

— SEAN POAGE —

THE  
LETTER

— < BONUS  
BOOK > —



# The Letter

A Bonus Short Story

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# THE LETTER

Two men sharing a bench outside a *taberna* would hardly draw a second glance, even in these suspicious times. The throngs of shoppers and the clamour of the peddlers calling out their wares made it difficult for anyone to listen in. But the elderly man on the left made such an obvious -- and flawed -- attempt to blend in with the locals that it only made his pale skin and manicured nails stand out all the more.

The man on the right, a swarthy fellow from the far eastern reaches of the empire, tore a bite out of his *moretum*-slathered flatbread. From the corner of his eye, he watched the dainty approach the other took to his slice. He puffed a short sigh of exasperation and swallowed. His companion noted the expression and frowned.

“Why, exactly, am I here?” the pale man murmured, just loud enough to be heard through the commotion of the forum.

“My patron wishes to express his understanding of the difficulties your *Consilium* has with the Praetorian Prefect of Gaul. He said you, a famed former holder of that office, would be the one to approach.”

“Whatever difficulties we may have, I fail to see how it necessitates this meeting,” the pale man said. “Or why your patron should be concerned.”

“Because the Prefect is damaging his interests as well. He sent me to offer a solution.”

“What interests does he think we have in common?”

“You are aware that Arvandus has cultivated close ties with the court of the Visigoths.” The other man nodded. “We have learned

that he has acted treasonously, supplying Euric with information about military operations planned by Anthemius and his allies.”

“You have proof of this?”

“Nothing that you could take to Rome. But my patron has resources in place that can obtain proof, providing it is worth risking his asset to do so.”

“So it comes to the purse,” the pale man replied, disdain and doubt evident in the curl of his lip. “What price does he seek?”

“You misunderstand. It is not a desire for reward that my patron seeks. Rather it is the courage to see justice done.”

“Nothing more than justice? Few people offer something of value without thought of gain.”

“His countrymen work towards the same goals as Anthemius. It would serve his interests to remove a threat to their success.”

“To indict one of such high rank is very dangerous.”

“Justice requires courage, both of which your record demonstrates. Thus, he had me seek you out.”

“I am a politician, not a soldier. This sort of courage would require irrefutable proof; otherwise folly would be the proper term.”

“What you do with the evidence would rest on your judgement of its worth.”

“Your resource is capable of such a dangerous undertaking?”

“Our resource is as skilled and courageous as may be found anywhere in the empire.”

The afternoon sun was high enough to shine directly into the narrow courtyard, illuminating the garden and making the fountains sparkle. Struthe had never set foot in the palace gardens, but she had found this little crevice on the roof of the storerooms where she could look down across the slope of the peristyle and admire the view. Having only begun her fourteenth year, she was still thin enough to tuck in and be virtually unnoticeable.

She regarded the piece of wood she held, then licked the tip of her finger and swept it across a line she had drawn, smearing it into a hazy cloud over a landscape of trees and fields. She added a few strokes with a charcoal chip and paused to consider her work, chin on hand. Art was her one joy. It even provided a little extra money at the forum. With better materials, she could do so much more, but paint was unattainably expensive. Luckily, she had made a friend who liked her art, and said he would bring her some paint from distant markets.

The sound of a mild commotion and the clear ring of a bell floated above the rooftops, announcing the arrival of important visitors. Struthe sighed for the loss of her small free time. She paused to gaze out across the expanse of clay-tiled roofs to the sparkling blue-grey curl of the Rodanus, then gathered her things and picked her way back to the little window into the servants' quarters.

The palace received many visitors, expected and otherwise. As Praetorian Prefect of Gaul, Arvandus was powerful and influential, even if the greater part of the lands he governed were, by now, Roman in name only.

The palace complex was managed by a host of servants, some free, most slaves. Struthe's family were freeborn, but among the poor, where jobs were hard to come by, a worker was nearly as chained to his employer as any slave, and trades were often passed down through generations. Her great-great-grandfather had won the post of chief carpenter when the Prefecture moved from Treveris to Arelate, and her father had assumed the post when her grandfather retired. Tragedy struck when her father died three years ago from a fever and horrible spasms after stepping on a nail.

Struthe's older brothers had joined the Roman navy before her father died. With no family member to take over his position, Struthe's mother, Theophania, feared they would be turned out and left destitute. Luckily, the steward had convinced Arvandus to let Theophania continue on as a menial. Struthe helped by splitting her time between the nursery for the few other small children, including her brother, and other tasks

assigned to her, such as cleaning or running errands. It was enough to get them by.

Struthe put away her materials, then dashed down to the courtyard. She and the other youngsters stood well back, while the adults lined up at the edge of the portico, awaiting their instructions. Her mother glanced over her shoulder, giving a relieved smile to see Struthe there.

In the courtyard, the steward welcomed a delegation of tall, yellow-haired foreigners. Germanic barbarians were not unusual guests here, but some were more important than others. She had to learn where these came from.

While the steward handled the preliminary greetings, the servants received their assignments and scurried off to prepare the guest quarters, stable the horses and put away the baggage. Struthe followed her mother, to help prepare the rooms.

“Who are they?” she whispered.

“Barbarians,” her mother replied over her shoulder. “An emissary from the king of the Visigoths. Be very careful! The last time this one was here, Maurus accidentally spilt the envoy’s wine and the Prefect sentenced him to twenty lashes.” Struthe shivered, remembering the incident. Some whispered that the unnecessary punishment was for nothing more than to impress the Visigoths.

Her mother handed her some bedding and sent her off to prepare one of the rooms. Several of these Visigoths were quartered in the Prefect’s private wing, indicating their importance. Struthe hurried through her tasks, then popped out of the room as she heard the boisterous, booming speech of the visitors approaching. She pressed back against the wall and bowed her head as several walked by, led by one of the older servants. None even glanced at her, but going unnoticed suited her. With a sigh of relief, she hurried on to find her next task.

The servants were busy making the delegation at home and preparing a banquet for the evening. Struthe volunteered to help the kitchen staff, running back and forth from the storehouses or fetching water.

Late in the afternoon, the Prefect called for refreshments at his study, where he was receiving the Visigoth envoy. Several of the servants collected platters of food and jugs of wine, then lined up to march down the corridor. Struthe grabbed a basket of bread and joined the line, ignoring the puzzled, condescending look of the older girl in front of her. Typically, the more mature, developed girls served important guests. The steward appeared in the hall, made a quick appraisal of the group, and with a pair of sharp claps, led them toward the Prefect's chambers.

The wing that housed the Prefect's private rooms was designed like a standard *domus*, though on a grander, more opulent scale. The *tablinum* overlooked the atrium, providing a relaxing study for the Prefect to work or entertain favoured guests. Arvandus lounged on a couch, resting a glass on his ample belly and speaking to one of the visitors, a young fellow in rich clothing and a haughty tilt to his head. His guest looked bored but perked up as the servants swept in with food and drink. They quickly laid out everything, executing a sort of dance around the space to avoid stepping between Arvandus and his guest.

Struthe arranged various pieces of bread on a platter, looking at the two men from the corner of her eye. They paid no attention to her, or the other servants. As she finished, the eyes of the Prefect passed over her. Her breath caught in her throat, but his gaze did not linger, and he continued the small talk with the young man. Feeling an odd mixture of relief and indignation, Struthe picked up her basket and joined the line of servants as they flowed out through a small door to the narrow passageway that kept the domestics out of view.

She returned her basket to the kitchen and darted off before she could be assigned a new chore. She had a much more important task to accomplish. From the moment she had picked up the breadbasket, she had been mulling over how to do so discretely. With an idea formed, she raced to the cellar storerooms. She collected a jar of the low-grade olive oil used for lighting, a wooden ladle, and a small terracotta lamp. These went into a basket with

a satchel of sawdust and another of sand. Grabbing a stool, she hurried back down the servants' passageway, pausing to duck into an alcove after passing a few other workers.

Struthe took out the lamp and examined it. The red, unglazed clay depicted a pair of women getting water from a well. It was used but had no chips or cracks common to these vessels. She would have to fix that.

Pausing for a moment to listen for anyone approaching, she gave the lamp a sharp tap on the stone corner of the hall, then examined her work. Nothing more than a chip in the clay. She held her breath and gave it another, slightly sharper rap on the marble corner. She let out her breath. She had managed to crack the lamp without breaking it. She filled it with some oil, then put it back into her basket and stood up. Taking a deep breath, she stepped out into the hall and hurried along until she found the correct door.

It opened to a wide hallway behind the *tablinum*. Doors were spaced along the left, with oil lamps set in iron rings high in the tall marble walls. A courtier, nose high in the air to avoid seeing the menial, passed Struthe as she started down the corridor. She hoped there would not be others, but a thin, elderly man followed a young slave boy out of one of the rooms ahead. She choked and nearly turned back, but they turned away from her and walked down the hall, ignoring her. She exhaled and continued on, well behind them.

At an intersection in the hallway, they turned right, towards the *tablinum*. When Struthe came to that corner, she paused, her eyes drawn to the left. The corridor continued to a great arch opening to a shaded garden. The late sun glowed on the tips of the trees. To her right, a short vestibule and half a dozen steps rose to the wide entry into the *tablinum*. The airflow from the atrium to the garden created a cooling breeze through the Prefect's chamber, and the unguarded speech of the occupants carried clearly into the hall.

"Oh, he is nobody. Just my secretary," she heard Arvandus say. "I wish to dictate a letter to your uncle."

Struthe set the basket and stool down against the wall near the corner, then climbed up, stretching to reach the lamp in the hook above.

The Visigoth mumbled an incomprehensible reply in his strange accent.

“Of course, Tulga. Euric knows I have the greatest respect for him,” Arvandus said. “That is why I immediately alerted him to their designs when I learned of them last year.”

Her heart pounded, and her hands shook as she squatted at the corner. Tulga must be the envoy’s name. This must be the sort of information her friend needed. She blew out the wick and poured a little of the oil onto the floor beneath where it had hung.

“A man in my position is a good friend to have,” Arvandus continued. “I am the Praetorian Prefect, answerable only to the Emperor. I know of Anthemius’s plans almost before he does.” Arvandus laughed, his guest responding with a dull chuckle.

“Here, have some more wine, while I describe the latest plots against Euric that scheming Greek is concocting,” Arvandus sneered. The disdainful way he said ‘*Greek*’ made Struthe grit her teeth. She was Greek, descended from the Hellenes who colonised this region when the Romans still lived in mud huts. Moreover, Anthemius was a popular, just emperor who deserved respect as well as loyalty.

Her resolve steeled, she spat into her palm and mixed in a little sand, using it to scrub the soot off the lamp.

“As I told Euric already,” Arvandus continued with a pompous flair, “Anthemius has made a pact with the king of the Britons.”

Tulga’s low murmur responded while Struthe ladled oil into the lamp.

“He lacks the resources to enforce his will otherwise,” Arvandus said. “Even if such belligerence was warranted, it is a poor use of the treasury to waste on such lowly mercenaries.”

She moved the stool to another lamp and reached up to light hers. Arvandus’s voice was muffled. Moving back to the corner, she used the lamp’s flame to light the wick of the broken lamp.

“Despite this, it is evident,” she heard Arvandus clearly again, droning in the manner of someone dictating to a scribe, “that the olive branch is thus offered with the one hand, whilst a dagger is concealed in the other.”

Once the wick in the broken lamp no longer looked fresh, Struthe blew it out and used the flame from the good lamp to blacken the clay of the broken one.

“While Anthemius’s envoys fill your ears with pretences of reconciliation and cooperation, his pawns gather to strike against you.”

Satisfied that the broken lamp looked well used, she put it back in her basket.

“It is therefore plain that any thought of making peace with the Greek emperor would be folly. In fact, the law of nations declares that such treachery violates the sacred contract between the *Foederatus* and the State. The only remedy is to cast aside the threadbare mantle of jilted loyalty.”

She moved the stool back and climbed up to put the original lamp back in its holder, breathing a sigh of relief.

“If the Greek emperor will not honour ancient oaths of friendship and confederacy,” Arvandus’s voice grew bolder, “then a worthy leader would find it his duty to preserve Roman law and tradition against the destructive foolishness of a tyrant. Gaul has long been protected by the effort of the Visigoths and the Burgundians. Reason and the law of nations requires that this be recognised, that there be an end to the long pretence that Rome governs Gaul, and that the sovereignty of Visigoths and Burgundians be acknowledged in their respective realms.”

Struthe sprinkled some sawdust and sand on the little puddle of oil, then knelt beside it, poised with a cloth to begin scrubbing if anyone approached.

“But peace is only possible if Anthemius does not have the means to wage war. The most expeditious approach would be to confront and destroy the army of the Britons assembling north of the River Leger. Without the Britons, Syagrius can scarcely defend

his own borders much less expand beyond them, and controlling the land the Britons inhabit in western Armorica would strengthen your position in Gaul.”

Her timing was perfect, as an elaborately dressed couple, high-ranking members of the court, entered the hall from the garden. They strolled along, arm in arm, tittering and speaking in hushed tones as they passed. They ignored Struthe, and continued down the hall and around the corner.

Arvandus continued talking, but Struthe was getting nervous. She understood enough to know it was important, but she needed more than hearsay. A sound of shuffling caught her attention, as Arvandus paused in his dictation.

“I seem to be out of clay for the seal,” he said. “Boy, fetch some immediately.” Seconds later, the boy she had seen earlier skidded around the corner into the hall. He blinked in surprise to see Struthe there, but noted her scrubbing, gave a quick nod and shot off down the hall to one of the rooms.

Struthe wiped up the remaining mess and gathered her basket. Staying any longer would raise suspicion. Walking away, she heard the returning patter of the boy’s feet behind her. There was only one way to get what she needed. She had to get that letter.

Stashing the basket and goods, she went back to the kitchen to listen to the gossip as they prepared for the banquet and evening entertainment. Extra wine would be needed, so Struthe was sent to bring more up. Barbarians were notoriously heavy drinkers who did not even dilute their wine with water. As Struthe knew, Arvandus’s own moderation tended to slip when he entertained such guests.

The reception was as lavish as any Arvandus threw, with jugglers, musicians, dancing girls and abundant wine. Struthe always tried to work on the serving crew so she could catch bits of the entertainment, but this night she stayed on the fringes of the activity. When the revelry was at its peak, she retrieved her basket and stole away to the personal quarters, a long hall on the second floor.

She stood in the shadows at the servants' stairway, listening for any sound. The hallway was dim, lit with fewer lamps, but the moon shone through the small windows high in the walls. She knew where Tulga would sleep that night. Well, she was reasonably certain. With luck, the letter would be there. Arvandus must have given it to him, and she could not imagine Tulga would take it to the banquet.

As she stood in that darkened nook, considering all the things that could go wrong, she began to shake. If caught, they would kill her. At the very least, her family would be evicted and left destitute. But if she were successful, it would go a long way towards getting them all away from this. From him. She took a deep breath and stepped out into the hall.

She carried the basket and lamp oil again. It would provide an excuse if questioned about being in this area. At the first of the apartments, at the far end of the hall from where she had stood, she paused to listen at the door, then opened it and peeked in. A single lamp provided enough light to prevent tripping and little more. She gulped and stepped in, pushing the door closed behind her, thankful they kept the hinges well oiled.

The rooms seemed unoccupied. When her eyes adjusted, she saw that the sitting room she stood in contained the envoy's baggage, still mostly packed. She picked her way towards the bedchamber, then stopped. On a table against the wall, a rolled up parchment poked out of a satchel. She pulled it out, realising she had no way to know if it was the letter or not. She could not read. She could think of no other reason for it to be there. It had the metallic tang of fresh ink. Even if she could read, the scroll was secured with string with a bit of clay molded around the knot and imprinted with a seal. Certainly Arvandus's seal. The clay was still tacky and fresh. It must be the letter.

But it would be missed. She had brought a parchment she had stashed away for sketching and planned to copy the letters onto it, replacing the envoy's letter afterwards. But that wouldn't be possible without breaking the seal. She needed to get a bit of that clay and Arvandus's seal.

She slipped back out into the hallway and hurried back downstairs to Arvandus's study.

The sound of merrymaking was clear in this part of the palace, and Struthe was grateful that everyone seemed to be attending. She slipped into the *tablinum* and paused to let her eyes adjust. There were no lamps here, but moonlight sparkled on the pool beneath the atrium's open roof, and it offered enough light to manage.

She poked around at the table beside the couch where Arvandus had lounged. Stacks of parchments, some scrolls and wooden wax tablets, a few dice, a knife and other odd baubles cluttered the surface. In a small wooden box, she found a lump of clay that felt like that of the seal. She pinched off a piece and put it on the table, frustrated that she could not find anything to make the seal's imprint. Footsteps and whispers, followed by a snorting laugh made her heart jump into her throat.

Struthe dropped to the floor and crawled under the table as a pair of shadows stumbled up the stairs and into the chamber. They flopped onto the couch with a laugh and slurred exclamations, close enough for Struthe to reach out and touch them. She recognised Arvandus's voice, but the other was a woman she did not know. Perhaps a member of the court, a servant, or a prostitute; it did not matter. They reeked of wine and seemed to have scarcely enough wits about them to communicate in more than grunts and giggles.

She squeezed her eyes shut and clapped her hands over her ears. Their activities were noisy, bestial, flailing. It was over sooner than it seemed, and the two of them sprawled on the couch panting for a few minutes. As their breathing slowed, Arvandus's took on a different tone, and he began to snore. His companion sat up, and after a moment stood with a contemptuous snort and padded out through the atrium.

Struthe sat there, still frozen, certain that he would wake at any moment and discover her, but his snoring continued unabated. She inched out from under the table and crouched behind it. Reaching out to find her lump of clay, her fingers came upon the

hilt of the knife and stopped. She slowly stood, her breath short and quick in her chest, the blood beginning to throb in her ears.

Enough light reflected into the room to illuminate the carefully curled and oiled locks framing his pale, fat face. The face that had sneered down at her, terrified her, violated her. She took a step around the table, the knife gripped in her hand the way she had wished she could grip his fleshy neck. Another step and she was standing over him. She stared down at him, recalling his acrid breath in her face, the weight of his bulk pushing her down. What he took from her she could never recover. What decent man would want her, when that time came? She was freeborn, no slave to be treated as property. Where could she find justice? He had made it plain that if she said anything, he would call her a liar, her brother a thief and her mother a whore, before casting them all out to starve on the streets.

The knife hung above him. The world held no justice for one such as this. Perhaps it would find him at the final judgement.

The knifepoint wavered. Would murder be justice in the eyes of God, or would she damn herself? If she were found out, would anyone believe her story, her motive? She remembered the letter, the entire purpose for her being in that room. It might be justice of a sort, and it would not leave blood on her hands that she could never wash away. The pounding in her ears faded away and left her trembling. She laid the knife on the table, located the clay and fled the room.

In a quiet corner of the palace, she huddled in a corner to catch her breath and calm her nerves. Was all this worth it? Was she out of her mind to think she could do anything about this man? Was she being selfish to risk her family like this?

*“What could I possibly offer?”* she had asked her friend. *“I’m just a child of a nameless family.”*

*“So many important things happen by people doing small things in their own interest,”* he had replied. *“You are capable of far more than you dare believe.”* She smiled at the inspiring memory.

Arvandus leaving the banquet worried her. Would that signal an end to the night? The sounds of revelry continued, but

for how long? She would not have time to copy the letter and return the original.

Struthe pulled the scroll out of the basket and examined it. Hints of writing showed through thin spots in the parchment and along the edges. She unrolled her precious piece of parchment and made random marks across it, approximating the bits of writing she had seen over the years. It would be utter gibberish when opened, but with luck, it would not matter by then.

She rolled the parchment up, ran the string through and around it in the same manner as the original and tied the knot in the same place. She applied the clay in the same manner over the knot and then sat back to compare.

It might do, especially if Tulga was not too interested in the letter. However, it lacked the imprint of Arvandus's seal, and this would not pass unnoticed. She studied the imprint of the seal on the original. It was a simple design, a stick figure holding a vine. She broke a piece of wicker from her basket and used it to carve a reasonable copy of the seal, impressing herself with her work. She had one task left for the night, and she prayed that Tulga had not yet wearied of the dancing girls and wine.

The hallway was empty and quiet. She approached Tulga's door, footsteps scuffed on the stairs and a moment later, two tall blonde Visigoths turned the corner. She nearly fainted, but neither man was Tulga. They passed by and went into one of the other apartments, ignoring the simple servant girl making the rounds of the oil lamps.

Struthe doubled back to Tulga's door and tapped on it. No answer, so she pushed it open. Nothing appeared to have changed since her last visit. Moments later, the fake scroll was in the satchel, and she was back in the hall, hurrying towards the stairs to the servant's corridor, lightheaded with relief.

She went directly to her family quarters, relieved her mother was not there. Her brother would still be with the other youngsters. She would feign illness if sought out, and with the way she felt, it would not require a grand theatrical performance. She hid the scroll

and collapsed on her bed.

It was a sleepless night. She fretted and started at every sound, certain that soldiers would burst through their door at any moment. When her mother returned, Struthe claimed illness, so her mother made her drink some herbed wine before going to her own bed.

As usual, the servants rose before the dawn to begin their many duties. Struthe's lack of sleep made her look even worse, so Theophania commanded her to stay in bed for the day before leaving to attend to the chores.

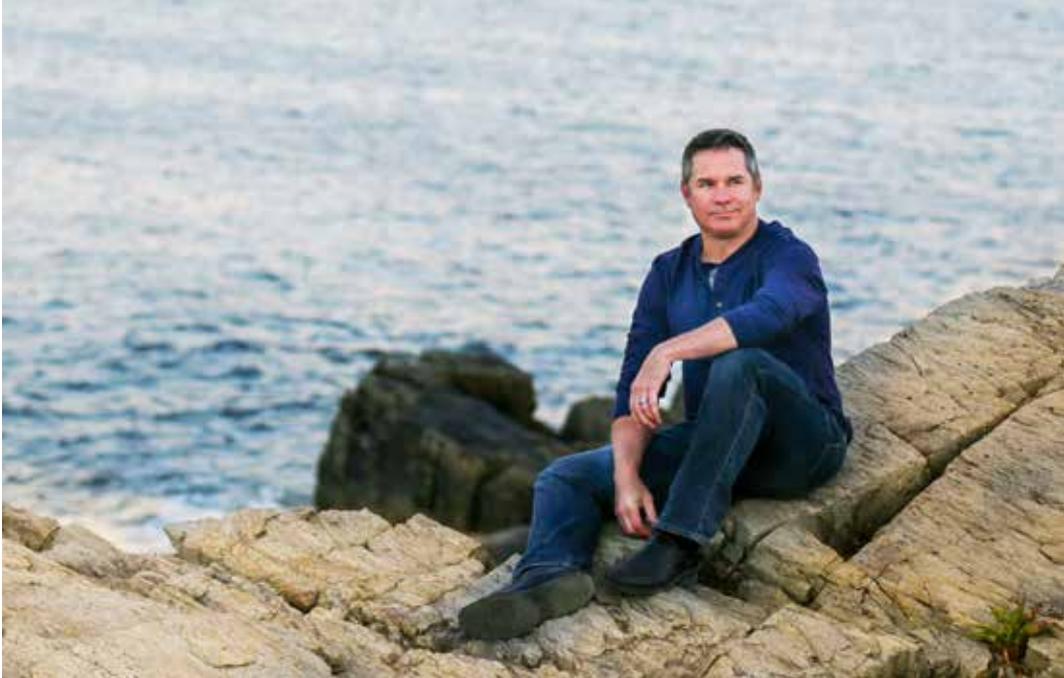
By the time the morning sun spread a rosy glow across the sky, Struthe was darting through alleyways to the waterfront docks, the stolen scroll hidden under her shawl. The fishermen were preparing their boats to cast off and the merchant vessels were loading their wares and she scurried along the street of the docks. She had seen her friend at the market a few days before, though he had furtively waved her off from approaching him. She prayed he was still in the city.

Not seeing him along the wharf, she began to panic, asking around for anyone who might know the whereabouts of a Syrian trader. The sun was up and the wharf was becoming crowded. She turned down an alley that led towards the market and nearly bowled over a dark-skinned elderly fellow who stepped out of a warehouse door.

"Hasdi!" she exclaimed.

"Ah, my young sparrow!" Hasdi smiled at her. "What has you flitting about so?"

"I've brought you something," she gasped, relief and sudden trepidation fighting within her as she worried what the future would bring.



## MEET SEAN POAGE

As a lifelong explorer, sleuth and amateur historian, Sean Poage has travelled the world and worked in a variety of occupations, including soldier, police officer and computer geek. His curiosity about beginnings, journeys and what motivates people drew him to prehistoric linguistics, Neolithic Britain, the ancient Sumerians, Mycenaean Greece and the enigmatic world of the “Dark Ages” in Europe.

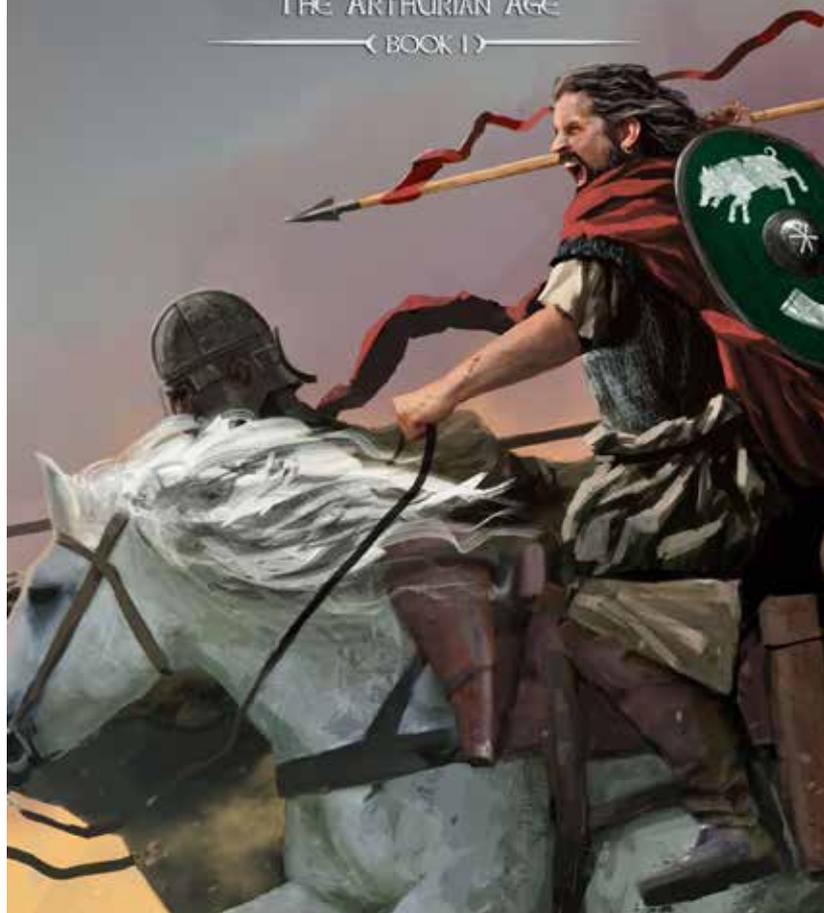
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Sean is a graduate with a Bachelor of Science in Computer Networking from Regis University in Denver, Colorado. When he isn’t writing, Sean works as an IT manager and enjoys spending time with his wife, Jennifer, and their blended family of four children, a cat and a dog in Maine, USA.

— SEAN POAGE —  
THE RETREAT  
TO AVALON

THE ARTHURIAN AGE

◀ BOOK 1 ▶



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