

WARRIORS

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CALGARY

WARRIORS

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DEDICATION

For Annie and John.

And for our readers. May the lessons of the past yield wisdom for the future. We have no doubt that Mallec and Rhonwen would join us in a collective and heartfelt, "Bless you!"



Map Illustration by Tania Clarke Goruk

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Gaius Julius Caesar, killer of children, destroyer of dreams, has come to Gaul. The legionnaires call him a great general, but we know him as a great teacher; he teaches the lesson of death. He brought the lesson to the Helvetii when they sought a place to live — 80,000 joined Rhiannon in a single day. A greater number of Germans learned the lesson when they tried to flee his cavalry. Such teaching becomes well known, such a teacher feared. Caesar sent two armies to Armorica the following year, one comprised of soldiers, another of tax collectors and slavers.

— *The Book of Mallec* —

Armorica, Western Gaul, 57 BC

Crows. Arienne shivered at the envoys of evil and crossed herself with the sign of the Goddess when they flew over the rampart she guarded. *So many!* As they spread out to feed amid the tender spring grasses of the commons, Arienne pulled a sling from her belt and slipped a smooth river stone into the supple leather pouch. She liked the feel of the weapon dangling from her hand as she judged which of the birds would make the best target. No one in the village would miss them or their baneful influence.

Before she could begin her windup, her uncle climbed the ladder to the catwalk. He towered over her, his giant stature and dark features made all the more striking by his soft voice and easy manner. "I'll wager a meal you miss."

Arienne looked up at him and laughed. "One of your meals, Uncle Vertimus, or mine? I want to know how long I'll go hungry if I lose."

"You don't sound very confident."

"Confidence and knowledge are different sides of the same coin," she said, quoting her teacher, Driad Rhonwen. "Besides, if you think I lack the skill, you should be willing to bet more than just a meal."

Vertimus crossed his arms and leaned back against the wall. He nodded toward the crows. "Send one of them through the Cauldron and I'll stand a night watch for you. Fair enough?"

"Aye." She grinned. "No trickery now."

Vertimus made a great show of sitting on his hands and looking at the sky.

Arienne whirled the sling over her head and let the stone fly. It hit the nearest crow and sent the bird screeching sideways with one leg crushed and its feathers splayed. The other crows took flight while their injured companion flopped around in the grass.

Vertimus raised an eyebrow.

Arienne exhaled heavily and started to climb down from the wall.

"Finish it from here," he said, "or can't you hit a moving target?"

In a single fluid motion, she stepped to the wall, whipped a stone into the leather sling, and sent it hurtling toward the crow. The missile bounced harmlessly two paces wide of the mark.

"Best three out of four?"

She grumbled and placed a third stone in her sling. Concentrating, she let it fly — this stone landing more solidly than the first. The crow collapsed and lay still as a few black feathers floated slowly to the ground.

"Not bad," he said. "One crow, three stones. How many do you fancy you'll need to drop a Roman?"

Her retort remained unspoken as she spied a cloud of dust rising on the road leading toward Gillac. Banners of red and gold broke the horizon. "Riders! Sound the alarm," she cried. "I'll get my father."

"Easy now," Vertimus said, staring down the road as the first rank of Roman cavalry rode into view. "They're expected. Setaine asked me to watch for them. There's no danger. It's not an attack." He signaled a boy on the wall. "Fetch my horse and Setaine's."

Despite his assurances, Arienne's heart raced. *Romans in Gillac!* Aside from herself and Vertimus, only a handful of warriors stood with them on the wall. In the distance she could make out the lead rank of Roman infantry close behind the mounted men. "There must be thousands!"

"I doubt that. They wouldn't spare more than a cohort for the likes of us."

Arienne stared at him. "What do you mean?"

"Our clan is too small to be much of a threat. Now run and find Setaine."

She raced down the ladder and into the village. The chief had already made his way to the main gate, and she nearly bumped into him. "Father," she said, panting, "the Romans—"

"Have finally arrived, have they?" He stopped to cinch the sword belt at his waist. "How do I look?"

Arienne squinted at him. "Like a clan chief." The gold and silver torc around his neck glittered in the sunlight, and he'd worn his gold armbands, too. His vivid red, green and yellow cape, woven in the distinctive Suetoni squares, partially covered an oval shield draped over his left shoulder. "How are you supposed to look?"

"Impressive," he said. "Druid Mallec says appearances are important to Roman officials."

Arienne smiled in spite of her uneasiness. "Then you'd best rinse your mustache — half of last night's dinner is still in it."

"'Twas a fine stew — I'm proud to wear it. Come!" He put his arm around her shoulders and pulled her with him toward the gate.

"When did you speak with Druid Mallec?" she asked. "I thought he never left his little enclave in the woods unless he was needed for some great ceremony."

"He'll be here soon enough. He sent a messenger to warn that the Romans would be coming."

In the past Arienne had been able to ignore the threat of Romans. Now their presence pressed on her like a river current. "What do they want?"

Setaine paused before answering and gave her a brief hug. "Hostages."



In the confines of a low-ceilinged hut in the druid enclave near Mount Eban, Dunn faced his teacher amid racks of dusty scrolls. The intensity of their words blanked out the enclave's more normal sounds of farm life. Dunn was the only student who ever stood up to the Master of the Enclave, and none of the others envied him for it. He didn't much like it himself.

"This is not acceptable," Mallec said, clutching the sheets of vellum on which Dunn had worked for days. "I asked you to record the bardsong of Brennus, nothing more."

Dunn felt hot blood rise to his temples and struggled to hide his anger and disappointment. When he showed any hint of emotion, the druid refused to discuss his work. He willed away the tightness in his chest and made himself listen to the bearded enclave master with no more real passion than one of the carved

trees in the sacred grove. It embittered him to know the druid was bound by no such need to disguise his own feelings.

Dunn cleared his throat before responding. "I've completed the transcription as you asked, but there are many songs, and they're all different. Every bard who sings the tale adds something to it. How am I supposed to know which version bears the truth?"

"They all do," Mallec said, pulling on his long mustache. "Is not mighty Brennus the subject in every one?"

"Of course he is, but—"

"Do they all relate how Brennus and his army marched to the walls of Rome and took the city?"

"Yes," Dunn said, staring out the unshuttered window at the rain-heavy clouds that mirrored Mallec's gray-eyed disdain.

Like every man or woman druid-trained, Dunn knew the stories well. Some made long-dead Brennus wise and courtly. In some he towered over his men; in others he walked among them unrecognized. All the tales made Brennus a near-god. He was, after all, the Celt who conquered Rome. "*Woe to the vanquished*" he'd said to the Romans paying tribute. Everyone knew that. To make sense out of all the songs in a way that would appease Mallec seemed impossible. Dunn clenched his fists under the table, out of sight.

Mallec sighed. "Then why have you had such great difficulty recording these facts?"

"I thought you wanted more than a dozen words on the subject," Dunn said. "The points you mention seem to be the only things on which the bards agree."

Arms crossed, Mallec rocked back and forth from his heels to his toes, a gesture Dunn had always found annoying.

At last the druid spoke. "I don't recall hearing any bard singing about how Brennus fed his army, or what he should have done to maintain control of Rome, or—"

"Or anything else of importance." Dunn shook his head. "What does it matter who took the hero's cut of meat at the victory feast if nothing was gained in the long run?"

"Brennus sacked the city, as was the custom. It was a great triumph — one which deserves to be recorded. You've failed in that."

Dunn didn't want another argument with Mallec, but the older man was being obstinate, as usual. "Brennus failed. I merely reported it."

Mallec dropped the vellum sheets on the table and looked at Dunn a long time before speaking. "How can you record our greatest victory as if it were a defeat?"

"Because it was!" Dunn said, unable to keep his voice calm.

"You think the bards have been wrong for over three hundred years?"

"That's not—"

"You'll need to discuss this with the Romans, though, since they've had it wrong, too. All these years they've held the Day of Allia — the day Rome fell — as a day of disgrace."

The tops of Dunn's ears burned and anger enflamed his face, but he remained silent and marshaled his thoughts.

"Did Brennus come away with great wealth and a victorious army?"

"Yes, Mallec." Dunn called on the strength of the great oaks; he, too, would stay unbreakable in the wind of Mallec's words.

The druid leaned close to Dunn's ear and spoke, his voice low and disdainful. "Then how can that have been a defeat?"

Dunn met Mallec's gaze in defiance. "Because Brennus didn't make Rome a part of Gaul. He took a few baubles and burned a few buildings, then he left."

"He took more than his weight in gold. I fail to see—"

"When the Romans conquer someone, they *stay* conquered, or the Romans return and destroy them utterly. Ask Driad Rhonwen the next time she visits what the Romans did to Iberia. Had Brennus treated Rome the same way, Caesar and his legions wouldn't be ransacking Gaul now."

Mallec's expression soured. "That's not our way."

"Aye, and that's the problem. If Brennus had made Rome a part of Gaul, we wouldn't be worried now that Gaul will become a part of Rome."

Mallec caught his breath. Dunn had never known the druid to remain speechless so it startled him when Mallec slipped onto the bench opposite him at the table.

"I've had visions of Rome doing just that," Mallec said finally. "Have you, too?"

Dunn waved at the scrolls and bound sheets piled in wooden racks around the walls — the collected work of Mallec and his students over the last twenty years. "My visions come from there — from the written history of Carthage and Greece."

"The young always see with such clarity," Mallec said, "even when the view is obscured."

"I've read everything I could. What have I missed?"

Mallec walked to the collection of documents, some acquired from places as distant as Galatia, and examined the list of titles inked on the bare wooden racks. "What have you read about Gaul itself?"

"I've read the genealogies of heroes and chiefs, the records of battles, and who fought them. There are no secrets in that —

the members of this very enclave recorded most of them. What have I missed?"

"I'm trying to determine that," Mallec said, turning to face him. "Who controls Gaul?"

"Caesar will control it soon if we don't do something."

"Perhaps, but who controls it *now*?"

"The chiefs of the big clans — Galba of the Sussions, Dumnoris of the Adeui, Cativolcus of the Eburones — there are hundreds of clans, perhaps a thousand chiefs."

"So, who's the strongest? Who directs the fortunes of Gaul?"

"No one does!" Dunn could not hide his exasperation. "That's what I've been saying. We're scattered. Nothing binds us together."

"You're wrong, Dunn." Mallec began to pace. "Think for a moment of all the clans in this vast land — every one rich in warriors eager for combat. Don't you find it odd that none of them ever became strong enough to rule over all the rest?"

Dunn stared, unsure of the point Mallec intended to make. "I've never—"

"Some clans are so small and poor their clanholds would burst at the seams if another family arrived unannounced. Yet others are so huge their forts cover dozens of hills and they sell the services of their armies to kings and princes."

"And Romans," Dunn added.

Mallec agreed. "So, why haven't the bigger clans swallowed up the smaller ones like hungry wolves? Over time, wouldn't you expect a few big clans to dominate the rest?"

"It seems logical."

"So, why hasn't it happened?"

Dunn smiled, confident of his knowledge. "None of them has the organizational skill to—"

"Nonsense. The bigger clans have huge armies and long histories of taking them to war. That requires considerable organization."

Mallec's tactics irritated Dunn more than he could stand. "Then what *is* the reason?"

"The druids," Mallec said.

Dunn laughed. "That's absurd! Druids have no armies."

"We have access to all the warriors of Gaul." Mallec leaned forward, his eyes bright. It startled Dunn to see him so intense.

"We're not merely priests, we're law-givers and judges. We're at the heart of everything meaningful to our people. Everyone comes to us to settle disputes. We're also bards; we record the history of the people. The greatest hero can walk these lands, but if the bards don't sing his praises, no one will remember."

"That's not the same as ruling the land."

"A chief who disdains druids won't rule for long. Don't you think the Ollamh and the high druids know who the strongest

leaders are, and which clans would likely fare best in battle? We keep such clans pitted against one another — balanced.”

“And one rises to the position of Ollamh by practicing politics instead of religion?” Dunn asked.

“They’re two halves of the same whole. To be a good druid, one must understand both. That’s why we send the brightest of our students to the big enclaves,” Mallec said.

Dunn wondered who had condemned him to Mallec’s tiny school but held his tongue. “For what?”

“To learn about power — to observe kings. I left the Eburones when I was young to study at Mona, the greatest center of learning in the world.”

Dunn struggled to assimilate all he had heard. There seemed to be a great deal more to the fussy old druid than he had thought. “Why are you telling me this now?”

Mallec smiled for the first time. “Because I’m sending you to the druid enclave at Vannes, to study among the Veneti.”

This unexpected news made him light-headed. “But I’m no druid, nor have I ever asked to be one. I may be a leader one day, but I won’t lead from an altar.” He had no desire to insult Mallec, nor any wish to follow in the druid’s footsteps. How like the man to make his decisions for him.

Mallec put his hand on Dunn’s arm. “Think, boy! You aren’t a warrior. You have no clan. How can you be a chief?”

The words stung, the same way they did when hurled as taunts by the other students when he was a child. He pretended not to feel them and pulled away. “I’ll find my clan one day, and then—”

Mallec clutched at him. “And then you’ll be an old man. You’re too smart for that. As a druid you’d continue exercising your brain rather than your sword arm. Leave the fighting to those less able to think.”

“But, I want—”

“What you want doesn’t matter. Only our way of life matters.” Mallec’s fingers dug into Dunn’s flesh. “Gaul has enough warriors. We need thinkers.” Mallec pursed his lips in silence for a moment and then smiled. “Of all my students, you’re the only one who saw through the songs of Brennus and realized the truth.”

Dunn looked up, confused. “But you said my work was unacceptable.”

Mallec leaned back and stroked his graying beard. His eyes sparkled. “I’ve said the same to every student. You’re the only one who argued with me.”

Dunn didn’t know what to say.

Mallec rose from the bench and patted him once on the back. “I happen to agree with your assessment of Brennus, though it doesn’t belong in his tribute.”

"You *lied* to me?"

"I tested you. And you passed. That's why I'm sending you to the Veneti enclave."

"And if I refuse?"

Mallec paused in the doorway. "Then you must make your way as best you can. There's nothing more for you to learn here. If you'd rather spend the rest of your life milking goats, I won't stop you." He left the room.

Dunn sat in stunned silence. The dusty volumes of history and legend surrounded him. Leave? This was the only home he'd ever known and the only clan he would ever have. Mallec was giving him a great honor — sending him to the sea-faring Veneti, the greatest and most worthy clan in Armorica. He cradled his head in his hands. Gods, he thought, what have you done to me?



The Roman standard, taller than the helms of the riders by an arm-span, marked the head of the column. More horsemen than Arienne had ever seen trailed behind, four abreast along the dirt track. She smirked at the dust cloud they raised. Stupid Romans! They were crammed so close together she wondered how those in the back could breathe.

She maintained her position on the wall as Setaine and Vertimus rode out to meet the column. Every available warrior not stationed on the rampart spread out alongside the chief, swords drawn. A Roman held an arm high, and the riders halted in unison. As the dusty haze settled she made a quick estimate of their numbers. Vertimus had been right; less than a dozen score of men faced the Suetoni warriors. Still, Gillac had only half that number on hand and should it come to a fight, friends would die. She bit at her lip with distaste.

Several of the Romans dismounted and milled around a fat man dressed in a voluminous white toga. Arienne grinned as he slapped at a horsefly. Only fools went bare-legged in Gaul at this time of year. The man seemed hesitant to approach Setaine, and Arienne suddenly wanted very much to hear what the Roman had to say.

She hurried down the ladder, jumping clear of the last three rungs. She stepped into the line of warriors near Setaine and caught his eye. He scowled in disapproval, and she brandished her spear. She could almost hear his resigned sigh as he jerked his head once to beckon her to him. She gladly obeyed.

She stood beside him, almost the same height, and proud that she resembled him. He stared at the Romans with unflinching blue eyes, his brown hair made white by limewash. He'd smoothed the short spikes of his hair to fit beneath an iron helmet with the figure of a horse on top. He had a broad, well-muscled body

and she shifted her weight to stand as he did, feet slightly apart and poised for trouble.

When the Romans turned toward them, Vertimus tugged at his chin-length mustache and leaned toward her. "Here's the Roman crow. I'd pay a lord's ransom to watch you send that one to the Mother, even if it took thrice three stones."

"I'd need no more than one stone for a target that big." She snickered. "He has a beak like a crow, too."

"A birth disfigurement, most likely," Setaine said from her other side. "Let's be polite for now. We can let the bards mock him later."

They chuckled, but as the Romans came closer, Arienne's mood shifted back to dread.

The crow-nosed Roman cleared his throat and muttered to a companion. "How like these half-naked barbarians to come caparisoned like horses. They have the wit of beasts."

The companion laughed.

How like these foreigners to think only they were clever enough to comprehend the dull Roman tongue, Arienne thought. She sniffed in disdain at the man's insults but said nothing. Driad Rhonwen had made sure she spoke Latin well enough to get by in the world of Roman traders. She was thankful Rhonwen had forced her to read more.

The stout Roman smoothed his toga and stepped forward into a pile of pig manure. The entire line of Suetoni warriors erupted in laughter.

"Enough!" Setaine's quick bark silenced them.

The Roman swiped his foot on the grass and proceeded with wounded dignity. He bowed slightly toward Setaine and held up a piece of paper with Roman scrawls upon it. Arienne couldn't make it out.

"I am Marius Publius," he said, his accent strongly suggesting the eastern clans close to Rome. "I am an emissary of the great Caesar, and Crassus, his esteemed lieutenant. It is Caesar's wish to secure peace for all the tribes of Gaul, and for them to look favorably upon Rome. Many in the east have already signed treaty agreements by which Rome will protect them from their enemies."

Vertimus snorted. "Who protects them from the Romans?"

Setaine motioned for silence. "Continue," he said.

Marius cleared his throat. "As a sign of good faith, Caesar requires two persons from each chief's household as guests of the local Roman garrison. Caesar's men will maintain the peace and protect your tribe from marauders. In exchange you will feed these troops and supply materials they can use to build their quarters."

Vertimus translated the Roman's words for the other Suetoni who roared their outrage, and only the force of Setaine's booming voice kept them at bay. The legionnaires responded with drawn swords and tightly reined mounts. Arienne looked from the wild ranks of cursing, gesturing Gauls to the confident and reserved faces of the Romans. She hefted her own sword and wished she'd taken the time to grab a shield. The short weapons of the Romans didn't look like much, but she wanted no part of a battle against them unshielded.

The Romans appeared impassive. Arienne shivered at their coldness and wondered who would win in a battle. None could match her people for bravery, but she had heard from Rhonwen about the cold efficiency of the legionnaires. They would not be as easy to kill as so many of her fellow warriors believed.

When the protests subsided, Marius continued as if he had never been interrupted. "These guests will stay near the Roman encampment in Trochu."

Had he said they would reside in Rome itself, his remarks couldn't have drawn worse favor.

"That's intolerable!" Setaine cried. "Wolves do not guard sheep." He stepped forward until he towered over the fat man. "The Lemarii are wolves, and Trochu is their den. How can you protect our hostages if they are forced to live amidst our bitterest enemies?"

Shouts of disapproval rippled up and down the line. Only silence issued from the ranks of the Roman soldiers though their horses trembled and jumped nervously.

Marius didn't flinch beneath Setaine's stare and Arienne suspected he'd said and done this many times. He had the bored, confident look of one who always has his way.

"What you fail to comprehend," he said, as if speaking to a child, "is that we do not request these guests as a sign of subjugation. We merely seek a sign of your good faith in our agreement of peace."

"Hostages," Setaine said. "Call them what they are."

Marius raised both eyebrows and sighed deeply. "Ah, then, hostages, but I personally guarantee their safety."

The muscles of Setaine's jaw worked wildly. "And if we choose not to provide these hostages?"

Marius looked at Setaine as one would a slightly stupid servant who failed to understand a command. His condescension rankled Arienne, and she wondered how her father could resist striking the Roman dead where he stood. Setaine didn't blink.

"You would invite disaster. After all, yours is a small tribe," Marius said, his gaze wandering along the clanhold walls before pausing on Arienne. "In these troubled times, bandits and marauders outnumber honest men. Such outcasts gladly kill those who resist and enslave the rest. Caesar would spare you that."

The only marauders Arienne knew of carried short Roman swords, wore red Roman cloaks, and walked in hobnailed Roman sandals.

Setaine, as usual, thought a long time before speaking. "This is not a decision to be made by one man. I will call a council to ask the others if they wish to accept the Roman peace."

"Just don't take too long. I'm expected in Trochu in two days."

Setaine raised a hand to signal the elder warriors to follow him, and strode back through the gateway into the clanhold.

Arienne caught his arm as he passed her. "Shall I come with you?"

"No, stay here. This won't take long."

"Do we die here today, Father?"

"I think not. I would play this out a bit and see what these Romans have planned before I commit to battle. A treaty gives us time."

She stepped back. Setaine might convince the others a treaty with Rome could work. She wasn't so sure.



Almeda had just disposed of the scraps from the rabbit she'd added to the stew pot when Mallec entered the room.

"Dunn leaves for Vannes in the morning," he said. "I thought you'd want to help him pack."

She nodded, already calculating how much food the lad would need for the trip. "How long will he be gone?"

Mallec frowned, and her stomach tightened. Surely this wasn't the moment she'd been dreading. She'd given up her family when she chose to stay with baby Dunn and Mallec rather than return to Trochu and the hated Caradowc — killer of both her husband and her son. Dunn was her child now, at least as much as Mallec would allow.

"How can I know what to pack if I don't know how long he'll be gone?" A day or a season didn't matter. She would miss him all the same. She still missed her real son, Gwair. She made the sign of the Mother across her chest in hopes that his ghost would one day pass through the Cauldron and rest easy before his rebirth.

"Pack it all."

She dropped her wooden spoon into the dust. Her heart went with it. She felt her age like the stones of the ancients on her shoulders. "Everything?"

"Everything he wants to keep. He won't be coming back." Mallec walked to the heavy iron pot and looked at the sliced vegetables floating in the broth. He lifted a dipperful to his nose and sniffed, then took a taste. "Rabbit?"

She scowled at him. "Snake."

He stared at her in surprise, then released the dipper into the pot.

Almeda wiped her hands on a rag draped over her shoulder and walked to the door. "Where is he?"

"We will *not* be eating snake," he said.

"Fine. Prepare something else, then. Where's Dunn? I want to talk to him."

"See here, Almeda—"

"No, you see here!" She tossed the cloth aside. "This enclave is the only family the boy has. You saw to that when you whisked him from his true mother's arms and swore us to secrecy about his parentage. You can't just send him away like some wandering bard come to sing for his supper, and not let him return."

He stiffened. "I did what had to be done to save him from Caradowc's vengeance. If we hadn't brought him here, he surely would've been killed." He took her hands in his. "Almeda, Dunn is a man now, and you've helped make him a good one. He's going to the Veneti enclave. It's a great honor. You should be proud of him."

"I *am* proud of him, but why must he go there? He has no desire to be a druid."

"He's not trained as a warrior. What else can he do?"

She frowned. "He's as hard-headed as you and would never suddenly change his mind. What did you say to make him agree to go?"

"I simply pointed out the advantages of being a druid, and that with his intellect, he could be quite successful." He scratched his head. "I still can't get over how a son of Caradowc could be so bright."

Almeda couldn't get over how Mallec could be so dim, but she said nothing. Just the thought of losing Dunn made her tremble. Irritated, she spat into the dust. "Why must he leave so soon?"

"Now's the best time. With all the trouble the Romans are causing, he needs to go where he can be of use. At the Veneti enclave, he'll learn skills I don't have. They need students like him."

"I still don't see why he can't remain here and help you with your work."

Mallec put his hands behind his back, and the folds of his robe hung like the bark of an oak. "He has no interest in it. Besides, he's meant for greater things."

"Is that the only reason?"

"No," Mallec said. "You know he *must* remain far from both the Suetoni and Lemarii clanholds, but that doesn't diminish his worth. He's too smart to stay here. His gifts would be wasted."

Mallec's unstinting praise for someone the druid had always treated more harshly than the others surprised her. Had he ceased blaming the boy for the evil committed by Driad Dierdre and her son, Caradowc? After all, it wasn't Dunn who sold the druid into slavery so many years ago. Everything was such a muddle. "I need to speak with him," she said.

"Certainly." He wrinkled his nose at the pot. "Then perhaps you could find something else for us to eat?"

She glared at him. "How about a nice, fat crow?"



Arienne watched her parents argue in alarm. Her glance jumped from her mother, to Druid Mallec who had only just arrived, and back to her father.

"I forbid it!" Setaine slammed the table with the flat of his hand. "If I must give the Romans hostages, I'll send someone who is at least *well*, Eleneth. You're not."

A smile touched the corners of Eleneth's mouth — a rare sight since she began showing signs of the wasting disease.

"I believe that's the first time you've ever 'forbid' me to do anything, Setaine. Why start now, after all these years?" She closed her eyes, fighting some inner pain. "Be reasonable. My going to Trochu as a hostage makes perfect sense. I haven't much strength to do anything more of value here."

Setaine stamped around the table in the great hall. "But if you stay in Gillac there's a chance you might recover."

Eleneth's short huff of laughter lacked humor.

Setaine beckoned to Mallec who warmed his hands by the hearth. "She won't listen to me, Mallec. Talk some sense into her."

The druid straightened and smiled at Eleneth. "There's always hope. It's spring, after all, the time of renewal."

Setaine growled like an ill-bred hound. "Becoming a prisoner of the Lemarii would make anyone ill, whether they started that way or not."

Eleneth shook her head. "I'm already sick. What's the sense of sending someone stronger?"

"The Romans demand two hostages from each of the smaller clans," Mallec said.

Eleneth gave him a wan smile. "Then if I go, the clan loses only half as many."

"But I lose everything," Setaine said, his eyes moist. "'Lennie—"

She hushed him. "You'll lose me soon enough anyway. 'Tis better I go now than have you remember me too weak to care for myself." She coughed and Setaine grasped her hand and held it to his lips, as if to blow his own breath into her.

Each of Eleneth's wracking coughs made Arienne want to weep, and only her determination to not show her grief kept the

tears at bay. Soon it would be kinder to give her mother herbs that would ease her passing through the Cauldron than to let her stay alive to bear such pain. She would not let her mother go alone to the Lemarii stronghold.

"I'll go with her, Father." She sank into the furs beside Eleneth and brushed a lock of brittle gray hair from her pale face. "No one will take better care of you than I, Mother."

"No. Absolutely not. Caradowc cares nothing about what's right, and..." Setaine suddenly sobbed and grabbed his daughter to his chest. "If you both left, I would truly lose all I have to live for."

"There is no one else you can send," Eleneth said, her voice a whisper. "That Roman peacock demands that all hostages must be family members. You can't send your sister — Modlen still has little ones to tend." She coughed again, her eyes on Mallec. "We're all there are, except..."

Setaine silenced her with a look, but not before Arienne noticed it.

"We have other family?" she asked.

Setaine grimaced as if from an old wound, and his look toward Mallec bore hard thoughts. "A distant relation we no longer speak of."

Eleneth frowned.

"Cernunnos!" Setaine shouted. "I'd rather fight than give up anyone. If it were just the Romans and not the Lemarii *and* their allies..."

Arienne was glad to have something else to focus on. "Will no one stand against the Romans?"

Mallec paced before the fire, his white robe appearing pale amber in the firelight. "Have you forgotten what they did to the Helvetii?"

Mallec's brown hair had grown thick with gray in the years she'd known him, and in all that time she'd never seen him as worried as he seemed now when talking about the Romans. "Caesar butchered thousands of them just so he could call himself a general."

Setaine clenched and unclenched his fists. "The Veneti are the most powerful clan in Armorica, and even they complied and made peace with Rome. If the big clans bow before him, what can we do?"

Mallec spread his hands. "Caesar has sworn to crush the Belgae, who continue to resist him. He wants assurances the clans here won't give him trouble while he wars against the north."

"Then this is the worst possible time to give in!" Arienne cried. "If all the clans rose as one—"

Setaine's bitter laughter cut her off. "Gauls fight *together*? There's too much bad blood. Can you imagine fighting alongside the Lemarii? You'd be at each other's throats before the first Roman fell."

Arienne couldn't let it rest. "We could fight with them if everyone agreed to put their problems aside."

Mallec pulled at his beard. "To rid Gaul of the Romans? Of course, provided—"

"Provided?" That's the problem," Arienne said. "No one will commit to anything unless they gain some advantage. Is freedom not advantage enough?"

"No. You're too young to understand."

Arienne swallowed her rebuttal. The argument was an old one, and neither Setaine nor Mallec would ever believe she was right.

"The choice is obvious," Mallec said. "We give up two hostages for a matter of months or risk losing the whole clan forever."

"So Rome wins without a struggle?" Arienne could barely hide her contempt.

A string of deer hooves clattered at the door. "May I come in?"

Arienne looked up to see her old teacher. "Rhonwen!" She ran to greet the driad she had not seen since the previous autumn. The two embraced and Arienne pulled her toward her parents, repeating the high points of the discussion. "We need an objective view," she concluded.

Rhonwen kissed Mallec's cheek in greeting, then examined her patient carefully. "Oh, Eleneth, I didn't know. I've been busy with the children and the farm. Why didn't you send word you were so ill?"

Eleneth forced a smile. "It's nothing."

Rhonwen brushed her palm across Eleneth's brow and cupped her cheek. "We both know that's not true. Come home with me. There may yet be something I can do."

"There's no cure for the wasting disease," Eleneth said, pushing Rhonwen away gently. "Everyone knows it. Would you taunt me with false hopes?" A new coughing fit seized her. When at last she caught her breath she sprawled on her back, exhausted.

Arienne tore her gaze from her mother and pleaded with Rhonwen. "She thinks she should go as a hostage to Trochu."

"Ridiculous. She's not fit to travel anywhere," Rhonwen said.

"I'm not fit for anything else," Eleneth gasped. She clutched at Rhonwen's hands with talon-like fingers. "We've been friends for years. Don't desert me now. I will do this."

Rhonwen agreed reluctantly. "I fear I'll not see you again."

Arienne put her hands on top of theirs. "I'm going, too," she said.

"No." Setaine stood. "I'll take care of her. She's my wife. My place is at her side." Stepping behind Eleneth, he rested a scarred hand on her shoulder.

She patted his hand. "Your place is with the Suetoni. Who will lead them if you're gone?"

"We've sacrificed enough for this clan already!"

Eleneth shushed him, and Rhonwen flashed a quick glance toward Mallec. The druid's face clouded, and then his usual inscrutable demeanor won out. Whatever he felt was now thoroughly masked.

"What do you mean?" Arienne asked.

Rhonwen motioned her to silence, and she bit back further questions.

Eleneth held one of Rhonwen's hands and one of Setaine's. "Does it matter if I tell you I *want* to do this?"

Rhonwen kissed her cheek. "It does to me."

"And you, husband?"

"I..." His voice trailed off as he stared into her eyes. "All right," he said, "but Rhonwen should go with you, not Arienne."

"She isn't family," Arienne said.

"Rhonwen can't go anyway. We all know how the Romans treat druids," Eleneth added. "The moment they saw her tattoos..." She didn't bother to finish the thought; everyone knew her meaning.

"Romans," Setaine grunted. "The only peace they offer is death."

"Or slavery," Rhonwen whispered, sending a hand to her scarred cheek, a memento of her own enslavement at the hands of Romans long ago.

Arienne had not seen her teacher touch the scar in years. Clearly, Rhonwen could not go anywhere close to Romans. "Then it's settled." She looked at her father. "When must we leave?"

"Too soon," he said, his hand still on Eleneth's shoulder. "Far too soon."

Arienne paced to the door and back again. She would bear herself with pride, bringing honor to the Suetoni and fulfilling the terms of the new agreement. She spit once into the fire to seal her secret vow — if her mother died in Trochu, those responsible would pay with their lives.