Auxilia

A Short Story from Times Past

By Maryanne Peters

During a brief period when our tribe was at peace with the Romans, I went to serve in the Roman army. I was not suited to peace, and I was told that the Roman Empire is so great that they are always at war with somebody, somewhere. I think this had something to do with why our leaders sought peace. We lived as farmers who could wage war between planting and harvest, but the Roman soldiers never stopped being soldiers. I disliked farming.

I was hungry for adventure and for combat, as they seemed to be the same thing at the time. The legions demanded ten years of service, and I agreed, but with no real intention of being under the Roman yoke for that long. I wanted to see Rome and understand these people, and to go to different lands and kill different people. That was all I wanted in those days.

The Roman army recruited a cohort of Goths like me, along with cohorts of other tribes from the borders of the Roman Empire. They called these troops “auxilia” which means “helpers” as if we stood to hand a sword to the real fighters. But we were the front line in many cases. Many of us were brought up to fight from a very young age. It is said in my tribe that you should place a dagger in the cradle of a boy-child so that he learns to respect it when he first feels pain and draws his own blood. We were fighters we Goths.

In the legion we were under the command of a Roman – a centurion who was himself a foreigner – from the islands of Britannia. But he demanded that all talk should be in Latin, the Roman tongue. Among us he placed commanders who spoke only Latin. It seemed like a complex language, but when you receive an order and you are beaten for not complying, you learn quickly.

I never went to Rome, but I went to many Roman Cities in Gallia and in Illyrium, where we went to fight the Dacians and the Sarmatians. I saw all of what was spoken about – the luxury of life for the rich, and moral collapse of the people. But as a soldier I learned to admire the strength of the army – its discipline and the machines of war that gave it such power. The problem for the Romans was that the best of their fighters were no longer Romans. They had the commanders and the engineers, and the managed the supplies as they needed to for long campaigns, but the only blood they saw was in the amphitheaters.

After the revolt of the Auxilia Batavi Rome made sure that an auxiliary unit would not serve in or near its land of origin. With units like ours now comprising the majority of the Roman army, that was important. We needed to be ready to kill strangers, and do it for our legion, and for Rome – a place we had never seen.

But we knew that it was great – greater than any single tribe. We knew that after 20 years of service a foreign soldier might become a citizen of Rome, and be entitled to lands, and to play a part in selecting those who administered or towns and territories.

But 20 years is a long time. I did not wait that long. I had become optio (deputy) to our centurion and through him heard that our tribe was in revolt against the Empire. We were serving on the Danube many miles from home, but there was a known route to the East that never passed through any Roman country, so it was an easy march for my colleagues and me. We deserted the Roman army, or many of us did. We decided that if our tribe was at war again, our first duty was to our own blood.

I could tell of our journey through those hostile places, in our Roman military clothing, but so clearly not Roman. It would be a good story, but it is not this one. This story only starts when we got back to our tribal lands and confronted the Romans as our enemy once again.

I would never have thought that in the time I had been away our tribe would have become soft, but for a few they seemed softer even than the worst of the Roman townsfolk. But as an experienced tribal fighter now with experience of Roman practice and tactics, I was tasked with bettering our fighting force. All young men were placed before me. Some had laid with the dagger, but others it seemed had never even seen one.

If there is one thing that the Roman army had taught me is that not all soldiers use the same skills. Some can fight in the front, and others can man the pikes for defensive positions, or use their bows from a distance. I wanted to find a position for everybody who had been delivered to me, including Kelric.

Kelric was a young man who seemed more like a woman to me. Although over fifteen he still had no whiskers. He wore his blond hair long and braided as all in our tribe did (except those of us like me shorn for service to the Romans) but in his case the braids were full and shiny like a woman’s. He was willing, and did not fear the sight and smell of fresh blood, but he was no killer.

It was the custom of our tribe to put such men to the front so that they can learn to kill or die early in battle, but my service with the Romans had taught me that this is a waste of manpower. I decided that I would form a small group of what the Romans call *milites medici*. These are people who drag the injured from the battlefield, and help them to survive.

The Romans had men of skill who could attend to wounds and we had only women who were healers and had no place on the battlefield. I told Kelric that he should learn some useful things from these women, and he set about doing that. He was allowed on the battlefield to do his job and he as not disappointed that I would not order him to kill.

Some of our tribe were critical of Kelric. They said that he looked like a woman and now had a woman’s job. But I had been tasked with preparing our tribe for war, and I told everybody that all under my command had a role, and we were all going into battle together.

Perhaps he felt that my attention to him required extra effort, and it was true that I saw him always busy helping to built litters for the injured and to prepare bandages and poultices and herbs to help with pain or to induce a stupor in those in extreme agony. Kelric was also using compounds made by the healing women as he said “To better prepare myself” although I had no idea at the time what this involved.

After some skirmishes with the Romans all of the Goth leaders felt that it was time that we break forward into Italy itself. The Romans seemed to be concentrating on the Eastern Empire as their western territories had fallen out of direct control. It seemed that all warrior tribes were on the move. The Romans had left rich pickings and had also built the highways that allowed us just to walk in. The very strength of the Roman military – their roads – would be turned against them.

I was ready for battle too. I have already said that I was not suited to peace – at least not at that time.

Some legions were put up against us on the road into Rome. Once again, the majority were auxiliaries from North Africa and Eastern provinces. They did not understand how forests could be used as shelter and to hide movement because their countries have few forests such as the Apennines. But at the end of the day the loyalty to the legion over Rome itself had faded through poor leadership.

Nevertheless, the last major battle was a fierce one, and the Syrian archers were as good as you can get. I was struck down just as victory became certain.

It was a minor injury – an arrow in the thigh. I tied it off and fought on, but I knew not to remove the arrow with cloth of fire to stem the blood. I took the precaution of wearing my roman breastplate under my tunic as other ex-legionaries did, but I had no armor below the waist as I would have worm when fighting for Rome.

Kelric came past in the middle of the battle. To keep his hair out of the gore he wore it in a single braid like a woman does, but it was easy to see. He was moving at speed among the injured, and asking those who could walk to help with the litters.

“I can still command with an arrow in my leg,” I called to him.

“Come and see me after the battle and I will remove it,” he called back.

We had victory that day, and there was still time to rejoice in that before I went to the tent he had set up. He had been waiting for me. For some reason he had undone his braid and his hair hung down like a golden curtain across his face. He bent over me as he attended to cutting off the arrow head that had passed through. He was close and he smelled of flowers.

“There will be a little pain,” he said, and then there was. The arrow was removed and the wound washed with scented water. He was applying a poultice and wrapping the wound. That hair hung down, and as I could see down his tunic I saw other things hanging.

“What is this!” I cried out. “What is on your chest? Small perhaps, but breasts like a woman? How can this be.”

“Perhaps I have been too long with the healing women,” he said, but he was grinning as if proud that he had lost the shape of a man and was taking on the shape of a woman.

“We are not like the Romans, debauched and effeminate, Kelric. We are Goths. We are world conquerors.”

“You are a conqueror, My General,” he said. “I am but a body carrier trying to learn to heal. In truth healing is a woman’s art, but I am not ashamed that I have become what I must, to heal you.”

I was a soldier and a man above all things. I was aware that the Romans and others of the Middle Sea may see no problem in a man having sex with another man, but it was not my way. Even among the Goths two men may seek comfort in strange ways, but that is momentary and without much feeling beyond the loins. But as I looked at Kelric in that moment, it seemed as if all that I believed of myself was crumbling like a wall of soil.

There was Kelric, the young man for whom I had found a place in our battle lines, but who now appeared to me not to be a man at all. That hair and a face strong and beautiful, and now with a body that seemed to demand I pull away the tunic and explore it.

Kelric had become this to heal me, as if that was his objective all along – to stay near to his commander and make sure that he lived. He was my auxilia.

From that moment on, I never viewed her as a man. To do so would be a perversion. But we had a campaign to fight in the weeks and months that followed. It was not until the city of Rome itself was in our hands that we had time to consider a life after war.

We settled in Ravenna which was to be the capital of our kingdom in Italy. It is a city with the comforts expected of a Roman settlement, and as I had sampled something of that life I could return to it and help to organize the municipal services in my military fashion.

I had Kelric take a Latin name – Julia in honor of the greatest of all Roman generals. We took on some orphans of both Gothic and Italian origin to build a family. She is a fine mother who can teach the girls to be a healer while I can teach the boys how to be a warrior.

We will need both. These are times of great dislocation. New tribes and new races sweep in from all sides, and we must be ready to do battle. But I have found a balance in my life. I have found a woman, even though that is not how she began life.

The End

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*Erin’s seed: “One of their tribes is judged not to have the right killer instinct or physical might to be a warrior so he is consigned to go onto the battlefield and drag off wounded good guys for rescue and wounded bad guys to become slaves. A warrior he has formed an attachment too is wounded…”*