



the
MASTER'S
RELIQUARY



Book One:
The Man of Signs

Jim Dameron

THE MASTER'S RELIQUARY

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by
Jim Dameron

Reliquary - A vessel enshrining
that which is beyond price.

"...such mighty works are wrought by his hands..."

"Is this not the carpenter, the son of Mary...?"

Mark 6:2,3



AKW Books, Washington

Credits

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The characters and incidents of this book are entirely fictitious creations of the author, Jim Dameron. Inspiration for this story came partly from reading accounts of St. Columba, one of the first to carry the gospel from northern Ireland into what is now Scotland.

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Dedication

This book is dedicated to my wife, Sammie, and our sons, Dan and K.C., who are the inspiration of my life.

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PREFACE TO THE SERIES

Jesus spent most of His earthly life working as a carpenter, leaving at about the age of thirty to follow God's redemptive plan. What if a fine chest of imported Phoenician cedar, crafted by His hands, survived the ensuing centuries? How might it affect those whose lives came in contact with it?

The story you now hold in your hands is the first in a series, *The Master's Reliquary*, to be written in response to those queries by the author, Jim Dameron. **Book One, *The Man of Signs***, begins in the fifth-century Irish kingdom of Dalriada. There lives Brother Brude, who has been raised as a Pictish foundling by The Brotherhood of the Twelve. As we join the story, Brude, who is little more than a servant, is chosen to be part of a mission being sent to his native Caledonia, the land of the notoriously wild and warring pagan Picts, where the Word of the One True God has not yet penetrated.

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List of Characters

Dalriada and the Brotherhood:

Brude - founding of the Pictish people, raised by the Brotherhood

Conall - Brude's friend of the Clan nOengusa

Eochaid - aged and blind Abbot of the Brotherhood

Muiredach - Eochaid's assistant

Domigart - the Brotherhood's mediciner

Bran - boatman and groom

Selbach - sea captain of the Clan Loarn

Gabran - cook

Dungal - wagon driver

Brec - leader of the Clan Loarn

The Land of the Picts

Maelcon - leader of the Northern Kingdom of Cruithne

Athfotla - Maelcon's son

Taezal - Athfotla's sister, and daughter of Maelcon

Caitt - nephew to Maelcon

Cein - Keeper of the Signs

Varar -elder of Orkney

Drust - village headman

Ketura - wife to Drust

Derelei - son of Drust and Ketura

Sola - piper

Ciniod - craftsman of Drust's village

Madow - wife to Ciniod

Venecon -leader of the Southern Kingdom of Cruithne

Fidach - Venecon's emissary

Kingdoms of Dalriada and Cruithne



PROLOGUE

Galilee, A.D. 24

Mingled scents of fresh-cut wood filled the carpenter's shop. The familiar fragrances of sycamore, olive, and oak always hung in its air, and, through the open storefront, wafted onto the well-trodden street with each gusting breeze to declare the sort of labor done there.

Recently a new fragrance prevailed in the shop - the pungent aroma of cedar. In this small village there was rarely a call for anything made of such an expensive material, one that no longer grew locally but must be imported from Phoenicia. The villagers' needs - handles, wheels, yokes and beams, tables and boxes - were very satisfactorily made from cheaper and stronger woods.

No customer had, in fact, commissioned the finished chest of Phoenician cedar gleaming on the workbench and now receiving a final polish from the carpenter. He had conceived it himself unprompted. It was the first time that he had constructed an item with no immediate use or pressing need. He knew it would also be the last. Perhaps that was why he had built it, as a culmination of his many seasons in this place, and as a celebration of the new work he would begin.

He would soon leave this sheltered spot. From the hills above the village, he had viewed the surrounding world - the mountains Carmel, Harmon, and Tabor, the plains of Esdraelon, and even a distant gleam of the Great Sea. This home, though humble and plain, had been a blessed haven of rich soil and green countryside, lush with the materials of carpentry.

A final symbolic caress with the polishing cloth, and the carpenter stepped back to view his work. The reliquary's measure was something more than two cubits long and a little more than one cubit square at its end. It was all of cedar and finished in oils and wax, shining lustrous and golden in the late slanting light. Its otherwise uniform coloring was interrupted on the reliquary's upper right-hand corner by a pale streak in the wood that now glowed like an imprisoned ray of the sun.

The carpenter was pleased with his labor. He had given this object not only all of the practical skills learned in nearly twenty years of apprenticeship and mastery, but also all of the spirit that drove his craftsmanship and life.

He stepped back to the reliquary and laid his hand upon the wood.

"Father, accept this gift of what I have been, and what I am. With this, and with all things, Your will be done."

Once more he turned and looked about him, out to the empty way, back at the rows of chisels and saws hung from pegs on the walls, finally down at a wheel and handles awaiting the return of their owners. The day's last light lay on the reliquary before him. He knew it would outlast all the other work of his hands. When he departed he would leave the chest undisturbed where it stood. It was a gift to his Father and he would know what to do with it.

Book One:

The Man of Signs

Northern Ireland. A.D. 473

"... lo, I am with you always, even unto
the end of the world."

Matthew 28:20

CHAPTER 1

Brude lifted a large basket of heavy cookware into the curach.

"Full enough!" Brother Bran in the small boat waved him and the others away, and pushed off toward their ship riding at anchor out in the bay. Brude, legs chilled by the lapping tide, watched him row quickly over the calm blue water.

"Brother Brude, a moment, please."

Brude turned to the call of Abbott Eochaid standing on the sand at the water's edge. Holding the hem of his robe Brude left the other Brothers and splashed ashore to where the old Abbot leaned on his cane, eyes cast upward as the blind do.

"The Lord has given a fine day for the lading, Abbot Eochaid. All goes well."

"So Brother Muiredach has told me. He seeks to be gone on tomorrow's tide. Come, let us be away from this bustle." Eochaid reached out and, though sightless, unerringly took Brude by the arm. As they walked up the beach through soft sand Eochaid leaned on Brude, coming barely to his massive shoulder.

Abbot Eochaid stopped and gestured with his cane toward a headland above them, the highest ground on the stretch of coastline which included the Brotherhood's grounds. "Brude, how long has it been since you stood upon the height?"

"I cannot say, Eochaid," answered Brude, puzzled by the question. "I went there much as a boy, as you

know." Brude gazed up at what had been a favorite refuge when he was a lonely and friendless child.

"I want you to go there now."

Brude waited, knowing Eochaid would explain why he wished Brude to leave his work when many hands were needed.

Eochaid smiled and gently touched Brude's hand. "You will not be shirking your duty, Brother, for it is my command that sends you." He lifted his eyes to Brude's face as if trying to see what he could not. "I will greatly miss you, Brude. I would like you to once more look over, and remember, this place you leave. Pray for those of you who will journey, and those of us who stay behind."

Brude nodded, holding to Eochaid's veined hand.

"Go now." Abbot Eochaid turned and made his way slowly back down the beach to the boy who had led him out.

When Brother Brude had at length climbed to the height he stood and admired the spectacle below. Boxes and baskets of all descriptions were being manhandled down from the Brotherhood's enclosure to the shore by Brothers who, wet to the thighs, placed their burdens in the small curachs. When full, each curach was rowed out for unloading aboard ship. The ship itself rode at anchor with squaresail furled and oars shipped. Sea birds wheeled across the bright sky, curious about all the commotion. God willing, on the coming tide they would put out northerly for the land of Cruithni.

Viewing all the preparations below, he felt a great joy came over him. That he should be going back to the place of his nativity as a witness to these, the Lord's blessings! The ways of God were inimitable.

There above the beach an intensity so filled him as he prayed that he did not notice approaching steps.

"Brude, you look so fierce!" It was Conall, Brude's closest friend in the Brotherhood. In his left hand young Conall held a bow, and in his right, two hares.

"Conall, do you see? It's all so glorious!" Brude placed an arm across the slim Brother's shoulders.

"You mean down there? I see a lot of hard work to be done. And you should be careful - standing up here glaring like that you look quite ominous. You could be a great hulking, painted Pict warrior set to slaughter the whole company. Almost I was afraid to come up to you!"

Brude laughed. "What terrible and shocking thoughts you have. But you are right about there being much work. We should be to it."

Conall relented. He gestured with his bow. "Truly, Brother, it is a glorious work." For another moment together they continued to take in the fresh morning and busy movement about the ship. Then they made their way to the confusion of materials waiting below.

There they at once came upon Brother Muiredach directing the work.

"So, you are here, Brude." Seeing Conall also, Muiredach looked at the hares clutched in his hand. "I have need of your bulk. Come with me. Conall, you may assist" Though he spoke peremptorily, it was no more than the manner in which Muiredach spoke to most.

Brude, with Brother Conall trailing, followed the older Brother's sprightly step back to the Brotherhood's enclosure. They stopped to give Conall's hares to Brother Gabran in the scullery,

then continued on into the Sanctuary. There Muiredach led them, as Brude had suspected, to a corner where sat an ancient chest. Even in the stone chamber's dimness, stray light drew a golden glow from the venerable reliquary, especially where one corner was shot through with a paler wood. The ever-busy and pragmatic Muiredach yet paused at its calm glory.

"Brude, you will see that this is taken aboard the ship. Carefully. As you know, it contains the Scripture which will travel with us."

"With gladness, Brother."

Brude, with Conall, embraced the unwieldy burden. As they walked cradling the reliquary, Brude once again wondered at its unmatched workmanship. None of its joinings were easily seen nor were any faults visible. It certainly had not been crafted anywhere nearby, for no other woodwork he had seen could be compared to its excellence. Its age, too, must be very great, since no one of the Brotherhood knew anything of its origins other than that it had been brought over to the Irish Church many years ago, some said by Saint Patrick himself. That it was in the keeping of the Brotherhood of the Twelve was a tribute to the prestige of their house, which included men of influence in its ranks.

But though the ancient chest might be sublime materially, for Brother Brude there was more. Long ago he had realized that for him there was peace in its presence. Since boyhood, his had been the responsibility for guarding this and all other of the Sanctuary's appointments from dust, mildew, and vermin. He had gradually found that when running his polishing cloth over the glowing wood his

loneliness seemed to melt away. Many times when alone and separate from all those around him he had prayed in the Sanctuary at the reliquary rather than at the altar. As a child he had, even though forbidden by Brother Muiredach, sometimes slept through the night curled up against its comforting frame. Unfortunately, in this way the submissive and ever-humble Brude had come to seem occasionally insubordinate in Brother Muiredach's regimented mind.

"Brude, hold here and I'll get the barrow," said Conall after they had negotiated the steps outside the Sanctuary.

When the chest was on the barrow and being steadied by Conall, Brude pushed on down to the water's edge. Together they took the reliquary out in a curach themselves and stowed it in the hold aboard ship.

One Selbach, not of the Brotherhood, captained the small, brightly-painted Irish vessel. He now came amidships from the stern where he had been loudly dealing with the tiller and an unlucky crewman.

"You two!" he barked for greeting. "So you are to be part of this mad business?" Viewing the loading going on apace he muttered, "I don't know why I agreed to carry this lot."

Brude didn't know whether he referred to the extensive cargo or to the Brothers themselves.

Conall, who enjoyed goading Selbach, asked, "What troubles you, Selbach? Do you worry that your ship may not be able to transport us safely across the sea? I can give it a blessing."

Selbach reddened. "My ship can weather

anything we meet, with or without your questionable blessing! Had you not better get that curach back for the lading? Or will the moon stand still for you and your blessing?"

Satisfied at the result of his prodding, and reminded of the tide, Conall winked at Brother Brude, and they departed for shore.

All the Brothers worked throughout the day, packing, loading, and stowing. The season had advanced past the equinox, so twilight arrived at an agreeable hour to cease the labor.

After the evening meal Brude and Conall worked together helping Gabran to clean his kitchen. When finished, Gabran hung the rinsed cloths to dry and then stood looking around him.

"Strange that tomorrow I will not work here in this place as I have done all these years."

"Who needs these four walls?" asked Conall. "Wherever you go, there will be our kitchen. I am glad that the Brotherhood's best cook chooses to go with us."

Gabran brought out mugs and poured a bit of ale for each. "I did not choose, but was chosen," he said ruefully. "But the Lord's will be done." They sat as the dimness gathered, but struck no light. "What of you, Brude? Why do you go?" queried the cook.

"I've always known I would. When I was a boy, Abbot Eochaid told me that some day I would return to the place of my birth. Now is the Lord's time."

Conall nodded. "Eochaid is no fool. Already the Cenel Loarn have made the outer islands their own. Now is definitely the time, before strife comes to the mainland." At the alarmed look on Gabran's face,

Conall added, "That is why we go there now with God's message of peace."

A light footfall brought their eyes around to see Brother Muiredach entering the darkening room. "If the work is done, all should be abed resting for the morrow."

Brude rose to his feet. "Yes, it will be an event-filled day."

"I'll go with you, Brude." Conall stretched and yawned dramatically. "I can hardly keep my feet. Good night to you, Brother Gabran."

Muiredach watched as they departed down the hall to the common dormitory, while Gabran went to his cot behind the kitchen. When they were gone he continued on his errand to the Abbot's quarters. At Abbot Eochaid's door he stood for a moment frowning at the empty hall, then knocked and entered.

Eochaid turned from the ministrations of Domigart, the mediciner, who was checking him for a cough. "Come in, Brother Muiredach." To Domigart he said, "Thank you, Brother, please leave us now. I know you have much to do to ready yourself for travel."

Eochaid gestured to a seat. "Brother Muiredach, how go your preparations?"

"Very well. Though the season grows late, we will be ready." Muiredach sat and began tapping the arm of his chair with a fingernail. "Abbot, I am not totally satisfied with our complement of Brothers."

"Do you mean as to number?"

"No, I believe certain individuals are not suited for our mission."

Eochaid's eyebrows rose. "Which?"

"Brother Conall, for one. Today he extracted permission from Brother Gabran of the kitchen to absent himself from our grounds on the pretext of hunting game for the table."

"Did he bring game?"

Muiredach waved his hand. "Yes, but much needed doing here."

Eochaid nodded. "You have been packing boxes and barrels this fortnight. He is young and grows impatient. You may be right about his lack of suitability." The old man leaned back in his chair. "But I am afraid it is necessary that we allow him to go. As you know, his brother, Arel, is *Ri* of the Cenel nOengusa. *Ri* Arel has written indicating his great pleasure that Conall will be representing their kinship in that land. As, of course, you represent the Cenel Loarn."

"My kinship is first to this Brotherhood."

"Yes, I know," Eochaid said gently. "You have been my eyes and my hands these many years." He leaned forward. "Tell me, who is the other whose going you question?"

"He is Brude." Quickly Muiredach went on, for he believed the old Abbot favored Brude unreasonably. "I do not have confidence that he will bend his will to my own. Obedience and dependability will be important to us."

"I understand that, Brother." Eochaid turned his sightless eyes out the small window of the cubicle. Perhaps he could hear or otherwise sense the distant gulls wheeling over the water, heading seaward to far-off places. A look of sadness came over his face, and he looked suddenly very old.

"Brother Muiredach," the Abbot said softly, "I

also do not wish to see Brude go. As you suspect, I am over-fond of him. But do you know that, after you, he is the one I believe is most needed?"

"Brude?"

Eochaid turned back to Muiredach. "It is to his homeland, Brother Muiredach, that you go. The Lord is calling him back to it."

Muiredach was shaking his head. Frustrated, he voiced an argument he should have known the Abbot could not appreciate. "His look is not in keeping with our purpose. He has Satan's own markings on his face."

Firmness entered Eochaid's voice. "Not put there by himself. We know it is with each man's own will that he chooses his master. And the Word tells us that one shall be defiled by what emerges from within, not by what adheres without."

Eochaid, a diplomat and peacemaker at heart, followed this admonition with practicality. "Besides, Brother, you are in need of one to speak your words in the Pictish tongue. How else will they receive God's Word?"

"After so much time among us, I am not convinced he will be of any use in that respect."

"Yes," Eochaid nodded, "that will remain to be seen. But I believe you shall be surprised at what use Brude may be." He mused for a moment. "Brother, we have long planned this effort you will lead. But let us remember that if this work is indeed the Lord's, he has been planning it even longer."

Muiredach bowed to Eochaid's will only because it was his duty to do so. He stood. "As you wish, Abbot Eochaid," he said stiffly, and went out the door.

When he had gone, Eochaid sighed and once again turned his eyes to the window and the unseen sea.

CHAPTER 2

In the clear pale light of pre-dawn, the last of the ship's lading resumed. Brude went aboard the ship early to help put things in order as they arrived. With Davan, a middle-aged crew member, he went to the hold where they stacked and secured the last bundles against shifting. The reliquary, hemmed in by bales and baskets, gleamed jewel-like among the rest of the rough stowage. Brude paused to trace lightly its pale streak with a finger.

"Davan! How goes it?" came the voice of Selbach at the hatch. They could hear his step descend the ladder.

"All well-stowed, Captain."

"I'll see that for myself." He stumped into view and looked over their work with an expert eye. After shifting a few items he seemed satisfied and came to where Brude was arranging a pad and small bundle by the reliquary.

"What's this?"

"My things. It is my thought to stay by night with the reliquary which holds our Holy Book."

"Hmm, your business." Selbach looked once more over the hold, scowling as though he wished its contents would disappear.

"Selbach, can you tell me why you disfavor our mission?"

"That I can, Brother. It's a waste of money and good men. Look at all this you are packing with you!"

"These are but food, medicines, gifts and the like for our journey."

"Gifts! Every bit of it is a gift! If the Pritini catch us at sea, we'll not be able to out-run them. And if you do make the coast they'll cut down the lot of you and take it all." Eying Brude's bulk he added, "If you still lived among them, no doubt you'd be doing the same. And better at it than most, I wager."

Selbach was of the Cenel Loarn, the clan of Dalriada which had the most dealings, mostly warlike, with the Picts, also known as the Pritini. Selbach's Cenel cruised the islands and coasts of the west, bringing them more and more into conflict with the people of Brude's nativity. Indeed, it was this clan into whose hands Brude and his mother had long ago fallen, eventually to be handed over to the Brotherhood.

"I grant you may well know the risks," Brude answered. "But our Lord has told us to go to those people in all nations."

"They're no nation. Do you know they have no writing, but must have someone memorize all things of importance? Organized cut-throats! They destroy anything of civilization."

"It seems that people in all places do either good or ill as they allow themselves to be used."

Selbach was shaking his head as if at a simpleton. "Well, Brude, you're a wonder to me. But I say you had best put that great size to good use when you meet the Picti; though you they might want to recruit rather than butcher." He went off to the ladder, leaving Brude with his troubling words.

Toward the end of the loading a wheelwright rafted out all the makings of a medium-sized wagon.

This they lashed to the deck. Then two ponies, hobbled and blindered, were hauled up with much struggling and oaths by the crew. Since they could not be gotten easily into the hold, the poor beasts had to be picketed by the main hatch. There they spread their legs on the swaying deck and hung their heads pitiably.

Those Brothers making the voyage came out with their bundles as best they could in the loaded curachs. Like Brude, most brought little in the way of personal items, though Brother Domigart carried a large satchel as dispensary which he kept by him at all times.

Conall swung aboard over the rail. "The Abbot and Muiredach come," he called out.

Brude and Conall went to the rail to watch the small boat come alongside and to catch the tossed line. Once helped on deck, Abbot Eochaid stood for a time as if to sense all that he could about this ship aboard which he would not travel but which would carry so much of his hopes. Crew and Brothers waited for his blessing and benediction. Finally he raised his hands and all grew still. As Eochaid prayed Brude realized that they would soon be leaving all they knew. And suddenly he was filled with the belief that he would not be returning to this place.

"Our Father, we ask Your care for those here who go to do, as best they can, Your will. And finally, Lord God help us to remember that we see only in part, but You see all in its entirety. In the Name of Jesus we pray. Amen."

The crew fell to readying the ship for sail. Eochaid took Muiredach aside for a final word and then,

before allowing himself to be handed down to the curach, he called for Brude.

Brude hurried over to Eochaid, the only man who had ever given him the feeling of having an earthly father.

"Brother," said the Abbot, "if we do not meet again in this world, carry my blessing and be assured I will look to see you at our Lord's side."

Brude felt a sharp sadness. He felt certain it would be as Eochaid said. Taking one frail hand in his own, he held on until the Abbot turned away to leave.

After the others' departure, twelve were left aboard besides the crew. These included wheelwright, groom, cook, and mediciner. Theirs would be a crowded passage, where all would have to find a spot on or below deck to stretch out as best they could. Of course Brother Muiredach would share the captain's small quarters. Even the bellicose Selbach showed restraint toward the leader of their expedition, for Muiredach was of the high-born Irish, and also of the Cenel Loarn.

The passage would not be a long one, only three days according to Selbach. The waters between Dalriada and the mainland could actually be crossed more quickly than this, but Eochaid wanted Selbach to skirt the more southerly isles and travel to where no confrontations or incursions had occurred. They would go north to a region known as Cerone on the mainland, then cruise the coast for a good anchorage.

With the anchor weighed, the crew took to their benches and raised their oars. To Selbach's chanted cadence they dipped together, and the Brothers gave

out a cheer as the ship began to move.

Brude looked behind them to the receding shore where small figures still stood. He thought he could make out the form of Abbot Eochaid, and he raised his arm high and long in farewell.

Soon they left the shelter of the bay for the breezy open sea. Some of the crew climbed aloft to unloose and shake out the large squaresail, freeing their mates from the oars. A smooth curl of blue water rolled up the plunging bow. For a long while the low coast aft was still visible, but an unmarked horizon lay ahead as they cleaved the sea. The voyage was a delight to both Brude and Conall. Neither of them sickened from the heaving motions, as did most of the Brotherhood. Brude found the sea to be full of music. Tinkling water, whistling lines, drumming sail and tackle -- all sang.

Throughout the day Muiredach led the Twelve in prayer, which the crew politely declined to join. He finally succumbed to queasiness and was seen no more on deck, to the relief of the watch. Conall amused himself in conversation with the crew, though he was wise enough to stay out of Selbach's way. The captain was a tyrant at sea and tolerated no slackness in his element.

Brude saw that Selbach spent much time at the bow rail looking off to the north and east. When Conall came to where Brude sat with his back against the mast, Brude pointed this out to his young friend.

"Selbach wishes to catch sight of any other ship before it catches sight of us," said Conall. "See, he has put a man aloft, also."

It spite of Selbach's worry, they saw no other

ship, unfriendly or otherwise. A pleasant night rolled over the ship, allowing everyone to lie out where they would. Brude descended below to where he had stowed the reliquary. As he had told Selbach, Brude was inclined to keep the precious symbol of their mission within his sight. He sat and rested a palm on the warm wood, remembering what Selbach had said of the people to whom they traveled.

"Dear Lord," he prayed, "I know your grace is sufficient to turn all Your loved creatures to Your way. Bless our company to be the agents of that grace." The troubling thoughts brought on by Selbach's earlier predictions of disaster settled back into peacefulness like scattered sheep gathered into the fold.

CHAPTER 3

On the morning of the third day the mainland began to take shape. The brilliant weather of the previous days continued to bless them, making visibility good. The headlands of their destination caught Brude's attention. He watched as the land grew. In reality, this land looked much the same as that from which they sailed. But to Brude it held a fresh promise and mystery, just as a new-born child, outwardly similar to all others, yet held an unknown and boundless potential.

All that day they paralleled the broken coast but saw only spray-lashed cliffs. Finally, just before dark, the cliffs fell back to a more friendly strand. Though everyone was by now anxious to be done with the crowded ship, they anchored offshore overnight.

The next morning, disembarking became a laborious reversal of the lading, though enlivened by the interest of this new shore. Green hills rose around them, full of the future. Brude, good with his hands, helped the wright assemble their wagon.

Selbach looked unfavorably on the lush valleys before them. He was nervous and could not be quit of them fast enough. With an eye ever to the low hills and surrounding sea he drove his crew. By evening Selbach and his ship had gone.

That night, over their meal, Muiredach spoke to the other eleven of their brotherhood. "Brothers, our goal is Craig Phadrig, where Maelcon, *Ri Ruirech* of the Picts, keeps his residence. There I will ask his leave to begin our mission among his

people. It would not do to begin our work without his cooperation. Above all we must take care not to offend him. Dungal, will the wagon be ready by early morning?"

Dungal, wright and teamster, was an able Brother, though timid. "Yes, certainly, Brother Muiredach," he replied. "Can you tell us anything of our track?"

"We must travel northward into the Druim Alban. There we will find locals and ask of them the way."

"Brother Muiredach, some of those on the ship spoke warnings. Do you think these people will receive us gladly?" Some shifting in the group around the fire showed that others had similar fears.

Muiredach, impatient of any weakness in resolve, spoke in a short manner. "Dungal, this is a Godless country. These people are given over to the will of Satan. You must strengthen your courage and put aside considerations of self."

With this dubious comfort, the Brothers went to their prayers and beds. In turn they stood watch over the fire through the night. Brude, with Dungal and Conall, lay under the wagon.

"Why should we have trouble with the Picts?" Dungal fretted. "Didn't we fight Roma as one?"

"Ah," said Conall, "but we fought them too well! Now that the Romans no longer trouble us, Gael and Pict look to their own advantage. Aidan in Dalriada would like to add these pleasant shores to his kingdom. You haven't seen these regions overly full of Picts, have you?"

"Brude," continued Dungal out of the darkness, "do you remember anything of these folk? From

before you came to the Brotherhood?"

"Dungal, it grows late," warned Conall, trying to spare his friend, Brude, hard memories.

But Brude was already at peace with what God had brought to his life. "I only remember my mother," he began. "She seemed always to smile. I have memories of watching her working. And of colors. Perhaps she dyed wool or some such. It is a blessed memory. But others? No, I can't tell you of the people we will meet. But I know that my mother was one of them." Brude rolled over to face where the timid wright lay. "Dungal," he said, "I believe we are here by God's will. Whatever becomes of us, we are in His love."

Next morning, true to his word, Dungal had the wagon ready. Bran, the groom, had tended the ponies and now had them hitched. He would walk at their head to keep a watch on them. The wagon was so laden that Dungal, as the driver, would be the only one able to ride. Even Brother Muiredach chose to walk, though not burdened by a pack across his back like most.

The small band of Brothers began to move off at Muiredach's word. Conall, youngest and spry, led out in the morning's foggy dimness with bow in hand, seeking the best way for the wagon, and hoping to catch sight of deer or other game to add to their larder. He followed a slanting track up into the hills of bracken.

Brude, a hundredweight of grain on his back, walked directly behind the wagon where he could see one corner of the reliquary beneath canvas coverings. Now and again he would have to lay aside his pack to help push the awkward wagon over holes

or small windfalls.

Higher up, Conall came upon a cart track which made easier going, but also increased tensions as the meager group waited to encounter those who had made the track. As the sun rose higher, so also did the mists until they shrank into puffs of white cloud in blue sky. Soon all became hot and dusty in the mid-day warmth.

Brude noticed that occasionally other trails joined the main one they traveled, increasing its width as well as its rutted condition. There could be no doubt that it would eventually lead the travelers to a populated place. Even so, Brude was unprepared when the wagon lurched to a stop ahead of him.

He stepped around it at the sound of questioning voices. There, near Conall on the road ahead, stood a half-grown boy. He was listening impassively to Conall's effort at friendly tones while holding a knob-ended stick at the ready.

"Brude," said Muiredach at his side, "go speak with that boy. Put him at ease. He must direct us to his elders."

"I will try, Brother," replied Brude. In truth he wondered if after these many years he could make himself at all understood. He walked to the head of their column, where Conall caught sight of him.

"Oh, good. Brude, my face is in pain from keeping up this idiotic smile. Tell our mute little friend ..."

But the boy was gone. He had looked up to see who Conall addressed, and one sight of Brude had sent him stumbling back and then flying down the road like a startled hart.

There were sounds of consternation behind as Muiredach hurried up to them. "You frightened

him," accused Muiredach. "What did you say? Now we can ask him nothing."

"Not so, Brother Muiredach," returned Conall, gazing down the empty road. "I have a feeling that soon you will have the boy and many others back to question."

This gave Muiredach pause. "Yes, I can see you are right. They will no doubt return in force." Raising his voice to the others he said, "We will wait here. Let everyone prepare to meet these people in friendship. Dungal, bring out such gifts as you see fit. Brude, stay well in the back so as not to give offense again."

Brude knew in his heart that what he had seen for a fraction of time in the boy's blue eyes had not been fear. He had been startled, though Brude did not know why. He did not gainsay Brother Muiredach but went back past the wagon to gather fuel for the evening fire. When the fire was going he began to help Brother Gabran with their meal. As their waiting lengthened, many of the brothers became obviously nervous, casting furtive glances all about as they conversed.

Conall came over, sniffing out the progress of the meal. "We're in for it now, Brothers," he said as he pulled an apple from one of the sacks. He sat down munching by the fire with Brude. "The boy was content enough to be within club's reach of me - what was it about you? You're not overly pretty to look upon, but you are one of his own, painted face and all."

"He was an untamed one, wasn't he, Conall? But I don't feel he means to bring harm to us."

A call heralded newcomers. Brude stayed by the

fire while Conall and several others, led by Brother Muiredach, went to meet a group of men who had appeared beside the road. There was still enough light for Brother Brude to see that they were strong-looking and armed with cudgels and bows, some with swords. Checked tunics of bright red or mixed colors came to their knees, and most wore colorful wool capes, shoulder to ankle.

Muiredach without hesitation led the way to this group, who greeted him with no apparent hostility. They seemed to be questioning and looking about for something. Eventually Conall tapped Muiredach's shoulder and pointed back toward Brude. Brother Muiredach said something and began to wave Brude over.

When Brude rose, watchful eyes turned his way. As he came near, the leader of the rough band suddenly cried out several words to him in a loud voice. Brude was taken aback. He did not know what these words meant, and he felt again the doubt he had known before of his ability to serve God's purpose in this way. But as the silence lengthened and he looked over the expectant faces, it came to him that he was needed here, by these people - needed as he had never before been in all of his life. He opened his heart and reached far back to the heritage locked inside. Words were there, simple yet adequate.

"I have great joy to see you, to be here again," he said. "I greet you all, brothers of my mother!"

A ragged chorus of affirmation, with words Brude could understand, broke from the ranks of the locals. "I am Drust, son of the sister of Bili," said their leader. "Your signs have power." He continued

on rapidly with his words, many of which Brude could not catch. "The night moves on. Will you come to the weem?"

Brude turned to Muiredach. "Brother, they ask us to go to their home place. Is that your wish?"

"A good idea for the night. We have God's plan as a surety for their goodwill. They can give us our direction in the morning."

With the light waning, they doused the fire, loaded the wagon, and started quickly on their way. They followed the same road as before, though for the Brothers it now seemed a friendlier one. Brude, walking beside Drust, caught sight of the boy they had first met. He was watching Brude covertly from a distance.

"Drust," Brude asked, "that boy - why did he run from us?"

Drust smiled toward the boy. "That is Derelei, the son of my wife. You were a great surprise to him. You are the first..." Here Drust used the same words that he had called out upon first seeing Brude. Realizing that Brude didn't understand, Drust searched for another way to explain. "You are a 'man-of-signs'; he has not seen your like before. He was... overcome, and thought I should be the one to speak to you."

Now Brude realized what Drust meant. He looked about him and saw that none of these men had markings on their faces. "I had thought all here would be as I am."

"Oh, no," said Drust, looking a little shocked. "Only the sons of the mothers of the great are allowed this." He looked at the markings on Brude's face. "Your crescents speak of the north, some noble

clan unknown to me. How is it that you do not know of these things?"

As the group moved north down the darkening track, Brother Brude told of his life with the Brotherhood and of their purpose in coming to Brude's homeland. Others of Drust's clan came alongside, and Brude listened to them talk among themselves, drinking in the sound of the language he had not heard for so many years.

The land here was rolling, though gradual, so that the wagon moved well. They wove constantly around large boulders which seemed strewn haphazardly, as if dropped from the sky. Full darkness, sprinkled with stars, closed over them.

Eventually, firelight ahead showed that they had reached their destination. To the men of the Brotherhood it was a confusing scene, half-visible by the light of sputtering faggots. They passed between wattled huts and met mute and curious stares of women and children. When Brother Brude passed those eyes opened even wider. Drust led them to a hut different from the rest in that it backed onto a shallow rise. He gestured for them to enter.

Seeing this, Brother Muiredach called back to Dungal. "Stay with the wagon, Dungal. Send in someone shortly with some of the lesser presents, blankets perhaps. Brother Brude and I will go in. All others assist Dungal." The Brothers, not used to sea travels and long marches, dropped thankfully to rest.

Inside the hut, lamplight flickered. Toward the rear of the hut, against the rise, Brude could see stone steps descending into the earth. Down these

steps the two Brothers followed Drust and several others.

Once below, Brude was amazed to find himself in a very large stone-lined underground chamber. This, the weem, was their stronghold. Narrow, the room curved gracefully away beyond his line of vision. The lighting was dim, and the ceiling of beams and sticks was low for Brude, but the place was full of activity. Several sturdy women in bright checks were fleshing sheepskins. Others were working with wool, picking, cleaning, and spinning. He could even hear the bleat of live animals somewhere out of sight down the passageway.

"Sit, friends," said Drust, indicating stools set before a table on a beautifully woven wool rug.

Another of the men poured out a light mead for Brude and Muiredach. Brude saw that the man's hands were strong and work-roughened, used to the plow as well as to the sword. These men, so reviled by Selbach and his crew, seemed to be simply proud and independent husbandmen. They sat now patiently, with faces expectant, waiting for Brother Brude's words.

Muiredach did not miss this deference. "Brude," he said, "tell them we go to see Maelcon. Find from them the most swift way to Craig Phadrig."

With a nod to Muiredach Brude spoke to the men. "We thank you for receiving us here. This one is Muiredach, who leads us to greet Maelcon. We bring to him the Word of the true God and of His son, Jesus. And we ask your help."

"Yes," said Drust, "you, a man-of-signs, will do well to report these things to Maelcon. He has been to the east to force the kin of Onuist to give him

homage as the One King. We have heard that Maelcon took Onuist captive and had him drowned in Fortriu Pool at Craig Phadrig, that being the manner of royal execution. Ciniod here has brought us this news." He gestured toward the leathery-looking man who had passed them the mead.

"Maelcon has returned to Craig Phadrig?"

"Yes. You will want direction - it is a long and rough way."

"What do they say?" Muiredach broke in impatiently.

Brother Brude told Muiredach of Maelcon's doings and began to relay Ciniod's description of the roads they must take.

Out in the mild night Conall was helping Dungal sort through a bale of woolen blankets. The full moon had risen brightly, giving a good working light. Bran had a bag at each pony's nose, while the others prepared for the night. It amused Conall that, all around them, Drust's people watched curiously. Most were children, but some elders were there also.

"I feel as if we must be a traveling minstrel show," he laughed. "Now, Dungal, we really must perform better for our audience. More flair, drama!" He began to whip the blankets out theatrically, presenting them as if for inspection by the onlookers. At their laughter he would bow ceremoniously and bring out the next.

Among the laughing watchers Conall saw the boy who, according to Brude, was called Derelei. He waved the boy over. Derelei moved cautiously forward.

"Derelei, I am Conall." He pointed at himself,

repeating "Con-all!"

The boy pointed back at him and said, "Con-all?"

"Yes! Good, good. Here, Derelei, put out your hands." Conall mimed his intent.

The other folk laughed again at what looked like a comical posture of supplication, but the boy caught his meaning and stuck out his arms. Conall passed down several of the chosen blankets. Then he jumped from the wagon to receive several more from Dungal.

"All right, Brother, we shall take these in to see if they are acceptable to our betters. My, Dungal, but hasn't our Brude become grand?"

"It is true that his clan were of some importance in this land?"

"That's to be seen. He humbly claims they are mistaken in him. He wouldn't have mentioned it at all, but one could see that they fawn on him like serfs. Well, Derelei, duty!" Followed by the boy, he turned toward the hut.

When Derelei led him down the well-formed steps, Conall looked about wonderingly. He had seen that this was not an over-rich settlement, but the close-fit dressed stone walls showed craft and permanence.

Seeing Conall, Muiredach called to him. "Brother Conall, bring the gifts here. To Drust he said, "Please take these in return for your hospitality."

Drust nodded, understanding. Then he said, "Your people are tired. A few days' rest here will not delay you in finding Maelcon."

Muiredach thanked him for the offer, relayed by Brude. He declined, though, a further offer to pass the night indoors, for to the Brothers, the air was

too close, almost fetid.

"Brother Muiredach," said Brude as Muiredach rose, "with your permission I will stay awhile and talk with these folk."

Muiredach fixed him with a hard look. "Surely," he answered. "But remember, Brude, do not be deceived by their perception of you as someone greater than you are."

Brother Brude looked up, surprised. "Yes, of course, Brother."

"I most heartily agree, Brother Muiredach!" said Conall. "As John wrote, 'God is able of these stones to raise up children unto Abraham!'" Looking innocently into Muiredach's eyes he added, "It would be sinful to be a respecter of persons simply because of mere lineage, would it not?"

Muiredach's brows knitted, but he only grunted and stalked up the steps.

CHAPTER 4

For the next two days The Brothers of the Twelve rested and restowed the wagon and packs. In addition, some of them visited in the settlement. Derelei, intrigued by Conall, trailed him everywhere and Conall thus quickly picked up a smattering of the local Caledonian dialect. When Conall wasn't at some duty, the boy took him all about the near countryside. On one hilltop the two suddenly came to a great broken ring of slender, upright stones.

"Derelei. These," Conall pointed. "Of your clan?"

"No, Con-all." The boy shrugged his shoulders.

Conall realized that this monument must predate even Derelei's people. To Conall, they stood like huge and solemn sentinels, watching for something that had apparently never come. He felt an oppressiveness at this extreme evidence of a people's ache to overcome impermanence. The builders had been outlasted by their stones. And now even the stones were failing - several had fallen back to the ground, supine. The builders' search for the Eternal had not been found in the strength of stone.

When they had returned to camp, Conall could see that Brother Muiredach chafed to be off. Cinioid had gone the previous day to make Maelcon aware of their coming. The other Brothers were also ready and in good humor. There was no reason to delay further. Derelei, though, hated to see Conall leave. In the way of the young he had become quickly attached to the fun-loving Brother. So it was that he went to his father with a request.

Later, as farewells were being said at the wagon, Drust brought forth his son.

"Brothers," he said, "Derelei has asked to accompany you to Craig Phadrig. He would then return with Ciniod, who you know has gone ahead." For a moment he looked with a measuring eye upon his son, as a father does. "It is a good time for him to do this." Glancing back at Brude he added, "He could be of some use, for he knows fully half of the way you are to take."

Muiredach, who had appeared skeptical as Brother Brude began to interpret all this, nodded approvingly at the prospect of a guide. Derelei beamed and ran to get those things he would carry.

"Drust, I will miss you and your fellows," said Brude.

"You have honored us. You have given us many things to consider. May the True God walk with you."

"And with you." Brude's ease in the Caledonian tongue had greatly increased during long hours of talk with these people. Though he knew that his homeland had been more to the north, he seemed at home here. He felt confident now of his ability to carry God's Word further in this land.

Derelei hurried up with a bundle and his knobbed stick. Conall gave him a hearty thump on the back.

"Glad to have you, young conniver," he said. "You're a youngster after my own heart!" Although the boy didn't follow all of this, he caught the air of welcome. As the twelve, now thirteen, moved off, Derelei strode along at Conall's side.

Almost immediately their journey took them into more rugged country. They twisted between bare

hummocks of stone, outriders of an irregular line of rocky rises ahead. Brude felt as if they were penetrating the outer defenses of a great bastion. Derelei, always ahead with Conall, proved his worth by unerringly leading the slow-moving procession through places where there were no marks to indicate a track. He and Conall were like eager young hounds who forged rapidly ahead, ever doubling back as if wondering at the delay.

For hours they ascended, leveling out momentarily, only to rise again. Brother Brude stumped tirelessly on, his great body streaming rivulets of sweat. The ponies slowed and in many places the bulky wagon required pushing. Many of the Brothers became winded, then exhausted. Brother Muiredach, by far the eldest, felt it most. He lost his place in the front, labored up to regain it, then fell back once more to plod along last in the line.

Brude, knowing that Muiredach took pride in steely self-discipline, felt sympathy for the older Brother. At the next reasonably level spot he waved Dungal to a halt and waited for Brother Muiredach to come abreast.

"Brother Muiredach, might this be a good place for the mid-day meal?" he asked.

Muiredach, after a visible struggle between pride and relief, nodded and sank to the earth. When the front-runners had returned, Gabran produced cheese, coarse bread and apples, over which Brother Muiredach pronounced a blessing.

"Brude, come up ahead," said Conall around a mouthful of bread. The younger Brother, unmindful of rest, led the way up through a jumble of rocks to a

rise. Derelei, of course, was with them, and the three came out together on the crest. There they surveyed a wide vista.

"Look," said Conall, "that's an arm of the sea - and that land beyond, Derelei says that is a huge island. He has been told that more of their clan live over there." He turned and pointed. "But we're going up into that."

Now Brude could see that eastward and northward the land rose again and again to heights where, even this early in Fall, snow already gleamed. The scope of their view was such that blues, greens, and browns, so distinct close by, surrendered their hard edges in the distance to become a multi-hued wash.

"Craig Phadrig," pointed Derelei.

"`Craig' means `rock'," said Conall dryly. Then he laughed. "But why do I tell you?"

"God has made us a beautiful land," said Brude.

Still a little awed by Brother Brude, the boy said tentatively, "The God is already here?"

"He has always been here, before you or I."

Derelei wondered why, if this was so, He did not announce Himself to Maelcon, rather than requiring it of these new friends. However, he had found Brude and Conall to be good and honest men. Something in him stirred, allowing him acceptance of a truth he did not understand.

The rest of the day brought more grand vistas, more taxing ascents. Brude heard wheezes and grunts of effort, but no complaints. He stayed with the wagon, sometimes pushing, and watching that the reliquary did not shift. Finally, at a gushing stream, Brother Muiredach called a halt and camp

was made.

In the chilly dawn of the next morning, Muiredach's feet were found to be badly blistered. Over his protests, Domigart the mediciner insisted that Muiredach ride the wagon. And though the aging Brother would not have admitted it, he was thankful, for he had doubts that his will could have driven his flesh through another day afoot.

No one mentioned another benefit of Muiredach's riding. This was that the entire company moved at a quicker pace. The way still wound and rose, but they made fewer stops, and settled into a rhythm of travel. Another afternoon saw them deep into the Druim Alban, near the limit of Derelei's guiding.

As evening came on, the line of toiling Brothers became so strung out that Brother Brude decided to pause and await the stragglers. It would not do for any to be left far behind. Just off the trail, Brude was drawn to the sound of bubbling water. There, beside a stream overgrown with bracken and delicate ferns he settled down to wait. The dashing stream produced an endlessly varied but soothing tone. Sometimes droplets of spray would be thrown up into the green lace and glint there, scarlet to blue. An idyllic place, and peaceful.

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Brude awoke with a start. He realized that he had been betrayed into sleep by tiredness and the lulling stream. He stood and stepped back onto the trail, looking about for a moment. Everyone must have passed him by now, unseen though only a few yards away. He turned and set out at a fast pace in order to catch the group, whom he reasoned could not have gone very far.

Before long, Brude, with relief, heard a shout ahead. At first he thought it must be a call to halt for the night. Moments later, after rounding a bend, he suddenly saw the wagon. With alarm Brude realized that around it surged a confused movement of armed and mounted men. One warrior was gesturing angrily with a long lance. As Brude hurried toward the scene he saw Brother Muiredach climbing painfully down from the wagon, but the angry warrior was looking at someone else. Suddenly the warrior drew back his arm and drove his lance violently downward. Brude rounded the ponies in time to watch Conall fall, blood on his chest. Derelei also was down, bent over on hands and knees.

"Stop, devil!" shouted Muiredach, waving his arms.

In a flash of silver and iron, the Pict wheeled his horse, arm rising again to strike the old man. Brude was almost there. He saw the blade descending, made a last desperate stride, and caught the spear's wooden shaft in one outstretched hand.

Brought up short, the warrior glared furiously down at Brother Brude, uttering a sharp word that Brude did not know. The man had twin zig-zag arrows etched across his brow, and in a quick glance Brude saw that several others in the group of horsemen were marked also. And he was surprised to see Ciniod in their midst.

Leaning forward, the warrior now made to pull his weapon from Brude's grasp. But when Brude's grip did not slacken, the unprepared Pict instead jerked himself clear of the saddle and fell heavily to the ground. In a rage, he staggered to his feet and

drew a sword.

"Caith, enough!" called another of the Picts warriors. He jumped his horse between Brude and the unseated horseman.

Caith wiped blood from his face. "Maelcon did not say to be gentle with them," he said derisively.

"He also did not say to bring in a wagon-load of corpses," snapped the other. "He wants to speak to this one."

Brude threw down the lance and went to where Conall lay with his head cradled in Derelei's lap.

"Leave him, he is finished," said the warrior Caith.

"We can aid him."

The one who had protected Brude swung down from his horse beside Brude and looked at Conall. After a moment he nodded. "This one has courage. Do what you will, but be quick - Maelcon waits."

Brude knelt by his friend. Bloody foam lay on Conall's lips. His closed eyes and too-white face were framed in Derelei's gentle hands, while tears ran down the boy's cheeks.

"Will he die?" asked Derelei through sobs.

"We will pray to God that he doesn't. Why did they do this?"

The boy looked up at Brude. "They were searching for you. They kept asking me, since the others did not understand. I said that I didn't know where you were, but that devilish one pushed me down with his boot. Con-all came between us."

"His lung may be pierced," said Domigart. "We must put him aboard the wagon." The mediciner pressed firmly on the wound while Brude carefully lifted Conall's slight frame. A faint groan came from the young Brother. Derelei and Dungal quickly

leveled a space in the wagon, padding it with blankets. Brude laid Conall there, and Domigart propped the lolling head against the canvas-covered reliquary.

"Someone must keep his head up and hold the wound so."

"The boy can do it," said Muiredach. "He is the lightest."

Brude relayed this request to Derelei, who hurriedly moved into Domigart's place.

Impatience was showing in the Pict riders. "Come, let us be off!" called Caitt. He at once slapped one pony's rump, sending the wagon lurching forward. The other Brothers came hastily after.

Watched closely by Caitt, Brude walked alongside the wagon, praying for Conall and gazing at his friend's face. Ciniod came up, dismounted, and fell into step beside him.

"I am sorry this has happened, Brude," said Ciniod sadly.

"Ciniod, what can be their purpose?"

The grizzled villager glanced toward Caitt. "Maelcon is worried that he does not know who you are, and that you come with these men of Dalriada in the name of the True God. He means to have you brought to him captive and to make you seem without power."

Brude was taken aback. "But I am no threat to Maelcon!"

Ciniod looked sorrowful. "I spoke of you and all you have told us, not knowing he would be displeased. But he has been troubled lately by rebellion." He looked nervously again at Caitt's