

THE SHADOW ACADEMY

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CALGARY

AFTER THE
PLAGUE WARS





~ **Extract from the Secret Journals** ~
of the Historical Society

It would be impossible to compose a definitive history of Grand Britannia, not only because a significant number of details have been lost, but also because the remaining facts have been obfuscated, one has to assume deliberately; so much of the truth, we are told, is not in the interests of the populace and would serve only to hinder progress towards the redevelopment and renaissance of the Islands.

The Plague Wars, responsible for the worldwide collapse of civilization as it must once have been, are today variously regarded as natural conflicts between nations; supernatural debacles engendered by irresponsible fanatics; and acts of a god or gods who have since the Wars had little more than mythic status with the populace. Clearly the Wars were as dreadful and as horrifically destructive to humanity as they are painted, and undoubtedly this has done much to foster an attitude of reticence and refusal to share information amongst the authorities who now control us.

There are a small number of people who need to know, we are told, while for the rest of us there is a thick curtain drawn over those remote days. Our Historical Society is therefore necessarily a secret order. Our recorded history is a labor of many minds, many researchers, people who seek the truth in the honest belief that only in truth can we move forward, both as individuals and as a nation in what may one day become a new world.

What the Society can conclude is that before the Plague Wars the world was thickly populated. Although this seems outrageous and even laughable today, Grand Britannia had a population numbering in the millions. (See appendices 2 and 7.) There were many cities and they were all linked by a very complex and highly sophisticated transport system that extended from what we know today as the very north of Caledon down to Londonborough and across to Dumnonia in the southwest and Cumra in the west— even across the sea to High Burnam. It is difficult today, with the Islands almost completely covered in forest, when even moors and uplands are succumbing to the spread of the trees, to visualize the terrain as it must have once existed.

Londonborough has always been the administrative heart of the nation, and although it survived the Plague Wars, it did not do so intact. So much of its original infrastructure has collapsed. The energy that Man once harnessed is now elusive, the sources of power either dried up or corrupted, fallen into disrepair. And, as stated at the outset of this work, knowledge has been lost. This has been exacerbated by a policy of deliberate suppression. The Central Authority that rules us from Londonborough today remains fiercely protective of its power and is afraid of releasing too much knowledge. To some extent this is understandable, but there is a growing feeling among scholars and intellectuals that the new power base is self-seeking, elitist, and ironically promoting a Dark Age.

The position of our Society is therefore a tenuous one. Our reasons for absolute discretion and secrecy we believe to be fully vindicated. The truth may come at a high price.



PROLOGUE

APRIL

SKELLBOW MOVED THROUGH the corridors of the old building uneasily, pausing occasionally to listen for any sounds in the night. Outside, the moon was high overhead, near full but obscured by passing clouds. Skellbow had finished the nightly lockup, jangling his keys and stomping his feet as he made his way back down to the entrance foyer. The sounds he made were deliberate. He hated the silence of the ancient Academy at night. He much preferred the place in the daytime when it was teeming with kids, even though their rowdiness and cheek roused his anger. After nightfall the place was empty and echoing, dead. Colleagues mocked his fear of spirits and supernatural agents, but they weren't the only reason he loathed this shift.

Security! The Prime, Miss Vine, had an almost obsessive regard for it, especially with another Inspection due. She ruled her Academy with a remorseless will to succeed in all things. Getting anything wrong was not a good idea.

"Security!" Skellbow muttered repeatedly, as if the word alone would ward off any consequences of error. "Not my fucking job. I'm just covering for Jordan. Not my fault if he's ill." He fiddled with the huge bunch of keys as though by doing so he would spot any that he hadn't used to secure the building.

There was a small overnight staff, and everyone would bed down in the Academy when they had finished their paperwork. The threat of the Inspection meant more work for all of them and some were frantically preparing for it. Rather than him. At least, for once, the Prime wasn't here. Skellbow never felt anything but highly nervous in her presence.

His keys had their own secure cupboard near the tall double doors to the outside. Skellbow was about to lock them away when he was cut short by an insistent knock on the doors. He

almost dropped the keys, turning to stare at the source of the sound in horror. *The Prime! It's her, for certain.* The knock came again and he went to the door, pressing up against it. Very slowly he unlocked it, easing it open no more than an inch, prepared to slam it shut and relock it if need be. Light from the thick candle in the niche just over his shoulder slanted out into the darkness. By its flickering glow he could discern a face. No one he recognized.

"Mr. Skellbow?" a gruff voice asked.

"What do you want? This place is shut for the night."

"We're the contractors. Working on the sea wall."

"It's the middle of the fucking night," Skellbow growled, readying to slam the door and bolt it.

"I know. But we need our tools. We left them, thinking we'd be back in the morning to finish the job. But we've been called to do another down in the barracks. Early start. We need those tools. Only take us a minute."

Skellbow was trying to think of a good reason to argue, when he became aware that someone was behind him. He swung around, even more on edge.

It was Carl Trencher, one of the senior staff. "Barry. What's the problem?"

"Builders, sir. They want their tools."

"At this time of night?"

"Shall I tell them to... come back in the morning?"

"I better have a word with them."

Trencher wore a long outdoor coat and was evidently about to go home for the night. He went to the door and eased it open a little further. Skellbow heard him speak to the men outside, not catching the words, but after a brief, polite exchange Trencher turned back to him.

"It'll be okay, Barry. Can't be helped. Just let them get their stuff and they'll be away again."

Skellbow nodded reluctantly.

Trencher allowed the three men into the foyer. They were all thickset, muscular navvies, used to hard labor by the look of them.

"Wouldn't have bothered you, mate," their leader told Skellbow. "We'd have stayed in the pub. But we need those tools." It was clear to Skellbow from the man's accent that he was no local man.

"I'll see you tomorrow, Barry," said Trencher. He gave

the caretaker a last nod and slipped out into the darkness.

Skellbow grunted and led the three men further into the building. "Sea wall, you say?"

"Yeah, north wall," said the spokesman. The other two were silent, eyes taking in their surroundings, but they were otherwise apparently indifferent.

Skellbow masked his disapproval with difficulty. He hadn't wanted these contractors here in the first place. Dunstan Fullacombe, the Master of the Watch, was a first-rate stonemason and he certainly hadn't wanted contractors in to fix a wall, sea wall or otherwise. But Trencher was in charge of the premises and he had insisted.

"Quiet in here at this time, mate," said the spokesman. He had an angular, unshaven face and eyes that lacked any kind of warmth.

Skellbow nodded. "Keep the noise down. Couple of staff, probably asleep by now."

They walked wordlessly down several echoing corridors until Skellbow opened a door to a narrow courtyard. Directly opposite them the high sea wall loomed like the threat of an avalanche. Moonlight picked out the curved line of its parapet and the stone steps that led steeply up to its wide, unprotected top.

"I'll be in the foyer," said Skellbow, eager to be free of them.

"It'll take no time, mate. Wait for us there."

As the three men crossed the yard, Skellbow closed the door and returned through the building. Once back in the foyer, he slid a bolt across the main doors to keep anyone — or anything else — out.

He waited, slumped against one of the stone columns beside the doors, cursing his fellow caretaker, Jordan Creech, whose shift this should have been. Still, he could get off to the pub in time for a pint, as soon as these three goons had gone. They were military men, typical of the types that the Central Authority in distant Londonborough was sending out more and more these days. Seemed the Authority wanted its own people to swell the ranks of the forces in the barracks here in Petra. Skellbow, like many of his fellows from the area, resented the influx into their southwestern province of Dumnonia.

His morose thoughts were interrupted by a flickering of the candle that told him its life expectancy was fading. At

the bottom of the key cupboard there was a box of fresh, fat candles. He took one out, lit it with the last of the existing one, and slid it into its holder. The exercise prompted him to consider, impatiently, *Where the fuck are they? Shouldn't take them this long to find their tools.*

Skellbow made his way back down the corridors, and as he approached the door to the courtyard, he saw movement through a window. Instinctively he ducked, though he was probably invisible from outside. What he saw made his breath catch in his throat.

Two of the men were carrying something through another doorway into the courtyard — a door he'd locked earlier. It led to an internal stairway up to some offices and a private staff area. He knew he'd locked it because he'd been up there a short time ago, talking to Drew Vasillius, one of the teachers. Vasillius, one of the staff working late that night, had been happy for Skellbow to lock the lower door because he was going to bed down in the back room once he had finished his work.

How in buggery did they get a key to that door? Skellbow asked himself, his whole body growing cold. The men were carrying some kind of large sack. *Sack?* Transfixed, the caretaker watched them manhandle it through the courtyard and up the first of the narrow steps ascending the fifty-foot-high sea wall.

He had no choice but to respond. He moved to the door to his right, threw it open, and crossed the courtyard. The spokesman for the three contractors stepped out of the shadows at the foot of the steps to the sea wall, limned in a pale wash of moonlight. He looked like a spectre.

"What the fuck is going on?" said Skellbow, conscious that he was shouting.

"Nothing to worry about, mate. One of your colleagues is a bit under the weather."

"Who is it? Mr. Vasillius?"

"He's had a fainting fit."

Skellbow pulled up just short of the man, whose hands were in shadow. "That's bollocks—"

The man shook his head. He looked very alert, body tensed. "Overworking. Needed some air."

Skellbow looked upwards. The two others had got their burden onto the sea wall and now disappeared from sight. Skellbow was a biggish man, the nature of his work making

him fitter than most men of his age, close on fifty, and he had never shirked a fight when he was younger. Instinct took over now, brushing away all his earlier fears — this was no supernatural threat he was facing — and he abruptly pushed the spokesman aside.

Though he was taken unawares, he made a grab for Skellbow. Skellbow, deceptively nimble, escaped the contractor's grip on his forearm and scaled the steps. It was a treacherous, awkward climb, but he clambered upwards with purpose. Behind him the contractor snarled an angry warning to the two men who were on top of the wall. Beyond its low parapet, which was no more than two feet high, was a drop of over a hundred feet to the churning sea below.

In front of him, Skellbow saw the two other men. They were alone. There was no sign of what they had been carrying.

"What's happened?" he gasped, dragging in ragged breaths.

"He went nuts!" said the first of them. "We were trying to help him. Get him some air. He just hit out at us. Started swearing. Next thing, he was up on the parapet." The man pointed to it.

His companion joined in. "Yeah. Lost his head, mate. Jumped off."

Skellbow, aghast, walked to the parapet and looked over its edge, but below the incessant crashing of waves and the explosive rise of spume obscured any sign of a body. No one could possibly have survived a plunge into that. Beneath that white maelstrom there were rocks, jagged and merciless. Vasillius would have been smashed to pieces.

"Nothing we could do, mate."

Skellbow turned around. The spokesman had joined them on the wall. He and his two fellow contractors were staring pointedly at the caretaker, and they shifted with practiced ease into a formation that penned him in, up against the parapet. *God, are they going to fling me off, too?*

"Why would he do it?" said Skellbow. He was too afraid now to ask them about the sack.

"Stressed out." The spokesman's right hand moved into a shaft of moonlight and Skellbow saw with rising horror that it held a long bladed knife. The caretaker's shoulders tensed, his fists balling.

"You'd better go down and give the alarm, Mr. Skellbow. Let people know what's happened. But get it right, you hear me?"

The knife swung slowly up, its point levelled at Skellbow's chest.

"Suicide," he breathed.

"In a minute, the three of us will be gone. We were never up here. We just picked up our tools down below and were out in a couple of seconds. Okay?"

Skellbow said nothing. His skin crawled as though something in the darkness was uncoiling, only inches away from touching him, polluting him.

The spokesman delicately touched the edge of his blade. "You're a family man, Mr. Skellbow. You've a fine wife, Myra, right?"

Skellbow felt his gorge rising. "What do you mean?"

"Young son, doing well here at the Academy. Davie, is it? Yeah, Davie."

"You leave them out of it!" Skellbow hissed.

"Whatever you say, Mr. Skellbow. Barry. But I need to hear you say what I want you to say. We came, picked up our tools, and left. Then, when you came out here to lock up, you saw Vasillius fling himself off the wall. You agree that you'll stick to that no matter who asks you what and we won't need to pay a visit to Myra and Davie, when you're not around."

Skellbow felt something briefly touch his arm, but his eyes remained fixed on the knife.

"Shit, why don't we just heave him over?" said one of the other men.

The spokesman scowled. "No, no. We've done our job. No need to queer the pitch by dumping Mr. Skellbow. That right, Barry?"

Reluctantly the caretaker grunted his assent.

"Good. We're going now. Lock up after us and then raise the alarm."

Skellbow's resistance drained. He could hardly move. The spokesman waved his two companions along the wall and they descended the steps as quickly as the incline would allow.

"Now you," the spokesman said to Skellbow, pointing to the stone steps with his knife. The caretaker managed to find the will to move and went down after the others.

A few minutes later they were back in the foyer. Skellbow unlocked the main doors and two of the men slipped outside. Their spokesman turned for a last word.

"Do the sensible thing, Barry. By the morning, we three will be long gone on the road back to the city. No one will know you're not telling the truth."

"What about the wall, your work?"

"All finished earlier today. And we put a little something into the stones. This place is marked now, Barry."

Skellbow hardly moved, his teeth clamped, holding back the fury within him. *Marked? What does he mean by that? Marked for who — or what?*

"If I find out you've let me down, someone will be back. And I promise you, it will be very bad, Barry." Something evil in the spokesman's eyes reinforced the threat.

"Okay, okay. Just leave my family alone."

Beyond the door, a sudden gust of wind swept across the playground and the spokesman cocked an ear as if listening to it. "Hear that, Barry? Keep your ears and eyes open. Every breath of wind, every bird that flies by, every wave that breaks on the wall, you can be sure that we'll be watching, listening."

Skellbow shuddered. God alone knew what agents these men could call upon. "I hear you."

The spokesman gave a curt nod, as if he had just concluded a routine business transaction, and he was gone, swift as thought.

Skellbow shut the door, locked it, and bolted it. He made his way quickly along the ground level corridors, back into the courtyard, and crossed to the doorway that led to the stairs to Drew Vasillius's office. He quickly ascended the tower's winding staircase, only to find Vasillius's office empty, with nothing indicating there had been a struggle. It struck him as strange, given what he had seen. The room was tidy, papers put away, the chair tucked under the desk. As though Vasillius had put things in order before leaving. Skellbow left the room, closing the door behind him.

Re-crossing the courtyard, he studied the numerous angled roofs high overhead, half expecting to see something up there staring back at him.

He made his way, deeply disturbed, through the building to the Academy's bell tower and let himself in to its relative sanctuary. A few moments later he was tugging hard on the bell ropes, waking the town to the story he would fabricate for its startled people.

PART ONE
A SEED OF DOUBT





I

PETRA: MIDSUMMER

CHAD MUNDY HAD his first view of Petra Dumnoniorum from the crest of the last of a number of hills after his long and arduous journey from distant Londonborough along the Great West Way, the arterial route from west to east of the country. The forest, which pressed up to the very walls of Londonborough, had seemed interminable, as though the world was no more than a matted tangle of trees. Here at the northern edge of Dumnonia the trees had at last given way to the open hills, which undulated towards the coast and the lonely city that Mundy now studied sleepily out of the aperture in the side of the horse-drawn carriage. He could see through the haze of the waning summer afternoon the broad river valley unfolding to where the fortress city clung to the steep incline of its far side, secure behind high walls. Several spires formed part of its skyline, one spiking the dropping sun as it fell towards the western sea beyond the city. The late sunlight bled across the roofs and parapets, coating them in shades of rusted red and crimson.

Mundy grimaced at the morbid thoughts prompted by the image. *Been on this damned road too long*, he thought. *I should be relieved to be here*. Somehow he felt the reverse, as though he was about to cross shifting sands.

The baggage train had been traveling for a week, its several carriages and carts drawn by teams of horses bred for the purpose, their progress necessarily slow and ponderous. Two hundred miles of being bumped and buffeted. A human cargo amongst so much other provender: medical supplies, fuel, a few additional weapons, and, although nothing was said, Mundy was certain there was a chest of coins. A lot of trade was through barter, but coinage in Londonborough was growing— *bound to seep out to the extremities in time*, Mundy thought. And then there were the soldiers. Fifty strong, under the command of the weather-beaten Sergeant

Crammon, whose barking tones cut through the still forest air from the early hours deep into the evening, every day. *Does the man ever sleep?* Mundy wondered. He'd read about machines, those semi-mythical things, and Crammon must be the human equivalent. He was, of course, precisely what the Authority required. His soldiers, mostly young men fresh out of Londonborough's military bases, were pliant to him, obedient to the strict codes that governed their profession. Their eagerness to reach Petra manifested itself as a murmur of excitement which even the rigid Crammon tolerated.

Mundy was the sole occupant of the passenger coach—another trial on the everlasting journey. The coach trundled down the last slope towards a narrow stone bridge. Mundy saw the small naval dockyards across the river, forming the eastern boundary of the fortress, a dozen or more ships of varying types berthed there. He had no idea what sort of craft they were. Warships, he assumed, or at least ships geared up in some way for the defense of the realm. The fortress city itself was more of a town, he thought, although it was far larger than any of the way stations he had passed through on his journey here. They had been isolated stockades, staffed by no more than a score of hardened military men, armed and alert as if expecting imminent attack. Their weapons had been unique to their posting—guns of one kind or another. Even at the military academy where he had trained, Mundy had rarely seen guns. The all-encompassing forest lands were dangerous places and defense against encroachment required extreme measures.

Guards patrolled Petra's boundary wall, built of stone and at least twenty feet high, light glinting on their javelins, pikes, and other weapons. They too seemed primed for war. This remotest of Grand Britannia's provinces seemed on first glance to be as obsessed with the possibility of hostile invasion as Londonborough was.

As the baggage train drew to a halt, Mundy heard Crammon and one of his corporals talking just beyond the window.

"Good turnout," said the corporal.

Crammon snorted. "That's for our benefit, son. This bloody lot spend most of their working day on their arses, from what I hear. They're no more prepared for the Invasion than the fucking sheep out in their farms. They've been ordered to sharpen up for us. Come back tomorrow. The wall will be

deserted." His voice was instantly recognisable to Mundy as a Londonborough voice. Like most of the soldiery traveling down here, he was from the city.

The corporal laughed appropriately. Mundy sensed the unease in it. His voice had a different inflection, which Mundy guessed to be of this area. It explained the youth's discomfort.

The Invasion, Mundy thought. *The threat that hangs over us all, a sword of Damocles*. How real was it? Across the southern sea was the massive central continent of Evropa: the received wisdom was that the Plague Wars had been started there. Now the continent was even more overgrown than Grand Britannia, choked with weed and tree, almost devoid of human life. The huge losses of population had led to the deterioration and collapse of the urban network and, indeed, the towns and cities themselves, allowing the return of a forest wilderness on an unprecedented scale. But whoever was there, word had it, would be set on conquest. They would covet the Islands. Everyone's duty was to prepare for the Invasion. The coastal fortress cities were manned as early warning stations, their lookouts' eyes seaward, ever watching for the first signs of enemy action. After all these years — no one really knew how long ago the Plague Wars had ended for the Authority had, as far as Mundy could determine, always done its best to obfuscate the records — the Authority still demanded this preparation, the training of soldiery, a navy, everyone a cog in the defensive machine.

We're all of us getting more and more indifferent. It'll never happen, we say. Can anyone remember when there was even a real hint of an Invasion? The transport moved on across the bridge. *What's this place going to be like, so far from Londonborough and the extremes of military control? What drives Petra?*

He had spent the last three years of his life in a combined college and military academy in Londonborough, training to teach and undergoing the military preparation that all citizens were required to go through. He had majored in English, and because of a natural aptitude his military expertise was in hand-to-hand combat, though he had no idea how he had inherited such an inborn talent, if talent was the word for it. He had needed that skill, though; more than once it had saved his hide in a tough scrape, and, he thought, *doubtless I am going to need it in this remote neck of the woods*.

Beyond the bridge the baggage train slowly moved under a massive stone arch as two tall wooden doors, which were a good foot or more thick, hewn from arboreal forest giants, opened for them to pass through. Once inside the town, the bulk of the train headed off for the barracks somewhere behind the docks, while the passenger coach pulled up in an open square fronted by a white-walled building. A flaking sign above its main door proclaimed it to be The Coach House. Several men came outside to meet the coach, exchanging pleasantries with the driver and his two colleagues.

Mundy got out, stretching cramped muscles and blinking in the light of day. Even though it was early evening it was noticeably bright. An unfamiliar cackle above him made him duck instinctively, but he realized immediately, with some irritation, that it was a clutch of large white gulls that had come to investigate the new arrival and the chance of a late meal. They dropped insolently to the pub roof and stared fixedly at him.

"Mr. Mundy?" One of the men stepped forward. He was younger than Mundy's twenty-two years, thin and bright-eyed, dressed in a rumpled light jacket, the suggestion of a moustache across his upper lip. He held his hand out almost apologetically.

Mundy shook it, not reacting visibly to the hot, weak grip. "Yes, I'm Chad Mundy."

"Very pleased to meet you. You're very welcome." The young man grinned awkwardly, putting his hands in his pockets as if they were a source of embarrassment. "I'm Andrew Wilkinson. I'm the helper." He made it sound like an official post.

"Pleased to meet you, Andrew."

"Have you got some bags?"

One of the coachmen had dumped Mundy's three cases down behind him as if glad to be rid of them. The man was already back up on the coach. Within a few moments it moved off, disappearing under the far eaves of THE COACH HOUSE into the shadows.

Wilkinson nodded. "I've told one of the boys to get Mr. Skellbow to bring up the cart. He's one of our caretakers. We've got two at the Academy. The Master of the Watch is in charge of them. There's a cart to take us up to the Academy. Have you been there? Oh, of course, you must have. When you came for your interview—"

Mundy gently interrupted, "Yes, this is my second visit. Though I didn't get to see much of the place when I was here before."

"Mr. Goldsworthy will be your mentor. Everyone calls him Brin. He teaches English." He said it as if teaching English carried with it a certain distinction, and Mundy was hard pressed not to grin. "He couldn't meet you this evening. Staff Meeting with the Senior Magisters. And the Prime, Miss Vine. Have you met her? Oh, yes. At your interview. Sorry."

His waffling was cut short by the arrival of a horse-drawn cart, driven by a bushy-haired giant, a scowl of concentration pasted to his face as he pulled up short. A thin cloud of dust eddied about them.

"I'm to take you up to the Academy," Wilkinson said. "Brin Goldsworthy will meet you later." He started loading Mundy's cases.

Mundy offered his hand to the burly caretaker. "I'm Chad Mundy."

"Skellbow, caretaker," said the man as he shook hands uneasily, as if unaccustomed to doing so, grunting his own hello through a rather fixed scowl.

Moments later they were on their way through the narrow streets. Petra was built on the steep side of a hill. Mundy recalled from his first trip that all roads seemed to lead up, often precariously, to the Academy above the town.

"Are you replacing Mr. Vasillius?" said Wilkinson, sitting between Mundy and Skellbow in the front of the cart, eyes watching the side streets as though he expected something to emerge and challenge their passage.

Skellbow looked briefly across at the young teacher, almost reprovingly, but then his eyes again fixed on the winding slope ahead. He gave a curt call of encouragement to the horse.

"Mr. Vasillius died," said Wilkinson. "Did they tell you? Nice man. We miss him." He clammed up for a moment, as if Skellbow's glance had hit a nerve.

Dead man's shoes, Mundy mused, not for the first time. He'd been told discreetly that his predecessor had died, though he'd not attached anything to it.

"Someone has to do his job," said Wilkinson, as if he felt the need to qualify his earlier remarks. Mundy concluded that Wilkinson's nervousness and odd way of expressing himself was probably due to the fact that he was a little slow.

They traveled in silence to the main gates of the Academy. These were set in another wall, which was far lower than the immense outer wall to the city. Unlike that huge granite city wall, this one was made from red brick. The wrought-iron gates looked to Mundy, from their uniquely ornate style, to be unusually old. Well preserved and painted black. *They're not that behind the times here.*

"Interesting gates," he said.

Skellbow reacted as if he had been poked. He nodded, though there was still no breaching the scowl. "Creech's pride and joy, these gates."

"Jordan Creech is our other caretaker," Wilkinson explained. "In charge of security. Mr. Skellbow is maintenance."

Mundy nodded. "Where on earth did you get them?"

The caretaker shrugged. "Been part of the Academy since long before any of us was around."

"How old is the Academy?" said Mundy, looking up at the sprawling building before them. It was constructed mainly from red brick, its high windows of a style and shape that suggested the building belonged to another world. The glass in the windows was leaded, the lintels of sandstone, slightly darkened by exposure. Granite steps led up to the main doors, which were black with age. Towers and spires rose from the main body of the building, their ancient slates seemingly in a creditable state of repair.

"Hundreds of years, I'd say," said Skellbow, swinging down from the cart and stroking the nose of his horse. He appeared to have ended his contribution to the discussion, ready to get on with whatever other chores his role demanded.

Wilkinson had deliberately kept out of the conversation, instead unloading Mundy's cases. "I'll take you to your rooms," he said eventually. "You'll be in the east wing. Until you find somewhere of your own in the town. All in good time. Food's not bad here."

Mundy inserted the occasional word of thanks into Wilkinson's endless chatter as they entered the old building and made their way through numerous corridors and up stairwells. At this time of day the building was unusually quiet, almost eerie. Mundy was too tired to take in the surroundings. He was familiar with them to some extent from being shown around earlier in the year. He could explore later. Right now all he wanted was to soak in a bath to ease

his battered muscles. Afterwards, he told himself, he would visit the canteen and eat an entire side of beef.

Wilkinson must have read his mind. "Mrs. Bazeley knows you're here. She's our chief cook. She doesn't usually cook after the end of the school day, but she always does something for new staff." He had stopped outside a suite of rooms and gestured for Mundy to go in.

"Thanks be for Mrs. Bazeley." Mundy smiled as they entered.

"Brin Goldsworthy will be here soon. He'll sort out your grub."

Mundy could see that Wilkinson was anxious to leave, as if he had overstayed his welcome. Mundy shook his head. "Thanks, Andrew. Much appreciated. You must let me buy you a drink some time soon."

Wilkinson coloured slightly. "That's very kind." He scurried off. Mundy closed the door and began unpacking.

• * •

Mundy was surprised to find he had a bathroom, equipped with a steel tub that was fed by twin taps set in the stone wall behind it. Amazingly, one of the taps provided *hot* water. He would have to get hold of Skellbow again to ask him how the system worked. *How the hell do they power it? And heat it? A lot of places in Londonborough are crying out for something this sophisticated.* The pleasures of a hot bath took over and he dozed on and off while soaking. Soon the rigors of the journey were forgotten. He was here. Petra Dumnoniorum.

Well, Mundy, this is what you wanted. A break from Londonborough. A fresh start, out in the new world. A challenge. It will be that, all right.

Shortly after he had toweled down and dressed there was a firm knock on the door. He opened it to face a man of medium height, once muscular but now a little overweight, his eyes unusually bright, his complexion ruddy.

"Chad Mundy?" he said, hand out like a piston.

"You must be Brin Goldsworthy," Mundy nodded, shaking hands and having his own almost pulped.

"Brin. Sorry to miss you in the town. Special meeting with management. Nothing but meetings at the moment, after the Inspection. Settling in okay?"

Mundy let him in and Goldsworthy looked around the room as if he might find someone lurking within. He was dressed

in smart slacks and a stiff shirt, the top buttons undone, the plain tie loosened. He looked as if he had been engaged in strenuous exercise.

"Yes, fine," said Mundy. "I had a bath. Hot water. Amazing."

Goldsworthy chuckled. "You can thank Dunstan for that. Master of the Watch. He's a dab hand at technical stuff. Done more to eradicate draughts and run the heating through the Academy than anyone would have a right to expect. You hungry?"

"Famished."

"Mrs. Bazeley makes pies to die for. She's fattening all of us up, bless her." Goldsworthy ushered Mundy out into the airless corridor. The Academy had an ethereal quality, as though it had been long abandoned.

"It's unusually quiet in here. Bit like another world," Mundy commented.

"No boarders. All the kids are local. Some come in from the farms. Furthest away is about ten miles. After that it's all forest, right up to Southmoor. Same across the river, over to Northmoor. Nearest ones walk in. Others ride."

"Yes, I saw the stables when I first visited."

They made their way down through the labyrinthine passages and stairs to a large hall that Mundy assumed must have been beneath ground level, as there were no windows. The silence was slightly unsettling and Mundy imagined the place heaving with youngsters, the air thick with the sound of clattering plates. Tables and chairs were spread out in neat rows, washed and gleaming. Beyond them was a long shutter behind a worktop. Goldsworthy tapped loudly on it: Mundy couldn't imagine him doing anything quietly.

A section swung aside to reveal the beaming face of the cook. "Pleased to meet you, Chad. Call me Emily."

The two men sat at a table, the air filled with a delicious aroma that made Mundy's mouth water. Goldsworthy leaned back, puffing out his chest, although it seemed an unconscious movement. "So I'm your mentor. Always look after the new recruits. You a married man?"

"Me? No. Not even close."

"My wife works in the town. Does a bit of restoration."

Mrs. Bazeley delivered two plates, swimming with gravy, huge pies and enough vegetables to feed a family. "Plates

are *hot*." She set cutlery down with another beaming smile. "Leave some room for the apple tart."

"You are a queen among cooks," Goldsworthy told her, attacking the steaming pie.

"Just as well, with all these funny hours you staff work."

"Blame it on the Inspection, Mrs. B. You know what it's like."

"I do. Everyone's running around like headless chickens," she laughed.

Goldsworthy snorted with amusement. "Don't let our Prime hear you say that, girl. She'll have you on the next baggage train out of here."

"Miss Vine knows a good cook when she sees one. And them Enforcers didn't complain about my cooking either." She laughed again and left them to their meals.

Mundy had never tasted a pie like it. The meat, which Goldsworthy declared to be pheasant, was unbelievable. "I gather the Inspection was less than satisfactory," Mundy said between mouthfuls.

Goldsworthy's food was disappearing rapidly, as if he had not eaten for days. He grunted assent. "Not good. You'll hear more about that at the morning gathering when Miss Vine addresses the troops. We've got four months to get our act together before the Enforcers return. If they're not happy then, well, it won't be good."

"Sounds like I've picked a bad time to start a career here," Mundy said with a wry grin. What little he had learned about the recent Inspection made him uneasy.

Goldsworthy pushed his plate away and wiped his mouth. "You'll be fine. It's us that need to toe the line. Well, according to the Enforcers anyway. You've been drafted in to bring fresh ideas, new tricks. Ideal for a youngster like you. Your speciality is the same as mine, teaching English, I gather?"

"And unarmed combat."

"Useful skill to have. I'm staves, pikes, spears, all that. Plus I like using the bow, but we're a bit short on top bowmen. Drew Vasillius was our expert. He'd been here a long time. Only had another couple of years to go to retirement."

Mundy let him talk, sensing a note of distinct sorrow.

"He hadn't been well for a few months. When you're like that, the Academy can be a pretty stressful place. Took its toll."

"Was he a popular man?"

"Very much so. Local chap, like most of us. Oh, no offense, Chad." The apology was obviously genuine. "We're not the least averse to new blood. Hell, we need it. Everywhere does. You'll be very welcome, I promise you."

"That's a relief."

"Drew had his own views." Goldsworthy seemed about to embellish this comment, but sat back again as Mrs. Bazeley presented them with two more plates, this time loaded with slices of apple pie drenched in thick, yellow custard. When the cook had again disappeared, Goldsworthy prodded at the food as if he had lost interest in it. "Did they tell you how he died?"

"I didn't like to ask."

"Suicide." Goldsworthy spoke the word as if it were foreign to him.

"I don't quite know what to say—"

"This place certainly got to Drew. One night he went up on to the north wall. Runs along the seaward side of the Academy. Doubles as the city wall and drops sheer down to the sea, a good hundred feet or more. Drew threw himself off. God knows why, but people do strange things when they lose it."

Suddenly Mundy no longer felt hungry. "That's too bad."

"Well, all in the past. We move on. Speaking of which, let's get you down to the local hostelry. After that feast, I could do with a drink. I'll introduce you to some of the staff."