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Opening extract from

Assassin

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Chapter 1
Leader Of The Pack

The boy was running down the forest path. He was following the tracks that a wolf pack had left. Suddenly he stopped. He dropped to one knee and grinned.

"A wolf left the pack here, Father," the boy said. He was peering at the ground. You could see his breath in the cold air. "One set of tracks goes off that way ..." he began. He pointed into the forest. "But, look, the rest keep straight on."

"You're right, Owen," said the boy's father. His name was Madoc. Both of them had long hair tied back, and they were both wearing thick green tunics and trousers. Madoc looked at the tracks. "There's blood there, too," he said. "Well done, my son – you must have hit the wolf with your spear after all."

Owen's grin grew even bigger. The people of his tribe thought that killing a wolf was a great deed. Owen's tribe was the Votadini. They'd lived in the north of Britain for as long as anyone could remember. Their land was rich, and full of hills and forests. The Votadini were farmers, and they bred cattle and sheep.

But there were wolves in the woods. In winter the nights were full of the sound of their hungry howling – and they came sniffing round the sheep pens like grey ghosts. So the men of the tribe sat up in the

dark hours to protect the flocks. And this year, for the first time, Owen had been with the men.



He thought again of the moment when he'd seen the wolves. He'd thrown his spear at them and raised the alarm. The wolves had run off.

Then, at first light, he and his father had set out to track them down.

"Come on, Father," said Owen and he jumped to his feet. "Let's go and finish the beast off. It can't have got very far if it's hurt, can it?"

"No, Owen, we're not doing that," said Madoc. He was walking along the path, looking down at the main set of tracks. "We follow the pack."

"Why, Father?" said Owen. He was angry. In his mind he could already see himself with his own wolf skin. The people of the village would be impressed. "Can't we just get this one now, then hunt the rest of them later?"

"But the wolf might be dead already," said Madoc. "Even if it isn't, it's not the leader. The one we need to kill is still out there, at the head of the pack."

"I don't understand," said Owen with a scowl. He hated it when his father talked to him as if he were a child, like his little sister Cadi.

"It's simple," said Madoc with a sigh. "Cut a man's head off, and his body is useless. Well, it's just the same with a wolf pack. Kill their leader and they don't know what to do, at least until a new leader takes over."

Owen scowled even more. He opened his mouth to answer back. But his father suddenly looked up, like a deer who senses a hunter nearby.

"Did you hear that?" Madoc whispered. "There it is again ..."



Owen's father was scowling himself now. He put a finger to his lips. He stepped off the path and nodded to Owen to follow him. They crept between the trees. Soon they were at the far edge of the forest and peered out. Madoc made sure they stayed hidden.

In front of them was a valley with a river running through it. Owen drew in his breath sharply. Just next to them, at the edge of the forest, was a warrior sitting on a pony. As they watched, the man gave a long, low whistle, and two more warriors came galloping up the slope towards him on their ponies.



"They're men of the Brigantes tribe. From the south," whispered Madoc.

Owen stared at his father. Did he think Owen was that stupid? Of course he knew what tribe the warriors came from. He could tell from the pattern of the blue

tattoos on their faces, and the shapes of their shields and spear blades. He knew the Brigantes' lands were right next to his own people's farms. And Owen knew that they were meant to stay there, on their side.

"What are they doing here, on our land?" he whispered back to his father.

"They look like advance scouts to me," Madoc said softly. He looked angry. "And you know who the Brigantes work for, don't you?"

Then Owen heard a new sound, a steady *tramp-tramp-tramp*. He felt the ground shake under his feet. Owen looked across the valley. What he saw was terrible. There was a long line of soldiers. They were marching over the hill, down the valley. The red crests of their helmets were nodding and the cold winter sunlight glinted off their shields and armour.

The Romans were coming!

