Lovereading4kids.co.uk

Opening extract from

The Mark of Edain

Written by

Pauline Chandler

Published by

Oxford University Press

All text is copyright of the author

Please print off and read at your leisure.

ESCAPE



There was one small rabbit left in the pen, in the corner of the kitchen, next to the window. It sat quiet and still, but Aoife could see what it dreamed in its bright black eye: of a grassy bank, sun-warmed, and a spreading warren over the hillside; the rabbit dreamed of being free.

'Me too,' Aoife whispered. She pushed her fingers between the loosely plaited willow wands of the pen until she touched the rabbit's fur, and glanced out of the window, as she often did, at the road which led into the city. On the far side were gardens and a field full of green shoots: good eating for a little rabbit. A slaver's wagon creaked into view. From dawn to dusk the road was busy with traffic: traders, pilgrims, soldiers, travellers, all making their way to Rome. She could do nothing for the slaves, nothing for herself, chained by the fetters between her ankles. Perhaps she could help the rabbit.

When Quintus, the cook, wiped his hands on his bloodstained apron and went to speak to the grocer's boy at the door, Aoife reached into the pen.

'Hey!' Quintus barked. Startled, the rabbit squirmed in her hands, but Aoife managed to push it across the sill and out of the window. If it escaped the wagon wheels and the clutching hands of traders, it had a chance to be

free. Better the chance, than certain death in Quintus's kitchen.

The cook's hard fingers dug into her shoulder. Aoife steeled herself for the blow to come, but he stayed his hand when Madoc, her brother, appeared, shouting, from under the archway that led into the house.

'Tessius Maximus is dead!' he cried. 'Our master's dead. It's true! It's true!'

His face alight, he stumbled into the kitchen. 'Mistress Lucilla thinks he's been poisoned and she wants to see you at once, Quintus!' *Quintus—not Master Quintus.* Aoife glanced at the cook, but, for once, he ignored the slight. Blanched with shock, he threw off his apron, and pushed past Madoc into the house.

Madoc came to Aoife and held up a knife. 'This lay on the floor next to Tessius's bed! He has no use for it, but we do.'

Aoife stared at the weapon. Gold filigree, intricate, polished steel blade: a rich man's dagger. 'How did Tessius die?' she said, as Madoc bent to use the knife as a lever to break through her chains. 'Was he stabbed?' *Madoc Hothead.* She grabbed his shoulders and made him stand face to face with her.

'No. I don't know. I don't think so!' Madoc said. 'You don't think I *killed* him?'

Aoife shook her head and let him go. *Madoc Softheart.* 'You shouldn't have touched the knife! If they find you with it —'

Madoc shrugged and went on levering at the chain.

'When did you find him?' Aoife said. 'What time was it?'

She glanced at the shadow cast by the gnomon on the carved dial on the wall above Quintus's bench.

'Less than a quarter ago.'

'Were you alone?'

'Yes.'

'Did you hear anything?'

'No! It was the same as it is every morning. There were visitors, as always, not that I saw them. I heard their voices from my cubby hole next door.'

'Raised voices? Was there a quarrel?'

'No!'

'Who was the last to leave?'

'I didn't see. Keep still. I was busy cleaning shoes and watching for Rosa bringing the eggs. Then I went to prepare Tessius's bath. You know the routine. He likes me to mix the oatmeal into the water. *Liked.* When I went into the room it was all silent. Usually he talks to me; he doesn't expect me to answer, just listen, but this morning he didn't say anything. That's when I noticed that he was still in bed. I drew the curtain aside and there he was—' Madoc looked up at her. '—all puffed up and purple. It looked like death by poison to me,' he said, then bent again to his task. 'I called Menander straightaway, but he wouldn't come at first, said he was busy with the accounts. I was hoarse by the time he arrived. I wish you'd seen his face, when he saw old Tessius! He went to tell Mistress Lucilla, then she sent me to fetch Quintus. And I saw a chance to escape.'

Aoife shot a glance at the archway leading into the house.

'It's foolish to run away now!' she said, jerking her foot

away. 'You might as well confess to murder! Why did you pick up the knife? It was stupid!' She shivered and hugged herself. Killing your master meant death. So did attempting to escape, not only for them but for the others. Stiff and wide-eyed, her kitchen companions watched them in silence: Pontius, Decius, Doranda. Fatima and Lucius.

A crash. Angry voices. The old woman, Fatima, stared at the corridor into the house, but Aoife could see that the noise came from the road. A wagon had overturned. No one looked at the villa, no one approached, no soldiers with swords drawn. Tessius's death was still a secret.

Decius stared at the vegetable knife he was holding, as if he had never seen it properly before, then began hacking at his fetters. The others followed his example. Pontius turned to free Fatima.

The shadow of the gnomon crept through the next quarter as the slaves worked on their chains: their luck held, no one came from the house.

The iron chinked as it dropped from Aoife's ankles. Four years she had worn it, day and night. She rubbed the scars; her legs felt loose and shaky, but she must move. Madoc was already climbing out of the window.

'The gods be with you,' he said to the others, as he left.

Fatima opened the back door that led into the orchard, then to the ploughed field and, beyond that, to the marsh, where you could disappear without trace. Guiding the others outside, she nodded to Aoife. *Be safe.*

Aoife jumped from the sill. Crouched next to Madoc, behind a dense laurel bush, she peered out at the garden path.

'Where do we go? Where do we head for?' Aoife said, shivering. The bright sun did not warm her.

'Sh!' Madoc pointed to a dark figure, coming in through the gate. 'It's the doctor,' he said. 'Lucilla must have sent for him. Wait until he goes into the villa, then we'll head for the road.'

The man in his dark scholar's gown went into the house, followed by his retinue of assistants, carrying bags and boxes and a live cockerel. Fearful cries came from the house.

Aoife and Madoc ran to the road.

'Wait—' Aoife said, darting back. She dug at a little patch of herbs near the portico, at the foot of the statue of Flora; her own patch of the garden, given to her by Master Tessius after she had cured him of a fever.

'Aoife! We have to leave—now!' Madoc called, running back to her.

'Not without this,' Aoife muttered, shaking soil from a small leather pouch. The door to the villa opened. Madoc shoved her behind the statue.

'Should have sent for me sooner,' the doctor called over his shoulder. He threw down the rag he was using to wipe his hands, and it landed in Aoife's patch. Mistress Lucilla, sobbing, wiped her red face with her shawl.

'I shall know more when I have examined the body,' the doctor said, keeping his distance. He straightened the folds of his cloak and said, with a look of distaste, 'Menander will see to the rites. Keep the cadaver as cool as you can.' Lucilla threw back her head, wailed, then snuffled into her robe. 'My men will collect it in the morning.'

'What about that powder?' Lucilla asked in a broken voice. 'My husband was always in pain after he took it. For all I know that was what killed him—your so-called remedy!'

She lumbered down the path, waving her crumpled shawl at the doctor.

'Nonsense, nonsense,' he said, increasing his pace. He hooked his finger at one of his servants who ran past him to open the gate. 'I shall know more tomorrow,' he called, before stepping into his litter.

Flicking aside the curtain, he craned his neck to look past the villa into the fields. 'Instead of making wild accusations, you should look to your household!' he said, pointing past the peach trees to where Fatima and the others, mere black dots at the far edge of the ploughed field, were escaping into the marsh.

'Aggghhhh! Stop them!' screamed Mistress Lucilla. 'Stop them! Menander! Menander!' She crushed the ends of her shawl in both fists and shook them at the heavens. 'Men-aaan-de-errrr!' When no one answered, with a last furious bleat she fled back into the villa.

As the doctor rode off in his litter, Madoc counted slowly to a hundred. 'That should do it,' he said. 'Ready?'

They ran down the path to the road. There, with a glance in both directions, Madoc murmured, 'We'll head for the Street of the Silent Knives.'

THE STREET OF SILENT KNIVES



Terror closed on Aoife like a fist, as she followed Madoc deep into the streets of Rome. She could not breathe properly. Her chest hurt. It was as if the shackles she had got rid of were now tightening invisibly around her whole body. She was free: she should feel exhilarated. She was more afraid than she had ever been in her life.

Like a judge's gavel, the facts fell like blows on her mind: Tessius Maximus, their master and personal friend to the emperor, was dead, probably murdered; Madoc had found the body and run away; he had stolen a knife. Mistress Lucilla would search for them.

She saw spies on every corner, hard-faced men with dogs. Every shout made her jump as if stabbed, every look was from someone about to betray them to the soldiers or to the slave-catcher with his iron collars. She threw off her sandals to run faster.

As warm morning increased to noon heat, as they turned from one sleepy street into another, and they were not pursued, she allowed herself the faint hope that Madoc might be leading them to a place of safety, where they could rest, where she could think and plan their next step.

It seemed unlikely: their destination, *The Street of Silent*

Knives, sounded like a den of assassins. Yet, confident and strong, Madoc led the way. Did he have a plan?

Four years ago, when they had been brought to Rome, she was eleven and he only ten. Now he seemed the older one. He was taller, too, which was a good thing, wasn't it, for their father's heir?

She clutched the dusty pouch to her chest and ran her fingers down the outline of the bronze insignia inside. The badge belonged to Madoc; she had kept it for him. Perhaps it was time to hand it over.

'Living in the household of Tessius Maximus suited you,' she called. 'I hardly recognize you, now that I see you—' *free again*? She could not say the words, not yet. 'Out here—' she finished weakly, with a gesture to the street they were crossing.

Madoc hurried on through the maze of narrow alleys. 'I was well-fed, treated well, by and large, and trusted to come into the city on my own,' he replied, over his shoulder.

'Why didn't you stay at the villa then?'

'Need you ask? *I AM CELTOI!*'

'Shhh!' Aoife said, yet she was ashamed to silence his proud cry. *Celtoi. The tribes.* The name given to them by the Greeks.

'I shall never be Roman,' Madoc said. 'And I shall make Rome pay for the death of my father.' They stopped to catch breath.

'As shall I!' Aoife said. 'But first we must stay alive.' As Madoc ran on ahead, cold fear roiled inside her. 'Stop!' she called after him. 'Listen to me. We have to go back! We shouldn't have run away—'

'We can't go back! We were leaving today anyway—' Madoc replied.

'What do you mean, we were leaving?'

Madoc stopped and turned to face her. 'We had to leave. Tessius was going to give us to the emperor.'

'*What?*'

'It's true. He was going to present us as a gift to the Emperor Claudius.'

Aoife walked slowly up to him. 'What are you talking about?'

'It's true. Tessius wanted to be a senator and he thought that Claudius would promote him, if he handed us over.'

'I don't understand. Tessius is dead—'

'That was nothing to do with me, I swear it. The plan was for us to leave the villa today, before the emperor got hold of us. Someone was supposed to come, before dawn, but they didn't come, and when I found Tessius dead, and the knife, well—the gods help those who help themselves, don't they? We're free, aren't we? No one's followed us and we're nearly there.'

'Where?'

'Look, Aoife, just follow me, right? Then you'll see for yourself.' He ran on.

'I don't understand,' she called. 'Why was Tessius handing us over now? We've lived under his roof for four years.'

'Claudius is about to lead an invasion of Britannia. We are kin of the British leader, *ergo*, valuable hostages. Think about it.'

Aoife looked up at the strip of blue sky between the

uneven line of tiled roofs, which leaned towards each other, almost touching, down the length of the long narrow street. Rome had waged war in Britannia for as long as she could remember. What was Madoc saying, that the emperor himself was going to Britannia, to fight Caradoc?

Lord Caradoc, her mother's brother, had led the most recent rebellion, so much she knew from kitchen gossip, and Caradoc was a mighty warrior. But the legions of Rome were so well trained, so efficient, that she hadn't dared to hope that his rebellion would succeed.

And, truthfully, if the emperor was about to face him, then Caradoc was already defeated, because Claudius would only go to Britannia if it was safe. The emperor would not risk himself in battle.

Caradoc. The Romans called him Caratacus. She swallowed the sourness of the Roman name from her mouth. 'Caradoc!' she called out loud.

'*What?*' said Madoc.

'Claudius will not bargain with the tribes!' she burst out. 'Why would he trouble himself? If he's going himself to Britannia, it means that the battle's over and Rome has won. He has no need of hostages. And now we're on the run, and if we're caught, we'll be killed—'Aoife was shocked motionless. *Tessius. Caradoc. Claudius.* She and Madoc were mere counters in a game played by others. The cold logic was terrifying. 'There must be no more *deaths*!' she cried. *Not in our family.* Long-buried ghosts stirred in her mind.

'None of it matters!' Madoc said. 'The Mother's with us—we're free! Claudius will not find us. And, best of all, we're going *home*!' He started to sing one of the old tunes,

one that Anwyn, their nurse, had called the Home Song: *Where salt sea flows, Where wild herb grows, Where hawk flies free and curlew calls . . .*

'Madoc—' Aoife called, digging her nails into her palms. The song tempted fate. 'Mother grant us a time for singing.'

It was past noon. The sun beat down as vendors closed up their market stalls, which lined the alley, packing their goods away or covering them with white cloths.

Though no one paid them any attention, Aoife was still afraid. When the last servant girl closed the last shutter and gave them a curious stare, she pulled Madoc out of sight, under a portico in front of one of the houses. She sagged against the wall, catching breath, and rubbed her hand over her forehead. Running had tired her: she had not realized how hot it could be in the city. She had never left Tessius's villa to experience it. The only time she had left the kitchen was to visit the bath-house once a week, to use Mistress Lucilla's tepid bathwater to wash herself. And, every night, of course, to return to her cellar bed.

Now in the street, which was utterly silent, the ground shimmered with heat. Cicadas sang and a dog howled a wide yawn, then found a spot of shade and settled down to sleep in it.

'Where are we?' Aoife said, as Madoc went to the corner and peered into the next alley.

'Near the river,' was the reply.

The Tiber that led down to the sea. The sea that would take them home. Talk of home had disturbed her, had dislodged all those barriers she had so carefully placed, like poultices,

over her memories. Now homesickness clouded her mind, as much her enemy as a Roman soldier.

Madoc signalled. 'We're almost there. Aoife, listen to me. We're going to find a man who will help us. He's not exactly your sort, but don't condemn him out of hand. He's a trader with his own fleet of ships, who will grant us safe passage back to Britannia.'

She pulled at Madoc, stopped him from moving on. 'Wait,' she said. She held out the pouch. 'Here, this is yours. You should have it, in case we're separated.'

Madoc opened the pouch. He slid out the piece of bronze, a thin rectangular plate, curved, with spikes at each corner. It was battered and bent from its true shape, with one of the corner spikes broken off, but the design on the front was smooth and unsullied. It showed the sigil of the tribe, of the Mother, Edain, the goddess of horses; the broad outlines of a horse's head, with slanting eyes made from polished green agate.

'The Mark of Edain,' Madoc breathed, and ran his fingers over the pattern. He reached up to the brand on his neck, then touched the same brand, grimy, but not faded, on the side of Aoife's neck, the mark of their tribe, scored into their flesh with a dark blue stain. Three horizontal lines, beneath it, marked their status, as son and daughter of the Druid Bevis, husband to the sister of Lord Caradoc, rebel leader of the Celts in Britannia.

They shared a smile. Madoc turned the bronze emblem over and over in his hands. 'How did you get hold of this?' he asked.

'I took it as we were leaving. No one saw me and no one bothered to search me on the boat. When we got to

Tessius's house, I pretended to be sick—do you remember?—and I shoved it under that bush. Later I dug the hole deeper and made a proper hiding place.'

Madoc put the badge back into the pouch, then shoved it into his belt. 'One day I shall take my father's place, at the head of the tribe.'

A familiar sound made Aoife stiffen. The sound of marching. At the far end of the alley, she caught the glint of a metal helmet.

'Soldiers!' she hissed.

She darted after Madoc, to the next turning, then hid behind a large bush in a pot on the corner as the commander shouted an order and the soldiers began their search of the street. Creeping backwards, his eyes on the guards, Madoc pulled her into the next alley. He looked at the houses. 'This is it! The Street of Silent Knives!'

Aoife scanned the line of tall narrow dwellings that faced each other in opposite lines of identical facades under a threatening gloom which hung over the alley like trailing smoke.

Barked orders disturbed the silence. They sped on towards the last few houses at the far end of the street, where there was a junction and daylight shining down on a wide road, and a glimpse of the river.

'It's one of these—' Madoc hesitated. They fell into the shadows as the soldiers turned into the alley. The commander hammered on a door.

'Slaves of Tessius Maximus! Come out now!' He stood back, shading his eyes, to stare up at the roof.

Madoc peered out. 'The emperor's men. He will search all Rome for us—'

Aoife felt light and unsteady. 'Where's this house?'

'It has ironwork shutters, with pictures of animals, bears, on either side of the front windows. Bears, yes.'

As the soldiers moved to the next dwelling, Aoife and Madoc scrambled under the pillared entrance to a five storey house, set back between the last two dwellings on the street. It looked derelict. A shower of plaster dust fell over them, as Madoc tapped at the door.

Aoife scanned the shutters. The soldiers moved again, then halted, as their commander knocked at another door. They stood to attention, searching every nook, every shadow, with their eyes. One man turned to look down the alley. He seemed to stare straight at Aoife. Then someone came out of the house and the soldier joined the others, pushing past the man to search inside.

Madoc pointed to the closed shutters, obscured by a dead vine with twiggy tendrils. 'Bears!' Aoife looked at the shutters: if you half closed your eyes you might see bears in the design. Madoc gave a loud knock on the door.

The soldiers had stopped an old man and woman, and were poking their swords into a cart of freshly washed laundry. Madoc banged again. 'Help me,' he said. Aoife twisted the handle.

'Halt!' The soldiers were a dozen houses away.

'It's locked!' Aoife said. She shoved hard at the door. The commander's voice, so loud, made her jump. 'You men search that way! You lot come with me! March on!'

Aoife peeped out of the portico, then jerked back. The soldiers were coming. She put her hands over her ears.

Tramp tramp tramp. That sound, of hard metal studs

ringing on the ground, was like hammer blows. Roman soldiers, after her. Tramp tramp tramp.

In the peace of Tessius's villa, she had pushed the memory out of her mind. Now it burst out, taking her back to the day, four years before, when the soldiers had come.

'Madoc! Mad-oc! Maa-ddoc!' The cries of their nurse, Anwyn, down in the settlement, was all the warning they had. Racing down from the top of the hill, Aoife made Madoc stop as they were about to enter the dun. It was on fire. Flames jumped from roof to roof. Roman soldiers drove people and horses before them.

Behind them, her brother Ewan flung his arms wide, as if to shield them. 'Run!' he cried. 'Run! Run—' His cry was stopped by the thud of a Roman spear in his back. Aoife had seized Madoc and jumped into the ditch that surrounded the settlement, running faster than she had ever run before. The Mother spoke to her: *'Go to the grove. Go to Bevis.'*

Darting over the hill, through the trees, they had eluded the soldiers. No one had followed them to their father's grove, deep in the wood. There was thin smoke rising from the hut. Dimock, the servant, must be late baking the bread.

They stepped into the sacred glade. Dimock's body lay across the entrance to the hut. Another body lay behind him, in the shadows, one bare foot poking out into sunlight, like part of a wax effigy dropped by accident.

'Stay back!' Her sister Igren had appeared from the hut, her clothes torn, her face smudged with blood. She stepped into the sunlight. She carried a sword.

'My father!' Aoife threw herself into the hut. Bevis's

body lay there with two others, Roman soldiers. She saw a helmet, crushed by a single blow from a sword. Her father's dead face was as grey as wood ash.

'Go to the river! Find Brec! Look after Madoc!' Igren shouted, flourishing her sword as she ran back to the dun. Aoife never saw her sister again.

While Madoc pushed at their father's body, as if to wake him, Aoife had picked up the staff lying next to the entrance and prised off the bronze badge at its top, the mark of the Mother, Edain. A resolve, hard as iron, rooted itself in her mind: to avenge the deaths of her father and brother.

'Go to the river . . . Find Brec!' She had grabbed Madoc and run, but as they left the grove, Roman soldiers had closed on them. Weaponless, Madoc had whirled round on them like a trapped hornet, lashing out with his fists. They were too strong.

Aoife and Madoc were not killed, but sold into slavery.

On the journey to Rome they saw many tribesmen, with many brands, but none from the tribe of Edain. No one recognized them. No one knew who they were. They were children, slaves, anonymous, stateless, without rights, without names. Yet the Mother watched over them and kept them safe. Until now.

'Halt!' The harsh sound brought Aoife back to the present. Cra-assh. The soldiers stood to attention.

Again came the shout: 'Slaves of Tessius Maximus! Come out! Come out!'

Aoife thumped the door with both fists.

'You men—check every house! Yes, I know everyone's asleep! Wake 'em up! Get on with it!' Tramp tramp tramp.

Aoife thought her arms would break, when, with a jerk, the door finally gave way. Two sharp black eyes appeared in the gap. The door was flung open and they were bundled inside.