the mainland from the force of the sea’s waves, and gray-green rolling slopes feebly made their way skyward, forming a series of low hills huddled together on the thin island.

*So low,* Rufius thought.

“It is no wonder it was drowned by the sea,” he said quietly and to no one in particular. “Blasted fools,” he added, his words drifting into the wind.

*It’s all gone.*

Stopping and turning his head toward the Optio, he asked, “Where is the Centurion, and why aren’t we moving already?”

“He is within the Officer’s cabin, sir, sketching the islands’ outlines on a parchment. These islands aren’t well charted—”

Rufius screeched, “I don’t care what is or isn’t charted.”

His voice deepened slightly, almost mischievously. “We are here for one purpose only... my purpose.”

Rufius squared his body to the Optio and firmly placed one hand on his own hip, with the other pointing a finger inches from the Optio's nose.

“Make for Rome. We will delay only with one stop, in two days as we approach near Londinium. I want to be anchored just outside the harbor at midnight. I’ll need you as close as we can get without alerting the port sentries.”

Slow confusion crawled over the Optio's face, giving him the appearance of a wide-eyed Plebeian new to studies.

Rufius let out an exasperated “Arghh,” and then added, “Although they are loyal to the Empire, the nature of my mission is privy to a select few. I do not wish for troops and politicians to be riled upon our arrival.”

“As you say, Praetorian,” replied the Optio. “Shall I organize a landing party, sir?”

“None will be needed,” exclaimed Rufius.

His face turned rigid and, once again, with his sharp nose, he looked directly at the Optio, meeting him square in the eyes.

“I will go ashore myself.” And then, with a slight chortle, “It will take no more than a few hours to do what I’ve come for, and then we shall be on our way.”

Snapping his boot heels together and pumping his right fist to his chest before extending his arm outward and palm down, the Optio saluted. “As you command, Praetorian.”

Turning to a small group of waiting officers, he said, “Weigh anchor. We sail south. Prepare the sails.”

Then, shouting into the belly of the galley, “Make ready to put oars to motion.”

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The next day and a half went on with little conversation between Praetorian Rufius Festinius and any of the crew of the galley.

Just after setting sail, the Optio made his report to Centurion Atius Barbatus, who patiently listened to how this new Praetorian, forced upon the command, continued to bark orders at the Centurion’s men.

Not only did Atius relinquish his spacious captain’s cabin to share quarters with his first and second officers, but he was also ordered by General Gnaeus Julius Agricola, the Consul himself, to ensure that Rufius’s commands were

obeyed without question and that he held full authority over the galley and its crew.

*Why divert Rome's already strained fleet for the bidding of one man?* Atius wondered.

The responsibility for the command and safety of his ship was his. It wasn't normal and proper to follow this imposition of authority.

For the first day and part of the night, as they climbed their way southward, Atius kept the barbaric Caledonian shores to the West just over the visible horizon, making sure to keep a prudent distance.

Soon, they had returned to Roman waters, and Atius drew the galley farther out to sea, keeping in mind the Praetorian's command to remain unseen by the Roman fishermen who might be filling their nets off the coast.

With the sun beginning to dip beneath the ocean's curve on the second night, the galley altered her course to starboard and for the waters near the edge of the harbor of Londinium. Noting the galley's speed through the water, Atius reassured himself that the cover of night would overtake them well before they came within sight of land.

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Dark winds and sloshing seas blanketed the rowboat's approach as it made for the shore.

Eventually, after what seemed to Rufius to be a ridiculously wasteful amount of time, the oarsman fought through the tide and waves and brought the small hull to rest upon a pebbled beach.

Looking directly at Centurion Atius, who insisted on being a part of the small boat's party, Rufius simply commanded, "Wait here."

Agitated as he clambered over a rocky slope leading into a poplar forest that skirted the shoreline, Rufius silently cursed Atius and his crew for their lack of speed.

The forest's tall, thin trees stood like scattered ghosts against a dark sky, shimmering with the night's light breeze.

The slope off of the beach climbed up, and Rufius climbed with it, disappearing into the woods as he continued to fume.

For nearly two months now, he mused, he had been forced to live amongst those dirty seagoing soldiers.

Not once had he been allowed to use his wand to teach them discipline and respect.

*Unless in the case of an emergency, of course,* Agricola had said before sending Rufius north to snuff out the small rebellion forming outside Londinium.

Small, they had called it. A gathering of farmers and laborers, with a man bold enough to give them a voice.

Rufius exhaled lightly through his nose.

Men rose. Men shouted. Men gathered. And then they were ended.

This would be no different.

He stepped onto a game trail leading further still away from the beach.

*Thank the gods I'm finally out of sight of those nitwits.*

Rufius stepped over a fallen branch and followed the narrow game trail deeper into the forest.

It was no wonder their kind had been denied mastery of the gift. Magic chose. It always had. The Electum understood that, even if the rest of the world did not. Common soldiers, fishermen, and laborers spent their lives grasping at things beyond them.

*And I have spent two months pretending they are my equals.*

The only permission Agricola had granted for open use of magic was when Rufius confronted the rebellion's leader, Duncan Turnbull.

According to the spy's report, Turnbull was a giant of a man, nearly seven feet tall and broad as an ox, with a ragged beard and dark hair that looked as though it had been hacked short with a dull farm blade.

This was the description given by the spy Rufius had commissioned to scout the rebel leader. Once the message had been delivered, the spy's own life had been extinguished suddenly and quietly.

Rufius allowed himself a light snicker.

*It makes no difference how big Turnbull is.*

Considering an appropriate spell, he imagined the giant's lungs filling beyond their capacity, with nowhere for the trapped air to escape.

*What good will his size be then?*

Rufius himself was likely nearly half the size of Duncan Turnbull, and that fact suited him just fine.

Unsuspecting or insignificant—that was what they all thought. Until the last moments of their lives, when they finally realized how greatly they had underestimated him.

They always believed they understood the moment right up until the end.

But what Rufius served did not end with moments. It moved forward—through blood, through time, through those who had not yet been chosen.

As he traveled deeper into the poplar forest, Rufius glanced behind him to make sure he had not been followed.

Once satisfied that nobody was watching—and that no light would be seen through the leaves by those remaining on the shore or aboard the galley at sea—he withdrew his wand from beneath his tunic and baldric.

Stopping beneath a large branch whose leaves stretched wide overhead, Rufius raised the wand and spoke the phrase, "Et Ire."

The moment the final word left his lips, Rufius vanished.

The air did not settle right away.

For a moment, the leaves continued to stir against one another, though the wind had long since died. The ground where Rufius had stood gave a faint tremor, as if something beneath it had shifted.

Then, slowly, the forest stilled.

But not completely.

Far to the north, beyond sight and leagues of rolling hills, something answered.

# Chapter 1 - The Fisherman & The Bow Hunter



The fish, with its gray and rainbow-striped scales, drifted quietly among the reeds. A sudden PLUNK nearby startled it, sending it darting aside before settling once more.

A faint wind moved through the reeds, carrying with it a chill from the sea—as if something unseen had shifted far beyond the horizon.

On the bank above, two young friends hovered over the water's edge.

“Are you sure they’re in there?” the red-headed girl asked, watching the boy flip the line and bait over the tall grass that grew along the bank.

“Be quiet, Viv,” the boy whispered.

Then, letting the remainder of his braided horsehair line slip through his fingers, he drew the staff to which it was knotted along the creek's edge. The heavy bone hook and grasshopper sank beneath the rod's end.

Each of them was silent, waiting.

The bait drifted downstream, then rose, bobbing lightly on the surface.

Nothing yet, the boy thought, almost discouraged but determined.

He raised the rod with one arm and pulled the bait high into the air and over the tall grass.

“I knew this wasn’t a good spot, Aiden,” Vivian said, wearing an expression caught somewhere between dissatisfaction and triumph. She playfully fiddled with her own staff’s horsehair string, one end of her yew bow resting on the ground while its center balanced against her thigh.

Aiden looked down both sides of the creek, struggling to decide his next move. His shaggy brown hair swung with the motion. It had been cut to a rough medium length and left to sit scraggly upon his head.

His deep-brown eyes searched the opposite bank. Across the creek lay a flat ledge and a deeper pool. Perhaps they should have crossed farther downstream and worked their way upstream.

Aiden refused to give up on the spot, however. He was sure there were still fish here.

“I caught one here last week,” Aiden whispered.

And then, hesitating at first but quickly recovering, Aiden raised the rod behind him, shifted his weight forward, and cast the grasshopper upstream, back into the water.

“You’re being too loud,” he whispered, glancing her way and furrowing his brow. “The fish can hear everything you say.”

“I am not,” Vivian retorted, while folding her arms across her bow. Her face soured at his accusation. “Fish don’t have ears,” she whispered.

She pressed her soft-colored lips together. Her bright blue eyes and fair skin gave a striking contrast to her face and would have stood alone if not for the sun-tanned freckles that rested on her cheeks, like tiny rounded pebbles on a sandy beach.

Focused as Aiden was on feeling for a nibble, he wondered if she was right. He had certainly never seen a fish’s ear.

The line twitched once.

Not a bite.

Aiden felt it before he saw it. The pull ran not through the rod, but through his hand, as if something deeper than the water had answered him.

The creek shifted.

Only slightly. Just enough that the current curled inward, bending toward the hook instead of away from it. The surface shimmered.

Aiden’s breath caught.

The fish turned.

It did not flee. It held there in the water, suspended, as if waiting.

“Aiden?” Vivian whispered.

The moment broke.

The current snapped back into place, the shimmer gone as quickly as it had come. The fish darted forward and struck the grasshopper.

Aiden lightly pulled back on the rod, setting the bone hook deep in the fish's cheek.

“I've got one!” Aiden shouted as he stood, pulling back on the braided line.

Aiden lifted the rod and took in the line with his left hand, carefully swinging the trout up and over the bank. It was the largest one he'd caught all spring.

“How big is it?” Vivian asked, running over and kneeling beside the flopping fish.

“This one's big,” Aiden said proudly.

With his left hand, he grabbed the fish just in front of the tail and lifted it proudly, turning it so the morning light shimmered across its silver scales. As he admired it, his eyes drifted to his forearm. Partly hidden behind the fish's tail was the mark he had carried since birth—a crescent moon.

His gaze returned to the fish. He traced a finger lightly along its scales, grinned, and tightened his grip.

“It's pretty big,” Vivian admitted. “I bet I could've caught a bigger one, though,” she added, sticking out her tongue.

She looked at the fish and then up toward the sun. “You should clean it so we can get goin’. I gotta get loads of stuff done or my daddy says I won’t be able to go to the opening day of the festival tomorrow.”

Vivian stared at Aiden, standing over him for just a moment. She then abruptly turned toward the path, taking a couple of steps forward and leaving him be.

Aiden never knew Vivian to be patient.

As much as Aiden wanted to try for another fish, which he knew was waiting for him, he thought he’d better get home too. Aiden’s mother always worried when he was gone for too long, and he and Vivian had already been hours at the creek.

Looking up at the sun, almost three quarters through the sky, and back over to Vivian, he conceded and went to work removing the hook and then clubbing and cleaning the fish.

While Aiden cleaned the fish, Vivian picked small purple flowers growing in clusters a short distance from the creek's banks.

The creek itself wove in and out, like a snake in motion, away from the mountains and toward the sea. Ancient white and gray-speckled birch trees crowned the hills on each side. The trees grew thicker first, covering leagues of low hills, before eventually thinning near an open valley and coming to an abrupt halt on the eastern shoreline.

Off the coast of Alba, or Caledonia as the Romans called it, the cold blue-gray waters of the northern seas wrestled with the winds, bursting the tops of waves and creating an expanse of white and churning blue blossoms, here one moment and gone the next.

Once he was finished, Aiden rinsed his hands in the cold running water of the creek and retrieved his own yew bow from where it was leaning against a sapling.

Once the two friends were ready, they made their way back along a thin game trail that would start them home.

"You're so lucky," Vivian started, walking just behind Aiden along the trail, "…to have your name day come at the time of the festival."

Without breaking stride, she picked up a small pebble along the way and threw it at his back. It struck him on the right shoulder.

“Hey!” he replied, laughing. A pebble to the back was a form of endearment from Vivian. “Yeah, well with yours there’s snow on the ground to play in,” replied Aiden. “That’s lucky too,” he said sarcastically, looking back and ticking out his tongue.

He thought about it a little longer and decided he did like the timing of his name day better. Aiden had always felt a little overwhelmed by the crowds the festival brought.

Their village was small, but each year enough visitors arrived to fill five or six villages. In recent years, he'd gotten to know a few boys his age from the nearby highlands, which helped. It still didn't make up for all the new faces that came every year.

The upside of the crowds, especially with Vivian at his side and fearless as she was, was exploring the camps and seeing all of the different things people had.

“Ugh,” Vivian started again. “Most of mine are spent stuck inside. You get to spend yours with everyone!”

Vivian stepped over a thin fallen branch from one of the aspen that guarded the trail. “…and this year you’ll get to play in Isaac’s games,” she continued.

Vivian abruptly stopped in the middle of the trail and crouched low.

Aiden heard her stop walking and turned back to see why. She motioned for Aiden to do the same. Her eyes were fixed on a patch of ground near the base of one of the aspen farther ahead and just off the trail.

Aiden crouched as well, his movements slow, his eyes looking at where Vivian was staring.

There, facing away from the two of them and caught up in its own business, was a fat, unsuspecting hare.

He quieted his breath.

The hare must have already been a few years old, with a healthy girth, no doubt from the plentiful nuts and berries available during the spring and early summer. It was fretting with something in its mouth and then, as they watched, became bored of it. It started looking for another twig or blade of grass to taste.

The hare scampered forward just slightly and then appeared to suddenly become aware it was being watched. It froze and looked up.

Just as its ears raised up to confirm its suspicion, the silence was broken, first by a quiet flick and then the swooshing of an arrow, darting past Aiden through the air and, an instant later, hitting its mark.

“Got it!” Vivian cheered, her eyes sparkling as she skipped toward her prize.

Aiden had never seen Vivian miss. She was the best archer in their village, and maybe even in all the lower highlands surrounding it.

“What a fat boy,” Aiden said, laughing as he caught up to Vivian, who had already dug a small hole to bury the innards after she finished cleaning the game, which she made quick work of.

As they started off again, Aiden's thoughts returned to the festival, his stomach tightening slightly at the excitement of Isaac Morrow’s games, the Lad and Lassie Games as Isaac called them.

Only those who had celebrated their fifteenth name day and started their sixteenth year could participate in the actual Games of Strength, but after the twelfth name day, beginning their thirteenth year, any boys or girls in the area could play in the games Isaac had come up with.

Isaac had started them up just a few years earlier, “keeping the lads and lasses out of trouble,” Aiden had heard Isaac tell someone once.

The trail steepened as it climbed, eventually angling back toward the creek.

Vivian’s home lay in the middle of a small clearing, nearly half a league down the hillside in the direction of the sea, which was leagues farther still to the east. Her father, mother, and two brothers managed a small farm

with just under a hundred head of sheep, many of which supplied Aiden and his mother, along with many of the other villagers, mutton for stews and wool for clothing.

Aiden and his mother lived in a small hut, the same distance away but nearly in the opposite direction. Most of Aiden's trek back would be spent ascending a long hillside with very few dips.

Soon, the trail began to part toward their respective directions, coaxing each of the young friends home along with it.

"Happy early name day to the mighty fisherman!" Vivian jokingly hollered just before Aiden slipped between a thick, peninsula-shaped grove of trees connected to the larger forest up the hill and ahead.

Aiden didn't turn but laughed and waved with the back of his hand, disappearing behind the sturdy trunks. Aspen and wych elm stood like sentries along Aiden's path, accompanying him on his journey home.

The walk was mostly quiet, save for the light whooshing of wind brushing through the high branches overhead. A few minutes further on, Aiden slowed.

Something lay half-buried in the soft mud where the trail narrowed between two roots. He'd passed by this spot before but had never seen it there.

At first he thought it was a broken bit of cart iron, but when he crouched and brushed away the wet leaves, he saw a curved strip of dark leather fixed with a small, dull metal plate. It was not the sort of thing anyone from the nearby village of Ceathram wore.

Pressed into the damp earth beside the trail was a boot mark unlike any Aiden had seen before. The heel was square and sharply cut, leaving clean edges in the mud.

Aiden stared at it a moment longer than he meant to. The woods around him seemed to quiet.

*Roman*, he thought, though he did not know how he knew.

A branch snapped somewhere behind him.

Aiden stood quickly and looked back along the trail. Nothing moved but the leaves. Still, the feeling stayed with him as he hurried on toward home, the fish basket suddenly heavier in his hand.

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Unseen by Aiden and Vivian, a figure watched from the shadows of a nearby hill, half-hidden among the trees.

The cloak they wore was finely made, its dark wool edged with threads of gold that caught what little light

remained. Beneath it, pale skin showed between the hem of the cloak and sturdy boots.

The hood was drawn low, revealing only a glint of watchful eyes—and the faint outline of a crooked nose.

The figure's gaze, initially indifferent to the girl, sharply shifted toward the boy as he vanished into the thicket.

*Not yet*, the stranger mused silently, a sense of anticipation building.

The stranger's gaze lingered where the boy had disappeared, as if measuring distance—not of land, but of time.

*Not yet.*

*Soon.*

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Far to the south, a ship cut through the dark waters—carrying with it something far less patient.