

The Emissary

Saoirse watched the island loom out of the fog as the pirates pulled her closer. The rowboat had been the property of a Kuzundi merchant before a Kraken had pulled his ship into a whirlpool. Zekos found it floundering in the sea with the merchant in it and after ransoming him, kept the boat.

Saoirse wore a long-sleeved, dark green tunic, black trousers like a man and leather boots on her feet. A gold chain weaved its way in and out of her brown hair and a small sword in a red and gold scabbard sat on her waist. She was short, very thin, and lacked the sensational beauty men often wished upon her in large part thanks to three, large scars that ran from her mangled, left ear, down the side of her face and neck, and under her tunic. During the siege, a mustelid had mauled her in the Garazi River delta, and she would have died had it been fully grown, or if Zekos had not broken his sword off in the thin part of its skull.

The pirates rowing the boat wore an array of stolen and decrepit clothing over their hideous tattoos. Rusted weapons— swords made from plowshares in makeshift blacksmith shops, a fishing spear and a large hunk of wood with bits of metal stuffed into it— lay on the keel of the rowboat.

Photus sat at the tiller. He had fewer tattoos, nicer clothes, a large, shiny, curved sword next to him and a mouth on him. “Queen Saoirse,” he said. “May I ask a question?”

Saoirse kept her eyes on the island. “Are you going to ask why I didn’t use one of my own ships to come here?”

“Aye.”

“The Gideans insisted. They know that if Setanta wants to attack from the sea then I am his most likely ally and they can’t have my men— or his men— scouting out the bay.”

“Do you know where he is now?”

“He arrived at Vicker Man Sool the day before you did,” Saoirse said.

“How likely is it he will attack?”

“If his daughter— or her dog for that matter— have been harmed I won’t be able to stop him.” It was this thought that had kept her from sleeping the night before. If she walked onshore and the girl was covered in bruises, or there was no dog, she wasn’t going to risk her life or her city lying to Setanta.

“So you’ll just give him your fleet?” Photus asked.

Saoirse turned and looked him in the eye. “He brought five hundred warriors with him,” she said. “That doesn’t leave me much of a choice now does it?”

“Five hundred?” Photus asked in disbelief. “Tescuitare?” The pirates stopped rowing and stared at Saoirse. Tescuitare, the northernmost Ridian tribe, normally raided in bands of about twelve, which was enough for any city to bar the gates and man the walls.

“Yes,” Saoirse said. “In my city. So I’d appreciate it if you’d start rowing again so I can give them good reason to leave.”

The pirates picked up their oars and Saoirse returned her gaze back to the island looming before her in the fog.

On the rocky shore two Gidean soldiers and a short, rotund man stood waiting for her. The Gidean soldiers wore full armor, but carried only swords. The man wore the white robes of a Gidean official. Saoirse recognized him, unfortunately.

She leapt off the boat and walked through seaweed up the beach. Against the hills on the far edge of the beach she saw the tan fabric of Belisarius’ awning.

“Greetings Queen Saoirse,” the Lord Protector said as she approached. His voice was deep and slow. “If you could kindly leave your weapon aboard the boat we will escort you...”

Saoirse spit at his feet and continued walking.

The awning was at the foot of a large hill. Half a dozen soldiers stood around it. Under it, a man in a red tunic lounged on a wooden chair before a small table. Not far from him, a teenage girl sat on a rock, her arms around the neck of an enormous gray dog.

“Allow me to introduce Prince Belisarius,” the Lord Protector said running up behind Saoirse. “Commander of the 1st Kandack, Heir to the Throne...”

“Shut up,” Saoirse said.

Belisarius laughed. He was handsome, with a calm, commanding face, thick dark hair and a lean, bronzed body hardened by years of campaigning.

Saoirse stopped at the edge of the awning. “Is that her?” she asked, nodding towards the teenage girl.

“Last time I checked,” Belisarius said.

“*Teacht anseo cailín*,” Saoirse said, still looking at Belisarius. She hated his arrogance. She hated the way he sat that chair. She hated the fact that he had tried to kill her and yet she was thankful she was dealing with him and not some other Gidean prince, or worse.

The girl got up from the rock, and walked over to Saoirse, the dog dutifully staying by her side. Saoirse was pleased to see the girl was more than a head taller than she was. She had

never met any of Setanta's offspring but knew he was not likely to father children the size of elves.

The girl had long, wavy, blonde hair tied behind her head with green string, grey eyes, and Setanta's square chin. She wore a long, green dress without sleeves. Saoirse was pleased to see she walked without a limp, did not touch her face or neck gingerly and had no recent scars visible.

The dog was dark gray with white fur on the chest and underneath its tail. It had the predatory body of a wolf and its shoulder rose past Saoirse's hip. Saoirse was no stranger to Tescutare dogs— she had quite a few in her city at this moment— and understood the necessity of dogs large enough to fight saber cats, ice bears and pull sleds but she had never seen a dog like this. She had never seen a wolf like this.

The girl stood meekly before Saoirse.

"*Cad is ainm duit?*" Saoirse asked.

"Maura," the girl said.

"Excuse me," the Lord Protector said. "If we could conduct this in Gidean for the benefit of us all..."

Saoirse's blood burned every time she heard his voice. "What's your name?" She snarled at Maura.

"Maura," she gulped.

"What's your dog's name?"

"Sinead."

"What was your mother's name?"

"Aoife," Maura said absentmindedly, she turned and looked at Belisarius.

Saoirse thought for a second that the girl was a double, and was being coached, but quickly realized that Maura was not looking at Belisarius, she was looking at the soldiers, and she was looking at the soldiers because Sinead, her dog, was looking at the soldiers.

"What was your sister's name?" Saoirse asked trying to turn Maura's attention back to her.

"Sit," Maura said to her dog. Sinead kept looking at the soldiers. Their hands rested on their sword hilts.

"Sit," Maura put her hand on Sinead's tail and pushed down. "Sinead." Her voice broke. "Sit."

The Lord Protector walked over to one of the soldiers and whispered in his ear.

Saoirse looked at the girl, the dog, the soldiers, the Lord Protector and decided this was not going to work. “Belisarius,” she said walking around Maura and into the awning. “I’ll not have this. Tell your soldiers to leave...”

“That is completely out of the question,” the Lord Protector said.

Saoirse had hated that voice from the first moment she heard it and decided she had had enough of it. She put her hand on her sword hilt; she was going to cut the Lord Protector’s throat out. Her corpse would not care if Setanta destroyed her fleet or if the Gideans attacked again... But before she could draw her sword, she got a better idea.

“Fine then,” she smiled, her scars contorting her face. “I showed up...” She dropped her voice to a whisper, to make sure they were all listening, and lingered her tortured smile on Belisarius. “And you all weren’t here...”

Belisarius’ healthy tan melted away. He sprang from his chair. “Wait,” he said to Saoirse. Then he turned to the Lord Protector: “You stop talking.” Then he turned to his soldiers and pointed over the hill behind them: “Go. I’ll call if I need help.”

The soldiers saluted and walked away.

“Your highness,” the Lord Protector said. “This is most irregular...”

“And as I said to you last night: this is an unusual conference.”

The Lord Protector shuffled uncomfortably. Saoirse remembered from the prisoner negotiations that it physically pained him not to be in complete control of a situation.

“Your highness,” the Lord protector said. “You do not need to open yourself up to such risk.”

“Flattered, but I have a sword too,” Belisarius said. “And I will have eight of my soldiers, just on the other side of that hill. Now go.”

The Lord Protector gave a stiff nod and walked over the hill.

Saoirse walked back over to Maura, who was kneeling next to Sinead, stroking her back. “There’s a good dog,” Maura said. Sinead sat and her tongue lolled out from her snout.

Saoirse knelt down next to them. “May I pet her?” She asked.

“Of course,” Maura said. “She’s very sweet.”

Saoirse had heard plenty to the contrary but said nothing. Sinead’s fur was thick and clean. “How long have you had her?”

“About three years now,” Maura said. “She was so little when my father gave her to me that I had to chew up meat and set it before her so she could eat.”

Saoirse rose. “I’m sorry I forgot to introduce myself earlier, I’m Saoirse.”

“Are you Queen Saoirse?” Maura said standing and noticing Saoirse’s scars and mangled ear.

“I am,” Saoirse was taken aback by the excitement in her voice.

“My apologies, your highness,” Maura bowed. “I forget myself.”

“There’s no need for that,” Saoirse said feeling her scars itch under her tunic.

“But I’ve heard so much about you,” Maura said.

“I’m sure most of it is false,” Saoirse said, turning red.

“I heard you took over a thousand prisoners when you seized Morgo Wyth.”

“That is true,” Saoirse conceded.

“And I heard you burned a hundred Gidean ships in a surprise attack.”

“It wasn’t a hundred ships.”

“It was eighty-nine if we want to be specific,” Belisarius said from under the awning.

“And I heard Zekos the Pirate Lord is in love with you.”

“That,” Saoirse said, feeling very hot underneath her tunic. “I can assure you is false.”

Belisarius laughed.

Maura blushed, but hid it by leaning over to scratch Sinead behind the ears.

“Now may I ask you a couple questions?” Saoirse said.

“Of course.”

“What did you say your mother’s name was?”

“Aoife.”

“And your sister’s?”

“Coaihme.”

“And what was her daughter’s name?”

“Maeve.”

Saoirse felt the weight that had kept her up at night and prevented her from eating at meals evaporate. “And this is Sinead?” She asked looking at the dog.

“She is named after the only female to ever leave my tribe,” Maura said.

“I’m familiar with Sinead the Conqueror,” Saoirse said. “She sacked Vicker Man Sool.”

“I didn’t mean...”

“Don’t worry,” Soairse said. “That was over one hundred years ago.”

Sinead yawned, revealing enormous, sharp teeth, and lay down in the mossy turf.

“So...” Saoirse was stunned at the size of those teeth. “Would you mind telling me what has brought me here?”

Maura looked at Sinead and Saoirse followed her eyes, thinking about the dog’s teeth.

Three and a Half Weeks Earlier

It is the Summer Solstice. Once the prayers have been said and the white elk has been sacrificed at the temple, the entire city of Gidea begins to celebrate the longest day of the year. The Palace is no exception.

The throne room has been turned into a banquet hall and the partiers, almost exclusively powerful nobles and royal family, have ignored the heaps of delicious food on the tables and concentrated on the drink.

Maura is not drunk, but she is worried, as she has not seen Sinead in almost an hour. This is a bad place to lose her.

"Sinead," Maura calls. She is wearing a black dress covered in small bits of Kuzundi glass, with a green sash across her waist. She is eager to admire herself in the darkened windows now that the sun has gone down but she wants to find her dog first.

"Sinead, *teacht anseo madra.*" She sees a shape underneath a couch but when she crouches down it is just a nobleman who has passed out. On the next group of couches a man and a woman are copulating, much to the amusement of their friends around them. Maura moves along quickly.

"Good evening your highness," she says as she comes across Belisarius. He wears a plain maroon tunic and a small golden crown on his head. He has a goblet in his hand but as far as Maura can tell, he has not had a drop of wine since the Temple earlier in the day.

"Having fun?" He asks. "Isn't this fun?"

"This is great fun," Maura says uncomfortably.

The copulating couple falls off the couch. Their friends let up a raucous cheer.

"Don't lie," Belisarius says. "I've seen Gleann auxiliaries behave better after a battle."

"I'm just looking for my dog right now," Maura says.

"You Tescuitare love your dogs," Belisarius muses.

"They're our hunting partners in the summer, our transportation in the winter and our companions year round," Maura says. "They can hunt, they can fight..."

"And they'll find their way home at night."

"How do you know that?" Maura is shocked.

"I fought with your father for years," Belisarius says. "I know all your rhymes."

Maura blushes.

"Feel free to leave once you've found your dog."

Maura bows and Belisarius moves on.

A minute later she finds Sinead under a couch gnawing on a large bone. "Sinead," Maura says crouching down. "Come here." Sinead's tail starts to wag when she sees Maura. "You can bring your bone," Maura says. "But we have to go." Sinead does not move.

Someone bumps into Maura and she falls over.

"I'm so sorry," Ziva weeps. Maura stands. Ziva is a hostage from the Konatz tribe near the foothills of the Baruthian Mountains.

"Its quite alright," Maura says.

"Ziva," Spiros slurs as he walks over, a large goblet in his right hand. "Did you just knock Maura over?" He wears the same maroon tunic and golden crown as Belisarius, but the goblet in his hand has been emptied and refilled constantly since he left the temple.

"She couldn't see me," Maura says. "I was crouched down."

"You should be more aware," Spiros says to Ziva. "Maura is a *very special* guest of the realm." He lays his hand gently on Ziva's face. "Do I need to take you to my chambers and teach you a lesson so you are more aware of our special guests?"

Ziva whimpers.

"She already apologized," Maura says.

"You know," Spiros turns to Maura. "You should also come back to my chambers, so I can show you what a *special guest* of the realm you really are..."

"And you should sit your drunken arse back down," Maura says. "Before you lose control of your bowels... again."

Spiros backhands Maura across the face with a loud smack. Before Maura can feel the pain, before Ziva can begin to cry and before Spiros can even bring his hand back down, Sinead leaps from out of nowhere, crushes her enormous fangs into Spiros' upper arm and rips him to the ground.

"Sinead no!"

Spiros screams as Sinead shakes him with her strong neck. There is sickening pop from his shoulder and then a loud crunch from his arm. Maura drops onto Sinead yelling for her to let go. A crowd instantly forms. Two nobles try to pull the screaming Spiros away but then there is a second, sharp crack from his arm and they recoil as the blood pumps out.

Someone grabs Maura's hair. Her hands and arms are slick with Spiros' blood but she clings to Sinead's fur. She will never let go of her only friend.

"Out of the way! Get out of the way!" Belisarius arrives; his soldiers beat drunken partygoers back with metal rods. Maura is worried they are going to use them on her and Sinead but the soldiers turn their back on her and Belisarius crouches down next to her.

"It's all right," he says. "Calm her down."

Maura leans over her friend and stroking her head, whispers gently into her ear. Her hand smears the blood into Sinead's thick fur but she stops growling and lays her belly on the marble floor and then opens her jaw.

Someone pulls Spiros away. Maura does not look at his arm.

"Get them out of here," Belisarius says to one of his guards over the drunken calls for punishment. "Take them back to her room. Post a guard... post ten guards." He raises his voice. "If anyone tries to harm her, or the dog, I will burn them alive."

Shaking, Maura wraps her dark green sash around the Sinead's blood soaked neck and surrounded by soldiers, leads her out of the Throne Room.

Sinead looked up at them to ask why she had just heard her name so much.

"What happened to you two after the party?" Saoirse asked.

"We stayed in my room," Maura said.

"How large is your room?" Saoirse asked. She knew Setanta was going to want to know that.

"It's a little larger than the awning," Maura said.

Belisarius saw Saoirse's expression and rose. "She was kept in her room, under guard, for her protection..."

"I'll be having her do the talking," Saoirse snapped. "How long were you kept in your room?" She asked Maura.

"Eighteen days," Maura said.

Saoirse's stomach filled with ice. Three nights indoors was akin to a prison sentence to a Tescuitare, even in winter. Setanta was going to be livid.

"We didn't spend all our time there," Maura said. "We would go out before dawn so she could run around, but never for very long, and there were always a lot of soldiers around."

"Were you fed?"

"Lots," Maura said.

"Was Sinead fed?" Saoirse asked.

"They brought her meat," Maura said.

"What kind?"

"Elk," Belisarius said.

Saoirse looked at Sinead. She did look well fed, and only slightly less dangerous than Setanta himself.

Saoirse thought of another thing Setanta would ask. "Maura, did anyone visit you while you were in your room?"

"Prince Belisarius did every day."

"Anyone else?" Saoirse asked.

"The Lord Protector did once."

Saoirse burned with rage at the mention of the man. "And what did he have to say?"

"That I had nothing to worry about," Maura said. "Even after Spiros died of his wounds."

"I'm sure that was reassuring to hear," Saoirse mused.

Belisarius snatched something up from the table and walked over to them. "Satisfied?" He asked.

"I suppose so," Saoirse said.

"What are you going to tell Setana?"

"That the Gideans are treating his daughter about as well as anyone can hope for."

"You've seen my father?" Maura asked.

"A few days ago," Saoirse said.

"How is he?"

"Angry."

"He gets like that," Maura said.

"Could you also bring this to him, please?" Belisarius held a sealed scroll out to Saoirse. "Without opening it of course."

"I wouldn't know what to do with it if I did?" Saoirse said taking the scroll.

"Prince Belisarius, can my father read?"

"He can read and write Gidean," Belisarius said. "I don't know about Ridianian."

"We don't have a written language," Saoirse said. "And we're smarter for it."

Maura's face brightened like the slope of a hill at sunrise. "Can I write him a message?"

"Can you write Gidean?" Saoirse asked.

"They taught me when I showed up," Maura said. "It was awful sitting in that stuffy room with all those little princesses but now I like it."

"I'd be happy to take a message to your father," Saoirse said. "Do you have a scroll or parchment or whatever it is that words go on?"

"I don't," Maura said in a small voice. "But the Lord Protector does." She turned red and looked at the ground.

Saoirse's heart broke. This girl didn't need to be a pawn in an imperial bargain; she needed to be riding around the northern valley with some young man going on adventures and

raids— nowhere near Vicker Man Sool of course. “Well don’t just stand there,” she said to Belisarius.

Belisarius called over the hill and one of his soldiers brought the materials. He set them down on the table— while Maura stood off to the side quivering with excitement— saluted, and walked back over the hill.

“All yours,” Belisarius said.

Maura thanked him, sat down, and with great solemnity, began to arrange the writing materials while a curious Sinead looked on.

Saoirse stepped out from under the awning and looked back at the ocean. Setanta was going to be shocked to receive a letter from his daughter, never mind Belisarius. Saoirse wondered if she was going to see him smile.

Belisarius walked up beside her. They looked at the ocean while the sound of Maura’s pen scratching on the papyrus drifted over the sound of the breeze. “I have another message for you to take to Setanta,” Belisarius said.

“Is it common practice now,” Saoirse asked. “For the enemies of the empire to carry messages to its supposed allies?”

“This is different from what’s in that scroll I wrote with Aagha looking over my shoulder,” Belisarius said.

“Is it now?”

“He’s going to like it too,” Belisarius said.

“And why’s that?”

Twenty Days Earlier

Because of the seriousness of his wounds, Spiros’ mother, one of the women of the Harem, acquired for him a large room overlooking the bay and had a featherbed, several couches and other luxuries moved into it.

Belisarius took it one step further and ordered every Gidean prince and princess currently residing in the palace into the room. There are almost two-dozen of them, their age’s ranging from eight to twenty-three, and they crowd out of the way when Belisarius enters, followed by ten soldiers.

He is wearing breaching boots, trousers and a loose fitting white shirt. The soldiers fan out along the walls of the room while those outside of it bolt the door shut.

Spiros is sitting on his bed propped up on pillows. The stump of his left arm is covered in red speckled bandages, his pupils are dilated and while he is pale, he does not lack for energy.

“Why did you order everyone into my room?” He yells at Belisarius. “Why did is the door locked?”

Belisarius stands at the side of the bed with his hands folded in front of him until Spiros falls silent.

“Before this girl showed up,” Belisarius says. “What did I tell you?”

“I don’t remember...”

“I said not to touch her,” Belisarius says, raising his voice with each word. “And then the Lord Protector came in, and repeated me, and then Lysander came all the way from Rajunkur to speak of the importance of keeping Setanta north of the Garazi River, and now you have given him a very good reason to come south.”

“He doesn’t know,” Spiros says.

“I’d bet *my left arm* Zekos is sailing up the coast as fast as he can to deliver the news, and offer him a ride south for the right price.”

“Why do you speak to me like this?” Spiros takes on a mournful tone. “I have been crippled.”

“You’ve put the entire Kingdom in danger,” Belisarius says.

“I am a Prince of Gidea,” Spiros says. “I will never take insults from a hostage, not matter who her father is. I fear no man.”

Belisarius grabs Spiros by his shirt and dumps him— stump first— onto the stone floor. While he howls in pain Belisarius walks up to one of his soldiers and draws the metal rod from his belt.

“You will all watch what happens when you ignore what I say!” Belisarius roars at the assembled princes and princesses. He walks up to Spiros and places his boot on his chest.

“Setanta isn’t just any man,” he says. He brings the metal rod down as hard as he can on Spiros’ stump. The scream echoes off the stone walls. “He has been the leader of the Tescutiare for over fifty years.” He brings the metal rod down on the side of Spiros’ ribs. There’s a dull crack before his cry of pain. “He killed a yeti— a beast as large as a house—and wears its skull into battle. He killed a minotaur in one on one combat...”

“Legends around the fire,” Spiros gasps. “Believed by fools.”

Belisarius brings the metal rod down against Spiros’ stump again. “It’s a not a legend!” He yells over the screams. “He was my auxiliary. I watched him kill the minotaur. He took off his armor before he did it.”

He takes his foot off Spiros’ chest, and faces the assembled royalty. A few try to shuffle away but the soldiers come off the walls and shove them back into the group. “Just because

someone fights for us does not mean they like us,” Belisarius says. “Setanta despises everything about us. Now that he is retired we have his only daughter here to ensure that he stays retired. But that only works if he feels she is safe and would rather hunt mastodons than come south and take revenge.

“Your brother is going to make amends for failing to remember what I told you all. He will write a letter to Setanta, apologizing and offering his services to him. Then he will give Maura his horse from the royal stable...”

“I will do no such thing!” Spiros shouts.

Belisarius turns back. “Did you hear nothing I just said?”

“I am not going to let my horse be taken by some peasant just because you are scared of her father!”

Belisarius doesn’t mean to— though deep down he probably does— but he puts everything he has into the metal rod as he swings it over his shoulder and onto Spiros’ forehead. Spiros’ eyes roll back and he slumps over. Belisarius reiterates his point until Spiros’ head is a pulpy mass.

Belisarius stands, panting, the brain soaked metal rod still in his hand, and faces his siblings. “I realize that many of you have never left the Palace, and I will do what I can to rectify that soon, but until then, you will do what I say so you do not bring the outside world — which lacks my gentle touch — into here.” He wipes the metal rod on Spiros’ corpse and hands it back to the soldier. The princes and princesses part before him as he walks to the door. He knocks and the door is unlocked.

“They will stay here until I feel my lesson has sunk in,” Belisarius tells one of the guards. “I’ll send word.” The guard salute and Belisarius exits.

“You’re right,” Saoirse said. “Setanta will like that story.”

Behind them, Maura was stacking the pieces of papyrus together and reassembling Aagha’s writing materials.

“Done then?” Soairse asked.

“I am,” Maura said rising with the papyrus clutched closely to her chest. Sinead, who had been lying under the table, bored with this new human activity, sprang to her feet as well. “Your highness, could you please take this message to my father?”

“I’ve never had a more important mission,” Saoirse said accepting the papyrus.

“No you haven’t,” Belisarius said.

“I can bring a reply too,” Saoirse said. “If your father wants to provide me with one.”

“Can she?” Maura asked Prince Belisarius.

“I don’t see why not,” he said.

“Maura,” Saoirse said. “Do you know what Prince Belisarius told me while you were writing?”

“I do not,” Maura said.

“That you’re going to get a horse and you are going to be allowed to ride around the Royal Park with your dog. The exercise will make Sinead a little less touchy.”

Maura’s mouth fell open in shock. She looked at Belisarius. Behind her, Saoirse held up the scroll. “It’s a chestnut mare,” Belisarius said.

“Thank you your highness,” Maura said bowing.

“Saoirse, I think the tide might start to come in soon.”

“Then I best be leaving,” Saoirse said. “It was a pleasure to see you again, Belisarius.”

“Was it?”

“And Maura, it was a joy to meet you, I hope I see you again soon under better circumstances.”

“Me too, your highness,” Maura said bowing.

Saoirse leaned over and patted Sinead on the head. “Be good now.”

“She will,” Maura said.

The pirates had pulled their boat onto the shore and propped it up to provide shade. Two lay underneath it, napping, while another two rolled dice next to a small fire and Photus sat on a rock, sharpening his sword so he would be ready if he ever saw into his old commanding officer again.

“Just you?” He asked as Saoirse approached.

“Who else were you expecting?”

“The girl,” Photus said standing. “Setanta’s daughter. Wasn’t that the whole reason we came down here?”

Saoirse shook her head.

The pirates looked at one another, not sure what to do.

“So after all that they want to keep her?”

“I don’t know how the Gideans think,” Saoirse said. She held up the scroll. “But as soon as you get us back to the ship Zekos can read this to us and we can begin to figure it out.”

The pirates sprang into action and within a minute they were pulling Saoirse through the surf. She felt no need to look back at the island.