

THE CIRCLES OF STONE



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Preface

This unfinished story was written during 1982-1983. It is a loosely historical fiction set during the Roman conquest of Britain.

The consolidation within occurred in 2024.

Chapter 1

The Roman sentry Octavius began to doze. He had only intended to rest his leadened legs and eyelids for just a moment as he sat against a boulder on the damp island of Mona. The smoldering campfires of the cohort were of little use to him at the dark edge of their encampment, providing perimeter protection for his slumbering comrades. Since this was supposed to be a fairly routine mission for them to capture an important Celtic political refugee whose whereabouts was betrayed to them the sentry had little concern or anxiety for safety. No breeze could be felt nor could any rustling of any vegetation be heard to disturb the sentry's gaze. Even the starry late spring sky was at peace.

Suddenly, distant cries of alarm shattered the delicate still air from other perimeter sentries. Octavius's eyes flew open as he instinctively sprang to his feet, his hands choking the staff of his wooden spear. To his horror, the rocky cliffs guarding the main pass to the heart of the island danced with tall tongues of fire. A volley of thunderous incantations from silhouetted robed figures echoed curses down upon the now raised heads of the startled Romans. A second volley of incantations and curses were accompanied by the sound of hundreds of harps. This horrid symphony added a new dimension of fear to the soldiers who swarmed around in chaos like bees around a disturbed nest.

"Look!" cried a young soldier. "It's the Druids calling down the wrath of the gods upon us! We are doomed!"

Finally, a third chorus of curses and harps heralded the onslaught of hundreds of black-robed Druidesses. Their disheveled hair and funeral brands danced wildly amidst the magical rite as they seemingly hurled their bodies around with menacing fury. These wild motions had never before been dared in open air, but their effect on the pale Romans was devastating.

"It's the Furies, the Furies!" several soldiers cried. "The Underworld has come up to swallow us!"

This last onslaught was even too much for the seasoned veterans. In this moment of indecision, panic took hold of their senses.

Aulus Didius Gallus, the current Roman governor-general, tried desperately to rally his men.

"Battle formation! Battle formation!" he shouted, waving his sword menacingly above his head, as if to add to their fear of the Roman eagle. "You veterans know better than to let some crazy old women make you run in panic!"

But his voice was drowned out by the sound of a hail storm of darts. Scarcely a shield was raised in defense as many of the soldiers turned and fled like stampeding cattle.

It was at this point that trumpets were heard as the Brittons, men from the tribes of the Silures and Ordovices, rushed the remaining veterans. The Brittons were led by Arviragus, son of the infamous Caratacus for whom the Romans had been searching. By this point the Remaining Romans were hopelessly outnumbered. A brief but savage fight ensued with these Romans fighting like lions. Their short swords clanged with the sound of metal on metal. They killed many Brittons before most were killed themselves. Several, including General Didius, barely escaped.

"Look at them run!" shouted Arviragus to one of his comrades on horseback.

"Should we pursue them?" the comrade asked with elated eagerness.

"No, we accomplished our task," Arviragus responded, restraining his horse.

"Let us return with this news to my father."

Upon returning to the cliffs and caves where the druids and bards were hiding Caratacus, Arviragus was greeted with open arms by his father and the archdruid of Mona, named the Ancient One. Evelina, the sister of Arviragus, threw her arms around her brother's neck.

"We heard of your impressive victory, my brother!" she said with a proud smile and flashing blue eyes.

"You make a father proud to have a man like you as a son, and proud to be a Britton!" Caratacus said, grasping his son's bulging shoulders.

"It was not different from what you used to do routinely when you were my age, father," he smiled proudly.

"Well," he said flattered, glancing over to the Ancient One who nodded approvingly. "You must be hungry and tired. Evelina, take your brother over to the fire so he can rest."

After they had left, Caratacus turned to Elidurus standing next to the Ancient One, and said triumphantly:

"Your mother's plan failed to produce the desired result!"

"She will be quite angry with me when she learns that I refused her will," Elidurus said sadly as the mid-morning sun made his eyes squint.

The aging Caratacus reflected. "I suppose as Queen of the Brigantes her reaction was only a natural one to protect what took her entire life to gain."

"Maybe so, but even if it had to be your life or hers, there had to be another alternative." Then turning away, Elidurus clasped his hands behind his back and added: "It is hard to expect a person to betray the champion of his homeland to his own enemy."

"But you did not, my son," said the Ancient One.

"No, but my mother and brother did, and that taints the entire family name."

"Our magic has turned the mighty Romans away," said the Ancient One triumphantly, then added: "Caratacus is safe with us here."

Suddenly, monstrous clouds of black smoke then orange flames shot into the sky from the dense oak groves that surrounded the druid cave dwellings. The Ancient One's eye widened in terror and frantic pain:

"Oh, horror, horror! Sacrilegious fires devour our groves!" Turning to several druid attendants he shouted, "Sound the trumpets again or all shall be lost!"

Caratacus, shocked at the archdruid's panicked reaction, answered: "Druid! Where is your fortitude! I will preserve your groves! That would be least repayment I could make for your generosity in harboring me. Let those who dare die nobly follow my step!"

By this time, other druids and bards in their white robes scrambled out of their cave dwellings with confused cries of alarm and terror. Caratacus, being the true king and leader that he was, beckoned with drawn sword to these holy ones as he ran off to counter the sudden attack. The site of the aging Caratacus with drawn sword was enough to rally those who saw him, and many followed him to meet the foreign enemy.

"Ruthless gods!" cried the Ancient One, glaring at the sky with clenched fists. The pain of hundreds of dying oaks blinded his eyes. "You take away our souls! Fly my brethren, fly to the aid of a friend and king; fly to preserve your altars!"

But they were too late. The Romans had returned with a half legion of men from their ships anchored just beyond the straits of Mona. General Aulus Didius had the area surrounded with soldiers and burning oaks. This time he came prepared. This time superstition would not overcome their military experience. He would not be embarrassed again.

Caratacus and the other Brittons that were in the area engaged the Romans in a fierce but valiant fight a few hundred meters from the cave dwellings. With the main part of their forces stationed several miles away at the previous night's battle location, the Brittons were badly outnumbered. The Roman surprise was so complete that the

Brittons never had the chance to organize a plan of defense. They were no match for the Roman phalanx as it methodically moved step by step forward through the few hundred Brittons who dared hurl themselves sporadically yet wildly upon those short foreign swords to certain death.

Caratacus never knew of his son's position on the battlefield, nor did he see him fall mortally wounded by an arrow through his chest, shot by one of the many archers who walked protected by the iron Roman phalanx. However, when it did become obvious to Caratacus just how hopeless their situation was, he waved his arms which signaled a trumpeter to call off the attack. As the trumpet sounded, the Brittons ceased their attack, each warrior exchanging silent, confused glances with another, then threw down their weapons, some with a fury as if to bury the now obsolete weapon. Caratacus listened to the sound of their fury as he saw the pain in their eyes. The once proud muscles in his face sunk with their despair and defeat.

Seeing the Brittons throw down their weapons, Didius on horseback triumphantly raised a clenched fist as a signal to his trumpeters to stop the phalanx advance.

"Sire! Sire!" cried one Britton clutching at deep sword wounds on his left arm as he stumbled over to Caratacus. "Arviragus is dead! The Prince is dead!"

Those words fatally stung the heart of Caratacus with such a paralyzing pain that he stood cold and lifeless, stone-like, for several minutes before he whispered to several of his warriors, "Take me there..." As he leadenly walked toward his son's crumpled body, he felt his burned-out eyes swell with tears he thought had long since dried out. The events of the past few months had placed a heavy demand for tears on him.

Tenderly, Caratacus pulled the defiant arrow from his son's limp body. Then, lifting the body as one would a priceless object, he walked across the body-strewn battle field to where Evelina and the Ancient One now appeared. Both stood like pillars of stone in the steamy sun which glared harshly into their eyes, futilely trying to evaporate their tears. For Evelina, the tears gushed forth in rivers down her smooth, pale cheeks.

"Druid, where are your healing arts, medical herbs, your wonder-working spells?" Evelina pleaded as Caratacus placed her brother's body at her feet. The Ancient One silently closed his eyes in pain and defeat, hoping that this was just a nightmare.

"He is dead, my daughter," whispered Caratacus. "There is nothing these holy men can do now."

"This should have been prevented! Our magic should have prevented this." The Ancient One said in a low voice which seemed to reflect his agedness.

Didius and his seven man escort of soldiers with raised spears, approached the mournful group on horseback.

"Greetings, Sire!" Didius smiled and bowed mockingly before Caratacus. "We meet again, only this time is the last time for you."

"Leave us, Roman. We will not parley with you. Pronounce your doom and be gone!" The Archdruid spoke out. His hands trembled slightly. For the first time in his long life he was now face to face with his Roman enemy. He had always hoped he would face this threat with courage and pride. But his hands continued to tremble.

"Hear it and thank us!" Didius said. "I will spare your groves this time, but take your British king, his daughter, and Cartimandua's traitorous son. But if you ever again aid the foes of Caesar, all of your old oaks will submit to our axes and torches."

Samoathes, one of the Ancient One's closest supporters, stood stone-like in the background listening to the proceedings. He could remain silent no longer.

"Our magic stopped them once before," he said with clenched fists. "Let us fly with Caratacus back to the altars and invoke the wrath of the gods upon those who dare enslave liberty itself!"

"We Romans fight not to enslave but to humanize, to civilize the world!" Didius said seriously, then added while looking at the Ancient One with a tell-tale smile: "And to save the world from barbarians and barbarian religious practices."

An immediate decision was demanded of the Ancient One. All eyes gazed upon him as he tried desperately to think out a solution to this dilemma. If he stole Caratacus back to his altars, more blood would be shed. And then, what if his magic failed? He would have to pay with his sacred oaks and with his own life.

When Didius saw the Ancient One's eyes refocus upon him, he knew his decision.

"Fear not, Druid. Your magic is powerless against the might of Rome! See, we have returned!"

"Roman," said Caratacus stepping forward. "The malice of your tyrant might furnish heavier chains than you could ever have placed upon me. As long as Rome insists on enslaving all nations, she shall never know peace and tranquility. Old as I am and as withered as you see these war-worn limbs, like the rest of these people on these isles, they still will support the heaviest burden that your injustice dares impose, and, what's more, we shall overcome it! My free-born spirit still has scorn to show through my eyes to frown its defiance on you!"

These proud and noble words shamed the Ancient One. His decision cost the life of a true freedom fighter. Was saving many lives and the identity of the Druid religion as reflected by the souls captured in those sacred oaks worth matching perhaps an intangible philosophical victory against the forces of slavery! The Ancient One thought so at the time...

"It's time to go, King," said Didius as he glanced around him, feeling light breeze ruffling his scarlet cape. "There is a favorable breeze to carry us back to Rome."

Caratacus, who was gazing sorrowfully at his prince's body, looked up and scornfully said, "Cruel man! Do you deny a moment for a father to shed a few cold tears for his dead son? Here in high Mona shall his bones rest under sepulchral stones piled to the clouds. Please, Druid, this is my last request to you."

The Ancient One nodded silently.

"Come, my daughter, let us join your captive mother and my queen. We have much to tell her. Children, we go to Rome. Farwell, holy men!"

As Didius and his men led Caratacus and his family back across the battlefield, the surviving Brittons stood and silently held a fist to their hearts in final salute to their warrior leader. The eyes of Caratacus began to mist with sorrow and pride at this tribute.

Suddenly, Didius turned his horse around and spoke loudly toward the Ancient One. "You bought some time for yourselves, you Druids, but your time is coming soon!"

Leaderless, beaten, humbled, the warriors and druidic priests of the Silures and Ordovices looked to the Archdruid of Mona for some sign of encouragement. The Ancient One stood stone-like on a cliff overseeing the beach landing of some of the stragglers from their recent skirmishes with the Romans after the Battle of Snowdonia. The flowing white beard and white robe of the chief priest seemed to float like an albatross on the prevailing sea-breezes.

"It is true that Cartimandua has handed over Caratacus to the Romans?" asked one injured warrior being helped off the landing boat by his friend.

"This is what I have heard," grunted the friend, trying to support the weight of the wounded warrior as they disembarked.

"Then there is little hope of seeing home again."

"At least not for a while," nodded the friend, as crutch-like he walked his wounded toward the healing area. Then motioning toward the Archdruid high above them, he added: "But the Ancient One will give us strength."

"Sure," said the wounded one bitterly, "just like he did for the Deceangli at Flintshire before they were overrun by the Romans!"

The tired eyes of the Archdruid began to mist over as he realized the impact of the tragic scene which was unfolding before him. The channel between the mainland and the Isle of Mona was filled with fleeing craft bobbing like corks as they limped to the safety and shelter of the sacred healing island. The extent of their defeat was obvious now. He knew that the power of his priesthood was slowly diminishing with each passing moment of his old age. Feeling the ancient weakness growing in his body and spirit, he tried unsuccessfully to ignore it.

Hundreds of survivors from the recent campaigns against the Romans struggled, many awkwardly, out of their boats trying to help one another, to comfort one another, through the blinding agony of their injuries. They came for the magic healing powers that Mona offered through her priests.

Some had to be carried out on stretchers occasionally writhed in anguish as any jolting movement sent ripples of pain throughout their sword-lanced bodies. Blood-stained mustaches and hobbled bodies limped like a herd of diseased cattle toward the blankets and tents of the healing areas manned by the many political refugees of the island as well as the white-robed druidic priests and priestesses of the sacred order of the circle of stone. The ceremonial blue dyes of the many war-painted bodies mingled bizarrely with the flowing red blood, changing the blues of war into the purples of death and despair.

But the breeze began to slowly build into a gale as the sky began to form dark islands of its own. The waves began to swell, showing its teeth of white as it slapped its own insult to the injured in their boats.

"There he is!" shouted one injured warrior on an incoming boat. "There's the one!"

"Yes, he is the one our beloved Caratacus put his faith in," said another bitterly, "who persuaded Caratacus to believe that our fortress at Snowdonia would endure--"

-- because of his sacred curse on all who tried to defile the splendor of the area. What craziness! Mere words to stop the Roman spears!"

Suddenly, there were fearful cries of panic as several of the landing crafts began to capsize because of the new waves of fury, crushing the wounded before they even had a chance to move away. As more crafts began to follow in their wake, they too succumbed to the same fate. Many of the warriors who were not seriously hurt and already on land began running back and forth like cornered animals along the

beachhead in an attempt to help pull out as many of their comrades as possible from their endangered boats.

Unfortunately, some of the incoming boats began to take on large amounts of the swollen, cold salt water to the point of sinking. The boats' occupants could do nothing due to the severe extent of some of their injuries. Cries for help began to fill the air but were drowned out by the wind's attempts to silence their cries with its howls.

In spite of the melee, the Archdruid maintained his statue-like appearance. Soon, many pleading eyes and voices turned in his direction, as vulnerable children would submit to a protective parent. The Ancient One could withhold his emotion no longer. Moved with pity, he raised up his robed arms to angry cloud formations and commanded in a loud, stern voice:

*Hear me, O Wind and Sky, and have mercy on your miserable servants
Stave not your gentile breezes to soothe the afflictions
Of those who champion your dominion
Jupiter, Juno, give strength to my words
Minerva, calm your aquatic steeds.*

"He hesitated, waiting presumptuously for a response from the wind and waves, but it did not come. He felt the blood draining from his tired face and his hands began to tremble. Trying desperately to subdue his guilts and fears, he suddenly felt the presence of many eyes upon him. He tried again, only this time there was a hint of doubt in his voice:

"Hear me, O Giver of Life, and grant power to the command of your faithful servant. Look not away from our moment of pain and bid your windy steeds to stop their mischievous deeds. This I do command in your name!"

"Look! He is trying to stop the wind!"

"He can no more stop the wind with his words than the Romans with his curses!" cried several of the warriors in dismay.

It seemed that they were right. The Ancient One now knew this was the day he would have to relinquish his sacred command. He always wondered what this day would be like when his powers as well as his youth would abandon him. Wearily, he lowered his arms like that of the battle standard raised high over the fortress of Snowdonia. His stone-like appearance began to loosen like clay in a rainstorm.

The wind seemed to sense his defeat as it increased its fury, trying to snatch the Ancient One from his pedestal and hurl him into the rocks below. His flapping robe and the overwhelming heaviness of his body hastened him to make a decision. The scurrying of the warriors below, the crushing of several landing boats by the fists of waves, the shrieks of terror and pain and curses upon the weather and the Archdruid himself seemed to mock him, to jeer him into leaping from his pedestal of stone.

But the Ancient One found a moment of inner strength. As if to hold back the wind himself, he stretched his arms out one last time as his eyes began to water with the flowing air's intensity and the realization that this was the end of his reign, his day of reckoning. In a voice that rivaled the fury of the wind itself, he cried out:

"Hear me one last time, O God of the Sun, and hear my humbled words. Spare the lives of those who fight in your name, and I will journey to the land of the sacred circles of stone, and there will I give back my soul to your glory. Soothe the anger of your windy servants; calm the appetite of your watery subjects, and comfort the cries of the afflicted. With all the power I have left to conjure, this I do command in your name!"

And with one sweeping gesture of his arms, the straining wind began to subside as did the swelling force of the wild waves. Cheers from the warriors below brought a last weak smile of pride and gratitude as the Ancient One collapsed into a heap at the cliff's edge.

Chapter 2

They traveled for more than two weeks, covering the miles on horseback between the Straits of Mona and Salisbury Plain. The Ancient One rode upright, somberly gazing southward toward the forested horizon, spiritually preparing himself to accept the fate which awaited him out there. Riding respectfully behind him, Abaris and Samoathes spoke not a word between themselves. Since they were the closest surviving supporters of the Archdruid, as well as his personal friends, they knew that their job was to help him reach his destination and give support in any way, should the gods and his strength totally abandon him.

As time and their journey progressed, the Ancient One maintained his silence and fasting, taking a moment only for water or sucking on the juices of an herb to give him strength and courage. Stone-like, the chief priest weathered the late summer sun, as he rocked rhythmically to the swaying tempo of his pearl-white stallion and the whispering September song of the leafy breezes. Both Abaris and Samoathes also were mesmerized. Their bodies seemed to be mere extensions of that of their horses.

Days melted into nights, blending only memories of the present with the past. Sleep only came to delay, to postpone their journey. The Ancient one's dreams were filled with the tortured faces of his defeat. Sometimes those faces were of the blue painted warriors, but at other times they were of his own. However, his dreams always ended the same. All the faces became faceless shapes behind a dark figure whose mocking, smiling face loomed and leered at him, and finally started laughing triumphantly at him. The face was always in shadows. He stood before the figure with outstretched arms up to the suddenly appearing sun, surrounded by tall monoliths of stone. The sun seemed to grow ever larger, ever hotter. "Do not forsake me!" he cried repeatedly many times with tears in his eyes, but still the sun's presence intensified, swallowing the monoliths of stone, the laughing, silhouette figure, and finally himself. At this, covered with beads of sweat and a face to match the grey-white of his matted, long hair, he would spring upright from his blanket.

Abaris, in the bedroll beside the Ancient One, sat up and handed him the goatskin of water. Then, placing his hand on the Archdruid's shoulder, Abaris gently pushed him back down to his blanket. But the Ancient One never slept after that.

As the days and the miles slipped past, the deep lined face of the Ancient One began to erode into a featureless expression, showing only a dreamy distance in his sun-scorched eyes. He began to ride with more of a slump to his once proud stature.

His friends began to ride more closely to him. A journey which should have taken only little more than a week took them almost three. Toward the end of the journey, Abaris and Samoathes rode closely on either side of the Archdruid so that he could be caught if he fell out of his horse. Stubbornly, he refused any direct aid from them.

With just a few miles left, the tree population began to thin out, giving way to a more barren, rocky terrain.

Upon entering the Salisbury Plain, the Ancient One stopped, raised his eyes toward the noonday sun, and, breaking his silence, cried out in a weathered voice saying, "Soon!"

It wasn't until sunset that the weary travelers caught their first glimpse of the fabled Circle of Stone. Ghostly silhouetted against a blood-red sunset, the ancient trilithons seemed to transmit strange vibrations across the miles of still, stagnant air.

"The feeling is stronger than it ever has been before for me," the Ancient One said in a heavy voice as the three gazed at the sight before them.

"I feel a strange tingling all over," remarked Samoathes. "I have heard you both talk of the Sacred Stones many times, but I am glad that I finally have the privilege of actually experiencing this for myself."

Without turning toward Samoathes, Abaris answered, "You have earned it, my friend, you have earned it."

"Feel its power grow in your mind and in your soul," said the Ancient One. He suddenly appeared taller on his horse to the two men. A new vitality seemed to surge through his withered body as he turned smiling to his friends and added, "The fast is ended. Tonight we feast to prepare for tomorrow."

With that, they moved reverently onward for this mile before they made camp near the north-eastern rim of the sacred stones. There, under an endless field of stars, they feasted on roasted rabbit caught by the true arrows of Samoathes, the Provider.

After the meal was over, the three lounged near the fire. The night air grew crisp as the evening progressed.

"O Ancient One, what may we expect tomorrow?" asked Abaris as he stared through the flames at the Archdruid. "How may we prepare ourselves?"

"Look at the stars for your answer." At that moment a meteor flashed across the sky. "As the shooting star crosses the path of the morning star, so too will one life end and another life begin."

"But how will taking your life give us a new one?" asked Samoathes, raising himself up.

The Ancient One seemed almost to stop breathing for a moment as he looked from one concerned face to the other. Slowly, he stood up, turned his back to them, and the fire in his eyes and spirit reached out through the darkness to the ancient trilithons. "I am too long of this land. My powers are unfocused and my spirit is being pulled away. The foreign threat within our land will in time change direction and swarm over us like the pestilence that devours the oak, digesting our way of life. It will be the beginning of the end." Then, turning back to face them, he continued.

"Abaris, stand up!"

Abaris and Samoathes exchanged puzzled glances before Abaris stood up.

"It has been assumed that you, with the wisdom of your age and the vitality of your youth, would fill my sandals and dawn my hooded cloak. And that is as it should be for one who had been selected by the Council of Knights to assist me in the ancient rites. You have learned well. Your powers have grown to give you the title of the Healer. But the people need more than a healer. Because I failed Caratacus, I failed our people. With your healing power and his determination to keep us free from foreign intervention, our ways could have endured. But without him our people need someone to give them the burning inspiration to survive and to make a united stand so that our spirits may proudly gallop across the stars, rather than being chained to the earth for eternity. Your words heal, but they do not inspire."

These words stung Abaris. This pain filled his eyes and his voice when he asked: "If I am not the one to lead, then who will?" By now Samoathes too was standing, his bushy brown eyebrows arched in amazement.

Raising his arms toward the sky, the chief priest continued: "See how the smoke of the campfire rises endlessly toward the angry star of Mars? There is one who will appear tomorrow that has the armor of Mars and the power of Jupiter."

"But a leader like this goes against the very nature of our religion," challenged Samoathes. "We are priests and judges, not warriors and leaders!"

"The time has come for some of this change." With obvious disappointment on his face, Abaris sat down, clutched his knees, and stared distantly into the fire. Samoathes continued to stand. His frowning, lack of submission needed no words to convey his feelings to the Archdruid.

"Sit down, Samoathes," the chief priest commanded in a gentle voice. "I knew this would be hardest for you to accept." He paused, reflecting for a moment, then sat down before them.

"The Roman threat is not as serious to us now as it will be in the times to come. Their expansion now is slow and erratic. They do not challenge our ways yet."

"Then why do we need a warrior for a leader?" Samoathes demanded.

"Have you not seen the path that Mars and Jupiter have taken across the sky? Have you not noticed the increasing numbers of disease-ridden oaks? These are signs of change and doom. The numbers of our priests and priestesses have diminished. There is a spiritless submission to the coming of Rome. We cannot let this happen. The One-Who-Is-To-Come will bring back the fire of the spirit." The eyes of the Archdruid seemed to glow with a fire of his own which his two friends had not seen in a long time. After a few minutes of silence, Abaris asked:

"Tell us, then, about this One-Who-Is-To-Come?"

Stroking his bristly beard, the Ancient One answered: "There is not much I can say about him. We only have to look at the growing influence of the morning star in the heavens at dawn. Its brilliance causes the positions of the other stars around it to fade into nothingness. In fact, lately it has even challenged the dawn itself!"

"But Ancient One, even the morning star must eventually submit to the dawn," said Abaris. The fiery glow in the eyes of the Archdruid seemed suddenly to be extinguished as if by a great flood.

"Alas, there is the problem..." The Archdruid wearily stood up. The flames of the fire seemed to consume him. "Sleep now, for tomorrow's strength will soon be needed." With that, the Ancient One vanished ghost-like into the darkness.

"Abaris, what do you make of this? What are we to do?" asked Samoathes, his brown eyes searching the eyes of Abaris for some sign of reassurance. Looking away from the dancing flames, the eyes of Abaris meet the eyes of Samoathes, and, like a reassuring hand on a troubled shoulder, seemed to momentarily quell their turmoil. A weak smile dawned across the face of the Healer as he then reached for his bedroll, silently spread it out, and laid down upon it.

Shaking his head, Samoathes stood up, appeased only momentarily, and walked to the edge of the darkness. Like a beacon, his eyes tried to catch some glimpse of the shrouded Archdruid. He knew that the chief priest would be praying to Jupiter for guidance and strength, as he prepared for his last day. Sentence had been pronounced on him by the gods after Snowdonia, a severe penalty to pay for the sin of excessive pride, for challenging the power of the gods themselves. Samoathes went back to the warmth of the fire. A hint of autumn was in the air. He picked up the Ancient One's bedroll and reverently spread it out on the cool, damp ground, smoothing the creases on the blanket with his large, rough hands. He knew the chief priest would not use it, but this gesture seemed to satisfy the Provider's need to express his understanding of the Ancient One's fate to himself. It did nothing, however, to quell his troubled spirit.

For the first time in the twenty years that he had traveled with the Archdruid, Samoathes' heart was filled with questions and doubts about the final decision made by the Ancient One.

The work and priesthood of the Druids was never concerned about the changes in the political tide, thought Samoathes as he rolled out his own bedroll. Governments may come and go, but our work will still be here. He then laid down and fell into a troubled sleep with the same question going round and round in his mind: Why a warrior?

"It is time!" Abaris was startled by the voice. His arms moved swiftly to remove his blanket from his head. The Ancient One stood stone-like before him. His appearance reminded Abaris of the eroded trilithons they were about to see again. Both Abaris and Samoathes stood up. Unmoving, the Ancient One said again: "It is time! The Circle of Stone awaits us!"

After they broke camp, the three quietly rode the final mile to Stonehenge. The Ancient One led the way, sitting tall in the saddle, having somehow renewed his strength. A strange fire seemed to smolder in his eyes as they starred trance-like at the approaching sacred grounds. Abaris and Samoathes followed in silence, towing the supply horse and the spare horse. Even the animals seemed to sense a presence, especially the spare horse, as he snorted nervously at the ancient, electrified air around them. The darkest hour before the dawn was about to end.

The three entered upon the remains of a worn trail, the eroded outline of which could be traced to the Avon River two miles away. The ancient Circle of Stone stood guard silently silhouetted before them. The only sound that could be heard was the clapping of their horses.

The Ancient One dismounted first and took off his blanket and saddle and placed these on the ground. Then he hugged the head of his white mare, and with a tear in his eye, slapped her hind and set her galloping freely on the open plain. His two friends dismounted and tied their horses and the two others to some bushes. Abaris pulled a sack containing the ceremonial sword from the supplies on the supply horse and walked somberly with it in his arms. Standing silently before the Archdruid, the gaze of his sad eyes seemed to embrace the surprisingly tranquil eyes of the chief priest. He suddenly felt overwhelmed with a desire to hug the Ancient One as his eyes had just done. But the final ritual was about to begin, and to have done so would have weakened the solemn tradition of the moment.

By now Samoathes too stood at Abaris' side before the Ancient One. Samoathes had forgotten his troubled sleep as for the first time he saw the Ancient One not as a

mystical priest but as a tired, vulnerable grandfather. For an instant he felt like a mischievous young boy who had just been caught by the master teacher. His eyes immediately felt like stones.

The Ancient One sensed the range of emotions, smiled weakly in pity for them and also for himself. He then turned to face the trilithons, took a deep breath, and began to walk slowly forward. Abaris, holding the sword, followed, then Samoathes.

The tilting heel stone looked like a sentinel giving advance warning that they were about to enter sacred ground. Towering twenty feet tall, the natural sandstone sarsen was eight feet wide, seven feet thick, and shaped like a heel. Its lean seemed to point the way to the entrance which was several hundred feet before them. As they passed through a break between two banks, a ditch and a large partially buried stone, the three finally stopped in front of the great sarsen archway, part of a series of thirty, eighteen foot tall, seven foot wide, three foot thick, sarsen blocks. Four of these were capped with lintels, and of these four, two were spaced more apart than the others.

The strange, psychic vibrations which seemed to make the skin tingle with excitement, were at their peak as the three entered the sacred Circle of Stone. through the archway. Samoathes' mouth gaped slightly as he was overcome not only with the antique simplicity and beauty of Stonehenge, but also with the realization that this was the seat of druidic power throughout the Isle of Brittan. He had heard so many stories and legends about this sacred ground, and for the first time he too could experience these wonders, these mysteries that seemed to stretch back to the beginning of time itself. This was the source of the circle of psychic power which emanated to the very circle of islands which surrounded Brittan herself with a kind of magic shield which so far had prevented its total conquest by a foreign power. Everywhere the druids based, they left behind a link in that vast chain of force forever. Knowing this, Samoathes felt a spreading sense of pride throughout his body that pulsed with a heightened intensity as he entered the sacred Circle of Stone through the remains of the bluestone circle, and finally into the midst of the sarsen horseshoe itself.

The archway and the central trilithon of the horseshoe all pointed toward the northeast and the sunrise. There wasn't much left standing of the eastern sides of the sarsen circle or the bluestone circle, though many of the stones fell into heaps on the ground. Several bluestones, which may have at one time formed a horseshoe within the sarsen horseshoe, were found as weathered stumps. The remains of one trilithon lay collapsed in a broken pile on the ground near the center of the horseshoe.

The cloudless, dark sky was already beginning to lighten. One by one the stars began waver then disappear, except for the morning star whose resistant power

weakened only slightly. The Ancient One starred at this star momentarily as the three stood in a circle at the center of Stonehenge. The once formless silhouettes which seemed to cut holes into the starry sky began finally to be splashed with the cold light of a new dawn, a new beginning. As the trilithons began to show their worn, smooth, grey-green surface, there was little difference between their faces and the face of the Ancient One.

The archdruid put up his hood which made him appear ghostlike as he stood before his friends. As he extended his arms straight out from his sides, the billowing sleeves looked like wings. This, however, was a signal to indicate that the ceremony of the sword was about to begin.

Abaris and Samoathes put up their hoods also. With outstretched arms, Abaris held the sword for the chief priest. Slowly the Ancient One drew the sheathed sword out of its scarlet sack, and, holding it with both hands, held it high over his and said:

*Sword of darkness
Sword of might
Prepare this soul
For its final flight.*

He then placed the sword on one of the pieces of a fallen megalith. The mica in the fine-grained pale green sandstone seemed to pick up new light from the upcoming dawn as it began to glisten softly. His wrinkled hands were shaking slightly as he touched the sword again as if to smooth out the wrinkles in its sheath.

The sky was getting brighter, changing the colder grays to the warmer pale yellows. A lone bird began to greet the approaching sunrise with a song.

"Let us join hands around the sword," said the Ancient One quietly. With the Archdruid facing the brightening horizon and after the three had joined hands, he starred for a moment at the sword on the stone, make-shift altar, and felt the firm warm grasp of each of his friends. It seemed to give him that extra bit of strength that he needed for the next part of the ceremony. Then, looking through the sarsen archway to the sunrise over the silhouetted heel stone, the Ancient One chanted:

*O gods of fire and water and wind
Please hear the cries of your faithful children
Desert us not today in our time of need
Deliver us from evil with all due speed
For time without end we worship your names*

*Throughout all the land we make known your claims
Forget us not in eternity
Remember us for eternity*

Simultaneously, the three dropped their arms to their sides.

"Prepare yourselves to see god enter into our midst," the archdruid said. He then seemed to glide to the front of the stone and was quickly joined by his fellow priests: Abaris at his right, and Samoathes at his left. As the three stood there, they looked more like spirits, almost transparent, as their white robes began to glow slightly with the pale light of the dawn. The three awaited god, the dawn, to appear just to the right of the darkened image of the heel stone.

Then, seconds before the dawn, a large raven landed on top of the heel stone. Both Abaris and Samoathes gasped in horror and surprise at this ill omen. The Ancient One's eyes widened slightly, but he had expected something like this to happen. The real event, however, was about to take place. As the first flash of the new dawn took place, the crow disappeared. A strange figure appeared from behind the heel stone. It was indeed a strange sight to see: the darkened heel stone, the strange figure standing stone-like, and the brilliance of the morning sun, all in a row, flanked by the fading brilliance of the morning star, Venus!

"Behold! God is among us!" said the Ancient One in a loud, firm voice and with outstretched arms.

"Who is that man, Father?" asked Samoathes with bewilderment.

"It is He-Who-Is-To-Come!" answered the Ancient One. Then, turning to them, he added: "It is time for me to submit to the power and might of god, to make way for Him-Who-Is-To-Lead." His majesty seemed to melt into frailty. He put down his hood. His eyes did not glow with intensity or conviction. They seemed distant, no longer part of this world. Yet he seemed at peace with the destiny chosen for him.

He placed his hands on the shoulders of Abaris and Samoathes. His grip felt cold and withered. As he looked into their eyes, he forced a weak smile as he said: "May the gods be always with you..." Then, motioning toward the figure still standing at the heel stone, he added: "Serve him as you have always served me." With that, he grabbed the golden dagger and turned and walked slowly through the sarsen archway and out to the heel stone.

A feeling of sadness and emptiness crept into Abaris like the damp, evening air. Throwing off his hood, he walked over and stood at the archway to watch the final

scene. Samoathes did the same. The two stood lost in the archway like two abandoned children.

The first breeze of the new day began to ruffle the Ancient One's thin white hair as he walked out toward the figure. The golden dagger felt heavy in his hand. The figure began to take on a definite shape and form the closer the Ancient One went. And still the figure did not move.

Finally they stood face to face. The figure was slightly taller than the ancient one. He had the characteristic high forehead of his race.

"You are He-Who-Is-To-Come," said the Ancient One gravely.

The figure nodded slightly. "I am Biochan," he said softly.

The Ancient One could sense a strange but intense aura of power around this circle of stone. And yet there was an odd stillness about him like the surface of a pond before a steamy summer night storm.

"It is time," said Biochan, motioning with his arm toward the half-buried slab of stone. "That will be our sacrificial stone."

Even though the ancient one had tried to prepare himself for this moment, Biochan's words still made his hands shake even more. The brief walk over to the stone seemed endless. The morning sun was getting warmer, baking the dank smell of dew out of the air. His sixty-one years of life did not seem to amount to much. He still blamed himself for what happened in Snowdonia. The sins of excessive pride and presumption would not only cost him his own life, but had already cost him the life of his closest friend, Caratacus, as well as thousands of his fellow countrymen. The Archdruid's ears still rang with the cries of terror and torture from those men and their families on the beaches of Mona.

At the rock, the Ancient One turned to Biochan and knelt on one knee before him. Bowing his head, he presented the golden dagger to Biochan. The Ancient One stood up falteringly, climbed up onto the stone slab and lay down upon it. The on bended knee and with one, smooth sweeping gesture of his arms, Biochan withdrew the golden dagger from its sheath which he dropped to the ground. He raised the blade high to the morning sun as it flashed a signal of atonement to the gods.

"For the glory of the gods," shouted Biochan with triumph slightly bending up the corners of his mouth. "A life for a life: one destiny to end; another to begin!" He thrust the dagger swiftly and cleanly, deep into the Ancient One's heart. The Archdruid, who had focused his eyes on one small wisp of a cloud in the sky, groaned slightly, bravely, and gurgled his last breath.

Standing up, Biochan raised his eyes toward the heavens and said out loud: "It is done." He clutched the medallion, the symbol of his leadership. He was the new archdruid, appointed by the gods themselves, and this brought another triumphant smile to his young face.

He glanced back at the bloody body of the Ancient One. The gods had been appeased and now his mission could begin.

As Biochan began to walk towards Abaris and Samoathes, neither man spoke a word. Abaris was lost in a past memory recounting the time when, as an eight year old boy, he first met the Ancient One. Everyone knew of the archdruid who had already been in power for a few years. They knew of his wisdom, fairness, and silent nature, but few were honored with his presence, until one day he passed through Abaris' village. The whole town turned out to greet him. As he walked down the street leading his great white stallion, out of all the children who practically climbed on top of one another to catch a glimpse of this great man, the Ancient One's eye was caught by Abaris who was lucky enough to be standing at the front of the pushing and shoving. The Ancient One walked over, patted his head, and said to him, "One day you will be a healer of men." Abaris smiled sadly as he remembered.

Samoathes felt anger and resentment towards the man who took the life of the Ancient One. Yes, he considered it murder, even though this practice was called sacrifice. To him, there seemed as if there should have been an alternative.

Abaris and Samoathes walked through the Sarsen archway and stood silently in front of it as they waited to greet Biochan: Abaris with solemn submission; Samoathes with clenched fists.

"I am Biochan," he said to both of them with a polite smile and piercing eyes that seemed to make their heads transparent. Then, turning to Samoathes, he asked: "Samoathes, why do you challenge my authority? There was no other way. It is the ancient tradition."

Samoathes' eyes and mouth widened. His face began to color slightly. As he regained his composure, his eyes narrowed but he did not respond to Biochan's observation. Abaris stood in surprised silence as he wondered how he knew their names and their thoughts.

"I must be sure of the loyalty of both of you."

If the Ancient One thought that your leadership is for the best, then we too feel the same, and therefore will pledge our fidelity to you, my lord," said Abaris as he knelt on one knee with bowed head before Biochan. Reluctantly, Samoathes did the same.

Biochan's chest swelled slightly as he gazed upon both kneeling figures.

"Samoathes," Biochan called. He immediately raised his eyes to meet Biochan's. "Now is your chance to leave us if your heart is not with us." Samoathes' eyes looked away to reflect upon his work. An awkward silence followed.

Samoathes tried to think quickly. He knew that if he did leave, it would be considered banishment, he thought. Just because something is the tradition does not make it right. Time will soon tell if Biochan is the answer. His eyes then returned unflinchingly to Biochan's.

Biochan smiled in acknowledgement and then withdrew the still blood-stained dagger from its sheath.

"Hold out your right hand then," he demanded. He then placed the handle into Samoathes' hand. Sensing what was about to happen, the Healer slowly stood with disbelieving eyes.

"If you feel I murdered your archdruid in willful corruption of the high laws of Jupiter, then strike me dead where I stand now before you and Abaris!"

Samoathes' gaze shifted from Biochan's eyes to the dagger and then back again. This one knows my thoughts, he whispered to himself. But still, what he did was wrong!

Biochan's eyes burned like coals. Their gaze never left Samoathes' eyes. Samoathes inhaled sharply as he swiftly raised his arm high over his head. With the dagger poised to strike and with revenge flashing in his eyes, a moment of hesitation stopped its downward travel.

But the law is the law, he thought. It was then he realized that Biochan had won. He knew he would not kill him. This man must be sent from the gods!

"Your faith has been tested. Come follow me, O Provider, and be accepted!"

Biochan placed a hand on each of their heads and, looking up to the heavens, he said: "With these two sheep, we will challenge the wolf!" Removing his hands he added, "It is time for us to bury the dead."

The three walked out to the Ancient One. He had already lost his color. They stood for a moment in reverent silence, in disbelief, waiting for the reality of the situation to finally take hold. How could a man who had been such a constant part of their existence for so many years be suddenly, almost carelessly swept away from them? Abaris fell to his knees, and slowly, lovingly, picked up the Ancient One's cooling hand, pressed it to his lips, and reverently placed it on his blood-soaked chest. Samoathes did not move, did not even seem to breathe during the entire scene.

"Let us bury him in the mound," whispered Abaris. "He would be honored to be part of this holy ground." Both he and Samoathes carefully lifted the Ancient One's

body off the stone and carried him over to the mound which surrounded and protected Stonehenge itself. Biochan watched somberly in the background as the Ancient One's friends prepared to say goodbye.

When the burial was complete, no marker was raised as was usually the custom for an archdruid. Just being buried on these grounds was memorial enough.

Biochan then joined them for the last rites. With him in the middle, the three joined hands and raised them to the warming sun. The brightening light seemed to bleach out Biochan's soul. The sun felt good, he thought. For the sun, to the sun...he prayed:

Sun of god

Fire of life

Accept the soul

Of your servant in strife

The three walked slowly back to the horses. Abaris respectfully gave his steed to Biochan, and then mounted the pack horse.

Chapter 3

"The Roman governor-general, Veranius, is finally beginning to move against us in strength," Arviragus, the short-tempered, long-winded king of the small but fierce tribe, the Silures, said with clutched hands to Biochan. The long, drooping black mustache of the king hung well below his rounded chin. He began to tug at it unconsciously. A few silver streaks could be found twined together with the other long black hairs. "He has already been driving swiftly through our land.:

"What is it that I can do about this?" Biochan asked as he carefully studied the dry, cracked skin on Arviragus's face, looking for strengths and weaknesses in the designs of those cracks.

"You druids have always brought comfort and guidance to our people. Your powers and medicines have helped cure our sick. Your knowledge and wisdom have mediated many of our civil and spiritual problems. We are about to go into full scale battle against these foreign foes who dare to interfere with our way of life.

"The great Caratacus was right. If we do not stop the Romans soon, our land will be their land; our lives, their lives. Too many of our lives have already been lost trying to defend our homeland from their treacherous advances.

"Since the word is spreading that you have replaced the Ancient One as the Great Druid, the Archdruid of sacred Mona, the powerful one whose coming has long been prophesized by even the Ancient One himself, we ask that you consecrate our battle preparations before this, our last great battle."

Flattered by the compliment, the Archdruid stood up and looked over to Abaris and Samoathes who stood near the entrance to the large tent. Abaris politely nodded his approval. Samoathes remained expressionless, almost rock-like, except for his eyes which radiated their confused distrust of Biochan's actions.

"Do you have any Roman prisoners with you here?" The Archdruid asked the king.

"Yes, about twenty."

"I want a large, wicker figure constructed capable of holding those men and some of your finest white bulls."

A sly smile stole across the king's face. "I will attend to that right away," he said as they all exited his tent.

Abaris was about to follow when Samoathes put his hand on the Healer's shoulder.

"Wait!" Samoathes ordered in a hushed voice.

Abaris stopped and turned. "What do you wish to know?"

"What is he planning on doing now?"

"Atonement to the gods for lost Silurian lives," Abaris said unemotionally, waiting for Samoathes's protest.

"How does he plan on doing that?"

"This particular ritual calls for the building of a large wicker figure representing a vessel of lives to be substituted for the empty vessel of lives taken from the gods and the Silures by the Romans. The figure will then be filled with the sacrificial offerings, set afire, with the smoke carrying the souls of the offerings high up into the heavens, to the gods themselves."

Samoathes turned away, cringing with guilt for having to take part in what seemed to him a needless waste of lives. He would better understand the death of an enemy through military execution, but to kill in the name of religion somehow contradicted everything he wanted to believe about the existence of a god.

"Did the Ancient One ever perform such a - treacherous - ritual?"

"The ritual has been performed before," Abaris indirectly answered.

"You did not answer my question," said Samoathes wheeling around to face him. "Did he sacrifice human lives?"

"Only once," Abaris sighed. "Just after he became Archdruid."

"Why is it that Biochan must use human lives for this sacrifice.?"

"If you are to find the gods, my friend, you had better learn never to question the decision of an Archdruid. You must have faith."

"Faith in what?"

Abaris became angry and said with eyes blazing, "The Ancient One and I agreed to teach you about the gods because we saw a lost soul that seemed to cry out for direction and meaning. You begged us to teach you about god and the many other gods. And you agreed to keep an open mind, and not to question matters of faith, no matter how foreign or mysterious these may seem!" **(use flashback: attempt at suicide??)**

Samoathes stood embarrassed in the middle of the tent, with eyes cast downward, looking like a scolded child. After a pause to let the words sink in, Abaris continued:

"Sacrificial offerings are made to restore the balance between life and death. If the balance is not restored, we stand to incur the wrath of the gods who become angry

with our daring to take life into our own hands, before the time the gods have already chosen for us."

Samoathes raised his questioning eyes and asked, "But why human life?"

Abaris looked away awkwardly. "Because a human life must be repaid with a human life."

"Even you do not approve of human sacrifice!" Samoathes observed from Abaris's awkward avoidance to discuss the value of human sacrifice.

"It is merely a matter of faith," Abaris defended with eyes that only glanced at Samoathes.

"And yet you are called the Healer!"

"I must assist the Archdruid in all matters of faith and morals!" Abaris responded in embarrassed frustration as he immediately turned away and stormed out of the tent.

Late the next evening as a large yellow full moon rose over the misty bogs of the Silurian highland plain, the Archdruid emerged with his black hood up from the holy tent set aside for the visiting druids at the top of a small barren rise. The Healer and the Provider followed behind him.

Arviragus approached from the distance with four torch-bearing attendants. The religious Silurian king stopped suddenly with superstitious fear when he saw the two hooded druids raise their arms high toward the rising moon, their silhouettes accented in silver from the light of the moon. Adding to the mystery of the ritual scene, the patches of translucent mist hung above the damp but warm ground, climbing like a burial shroud.

"It is bad luck to interrupt the prayers of druids, especially an archdruid," whispered the king whose eyes seemed nailed to the two silhouettes, as their arms swayed rhythmically, hypnotically.

After a few brief moments, Samoathes, who stood carefully observing the two druids a short distance away, waved to the king, signaling him to advance.

"The Colossus is ready, my Lord," said the king to the Archdruid.

"We will wait until the moon is higher in the sky before we perform the ritual," Abaris said as he looked up at the partly cloudy night sky.

"Let us all go down to take a look at the arrangements," the Archdruid said.

The Silurian encampment contained only a few hundred warriors. The main force lay a few miles to the west. At the top of the hill which protected the northern flank of the encampment stood the wicker colossus within a circle of torches.

The basket-like colossus was made of some birch but mostly oak branches twined and fastened together to form a fifteen foot tall, human-shaped figure with large, short arms and legs. Most of the wood was taken from the forests of the Wye River valley which crept up the sides of the hills leading to the Highland Plain. It must have consumed many of the warriors' time to gather the materials and then assemble it in the short day. Logs were used to prop up the figure on all sides so it could support the weight and expected frantic activity of its sacrificial occupants.

There were small groups of warriors standing just outside of the circle of torches which separated the regular ground from the soon-to-be-made-holy ritual earth. No one was permitted within the ritual ring except the privileged ones.

Each group of curious on-lookers, some of which traveled from the main camp to the west, seemed to be engaged in the same pastime of pointing out the frightful features of the colossus. The fearful awe of each on-looker was also the same. Some had heard stories over the years of such druid rituals, but few had actually seen the event. Relief was expressed in whispered words by one another as each was glad he was not going to be the main dinner course to fill the belly of the wicker creature. Even though many were taught by the druids that life was merely a stepping stone to a more pleasant hereafter, it was only convenient for each to believe that when it wasn't his turn to die.

As Arviragus and the druids approached, many of the on-lookers began to bow away from them with lowered heads and large eyes that dashed between the giant creature and the holy druids as if to plead, 'Do not come for me!'"

The noble party stood in a momentary speechless silence before the wicker colossus. Obvious fear consumed the faces of the superstitious Arviragus and his men, as well as Samoathes himself. Abaris viewed the figure with innocent respect for its direct communication with the supreme deity, Teutakes, who possessed the great powers of creation and destruction. Although Biochan also viewed the creature with similar reverence, there was the growing inner voice of pride that made the Archdruid faintly smile with the exciting realization that this was the key to establishing his power and name among the superstitious and war-like Silures, an assertion of authority that would spread greatly exaggerated to many of the other Celtic tribes. Then, whenever Biochan would appear, his powerful reputation would garner immediate and unquestioned loyalty and respect. He would come to be known as the Dark Lord of Mona.

"What is the name of the Roman governor-general who hunts you?" asked the Archdruid.

"Veranius, my Lord," said the king, spitting out his name in distaste.

"So be it," said the Archdruid. He then extended his arms toward the colossus as he said in a loud voice: "There stands Veranius, the doomed leader of the foreign foe who dares to take over our land and extinguish the fires of our faith!" He turned to Arviragus and commanded:

"Collect the shields and swords of the captured Romans, and have your men decorate the figure with these, so that all men will know the Colossus to be Roman, so that the gods may know that our living sacrifice replaces lost Silurian lives."

During the early morning hours, when the moon hovered high above the lowland valley of the Wye River which sparkled like a river of jewels reflecting the moon's glow, the appeasement ritual was about to begin. The wicker colossus seemed to dance in the afterglow of the circle of torches as the narrow slits for its eyes stared blankly at the Talgarth gap which lay to the west of Black Mountain. It was the Talgarth gap a few days ago that the backbone of the Silurian force was broken by Governor Veranius and his two legions in a bloody battle that inevitably would mean the end of the forces of King Arviragus. It was in that gap, one of the main eastward entrances into southern Wales that Veranius made camp before what he considered to be the last battle for southern Wales.

"This final battle should be an easy one for us!" laughed the Tribune Octavius as he gulped down the last of his wine before retiring for the evening. The aged governor-general Veranius with disheveled salt and pepper hair nodded solemnly as he lounged also drinking wine in his tent. The Tribune continued proudly as his newly-polished bronze phalerae reflected the torchlight off the image of the deified dead emperor Claudius who once began the Roman conquest of Britain, some twenty-five years earlier:

"With minimal losses from the last battle, we are at full strength. I told you Legio Twenty knew these parts and could lead any offensive to victory!"

"You are right, Octavius," answered a drunk Veranius. "And your name as well as your legion will figure prominently in my next report to the Emperor. Rome needs good men like you!"

The Tribune smiled broadly as he too by this point was feeling the full effect of the victory wine.

Veranius took another long sip of wine from his silver goblet. "I say that if I can have just three good years of campaigning with brave men like you and smart military tactics like mine, I can easily tame this wild, barbarian land. I know I can!"

He slammed his fist for emphasis on the table before him, but as he did, the wine goblet in his other hand spilled some of its red contents onto his white tunic, splattering its blood-like stain over his heart. Annoyed with himself, the general tried in vain to hastily brush away the stain, but this served only to smear it in even more.

"I will leave the governor-general now to get his much deserved rest, for there will be much to do come daybreak," Octavius said as he stiffly stood up, saluted the governor and then exited the tent.

Veranius barely noticed the Tribune leave as sleep very rapidly seized control of his heavy eyelids. Lying there on his couch, the governor drifted quickly into a deep sleep, but with heavy, labored breathing.

In the last hours before dawn, the forces of King Arviragus stood armed and ready for combat as they circled the "Veranius" colossus.

"Bring forward the Roman prisoners," commanded Arviragus, "and have them climb up inside the colossus."

The Silurian guards led the eighteen weary, half-starved Roman legionaries at spear-point to the entrance of the colossus. The guards motioned with their spears for the men to enter the figure.

"How?" demanded the first legionnaire in line. "There is not enough room for all of us to stand!"

But the guards grunted "Up!" as they heavy-handedly pushed each one into the wicker figure.

"What is this? Some strange cage?" asked one injured legionnaire with a bandaged chest.

"Must be," returned the other as he struggled to climb toward the eyes of the figure. "But I don't like to see all that wood piled around the base of this thing."

"I've heard tales that these barbarians burn their prisoners alive as an offering to their gods," commented another as he stood shoulder to shoulder at the bottom, trying to help his injured comrades. That rumor spread fear rapidly throughout the imprisoned group. Wide-eyed with fear, several tried to thrash through the entrance and mouth of the figure, only to be turned back by the threatening guards.

Samoathes then led three white bulls ????????

With a long, solemn face, Samoathes slowly backed away from the figure. In the flickering torchlight he saw only a few faceless shapes peering through the eyes and mouth of the colossus. The Roman shields, arranged on the figure's chest to form a chest plate of armor, muffled the fear-quivering voices of its doomed inhabitants.

Samoathes thought to himself. I must not see their faces. This is war and this is an execution. Remember what they did to your sister! The gods will be pleased and lead the Silurians to victory!

As he turned his back on the "Veranius" colossus, Samoathes' facade of fabricated justice seemed to give him the tolerance he needed to witness the upcoming ritual. But it wasn't enough. His inner voice cried out in unison with the angry and terrified voices within the colossus.

Abaris put his hood up as a sign for the ritual to begin, and then he entered the circle of torches. The Healer took an oak branch and reverently raised it high over his head praying:

*O mighty oak that reachest high into this early morning sky
And receiveth its power and glory from where the gods lie
Open the mysteries of your creation
And make easy our search for true salvation
Hear our pleas we make unto you
Receiveth our gifts we send unto you.*

Abaris then slowly lowered the branch and walked out of the circle toward the Archdruid who waited patiently a short distance away from the colossus.

Once Abaris appeared from within the circle of torches, he stood at the circle's outer edge. He then raised high his arms, still holding the oak branch in his left hand, and shouted for all to hear:

*O mighty oak that endurest the fire -
Fire our souls with a burning desire
Hear our pleas we make unto you
Receiveth our gifts we send unto you.*

This chant was repeated continuously until Abaris had made his way back to the Dark Lord from the circle of torches. Each torch was now manned by a faceless Silurian warrior. The Archdruid's face could not be seen within the dark abyss of his hooded robe. Arviragus stood proudly nearby in full battle dress wearing his bronze helmet that was topped by the short horns of the sacred white bull. Samoathes watched anxiously by his side, his breathing becoming shallower and more rapid.

Upon reaching the Dark Lord, Abaris bowed his head to him and presented the oak branch as a sign of the transference of power from the gods. Biochan took the

branch into his right hand. Both then returned side by side to torches where each then took a torch from one of the Silurian attendants and entered the circle. Only the druids could now walk on the sacred ritual ground. The Archdruid stopped and, closing his eyes, looked up to the heavens and prayed in a loud, commanding voice:

*O mighty and powerful god of the sun
Who hath created us to worship and serve
Protect us from our foreign foe
Who threatens your servants with extinction
Lead us not astray from thee
But rather help us to be set free
And restoreth the balance between life and death
That guides the universe safely back to you.*

*Here stands the foreign foe Veranius by name
Whose hunger and thirst for power defies thee
And whose appetite must never be satisfied.
Accept from us these sacrificial offerings
That fill his belly with more than he can feed
To devour his own entrails and to consume his own life
In repayment to restore the balance of life.*

By now, all of the Roman prisoners were shouting either threats or pleas as they heard their sentencing. The Archdruid then extended the oak branch toward the colossus and continued. His voice deepened with anger:

*The thunders of wrath doth slumber in thee
As in this mighty oak
Where these be the thunders that in an instant roar
With a hundred mighty earthquakes
And a thousand as many surges
Which rest not nor know any time.*

*One rock bringeth forth a thousand
Even as the heart of this man Veranius doth his thoughts
For woe shall be to him
His iniquity shall be great.*

O ye that rage in the sun

*Buckle your armor and visit us!
Bring forth the faithful of Bile
So that the Lord of the Sun may be magnified
Whose name amongst ye is wrath!
Move therefore and appear
And unleash the mysteries of your creation as well as your wrath!*

With a mighty heave, the Archdruid through the oak branch onto the pile of wood surrounding the base of the figure. A death-like stillness hung over the wicker figure and all within it like a burial shroud. The victims within dared not make a sound for fear of the power of the curse.

The Dark Lord raised his torch high for all to see:

*O thou mighty light and burning flame of comfort
That unveilest the glory of the sun to the center of the earth
In whom the great secrets of truth have their abiding
Be thou a window of comfort unto us
Lower the heavens beneath you
Let them serve you.*

*Govern him who dares to govern you
Cast down and destroy the rotten
Consume them within the fires of your wrath
Arise, move, and conquer!
Open the mysteries of your creation
And make us partakers of your undefiled destiny!*

Flinging his torch into the wood pile, the Dark Lord shouted: "Consume him; destroy him!"

Abaris echoed with extended palms: "Consume him; destroy him!"

Biochan whirled around with devilish glee in his dancing dark eyes. The moment the torch hit the pile of wood, shrieks of terror and panic arose from within the belly of the colossus as the worst fears of the victims were finally confirmed. Biochan then pointed first to the torches which encircled the ritual ground, and then motioned, pointing to the wicker figure, a signal for the Silurian attendants to add their torches to the growing flames as well. They responded immediately with excited shouts as they attacked the "Veranius" figure with an impassioned, animal-like frenzy. Within minutes, tongues of yellow-orange flames were quickly and greedily lapping up

the sides of the Roman-like figure. An excited cheer went up from among the Silurian on-lookers.

Arviragus turned to Samoathes, who stood gaping at the barbaric spectacle, and shouted victoriously: "We will cast the Romans back now!" The desire for him to become personally involved in the Roman governor's destruction quickly drove the king to seize a spear from one of his warriors and, racing to add momentum to his throw, flung the weapon at the heart of the figure now engulfed with flames that seemed to leap off the head and shoulders of the colossus. The spear found its mark but its protruding position did not last long for it too began to burn.

As Biochan and many of the Silurian warriors danced around in fiendish delight, the screams and cries from the Roman legionaries fell hushed by the roar and crackle of the consuming flames.

The governor-general Veranius began to have a nightmare. He found himself encircled by a wall of flames. As he pleaded for help, he heard only frenzied laughter from beyond the flames. The old veteran's heart raced as his writhing body became drenched in a feverish sweat. His pleading turned into a terrorized loud cry for help. The Tribune Octavius and three of the governor's personal attendants rushed through the tent's entrance only to see Veranius thrashing dreamlike face down on his couch. By the time Octavius reached Veranius to try to wake him, it was too late. Veranius gasped loudly as his eyes flew open wide in painful terror while his hands clutched at his heart. He then sighed his last breath and became still. His eyes still open seemed to gaze into a horrified oblivion, as his hands still tightly clutching his tunic had to be peeled away by Octavius. All that was revealed was the blood-like wine stain over his heart. His garments were drenched in a hot sweat. Octavius looked up into the worried faces of the governor's three attendants and shook his head from side to side. The Tribune knew that this would be a temporary end to the conquest of Britain until new orders and a new leader could be sent from Rome.

Chapter 4

"Hail Caesar!" stiffly proclaimed the dusty Roman messenger. General Didus sat wearily at the table in his simple but comfortable officer's quarters, sipping wine from a goblet as he read through his weekly reports. The sun was just rising over the city of Londinium.

"come forward," the general instructed the messenger with a sigh. "Good news, I hope." As Didus unfolded the paper, breaking the Imperial seal, the messenger remained at attention.

The general's shoulders began to droop as if under a heavy weight:

Seutonius Paulinas will be arriving soon to take command of the territories of Britannia as governor-general. Assist him in every way possible with this difficult task.

Nero

"I was sure I'd be the one to get this!" he said disgustedly as he crumbled the note and hurled it violently at the messenger's face. "Now get out!" After the messenger fled, Didus stood up, snatched the pitcher of wine off the table and began to guzzle its contents. He suddenly had a bitter taste in his mouth which triggered in him an uncontrollable desire to hash it out...

A few months later in the governor's private quarters in Colchester, Didus was summoned.

"By your command, Sir." Didus stiffly snapped to attention.

"At ease, general." Governor-general Paulinas said in a relaxed tone. "Sit down. Make yourself at home. Some wine?" The governor, lounging in his chair, reached over to the wine on the stand and poured two goblets full. Didus did not reply as he sat in the chair opposite the governor.

Paulinas sniffed the wine's bouquet. "A fine batch this time," he remarked as he savored the wine's taste. His clean-shaven face and newly trimmed hair made him look younger than a thirty year military officer normally would. His white toga was made of the finest imported fabric from somewhere in the Empire.

"I think it is time that you and I understand each other," the governor said as his brown eyes carefully studied the unshaven, dusty features of Didus as he was

greedily draining his goblet. "Rumor has it, that you expected to be made governor-general. Is that true?"

Didus leisurely placed his goblet on the stand, and, looking up at Paulinas, stared into his eyes saying in a slightly defiant tone, "As you say, sir!"

"Off the record, I can understand your resentment of me, but-"

"You can't even begin to imagine, sir," Didus smiled calmly. "I may only be a twenty-five year veteran, but twenty-two of those years were spent here in this barbaric hole. I know the Celts better than any officer."

"I know, and that is why I must have your cooperation."

"The only reason you are governor is because your father was a highly respected member of the Senate." Didus sprang to his feet. "Well let me tell you, governor-general sir, fine clothes and good table manners will not tame this land!"

Paulinas stood up. "My appointment was an order which both of us must obey and carry out to the best of our ability, for the glory of Rome. You are a professional; you must accept that."

"As a professional, you will have my cooperation. As a private citizen, you will have my distaste and my disgust. Just so we understand each other, sir!"

"Just so you understand me, I would have hoped our relationship would have been more compatible, since we will be working closely with one another."

"If you will not be needing me further, sir-" Didus started to ask with head held high.

"Dismissed!" Paulinas abruptly said. He knew that without the loyalty of his closest officer, his job would be very difficult to learn what the Celtic tribes were really like, or to know who those strange people, the druids, were.

Prastatagus lounged lazily on his couch, gnawing on roasted meat which he greedily tore away from its bone with his yellowed teeth like a hungry wolf. His royal garments were grease spotted and speckled with crumbs of bread and other food particles.

"More food and drink!" he shouted to his servants as one filled his cup while another brought him more meat. All of his personal servants were young, attractive females. He made sure of that.

He belched loudly. "My compliments to the cook!" His golden rings and bracelets sparkled from the sunlight streaming through the open window into his room. The glittering jewels mesmerized the eyes of his servants as they waited on him,

hand and foot, eagerly hoping somehow that their services would please the king of the Iceni.

His toothy smile still showed particles of meat caught between his teeth. He grabbed the thin, white arms of one of his servants as he laughed heartily: "Come here, my lovely little wench! Clean these crumbs off my royal body!"

Julia knew what that meant. Sitting next to Prastatagus, the skimpily clothed, sixteen year old girl gingerly brushed the multitude of crumbs off his bare chest. The smell of burnt flesh hung heavily on the early summer air in the large chamber.

"Some crumbs have fallen within my garments. We mustn't let that happen," he smiled slyly, hungrily eying the well-rounded chest like a fox eying a chicken.

The three other servant girls stood like statues, watching fearfully what was about to unfold. Julia did not resist, however. A slight smile of anticipation creased her delicate face she slowly raked her hand across the sparse hair on his chest. The further down the chest her hand went, the farther up his hand went, first from her soft, warm leg then with clumsy eagerness up toward her teasingly exposed breasts.

"So!" a harsh voice shouted from the doorway to another chamber. "You two are at it again!"

Julia was at her feet, clutching to close her garments around her breasts. Her head was held high as her eyes danced in defiance.

"No, my queen, my servant was just-"

"- I know what your servant was just doing!" Boudicca, Queen of the Iceni and wife of Prastatagus said. Her long, red hair seemed to smolder.

With a wave of his hand he dismissed his servants. Groggily, he staggered to his feet. Then the dark cloud seemed to pass across his features as his eyes glared at her from across the room.

"Woman! You have no right making a scene like that in front of my servants. What they do for me is my business, not yours!"

"Not mine!" Boudicca screamed as she advanced menacingly with fists clenched so hard her knuckles were turning white. "It is my business as long as you are my husband."

"As long as you are my wife, you will submit to my desires because that is the way."

"Your way! Your way is with any female on two legs!"

"And why shouldn't it be!" Prastatagus was beginning to sober. "You can't even give me a son, an heir to my throne!"

"How dare you blame me for that! With two beautiful daughters, the next child has to be a son."

"I've lost interest in you," he said disgustedly as he turned his back on her. He then reached for more wine.

Shocked and confused, Boudicca had no response. Her fists unraveled slowly, painfully. Without a word, she turned and walked quickly out of the room, her eyes swelling but refusing to flow.

"Mother, you look upset," Boudicca's younger daughter observed. "Want to talk about it?"

"No, I'd rather not," Boudicca said softly, gently touching her daughter's long reddish brown hair. Then, she seemed to summon every ounce of courage from deep within her as she held her head up high and spoke in a commanding voice: "This is something I must work out for myself." With that she continued down the hall and out of the house.

The leaves of the big oaks rustled lightly from a gentle June breeze as three birds chattered cheerfully. Boudicca began walking through the woods, deep in thought. She knew when she agreed to marry Prastatagus that he was actually renowned for his many romances, and that he always preferred young women because they had more sexual drive than women his own age. In fact sixteen years ago, he lustfully perused her, not only because of her appealing physical characteristics, but also because she was the first woman he met who actually had a political sense about her.

But Boudicca was often in the habit of deluding herself. She thought that somehow things would be different after she and Prastatagus were married; that somehow Prastatagus would change and fall madly in love with only her. She had her mind to offer to him.

A few months after they were married, she became pregnant. She remembered a day very similar to this day when, while she was about to deliver their first daughter, she walked in on Prastatagus and a messenger girl in bed. Since then there had been many days like this one, and always the result was the same. She forgave him, not because she loved him, but because she believed that marriage should be forever, and she never wanted to return to her poor previous way of life where the only way she got by from day to day was by selling whatever service she could offer.

But today's letdown was too much, she thought. I am worth more than to be treated like this...

Boudicca plucked an oak leaf from a nearby branch. It felt cool and silky between her fingers as she studied its vein pattern. Confused and directionless, she felt abandoned by life, left without a purpose. Angry with herself for allowing herself to be taken advantage of for so many years, she crushed the leaf in her hand and let it fall crumpled to the ground. As she approached a clearing in the oak grove, she heard a strange voice chanting:

*O mighty is the strength of thy majestic limbs
With leafy palms raised high to praise
O grant unmove-ed strength of purpose now to me
My dreams will grow on length of days*

The hooded, dark figure stood at the center of the clearing with arms raised high and palms outstretched. Without turning around, the figure spoke again:

"I have been waiting for you, Boudicca, Queen of the Iceni." The figure turned to face her. His golden, sun-shaped medallion stabbed her eyes as it caught the sun from around his neck.

"Who are you, and how did you know my name?" She asked as she stood frozen at the edge of the small clearing.

"Everyone on either side of Snowdonia knows of the famous wife of King Prastatagus."

This patronizing compliment did not offend her. She felt very vulnerable, and wanted to hear more, like this. The stranger sensed this.

"It is said that you are the real voice of the Iceni peoples, and that when Boudicca speaks, men listen."

"Not all men, sir," she said somberly.

"All men, my Queen," he said as he bowed slightly and began to approach her. "That is why I have come."

"Who are you?" she asked holding her head high, having regained her regality. "I recognize the medallion of an Arch Druid, but you are not the Ancient One. Or are you from the North?"

"I am Biochan, Arch Druid of Mona," he said with an air of authority. "The Ancient One has yielded his claim on this world to me."

"A true loss." Boudicca lowered her eyes briefly.

"A true fool," Biochan said harshly. "The time non-political intervention is past. The Roman invaders have made it clear that they are bent on our extinction! The time to act against them is now!"

"So what do I have to do with this?"

"Until the time is right for another general uprising, resistance to their rule must be increased. That is where I hope you and your people can be of service."

"Our position is very secure right now. Why should we disturb this?"

"Because, my Queen, your husband's arrangement with the Romans is mostly for his own gain. These lands belong to Brittons, to be run the way Brittons see fit."

"Prastatagus still has control."

"Only as long as Rome desires it. They are still to come and go in this land to raid other tribes who do not submit willingly to them."

This last bit of information shocked Boudicca into realizing the irony of the situation in which she and her people were involved.

"All this time I blindly accepted our position with the Romans as having been a rather clever arrangement," Boudicca said slowly. "But still, they pose no threat to us."

"You disappoint me," Biochan said as he shook his head. "You have shared your husband's blood too long." He clasped his hands behind his back. "The other tribes are being destroyed while you have your cozy arrangement with the trusted Romans!"

Feeling uneasy embarrassment, Boudicca lashed out; "Of what concern is politics to a man who is supposed to be so concerned with afterlife?"

"It is exactly that concern with the afterlife that makes me so concerned with this life! If a human life cannot be given in retribution for losing a life, the gods cannot be appeased. The balance between life and death must be restored or the wrath of the gods will be upon us."

Boudicca turned her head away skeptically. Biochan sensed her view.

"Maybe this will make more sense. Rome views our religion as barbarous, and has vowed to civilize us by exterminating us." Biochan to pace. "The civilized Romans are going to civilize us by barbarically wiping us out and any others who get in the way of Rome's attempt to bring civilization to the barbaric peoples of the world!"

Biochan clenched his fists as he gazed up at the tall, proud oaks which surrounded the clearing. He shook his head sadly and relaxed his hands. Boudicca watched him closely. For the first time during the entire conversation, she actually noticed his face and features. Here was a man who showed conviction and concern for others, she thought. He suddenly seemed very attractive to her. Her brown eyes

studied every shape and curve of his young, slender figure; his neat, sensitive face; his piercing eyes.

Without looking at her, Biochan reflected knowingly. "I feel the same way about you." Then, turning to gaze upon her slightly worn features, he said reaching out to touch her chin, "You are as proud, as strong, as majestic as these oaks."

A slight smile warmed her face with gratitude. Biochan then turned his gaze upward again, as he walked into the center of the clearing. Raising his arms toward the tree tops, he added, "This is what life is all about. Life is significant only in so far as it can be used to bring glory and honor to the gods!"

Boudicca walked out to him. "There is little I can do to remedy this situation, not as long as Prastatagus still rules."

"Ah, but that is where there is something you can do," Biochan said with a twinkle of the devil in his eyes. "Use your power to influence your people secretly to begin interference with the Romans."

Boudicca put her hand to her mouth as she took a step to the side. She was quiet for a few moments. Turning toward Biochan, she asked with a sly smile, "What do I get out of this?"

"Let's just say that once resistance to the Romans begins to grow in this area, your husband will fall out of favor with Rome, and be overthrown. And since you would be the leader of the resistance, the kingdom may end up yours. Besides," he paused, then touching his medallion, he added, "after discovering your husband with another woman, and knowing his history of infidelity, revenge would seem to be appropriate here, don't you agree?"

Startled, she asked, "How could you possibly have known about what has just happened between my husband and I?"

Touching his medallion again, Biochan smiled. "Do you not believe the Druids, especially an Arch Druid, to possess certain - powers?"

She nodded and smiled weakly. "We Iceni will help all we can."

The first light of day began to warm the cool night air. The Roman sentry on the fortress walls stood resting on his spear with his cloak drawn close to keep away the icy fingers of night. Although the sun would be rising soon, his eyelids couldn't resist the temptation to close momentarily, as they had been doing for the last ten minutes. He looked forward only to the end of his shift and the warmth of his bed roll. The camp lay still behind him, stirred occasionally by a guard or two as they made their rounds through their fortified island at the edge of an Iceni plain.

Lack of the sentry's familiar movement on the west and in the compound itself was a signal to the awaiting Iceni rebels. A small, lightly armed band of about one hundred warriors quickly dashed the several hundred yards distance between the underbrush edge and the west wall of the compound. The scaling ladders were silently raised against the short, fence-like wall.

Like cats, the men swiftly and quietly ascended the ladder and spilled onto the catwalk. Before the dozing sentry had a chance for a reflexive reaction, a swift blade slashed through his throat, spurting its liquid contents out and then down the front of his tunic.

Several archers immediately took positions to search out other sentries. The twang of bows sent arrows on their ways. All found their marks. Several sentries crumpled to the ground in a heap below the catwalks.

Most of the Iceni raiding party flowed swiftly down the ladders from the catwalks to the camp below, while the archers kept their stealthy vigil, trying to delay detection for as long as possible. The raiding party broke into two groups. One group set their torches on fire from nearby campfires as they proceeded to set ablaze the large, wooden granary holds, the food source for the patrolling cohorts and the camp itself. The other group set fire to the barracks. The fires began to hiss and crackle as the flames licked their wooded sides, filling the clean camp air with their black smoke.

Cries of alarm and terror quickly rose from the barracks as the weary Romans, most of them aged, seasoned veterans, streaked out of the flames, some like hornets from a disturbed nest, others like human torches.

The first waves of terrorized Romans did not have a chance at defense since the Iceni stood ready to hack them apart. As soon as the Roman horses were set free to scatter throughout the compound, an Iceni trumpet was sounded from the catwalk, signaling the job was done and time for retreat.

The south gate of the compound flew open as many of the Iceni began to flee from the reorganizing Roman forces who began to fight back with such a vengeance that many raiders fell in their path. The Iceni archers were kept very busy trying to protect the fleeing raiders, but they too were being picked off by Roman archers.

Being much more in number than the small Iceni raiding party, the legionaries successfully defended their camp and began to pursue the raiders through the gate and outside of the compound. But this is where the Iceni had the last strategic move. From the bushes at the edge of the plain sprang nearly fifty more archers and began to spray arrows volley after volley into the advancing Roman horde. This surprise startled the Romans, forcing most of them to retreat in terror back to the security of

their walls. Still many of them fell looking more like human pin cushions than like noble Roman soldiers.

This turning point was enough to give the Iceni time to mount their nervously awaiting steeds and thunder off toward the foothills of the Snowdonian mountains, abandoning as they did their wounded comrades screaming with pain. Seeing that the attack was over, several cohorts of cavalry had regained their horses and dashed from the compound in a mad pursuit of the raiders. As they charged from the camp, they vengefully trampled the torn, wounded bodies of the remaining Iceni. Those who were spared from this onslaught were not so lucky long. Several bands of legionaries began checking the bodies for survivors. Those that were found alive were vigorously hacked to death.

Chapter 5

The evening sun painted the caps of the endlessly receding waves with a rainbow of transparent colors. Abaris stood silhouetted atop a cliff on the far side of Mona. Behind him stood two stone-like attendants. The oak leaves on the trees behind them seemed to whisper softly some unspoken message. Abaris sensed its meaning. He turned to his attendants and said, "Let us return to the Sacred Place. A visitor is coming. We will receive him there." The three made their way back to their horses.

"Abaris! It is good to see you again, my friend," said a battle-dressed, tall-looking, older warrior. The steel and gold inlaid handle of his Roman sword glinted in the torch light. The sword was his prize booty and possession. His right hand never seemed far from unconsciously stroking its simply designed scabbard with pride and security.

"Venutius! It is good to see you also!" returned Abaris. Both men grasped each other's arms. "But what brings you so far and in such battle dress?"

"War!" Shouted Venutius, restored king of the Brigantes. "The Ordovices have been raiding our borders, stealing our cattle. The whole situation has gotten to this point with both of us massing troops at the border waiting for the other to attack."

Abaris became saddened. "This is mournful news, Venutius. The last time there was battle between the Brigantes and the Ordovices, I lost my father and two brothers. Those were dark days for our people. If not for the Ancient One-" He suddenly stopped, frozen by the past memory.

Seeing this, Venutius kindly said, "The Ancient One saved many lives on both sides that would have been lost had the fighting continued. That is why I am here, Abaris. Biochan must intervene for us. You Druids have always been respected for your wisdom. We need not to fight among ourselves while a foreign force walks upon our soil."

The two stood silently for a moment against a torch-lit background which illuminated the sacred circle of stone with a ghost-like pallor. The gray-blue monoliths and trilithons stood sentry-like guarding the small stone altar at the center of Mona's source of life. The silence did not feel like a chasm between the Healer and the king. There was an indefinable presence, a radiation of power that seemed to be absorbed and then radiated again by the circle of stone, filling any emptiness felt by the two. The ancient oaks, which dominated the island, sheltered the Sacred Place with leaves

that seemed to dance in time to the flickering of the torches held by faceless bards and seers.

Samoathes approached the two with curiosity in his brown eyes. "What brings such a noble visitor to our humble island?" He asked directing his question to Abaris while his gaze studied the visitor's royal, aged features.

"This is Venutius, King of the Brigantes, who has come to ask for mediation between them and the Ordovices."

Samoathes fists clenched in silent anger. Noticing his reaction, Abaris turned toward the king and added, "Samoathes was born to the land of the Ordovices."

"You and your Queen Cartimandua were responsible for the last bloody border dispute which left many of my people hungry and homeless when your warriors raided our granary supplies!" Samoathes' eyes were on fire. "You sought mediation then after you had taken what you were after in the first place to prevent retaliation by us. And you seek mediation now because your forces are weakened by alliance with the Roman enemy!"

This swift tongue-lashing surprised the King. Abaris intervened. "His farm was burned and his sisters were abused during that dispute."

"This is the sort of thing we must stop before it gets out of hand!" Venutius said with eager determination. "I am also afraid that if we do engage in a battle, the Romans may take advantage of the situation and settle the dispute for both of us by seizing both our lands. The only victor then would be Rome."

"Surely the situation can't be that desperate, Venutius." Abaris commented.

"But it is becoming so. We have been receiving reports that the Iceni have begun resistance raids upon Roman outposts and granaries."

"Truly the balance between life and death would be disturbed if the Romans took your lands. The gods would have to be appeased." Abaris concluded, as if trying to balance some giant, unseen scale in the sky.

"And tell us, Abaris, how would this be done?" Samoathes demanded, knowing well what the answer would be.

"The law says a life for a life."

"The law is wrong!" Several of the torch bearers gasped. "If there are gods, it seems to me that life would be considered far more important than merely matching numbers of good that have died by killing equal numbers of evil." Samoathes stood glaring into the eyes of Abaris like the torches which surrounded them.

"This is the way it has always been!" Abaris returned in a frustrated, helpless rebuttal. He turned away from Samoathes.

"But that doesn't make it right! That's the trouble with you, Abaris. You follow blindly!"

Abaris turned back to face Samoathes. "It is called faith and it is called trust, something that you are too stubborn and too skeptical to accept."

Samoathes' hands clenched in frustration. "I may not be a man of wisdom like you, but it does not take wisdom to know the value of a life, just common sense!"

"I came here for help," interrupted Venutius, "not a private argument!"

The two friends glanced menacingly at each other, then looked away quickly. Turning toward the king, Abaris smiled, "You are right, my friend. The Archdruid will be at the border in a few days. Go in peace and spread the word that Biochan is coming. Urge everyone to refrain from fighting."

"Thank you," Venutius bowed slightly. "I knew the druids would come to the aid of peace."

When Venutius had left Samoathes demanded, "Just how do you plan on contacting Biochan? You know it would be almost impossible to locate him in the dense forests of Snowdonia."

"Only a druid knows how to contact another druid," Abaris answered.

"When do you plan to contact him?"

Abaris thought for a while. "At the same time when Biochan first appeared to us: just before dawn, as the last star above the altar fades from the night sky."

The circled monoliths stood barely taller than the twenty hooded druids and bards. The featureless stones and men seemed almost two-dimensional, mere silhouettes against the lightening sky. Abaris gazed toward the east. "It is almost time," he said softly to Samoathes. Then, watching Samoathes' eyes, Abaris slowly continued. "My power is not great enough to allow you to stand within the stones. The balance would be weakened."

Samoathes felt guilt and offense. "Is it because-"

"You are not a believer." Abaris cut Samoathes short.

Samoathes nodded slowly and withdrew outside of the circle. Then he stood granite-like as Abaris put up his hood and approached the Sacred Place. The only sound that Samoathes heard was an occasional sigh from the giant oaks observing the ritual.

Abaris stood with his back to the semi-circled druids, his long thin fingers placed lightly on the damp, flat boulder which served as an altar. His fingertips sensed a pulsing presence from within the altar stone as it seemed to channel a focused zone

of force radiating through the meditative druids, a force whose origin seemed to emit from the powerful monolithic circle outward to the majestic oaks behind them, and ahead to the sunrise over the sea.

As Abaris raised his arms and his gaze toward the sunrise, a single trumpet was also raised in this same direction and produced a loud, penetrating tone which shattered the stillness of the sluggish damp air within the Sacred Place.

*O thou mighty light and flame of comfort
that unveilest the glory of the gods to the earth's center
in whom the great secrets of truth have their abiding resort
Be thou a voice of strength and power for my voice to enter
Open the mysteries of your creation
Be friendly unto me for I am the same
the true worshiper and guardian of a sacred circled source
Arise O wind that moveth the air
that carries your mighty voice for all to hear*

Then, raising his staff of oak handed to him from an attendant to his right, Abaris slowly turned rotated once to his right as the others raised their arms to join him.

*Lend me that voice that I may send
a message to your presence on earth
to he who praiseth your name and carries your glory
Arise O wind and carry our voice!*

"Arise O wind and carry our voice!" echoed the others continually. The vigilant oaks began to sigh as a breeze started to stir, from the dawning orb over the sea and moving inland. Abaris voiced his appeal:

*Black Lake, three days
Black Lake, three days
Black Lake, three days*

Abaris' arms dropped to his side like weights of stone, a signal to the trumpeter to produce the final tonal blast signaling the end to their ritual as the last of the wind swirled away to the east.

Biochan lay sleeping in a shallow grotto overlooking a small mountain lake called Black Lake within the heights of the Snowdonian mountains. The oaken valley below was framed by steep dangerous cliffs that formed the stepping stones to the summits of the Snowdonian range. Such a lonely, tranquil spot was a favorite resting spot for Biochan during his travels to the neighboring Celtic tribes. Because of the density and height of the trees surrounding the lake itself, the water appeared black and still, especially during these pre-dawn moments. Biochan always seemed to be able to think more clearly and sleep more deeply here than even on Mona herself.

It was during the last hours of his sleep when the dream appeared to Biochan. A violent storm was brewing out of the southwest. The late summer afternoon sun had just been swallowed by a rapidly approaching vanguard of tall black thunderheads which rumbled and flashed messages to one another as they advanced. Biochan felt pursued by them as he ran over the exposed, mountainous ground that seemed to stretch endlessly to the horizon before him. His heart pounded a rhythm in time to the increasing sonic levels of the coming storm.

Sweat drenched his thick dark brows and dribbled into his eyes and beard. His neck began to burn with a salty sweat which matted his long black hair. As he clawed his way over the tops of the stones which had suddenly become boulders, he felt his strength dwindle. Then the wind which began as a whisper through the rocks started to howl with delight as it chased after Biochan.

By now the storm was almost directly overhead, with thunderbolts exploding around him. Strangely, there was no rain. Just when all hope seemed to be lost, Biochan's electrified skin and terrified blue eyes discovered in triumph a tremendously tall, old oak tree standing in rescue before him. Its huge twisted and knotted limbs seemed to reach into the thunderheads themselves. Just as he was about reach the thick trunk of this proud old oak, a thunderbolt in the shape of a flaming sword split the tree in half and caused it to burst into flames. As he shielded his eyes in terror from the flames and the heat, Biochan cried out, "No!"

Sleep fled from Biochan's eyes as they spilt open in horror. His clothes were soaked around him as he kicked off what little of the blanket covered his quivering body. A faint whistle of wind seemed to echo a message among the cliffs, "Black Lake, three days!" Standing up, he walked over to the edge of the cliff and felt the cool and damp morning breeze lift his matted hair momentarily away from his face. He felt his eyes tear briefly from the impact of the breeze and the memory of his nightmare. Staring over the edge, he saw the quiet waters of the lake below and suddenly recalled the echoing words, "Black Lake, three days!" And so, he waited.

"But governor, now is the time to attack these barbarians while they are in a state of confusion!" Didus slammed his fists onto the table of Paulinas. "We could easily march in and squash any growing ideas of rebellion now to prevent what happened several weeks to one of our western outposts, as well as to your own friend."

Paulinas shot him a piercing stare. "I disagree." He leaned forward in his chair. "Why waste Roman lives when a battle between tribes could accomplish the same objective for us. Let them channel their own aggressive natures on each other. Besides, your own campaign to the north is absorbing our constant attention."

The bushy eyebrows of Didus narrowed their defiance as his brown eyes became spear-like. "This campaign of expansion hasn't seen action in several weeks now. My men have been establishing their outposts and the Celts have fled from our advance. Let me lead any legions you can spare, and I'll tame these western provinces for good. Your administration would benefit from the peace, and my reputation as the spoiler would grow!"

Standing, Paulinas raised his voice in anger. "I will not endanger the lives of my men just to satisfy your quest for glory!"

Pointing a dagger-like finger at the governor-general, Didus said bitterly, "Mark my words. You are making a serious mistake! You will see, when those barbarians are knocking at the gates of Londinium and threatening Camulodunum itself. You will remember my words!"

Paulinas folded his arms and held his head up high as he asked Didus calmly but firmly, "Are you quite through, General? Then you have my decision, and now an order: return to your position in the north!"

Didus' eyes continued to blaze in silence. Then, he snapped to attention, thrusting his arm forward in a salute as turned and briskly exited the room.

Once outside, the city of Camulodunum seemed to close in around Didus, choking him with oppressive heat. He felt feverish, as if his blood might boil away his veins.

"Well?" asked a friend of his as he stood patiently by the horses in the noon day heat. "You were not in there very long. What did he say?" His friend caught the searing gaze of Didus.

"The governor-general is not concerned with the barbarian threat," Didus said sarcastically. "He wants to do things his own way, for his own glory!" As they mounted their snorting horses, the Tribune asked, "Did you not remind him of the attack on the western outpost?"

Didus looked enviously at the large, well attended governor's mansion. The white stone columns stood impressively at the entrance to the building. It could have been his, he thought. It should have been his! Then another thought crossed his mind. He smiled thinly.

"The governor-general does not understand the seriousness of the situation. I think that it is time we take it upon ourselves as good citizens of Rome to show him just how serious it could be." Didus jerked the reins firmly, sending his horse into a gallop that would lead them both directly out of town.

Biochan smiled maliciously. "I do not see the Romans as a threat in this situation," he said to Abaris and Samoathes as the three rode down a path through the dark green woods away from Black Lake, towards the disputed border. "They think they have enough to do in the North."

"How do you know what the Romans are thinking?" asked Samoathes as he waved his hand trying to chase the flies away.

As the three rode in silence, Samoathes began to wonder what the outcome of their arbitration would be if they failed to prevent hostilities between his tribe and that of the Brigantes. What would become of his remaining family? Since his parents had died from some strange disease when he was very young, all that Samoathes had left in life were his two older sisters, one of whom gave birth to an illegitimate child, the scorned seed of those who demanded booty in one shape or another. The Ordovices were proud warriors but would be no match for the once Roman-armed and trained Brigantes, in spite of their weakened numbers.

Emerging from the woods along a shallow river bed, the three found themselves between the two poised armies. The simple robes which both Biochan and Abaris wore were immediately recognized by some of the soldiers on both sides. Word was immediately sent to their leaders to announce their arrival. Both Biochan and Abaris dawned their hoods as the traditional sign of their ministry.

The open plain that lay between the two armies was divided by the shallow, rocky river bed that during the spring overflowed its banks, swollen by the melting Snowdonian snows, producing a rich, fertile ground in which to grow crops. Since there were two neighboring farmsteads, one on each side of this natural border, each claimed that the other's livestock consumed too much of the vital but scarce river water that barely trickled during the basically dry summer months, depriving the other's livestock of the necessary water. Soon animal blood then human blood was shed on both sides of the stream, gradually dragging in the leadership of both tribes.

The river bed was bordered by a ridge on either side about a quarter mile in either direction from the water itself. It was from the tops of these small well-rounded ridges that both armies stood nervously in battle dress awaiting what seemed like an inevitable confrontation. The only sounds that could be heard among the ranks of men were an occasional buzzing of flies or other insects in the late afternoon humid summer air.

Despite the warm hazy sun and the containment of heat under his hood, Biochan's long, smooth fingers still felt cold and moist grasping the leather reins of his sleek brown steed. Biochan knew the importance of the event in which he was about to participate. This would be his first public demonstration of his power as head of the Druids. He knew that whatever the final outcome would be, it would significantly effect his mission. For even a proud, seemingly confident man like Biochan found it hard to keep hesitation out of his eyes. He dared not look over to Abaris and Samoathes who sensed the importance of the events which were about to take place. They sat nervously glancing from one ridge to the other.

Five horsemen finally appeared from the ranks of the Ordovices and rapidly approached Biochan's party. Six horsemen and one chariot pulled by two silver-white horses emerged from the Brigantes positions.

Samoathes immediately recognized the leader of the Ordovices.

"Bardus! It has been many years since you and I have grasped arms like this," greeted Samoathes. Bardus was a slender, short man with bushy brown eye brows that seemed to give his leathery face a noble appearance. Although his weathered features seemed to sag under heavy burdens, his tired gaze still pierced unflinchingly, carefully observing even the smallest of details. His proud eagle-like appearance seemed to more than compensate his lack of physical stature.

"Samoathes, my friend, it is good to see you again," Bardus smiled. "The last time you and I were together, we showed the Romans that Ordovice warriors are true fighters!"

"That we did, Bardus," Samoathes laughed, "that we did!"

As the chariot approached with snorting steeds, Abaris walked over to greet Venutius, king of the Brigantes.

"You arrived just in time," Venutius said loudly as he dismounted, his right hand finding its natural perch around the handle of his proud Roman sword. "My army has just reached its position."

"We came as fast as we could," smiled Abaris as he put down his hood. Beads of sweat dribbled down his receding hairline.

Only one person remained mounted, quietly observing the appearances of the two leaders from the feuding tribes, seemingly looking for cracks of weakness in their proud displays of strength. Biochan sat tall in the saddle, patiently waiting for the leaders to greet him. He dared not give away any emotional sign of response for fear of weakening his position of power and mystery as the Archdruid.

Putting up his hood, Abaris grew somber and stood before Biochan's horse. In a loud voice, the Healer announced: "This is the powerful and wise diviner of the circles of stone; worshiper of the mighty oak; a god through whom the gods above speak and act; the Archdruid Biochan!"

All who were present immediately knelt down on their right knees and stared reverently at the ground before Biochan's horse. Bardus, however, continued to stand defiantly as he looked into Biochan's darkening eyes.

"I am sorry, O wise diviner," Bardus slowly spoke, shaking his head. "I get down on my knee for no man." Nervous and fearful of what Biochan might do, all eyes were on the stone-like Archdruid. There was a moment of deafening silence which seemed to last hours. The wind began to pick up, blowing from the Brigantes toward the Ordovices, tossing Bardus' hair and momentarily breaking his contact with Biochan's eyes.

Finally a voice came from within the dark hood. "You may find soon that misfortune hinders the course of your cause."

Laughing lightly, Bardus spoke, "I am here out of curiosity to see the man whom many proclaim as a god."

"Whom do you say I am?"

"A man - no more, no less."

Venutius stepped forward with his helmet in his hand. "I have asked the great diviner to put an end to this feud before more blood of our sons is spilled."

Turning to the Archdruid, Bardus asked, "How do you plan to do this? The time is not for words. The action of my people will be our words!"

"The time is not for words," Biochan slowly repeated each word.

"A rider is coming!" shouted one of Bardus' men. The hooves of the approaching horse sounded like thunder on the hard clay ground. The rider quickly dismounted and ran over to Bardus.

"The farmstead is on fire and -" the Ordovician rider paused, trying to catch his breath as his eyes focused on a stone embedded in the ground.

"Speak up, man!" Bardus demanded.

"- Your daughter and her infant are dead."

Bardus' eyes widened in horror and disbelief. Then turning to Biochan and Venutius he bitterly asked, "Is this how you plan on ending this feud? By destroying our farm involved in the border dispute, and by killing a woman and her child?"

Bardus did not wait for an answer. Turning abruptly, he went back to his horse, mounted, and followed by the rest of his party, galloped back toward his forces. Seeing this, Venutius angrily looked at the Archdruid with accusing eyes, then quickly mounted with the rest of his party and raced back to his own lines.

Both Abaris and Samoathes glanced at each other in disbelief at what had just taken place, and most importantly, at Biochan's lack of involvement.

Abaris' mind was troubled, but he refused to question the wisdom of the Archdruid. In fatalistic optimism he insisted on believing in the infallible wisdom of an Archdruid.

Samoathes, the Doubter, could no longer restrain himself. "Why did you not try to stop them?" he asked with clenched fists.

The advancing clouds began to darken and thicken as the Archdruid silently dismounted. Facing Samoathes, he quietly said, "They do not yet believe." Biochan withdrew his oaken staff from the pack on his horse and quietly began walking along the riverbed.

Samoathes watched momentarily as Biochan walked stiffly away. "I am going to join my tribe in protecting our land," he said to Abaris as he mounted his horse. "It is my duty." Abaris nodded solemnly as Samoathes galloped away.

As the wind began to pick up in intensity, brief flashes of light began to jump from cloud to cloud. The warriors from both tribes quickly began forming battle lines. Swords were drawn; archers positioned; and spears poised. The ranks began to thicken as more nervous, blue-painted bodies were packed tightly together, snaking their way along the ridges.

Bardus, who rarely led a front line assault, galloped to the front of his lines with his two sons on either side of him.

"Bardus is going to lead us himself!" observed one young warrior to a seasoned veteran who was standing shoulder to shoulder with him.

Smiling with eyes ablaze, the veteran responded, "To avenge the death of his daughter and grandson!"

Just as the last of Bardus' men were taking up their positions, a rider raced from behind the lines toward the Ordovice leader.

"My King, two Roman spies were captured leaving your daughter's land," the messenger gasped for air. "They admitted they were sent by the Brigantes to set fire to the farmstead."

Bardus' face hardened. "Then that's the last piece of evidence we need!"

Biochan finally reached his destination - a small, shallow pool of water directly in the middle of the upcoming field. Stepping along some stones, he finally reached a flat rock almost at the center of the pool. By then, Abaris arrived with the horses. Biochan motioned to him to stand at the pool's edge. Removing his hood, the Archdruid raised his arms, pointing his staff at the largest thunderhead.

"Venutius!" cried several of his followers. "Surely we must not attack now. To disturb an Archdruid while he is praying would bring us misfortune."

"Worse than that," Venutius answered from atop his nervous horse as he sheathed his weapon, "if he were killed in the line of battle, the wrath of the gods would be upon us all!"

Venutius glanced up and down his lines and saw the same reaction from his terrified men.

With tilted head and outstretched arms, Biochan prayed:

*Hear me
O fire gods of golden light
And heed my words to prevent this fight
These servants you have who worship your name
But doubters there are who need to be saved
Send us a sign your powers we see at work
Emblazon our spirits, our hearts, not our swords*

Lightening began to flare like a torch directly overhead, sending bold streaks from thunderhead to thunderhead. The Archdruid looked over to Abaris as he stood praying with closed eyes at the pool's edge, his garments rippled by the wind. His eyes flew open as if summoned by the gaze of the Archdruid. Biochan nodded to him, a clue for Abaris to follow his lead. Facing the Brigantes, the Archdruid cried with angry eyes:

*Cast down your weapons
Breathe not your breath
For the Source can bring life
Or the Source can bring death!*

Upon hearing this strong command, the Brigantes threw their weapons to the ground. Then, facing the Ordovices, the two druids repeated the prayer. After seeing the reaction of the Brigantes, the Ordovices, no less superstitious, also disarmed themselves.

Bardus was the only one who remained armed. With his right hand choking his proud, outstretched sword, he glanced uneasily around at his men, hoping to find some other non-believer for support. He found none. Even Samoathes was not going to take a chance. Then his eyes seemed to be magnetically seized by the Archdruid. Bardus' pride refused to allow himself to break the focus first, a blind decision he quickly regretted, for his sword seemed to his hand to be a sword of fire, consuming his fingertips with a fiery blaze of pain. The sword fell uselessly from his hand. His left hand dashed to comfort his right hand but only to find that the pain, as well as Biochan's gaze, disappeared.

Suddenly, a bolt of lightning seized a tall oak in the woods that bordered the battle plain. The Archdruid's smile as well as the fire from the scorched oak was quickly soaked with a pouring rain which sent the forces on both ridges running in chaos, seeking shelter from the fast-moving storm. The downpour was brief but intense, and when it was over the warriors began peeking out from under cloaks and make shift canopies like timid forest creatures.

Biochan put down his rain-soaked hood, a sign that mediation between the two warring tribes could then begin. Again the same delegations from the two tribes assembled. The sky was beginning to soften as shafts of sunlight burned holes through the retreating clouds. Both Bardus and Samoathes dismounted, and along with Venutius, the three stood before the Archdruid and the Healer.

"Tell your men to set up camp. Here." motioned Biochan with authority. Although he was soaked and his body cool, his hands felt warm and confident. No longer did hesitation fill his eyes. He was once again in control.

"Set up a tent here, between your camps, and collect a large amount of fire wood for a Midsummer Eve bonfire. Place two stakes at the center of the wood, and then bring the two Roman prisoners here as well." And with a gleam of delight Biochan added, "They will be the center of attraction tonight!"

Bardus' mouth fell open. "How did you know about them?"

Biochan answered him with a question. "Why did you drop your sword?"

Confusion grabbed Bardus' logical mind as he wrestled with his conscience for a way to reason the events and words he had heard.

"Roman prisoners?" asked Venutius.

"Don't be so surprised, Venutius," Bardus scoffed. "Your Romans burned my daughter's farm, killing both her and my grandson!"

"We had nothing to do with that or with such Roman swine!"

"It is well known that the Brigantes have had ties with Rome. Cartimandua -"
"- Has long since been forced to flee along with her Romans because of me and my men," cut in Venutius with creased eyebrows. His right hand was itchy on the tapered handle of his proud sword.

"Oh yes," Bardus said sarcastically, "I almost forgot. You as her husband were cast aside like an old boot for a younger, more satisfying man! I believe he was your weapons-bearer. I heard he bared his weapon one time too many!" The Ordovice attendants laughed.

Venutius immediately drew his sword and held it over his head. Bardus and several others on both sides also drew theirs in reflexive response. "This sword, a gift from the Roman governor Scapula to Vellocatus, Cartimandua's beloved, put a swift end to that lover of queens and of Rome!"

Abaris, the Healer, stepped between the two kings. "Put away your weapons and angry words for tonight will decide your quarrel. The Archdruid has given us much to do before then."

The two tribal leaders, their tempers cooling from the soaking rain and the Healer's intervention, bowed their heads in obedience to the Archdruid's wishes, and then they, along with their delegations, departed to their forces. The swift moving rainstorm was beginning to subside.

Biochan turned to his two friends and said with boyish excitement, "Let us ride back to the forest where the lightning struck. Perhaps it was an oak that was struck, and perhaps we will find the sacred mistletoe delivered by the gods!"

Abaris too responded with excitement. "If we do find the mistletoe, it will truly bless the ritual of the fire tonight."

"I know the mistletoe has sacred healing powers and is the essence of your work, Abaris," said Samoathes as he and the two druids mounted their horses. "How did it get such mystical importance?"

"It is very rare to find a mistletoe growth on an oak, Abaris explained. "It is believed to have fallen from heaven and to be a token that the tree on which it grew was chosen by the god himself."

"Then it is considered a product of the lightning?"

"Yes, and that is why a mistletoe-bearing oak is worshipped above all other trees in the forest."

"But if it is so rare, how will we begin looking for it?"

"The lightening which just struck that tree is a sign from god of the location of a mistletoe, for if our faith is strong enough, we will find this oak," Biochan explained as they rode quickly through the meadow which bordered the forest. "Once found, this visible emanation of the celestial fire will be our gift of the magical properties of the thunderbolt."

"And since the source of this thunderbolt is the god of the sun himself," added Abaris, "it is of greater power to be captured during the Midsummer Eve, the height of the power for the god of the sun."

"This golden bough, if found by us," said Biochan, "will be a sign of our favor with the gods, and it will mean a magnificent increase in our mystical powers."

The three arrived in the rain-soaked forest. The moist, humid smell of the rain water evaporating from decaying vegetation was mixed with the smell of Beachwood and Scottish pines. It was not long before the charred trunk of the lightening struck tree was discovered.

"There is the tree!" shouted Samoathes, the Provider. "It is an old oak."

"Old and blessed," Biochan added with a greedy smile as he bent his head under some low hanging branches.

"Good work, Samoathes," said Abaris. "Now all we have to do is find the mistletoe in a neighboring oak."

"Well, that makes this job a little easier since there are not very many oaks in this area," Samoathes observed, glancing up at the trees around him. "Where is it usually found?"

"Between the limbs the main trunk," responded Abaris as he dismounted.

The three spread out covering a large radius from the lightening-smoldering oak. The remaining late afternoon daylight began slipping away as Biochan began to worry about finding the mistletoe. Have I displeased the gods? Biochan wondered as he stepped through the boggy, cool mud which oozed through his toes in his sandals. For the first time since becoming Archdruid, Biochan felt alone. Being in this position of power was like walking at the edge of a cliff. As long as he provided all the correct answers and performed all the proper miracles, he would remain high on that mountain of leadership and power.

Biochan's eyes suddenly widened in panic as they darted from oak limb to oak limb. "I must find that mistletoe!" he muttered aloud.

God of thunder
God of light
Show your servant
He is doing right.

Each time Biochan repeated this, his voice grew louder to the point where, as he began to thrash through bushes and mud, his voice began cracking under the volume strain. Biochan's right shoulder was wheeled around by the thin hand of Abaris.

"We will find it," the Healer reassured.

A heavy silence filled the humid air; no sounds, no movement except for the gentle rising and falling of Abaris' chest.

"I know this is important," the healer added.

"The gods must smile upon us," Biochan said under more control. "This would be a sign of their support for our mission."

Biochan turned away, looking up again into the oaks. "We must keep nature's balance. We must unit those tribes against Rome. If we do that, we will be free. Our people will be free, and our work will carry on."

"The gods do smile upon us, my lord. We will find it." Abaris' voice was as soothing as the sighing oak leaves which began to whisper their own comfort.

O mighty oaks, show forth your fruit," Biochan quietly prayed. The late afternoon sun began to break through the overcast for the first time this afternoon. Beams of sunlight radiated through the oak leaves, silhouetting them in hazy light. Biochan thought, the oak is truly god's gift to us.

Suddenly, within one of those luminous stairways to the sun, Samoathes, who was resting on a fallen log just out of sight of the druids, gazed halfway up a knotted, thick trunk of a proud, old oak and saw the answer to their prayers. "I found it!" shouted the Provider triumphantly.

"The sun has smiled down its gift to us!" Biochan shouted as he heard the good news.

"Samoathes! Samoathes!" Abaris shouted. "Where are you?"

"Here! Here!" Samoathes answered, waving his arms as he spotted the thrashing figures who were running in the direction of his voice.

"Where?" Abaris asked eagerly as he and Biochan made their way through the brush.

"There!" Samoathes pointed to a bushy outgrowth of clustered white berries.

"Now begins the rite of removal," Biochan said.

Abaris removed his sack from his shoulder and pulled out a golden sickle and a small, white blanket. He glanced at the Archdruid who nodded his approval, and then handed the blanket to Samoathes. "Because the gods have opened your eyes and allowed you to discover this miracle for us, we would like you to take part in the removal rite. The gods seem to have chosen you!" Abaris smiled at Samoathes who responded with a puzzled expression. Abaris continued:

"You are to unfold this blanket, and after I cut down the mistletoe with the golden sickle, you are to catch it in the blanket so as to prevent it from touching the ground, thus corrupting its sacred and mystic powers. Will you accept this role?"

The hazel eyes of Samoathes were probed deeply by the blue eyes of Abaris, searching for a sign of doubt or acceptance. Samoathes for the first time felt the full tranquil spiritual power of the Healer. As thin and as frail as Abaris appeared to be, there lurked behind that shell a deep, strong source of pulsing energy, similar to the force Samoathes felt when he first approached the Stonehenge. Abaris' soft features seemed to blur, dissolving into a blend of light and color. Somehow, Samoathes did not fear what he saw but felt the hair on his body tingle in response to this pulsing power. His hands which were clenched with anxiety and doubt about the purpose and plans of the gods for his life suddenly relaxed with tranquility as the healing power of the Source drenched his spirit like the rain which had soaked his skin. Having been troubled by the Source, Samoathes for the first time in his life experienced an inward peace which he could not put into words. The only physical response he could give was smile which creased a pattern of new lines into his weathered face, a pattern he hoped would never be erased by the grating sands of time.

The experience lasted only an instant as the Healer's shape shifted back to its original form. Was it a dream? Samoathes wondered. He could not answer that question. Somehow, he felt it wasn't important.

"Will you accept this privilege?" Abaris smiled as he repeated and rephrased his original question. The blanket lay neatly folded across his outstretched palms. Reverently taking the blanket, Samoathes sighed "Yes."

Abaris nodded his approval and then, turning to the Archdruid, presented the golden sickle to him. Biochan put up his hood as a sign the ritual was about to begin. Biochan too was strengthened by the Healer's miracle. Interpreting this as a good omen, he triumphantly raised the sickle high up in the feeble forest light toward the oaken prize, saying as he addressed it:

*O thou mighty light and burning flame of golden comfort
That unveilest the glory of god to the center of the earth
In whom the great secrets of truth have their abiding
That is called in thy kingdom Joy Through Strength
And is not to be measured
Be though a window of comfort unto us
Move therefore and appear
Release the golden bough and
Open the mysteries and release the wisdom of your creation!*

The Archdruid then handed the sickle back to the Healer who immediately began to climb the oak after being boosted by Samoathes to the first limb. Slowly, Abaris climbed from branch to branch like a squirrel looking for nuts, while Samoathes waited nervously for his role in the rite. Abaris finally arrived at the golden prize.

The branched of the mistletoe were woven together like a fine, dark green cloth. Its leaves were brown green and contained at various intervals small clusters of white, translucent berries which seemed almost clear enough to see through. The prize grew at the joint of the bough and the main trunk, feeding off the moisture and moss collected there.

Abaris looked down to the Archdruid and waited for the final prayer to be said.

O mighty oak that receiveth life and power from the sun
Yield forth your golden prize and
Open the mysteries and release the wisdom of your creation

Samoathes suddenly realized this was his cue to position himself under the bough and unfurl the blanket where he thought the falling mistletoe might land. With that, Abaris took several swings with the golden sickle, severing it from its oaken life source. As it tumbled, Samoathes shifted back and forth beneath the apparent course of the golden bough. His nervous grasp stretched the fabric of the white blanket almost to the point of tearing it apart. Finally, the sacred prize landed safely on the blank with a small bounce. Samoathes breathed a sigh of relief as he turned to face the Archdruid for the last step of the ritual.

Biochan, with a smile of satisfaction creasing his face, then raised his palms toward the darkening sky and prayed:

The sun and thunder have blessed us with this golden bough

*A source of power bestowed upon us through this mighty oak
We praise your names in gratitude for this gift of gold
Whose symbol of trust we acknowledge and carry forth*

The Archdruid then reverently wrapped the mistletoe in its reception blanket and gave it back to Samoathes for the honor of carrying it back to the camp. As he accepted this honor, Samoathes realized that the Archdruid was finally beginning to accept him as a true disciple.

As twilight began to absorb the last rays of the setting sun, the three happily mounted their horses and returned to camp.

"Set up two stakes in the bonfire for our two Roman guests!" commanded the Archdruid to a group of warriors assembling the massive woodpile for the Midsummer Eve ritual. Many campfires dotted the fields surrounding the ritual site as both armies, informed of a truce were invited to gather near the river to partake in the proceedings of negotiations and ritual ceremony.

The Midsummer Eve celebration took place in connection with the turning point of the sun's travel across the sky as he begins to retrace his footsteps, weakening in intensity and sinking lower each day. The fires were believed to prop the sun's failing steps and rekindle his sinking flame, an act which would ensure a plentiful harvest. But Biochan had a more evil plan in mind, a plan he fancied which would end the tribal feud through unification against the armies of Rome as well as restore the delicate balance between life and death in appeasing the god of the sun.

The night sky seemed unusually clear and decorated with an endless milky way of stars in preparation for the event. Many of the men from both the Ordovices and the Brigantes began to gather around the bonfire site. As more and more men began to notice the two stakes positioned at the heart of the circle of firewood, rumors began to fly about the reasons for those stakes. It became apparent that a simple Midsummer Eve celebration for a good harvest was going to harvest two human lives in the process. Some began to run around in terror suggesting that Bardus and Venutius would be the sacrifices.

"My lord, why must there be human sacrifice tonight," demanded Samoathes as he stood with anguished expression before the two seated druids in the tent.

Biochan slowly stroked his short beard as he explained. "We have a situation here which is far more serious than appears to you. As Abaris knows, the truth must be revealed to both sides, and the balance must be restored between the sun and man."

"Certainly, this could be accomplished without human sacrifice. Let us use livestock for this." Samoathes strained to reason with the calm Archdruid. Turning to Abaris, Samoathes accused, "You are the Healer. Surely you must feel the same as I do about the importance of human life, and yet you say nothing. You never even questioned what he did to the Ancient One. Are you not man enough to challenge this position?"

Abaris who sat stone-like through the accusations quietly spoke up. "As a druid you learn that the balance between life and death is more important than life itself, for without this balance, we, the living, will have to contend with the wrath of the gods."

"Death is only a pause in our eternal life," said Biochan. "It is not an end, but rather a new beginning. Our souls merely wander from one body to another. What I said to you the day the Ancient One departed this world is still true: life is only important as long as it continues to praise the glory of the gods who created us."

Samoathes could not respond. His fear of death and his love for life was too overpowering. He covered his face with his hands and turned his back away from the two druids. He realized that if these outbursts continued, if he persisted in challenging the very foundation of druidic thoughts and beliefs, he could be exiled from any contact with those who did believe, at least outwardly, since he would be viewed as a disease which could affect other impressionable followers.

"I am sorry," he muttered. "Please forgive this outburst." His search for meaning in his life, the reason he attached himself to Abaris, was stronger at this vulnerable point for him than his contradicting need to rationalize, to question. But still the hidden, private voice deep within him asked, why human sacrifice?

Not desiring to dwell any longer on the topic, Biochan stood up and said, "It is time to start the proceedings." With that, both he and Abaris put up their hoods, and as the three exited the tent, those gathered outside fell silent.

Abaris turned to one soldier and said, "Send for Venutius and Bardus. The time has come." The judgment ground was then prepared through the orders of the two druids. Ten men, five of the best warriors from each tribe, were ordered to bear torches to shed the light of wisdom on the proceedings. These men were to stand alternately in tribal representation, forming a semi-circle with the bonfire wood at the center, a sacred boundary between the onlookers and the ritual ground.

The Archdruid and the Healer stood somberly within the judgment ground. Samoathes stood just outside of the ring of torches which danced with impatience, illuminating the two stone-like druids with a ghostly, supernatural light, creating darting snake-like shadows on the barren ground. Two tall stakes protruded like

arrows from near the center of the bonfire wood, pointing a path directly up to the heavens.

Voices began to stir from amidst the crowd of tribal onlookers, signaling the arrival of the two feuding leaders. Bardus appeared in simple, dark garments. The only object which distinguished him from the rest of his warriors was a gold medallion of the sun draped around his neck. The torch light glinted off its simply cast surface. This symbol of his Ordovice power seemed to add inches to Bardus' diminutive physical appearance.

Venutius emerged in royal habiliments, a sight which seemed only lacking in fanfare. His scarlet tunic and silver charms and necklaces reflected a kingly splendor from his brown eyes. The gold inlaid from his Roman sword hilt and its scarlet scabbard still seemed to dominate his appearance with his right hand enthroned upon its curved hilt.

Both leaders paused before entering the judgment ground, somewhat startled by the ghostly appearance of the two figures occupying the semi-circled torches. The Archdruid seemed to loom menacingly at the center, his dark robe in striking contrast to the light garments of Abaris. All that could be seen of his face was his thin, pointed bearded chin.

The two tribal leaders stood somberly before the Archdruid who then addressed them:

"The origin of this border dispute dates back many, many years, and the reason for its start has long since been forgotten. Since then, border disputes between your two tribes have come and gone, some with no bloodshed, others like lately with bloodshed. Treaties were signed to keep your people respectful of the other's place in this world, unified as it were at least in the spirit. Until now -"

"What do you mean until now?" Bardus demanded. "The Brigantes are the ones who have always had the advantage: the best farming lands, and an extended kingdom granted by the Romans which included not only parts of the Cornovii and Deceangli territory, but also parts of our own land too." He paused as he turned to face the scowling face of Venutius.

Bardus continued in a choking voice. "All of this, and to lose a daughter and grandson as well..."

Venutius' face softened. "We had nothing to do with that."

"Nothing to do with that!" Bardus exploded. "Am I to believe the leader of a people who sets one tribe against another, and then while they are fighting, ride in and

steal the land from both tribes?" Turning toward the Archdruid, Bardus motioned toward Venutius with a sweeping gesture as he added:

"Tell us, O Wise Sage, how must one deal with such a man other than fighting to the death?"

All eyes were upon Biochan. He knew that this moment was the showdown for his role as mediator. His hands which dangled loosely by his side, suddenly clenched tightly as if to wring all the moisture from the palms of his hands. Turning toward Samoathes who also sensed the urgency of the moment, the Archdruid's voice commanded as his eyes pleaded:

"Go and fetch the two Roman prisoners. The time has come to prove to all the guilt for these war-like acts!"

A wave of confused whispering voices crashed like the tide upon the silent stones that circled the ritual ground. Samoathes disappeared into the mass of faceless shapes that suddenly began to weave back and forth like weeds in a storm.

"Surely we are not to blame for this latest incident of war!" Venutius complained to the Archdruid. Then turning to Bardus, he continued. "We were provoked into attacking!"

"And what were we to do," demanded Bardus, "sit back and watch you take our land?"

Venutius' hand tightly grasped the handle of his short, broad-bladed Roman sword in anger. Bardus took a menacing step toward Venutius.

Suddenly a voice shouted "Make way!" from outside of the barrier of torches. Samoathes appeared with the two Roman prisoners escorted by three Ordovice guards who seemed proud of their role as they joked with friends standing nearby. Samoathes also carried the sacred mistletoe wrapped in its cloth. The eyes of the two Romans darted nervously from face to face. They tried desperately to hold their disheveled heads up in pride, pretending to be unafraid of the angry mob around them. Their bound hands did not panic behind their backs. Once within the sacred ground, the prisoners were forced to kneel before the Archdruid who then instructed them to stand.

The tribal crowd surrounding the ritual ground fell silent, curiously and eagerly listening to the proceedings. The Archdruid stood dark and tall before the prisoners, his brown eyes seemed to burn holes into theirs. Not a word was spoken for what seemed like hours to the two Romans.

"We did nothing wrong here," lashed out the smaller of the two, the noble Tribune Polonius, breaking the silence in eagerness to get the proceedings over with, one way or another.

"We were merely observing the beginnings of a battle which was about to start," added the other prisoner.

"I want the truth about your involvement in this tribal feud and then you will be set free," commanded the Archdruid. Both prisoners looked at each other. Then the Polonius said, "We told you, we were merely observers." Bardus glanced angrily at Venutius who in returned the glare.

"Then tie them to the stakes!" Biochan shouted as he waved his arm in the direction of the stakes, his eyes dancing with an evil glee.

The guards grabbed the two Romans and vigorously thrust them toward the stakes as a cheer went up from the tribal spectators. The prisoners struggled feverishly to free their hands as beads of sweat began to trickle down their twisted faces.

Once secured to the wooden posts, the prisoners began to realize what was in store for them as the guards began to pile the bonfire wood around their bodies. Taunting shouts and laughter rose from the crowd as several warriors began to place bets on how long the two would live once the fire set to the wood.

"What we have told you is the truth!" shouted the taller Roman. Not hearing what he wanted to hear, the Archdruid turned to Abaris and nodded for him to start the prayers. Abaris then motioned to Samoathes to bring forward the mistletoe. Carefully, Abaris unwrapped it while Samoathes held the cloth. Then he carefully lifted the mistletoe on its cloth high above his head, being careful not to let it touch his hands, as he said:

*The sun and the thunder have blessed us with this golden bough
A source of power bestowed upon us through the mighty oak
We praise your names in gratitude for this gift of gold
That receiveth life and power from the oak, thunder, and the sun*

*O though mighty light and burning flame of golden comfort
That unveilest the glory of god to the center of the earth
In whom the great secrets of truth have their abiding
Be thou a window of comfort unto us
Open the mysteries and wisdom of your creation
Through the released power of this golden bough.*

He then walked over to the pile of wood and flipped the cloth so that the mistletoe landed on top of the wood, untouched by human hands. The Archdruid then raised his arms high and prayed:

*O mighty guard of fire with two-edged swords a flaming
Will soon prepared to take these two souls unto you, O gods, for gaming
Cursed are they who steal from life to lives soon replacing
To restore the balance in life through these flames of truth and cleansing.*

*I reign over thee, saith the Lord of the Earth
In power exalted above and below
In whose hands the sun is a glittering sword
And the moon a cold fiery glow.*

*I trusseth you up on the palms of my hands
And brighten your garments with infernal light to show
The law that was made to govern the holy ones
Delivered by a rod with wisdom supreme.*

Abaris stepped forward and with head raised and eyes closed, he continued:

*We lifted our voices
And swore our allegiance to Him
Who liveth triumphant
Whose beginning is not nor end cannot be
Which shineth as a flame
And reigneth amongst us as the balance of life*

*Move therefore and appear O Bile
Open the mysteries of your creation
Accept these offerings, this fire of souls tonight
To help you in your journey across the sky.*

As the praying stopped, Biochan stood in front of the two Romans. He appeared as a dark silhouette against the flaming background of torches. The heated air hung like a shroud over them. Biochan knew that unless the two admitted to a Roman conspiracy of intervention against both tribes, his credibility and effectiveness as the Archdruid would be greatly reduced. He gambled that this fear tactic would work.

After a brief silence to allow the seriousness of the situation sink into the prisoners as well as the uncertainty of what would happen next, the Archdruid demanded:

Speak now of your involvement and be set free, or feel the flames of truth cleanse away your guilt!" The two Romans looked at each other, their eyes overflowing with terror and indecision. Biochan held his hand out to Samoathes, his eyes still fixed upon the prisoners. "The first torch!"

Grasping the torch, he applied the first flames to several edges of the wood at the outer perimeter of the wood pile. The eyes of the taller prisoner flew open wide as if to explode from his head. "No more! No more! We will tell you what you want!"

"Shut up, you fool!" shouted Polonius. "If Didus finds out that we betrayed him, we will surely die anyway!"

"Not if we never return! We can get away, perhaps back to Rome!"

Handing the torch back to Samoathes who gave it back to the torch bearer, Biochan demanded, "Now then, who sent you, and what was the plan?"

"What guarantee do we have that we will be set free?"

"You have none," smiled a confident Biochan. "It is the chance you take."

By now, the flames were growing taller with the sound of cracking, popping and hissing. The heat was beginning to be felt by the two prisoners. Indecision once again gripped the two as they glanced at each other in panic. The chance of freedom, however slim it may have seemed, was too powerful to ignore. Patriotism often burns away in light of the torch of personal preservation.

"General Didus sent us to provide the necessary spark to set off a full scale tribal civil war," shouted the taller prisoner. "Once your battles had taken enough of the lives of your best warriors, the general was going to step in and crush the both and claim the territory of Rome!"

"What!" exclaimed Bardus. Another wave of angry comments passed rapidly through the mass of tribal spectators. "But the Brigantes are still responsible for the death of my daughter and grandson!"

"We did that!" shouted the smaller Roman, struggling to free himself.

Samoathes' mouth dropped open in amazement at this revelation.

Turning to Venutius, Bardus apologized, "I was wrong about you."

"We were all wrong about the power and ruthlessness of Rome!" exclaimed Venutius.

The flames had almost entirely circled the two Romans. The searing heat was getting intense. The warriors from both tribes near the bonfire were beginning to back

away from the fire's perimeter. "What about us! You promised we would be set free if we told you what you wanted!"

In between the frantic flames, the Archdruid caught sight of the two men for the last time. The Romans saw Biochan smile as he said, "And you shall be set free - set free from your earthly guilt and crimes; set free to restore the balance of nature disrupted by the loss of the two lives you took away! The flames will escort to Bile to help him on his journey across the sky!"

"You lying barbaric dogs! So this is how the holy druids keep their bargains!" said Polonius as he struggled to free himself. The ropes were cutting off his circulation as they gouged their way into his flesh with each movement to free himself. "Druid! You and all your peoples will soon learn of the might of Rome! Our deaths will prove only as the beginning of the end to your proud barbarism!"

Biochan angrily motioned for another torch.

*O thou cleansing flame
Whose wings are thorns to stir up vexation
And who will set a myriad of living lamps blazing before thee
Whose god is wrath in anger
Gird up thy loins and harken!
Consume this foreign foe called Rome
And bless the defenders of your names
With this mighty flame
The flame of the sun.*

As he finished the prayer, Biochan hurled the torch with an animal-frenzied passion at the two now silent human torches at the center of the Midsummer Eve bonfire.

Samoathes had mixed emotions. Part of him was glad that the deaths of the daughter and grandson of Bardus was avenged. But the other part of him was abhorred by the gruesome manner in which vengeance was achieved.

The Archdruid turned toward the two kings and began his speech of judgment decision:

"Guilt and responsibility for starting this feud lies no longer with either tribe. Lives were still lost and property destroyed but as a result of trickery and lies. Therefore, let no animosity linger between fellow Britons in both tribes."

Knowing that the fire of rage were being fanned toward Rome, Biochan felt he was finally beginning to fulfill his prime mission: the preservation of the druidic traditions and Celtic culture through the destruction of the foreign foe that was so

piously bent on the civilized extinction of the branded uncivilized. But the glory of the moment did not seem as sweet as Biochan once thought it would be. Personal glory and power was beginning to cloud the pure, god-like vision he was supposed to possess.

All miracles and deeds performed were to be done solely to proclaim the power and the glory of the gods who had led me here in the beginning, thought Biochan. Why do I seem to be feeling greater personal victory than spiritual victory? He avoided the answer to this question, allowing the immediacy of the moment absorb his attention. But doubt and guilt can wear away even the tallest of mountains...

"It is as I have said all along," Venutius said to Bardus. "Rome is more enemy than either you or I. Action must be taken against them."

"Those Roman dogs must pay for they have done to my daughter, my grandson, and my people!" demanded Bardus.

"Let us band together, and join with us as many of the other tribes as possible to fight this foreign foe. I have recently received word that the Iceni, led by Prastatagus' wife Boudicca, have already begun in hit-and-run warfare against Roman outposts. Perhaps they will join with us!" Venutius said excitedly. "What do you say, Bardus? Are the Ordovice warriors capable fighters?"

"You would have sampled our fierce, courageous swords today had there been a fight!" Bardus said indignantly. Glancing around at some of the faces of his men for an answer, he them start to chant, "Down with Rome!"

Bardus nodded his head toward Venutius as he said, "Down with Rome!"

Venutius drew his prized Roman sword out with delight, pointing it straight up toward the starry sky and then at the red star of war, Mars, as he shouted, "Down with Rome!"

The result was very contagious as a sea of spears and swords were raised high around the Midsummer Eve bonfire by the warrior spectators from both tribes as many continued to chant "Down with Rome!"

Biochan was very pleased as he glanced smiling at Abaris and Samoathes.

"You ended the feud, my lord," said Samoathes respectfully.

"Surely the gods must be pleased with your work," Abaris added joyfully.

As the bonfire rose higher and higher into the night sky, the warriors from both tribes joined together in a bizarre madness of dancing spears and swords raised high as if to poke holes in the stars themselves. Amid the laughing and the shouting of "Down with Rome," a few warriors began seizing and tossing any burnable material into the fire: several carts, spears, the remaining circled torches, food, and joking

attempts at burning fellow warriors as they mocked the death screams of the Roman prisoners.

Bardus and Venutius stood together discussing war strategy that could be used against the Romans while Abaris and Biochan stood listening with lowered hoods. Only Samoathes stood alone in front of the fire staring distantly at the spot where the two Romans had died.

The fire and festivities continued well into the night until one by one all drifted off to sleep - all except Samoathes, for fear of the dreams he might have.

Early before sunrise, Bardus and Venutius were summoned to the Archdruid and Abaris. A small pile of ashes was cooling beside Abaris who dug them from the approximate location of the cremated Romans.

Before you and your armies depart for your homelands, you must be anointed with a symbol of your new alliance and quest for freedom," the Archdruid said.

Abaris scooped some of the still warm ashes into an earthen bowl, and looking toward the East where the sun would dawn over the highland plains shedding its light into this lowland tributary of the River Dee, he raised the bowl in both hands and shouted with closed eyes:

*O thou mighty light and burning flame of comfort
That unveilest the glory of god to the center of the earth
Send forth your great secrets of strength and power
To guide these men in their quest for freedom
From the oppressors of the sun
Move therefore and appear
Be thou a window of comfort unto us.*

He handed the bowl to the Archdruid and then took some berries from the white cloth which once held the sacred mistletoe. Crushing these pure, powerful berries between his fingers, the Healer smudged the clear liquid with his thumb onto the closed eyelids of the two kings.

*Heal their sight from further rivalry
And grant them the clarity of insight
To aid them on their perilous quest*

The sun was just beginning to stream forth across the rugged highlands and down finally into the lowlands. The Archdruid instructed the kings to face the sun as he thrust his thumb into the bowl of ashes. Nearby, Samoathes stood moodily, the

burden of guilt and sleeplessness weighing heavily across his eyelids and drooping mustache.

The Archdruid then smudged the funerary ashes onto the sticky berry liquid on the eyelids of the two kings.

*Go forth and conquer the foreign foe
That hath threatened our land and our way of life
Fear not your perilous lives
For if a life be taken
Life will be given back
By the god of the sun*

*Let these warm ashes be a sign
Of your great victory over this foreign foe
And receiveth the power and strength
From the fires of Bile
For your courageous fight.*

The Archdruid motioned to a warrior carrying a sack containing some personal coins, swords, and other belongings of the two dead Romans, as well as some of their ashes. Presenting the sack to the kings for their amazed inspection, Biochan said:

"This sack will be sent to the new governor-general so that he may be made aware that the ruthless trick of him and his ambitious follower failed, and that their plan of conquering the uncivilized will be doomed to such frightful failure."

Biochan's eyes looked up toward the rising sun, its rays lightening and warming his face as his heart began to race with the glory and triumph of his first public leadership as the Archdruid. But still the deep voice of conscience questioned his motives...

Chapter 6

The city of Londinium lay sprawling before Paulinas as he gazed upon the city of 100,000 from a small rise a few miles from the city. Smoke from the many chimney's seemed to hang above the city.

After tying his horse, Paulinas walked up the stairs to the modest cottage of the wife of his childhood friend, Polonius. The governor's hand hesitated momentarily before knocking at the door.

"Yes, your Excellency, what can we do for you?" asked a short, wrinkled servant.

"Is the lady of the house here?" he asked holding his helmet.

"Yes, sir, she is. Won't you come in." The servant bowed slightly and motioned to a small but cozy sitting room. Seutonium Paulinas was too nervous to sit.

"Seutonium! How nice to see you!" A graceful, light-footed woman with brown hair piled high on her head entered the room. Her face, slightly rippled by the tides of past joys and sorrows, reflected an elegance that reminded Paulinas of the stately days of his rich upbringing when Senate wives would parade around in flowing gowns at Senate socials, discussing only how so-and-so looked, or how one type of food tasted juicier prepared one way rather than another. He hated to be the one to bring a cloud of pain to her radiant, beautiful face.

"My dear, Altera, how are you?" he asked as they clasped hands. "It's been a long time."

"Yes, it has. But I've heard that time has treated you well. Polonius has kept me up to date about your many impressive military victories. You are governor-general now?"

"Yes, I am," he shifted his weight uneasily, forcing a smile. "Fortune has been on my side..."

"I should say the gods have been, too." Altera motioned to her servant. "Some wine, Seutonium?"

"Thank you," he sighed, taking the goblet from the servant. He took a long sip for courage and procrastination.

"I received a note from Polonius yesterday," she said enthusiastically as she took his large, moist hand and led him to a chair. "He said he is so proud of you, and sends his congratulations on your new appointment."

The forced smile melted away from Paulinas' face as his eyes sank to the floor. Altera sensed something was wrong.

"You didn't come here just to visit, Seutonium. Do you have some - news?" She held her breath.

Paulinas finished his wine and stood up. "My dear, Altera. Polonius has been killed." He watched her face closely to monitor her reaction. Her fearful eyes became clouded with the darkness of pain and shock as her fingers choked the arms of her chair for support, for fleeting comfort.

"But how is this so?" she gasped. "Only yesterday -"

"- Only yesterday you received a note that was written several weeks ago." Altera felt suddenly weak.

After an uneasy pause which seemed eternal, she asked feebly, "How did you find out so quickly?"

Paulinas sat down again. "Well, we received some of his belongings from a Celtic messenger."

"How did it happen?"

He looked up quickly, saw her anxious eyes, and looked away quickly. "Well, he was on a special mission -"

"- But he was a garrison commander. Why did he get involved with this?"

"He felt he had something to prove to himself, because of his age."

Altera nodded slowly. "He was afraid of growing old." She seemed lost in thought for a moment.

Paulinas continued. "Polonius volunteered for a secret mission set by General Didius. You know how Polonius hated barbarism and always seemed to go out of his way to stamp it out before it could spread. And since he was already looking for an excuse to get back into the field, he felt he could have been of some assistance." He was about to speak again, but then turned away.

Through moist but brave eyes, Altera sensed the story was not quite over. "There is more, Seutonium. Where is my husband's body so that I may properly bury him?"

"The savages also returned some of his ashes along with his belongings." He heard her gasp then sob. His own words sounded foreign and distant to him.

Composing herself, she added slowly, "I have constantly tried throughout his career to prepare myself for the day when he wouldn't return from one of his assignments. But how can one prepare for such savage news?" In spite of her bravery, she finally began to cry.

Paulinas gently took her into his arms and embraced her with the vigor of squeezing the nightmare out of this horrible truth. Her thin arms hugged his neck as

he felt the warmth of her sobbing body so close to his. He wished he could have spared her this pain. A loyal wife like her deserved the royal treatment of a queen. A wife like her would have made his life complete.

"You sent for me, Commander?" asked Didius, stiffly standing at attention with eyes forward, looking beyond the seated governor-general.

Paulinas said not a word as he finished putting his signature and seal on a military supply requisition. The only sound that could be heard in the office was the sound of his quill scratching across the parchment. The late afternoon sun streaming through an open window cast long shadows off the tables and chairs onto the marbled floor.

The governor-general's brown hair was neatly combed and matched the neat appearance of his flowing white toga which showed not a wrinkle. His stately appearance was further enhanced by a quiet air of confidence and authority which surrounded his conservative but noble appearance.

Standing finally, Paulinas walked around his table, struggling to control the rage within him, and stood face to face with Didius. Their eyes met but yet not a trace of facial expression gave away the other's true thoughts. Without turning his gaze from Didius, the governor-general motioned to one of his servants who stood statue-like against a far wall, holding a large brown sack. The young servant silently emptied its contents onto a small wooden stand next to the governor's table. The two swords, a few coins, and several handfuls of powdery ash thumped onto the stand.

"An Ordovice messenger brought these this morning," the governor slowly said, watching for a change of expression. "He said the belongings and the ash were all that remains of the two officers operating under local disguise, and that they were sent by you to sabotage negotiations between two feuding tribes." He let these words sink in for a moment before continuing. "He said you tried to spark a tribal war."

Didius's eyes did not flinch while he maintained a stoic silence. The governor continued:

"The messenger also said that any further attempt by such 'ambitious' men would result in a similar, frightful failure. In this case, the two were burned at the stake by the Archdruid of Mona himself," said the governor as he fingered the ashes of cremated friend and companion. "Do you have anything to say about this, especially since I forbade you to take any action without first consulting with me?"

Didius finally looked away. Slamming his fist onto the table, the governor's bushy eyebrows narrowed as he demanded, "Why did you interfere?"

"The opportunity was right for interference, Commander," Didius responded mechanically, his hands beginning to tremble lightly with building rage and resentment. "It would have worked, too, if the fools hadn't been caught!"

"You disobeyed a direct command!"

"There wasn't time to send notes of consultation. I saw an opportunity to keep the tribes occupied against each other, rather than being occupied with resisting us, so I took it. Someone had to take advantage of a situation which could have tipped the scales of power to our advantage."

"That is for me and me alone to decide!" the governor shouted angrily. "You leave me no choice now but to reprimand you to the Emperor." Paulinas was straining to maintain tempered control. "If I didn't need you so much, I would transfer you right now."

"I know you need me!" smiled Didius.

Turning away for a moment, Paulinas tried to regroup his composure. He did not like being in a weak position. Trying one more time for reconciliation, the governor asked, trying not to let his voice sound pleading as he thrust forward his chin, "For the last time, is there some agreement we can reach to make our service time here together more tolerable?"

Didius turned his head sharply and looked deep into the governor's searching eyes and asked coldly, "Am I dismissed, Sir?"

Paulinas spat out the word "Dismissed!" as he wheeled away from Didius, who smartly saluted and marched out of the room.

A few weeks later, Seutonius Paulinas rode tall in his saddle as he made his way slowly toward the city palace in Londinium silently accompanied by his personal servant. After a day of reviewing the operation of the Legion garrison on the outskirts of the city, the governor looked forward to having a hot bath and then supper.

His thoughts then became engrossed in his plans for the reactivation of the mostly veteran garrison and of the order rebuilding it to full fighting strength. This would take time to accomplish, but it now seemed important to protect the city. His campaign to the North beyond the Fosse Way would soon have to be halted and the manpower shifted back to the South and West due to Didius's ambitious error which succeeded in stirring up the tribes west of Londinium. Several reports warned of possible unification efforts between the Iceni, Ordovices, Brigantes, and Duoboni. The troublesome Silures were also expected to join the newly forming alliance. Paulinas

knew that if he did not act quickly and decisively, he would stand to lose several provinces and possibly the entire Isle itself.

With these thoughts weighing heavily on his mind, his half-hour ride back to the Palace passed quickly until he suddenly recognized the entrance to a certain Villa. In spite of the pressure he was feeling of being in command, he had a whimsical desire to escape if even for a short few hours. It had been several months, just after he had assumed the position of governor-general on the Isle, since he had performed the unpleasant task of informing his close friend's wife of the death of her husband. Seeing her villa, he decided to visit Altera to see how she was getting along.

Turning to his young servant who always accompanied him wherever the governor went, Paulinas said, "Dardanius, go back to the palace. I want to visit with a friend for a while."

Dardanius looked up at the darkening sky. "I would not be too long, my lord. It looks like a storm may be coming."

Paulinas looked up at the sky and realized how engrossed in his thoughts he really had become. The dark outlines of the clouds drew across the evening sky like a curtain, absorbing as it did the last light of a tedious day.

The governor smiled tiredly and said, "Thank you," as the servant trotted away.

Riding into the quiet courtyard, Paulinas felt that the warm Midsummer air contained in the villa seemed to possess a freshness, a vitality for life, something that was missing from his. He dismounted and tied his steed to the hitching post outside of the front entranceway. He walked up the stairs and then he, the governor-general, the brave, tactical commander of many difficult military campaigns, froze with fear. He began to question his real intention and goal for coming.

Loveless thoughts of his wife Lucia stabbed through his mind like a dagger, the months apart being more of a blessing than a regretful parting. It had been years since Paulinas had really been intimate with a woman.

The governor removed his plumed helmet and hastily smoothed back his hair with the moist palm of his leathery hand. He knocked decisively at the door, then horrified, remembered how dusty he was from his ride. Trying desperately to brush off the dust from his tunic, he was caught in the act by the middle-aged female servant who answered the door. Peering over her shoulder was the beautiful Altera. The fragrance from her perfumed hair filled the air around her.

Looking like a child who had been caught sneaking food from the table before it was to be served, the governor awkwardly straightened and bowed his head slightly as he asked, "Ah, well, may I come in to speak with the lady of the house?"

The servant smiled slightly and turned to Altera who then appeared in full view in the doorway. The blood in the governor's veins seemed to pulse more quickly, a feeling he usually only experienced the moment before a battle.

Altera smiled radiantly as she responded, "Please do!" As Paulinas marched in, Altera motioned the way toward the main greeting room. As the two began to walk slowly down the hallway, she turned her head to look at Paulinas' distinguished yet weathered face, as she asked:

"Seutonius, to what do I owe this privileged visit?"

"It is I who is privileged to engage in this visit," the governor said with a nervous smile. Altera blushingly smiled as she turned partially away. Entering the greeting room, Paulinas clumsily explained:

"I was just returning to the palace from the garrison when I thought I would just drop by to see how you were getting along."

"Then you haven't eaten yet?"

"Well, no, but -"

"Jova," Altera called to another servant who was standing at the corner of the room. "Please bring some supper for the governor, and send in Alexandra with some wine."

She motioned to a lounge chair and said to Paulinas, "Please, sit."

Paulinas waited until Altera sat opposite him before he sat down.

"So, how are you doing?"

"As well as could be expected," she sighed. "I've had to sell most of our land and let go most of the servants in order to cover most of my expenses. I too have had to learn to help in the fields and around the villa."

"Did you not receive Polonius's past wages?" the governor asked concerned.

"Yes, and I am grateful that you arranged for it to be sent so quickly. But I am afraid it was not enough to cover all the debts that accumulated."

"I am sorry to hear that. Is there something I can do?"

"No, you have been too kind already."

Paulinas paused for a moment, and then as he studied her face he gently asked, "Is the memory still painful for you?"

Altera looked down at her toga and began smoothing out some of the wrinkles with her work-worn fingers. "Not so much when I am busy. It is the nights, those long nights..."

Changing the subject, as she threw back her head, she asked in a strong voice, "But tell me, have you heard from your wife and sons lately? How are they getting along in your absence?"

The corners of Paulinas's mouth sagged slightly. "Well, both Gaius and Marcus are doing well. They are attached to the Legion garrison in Rome. In fact Marcus is a Tribune and is part of the Emperor's personal guard."

"Oh, quite an honor," Altera admired.

"And as far as Lucia is concerned, she always gets along well in my absence - too well."

Altera detected the bitterness in his voice. Slightly embarrassed, she apologized:

"Oh, I'm sorry. I did not mean to pry."

"No, really. It is quite all right," Paulinas quickly added as he nervously rubbed his moist palms onto his toga. Then standing, he slowly paced in front of her as he continued:

"Our marriage, of course, was prearranged by our Senator fathers before we were even able to walk. 'Noble blood could never be mixed with low-class clod,' my father always used to say to me.

"Lucia and I always respected one another, but there was never any love. She was one of those elegant ladies of Rome who always attended the social functions of state with me, an elegant statue who adorned my presence because it was expected. But once there she became the social butterfly, always hovered near the rich and powerful.

"And while I was away, she became the social nymph by night, privately entertaining those rich and powerful figures." Paulinas picked up his wine goblet and walked over to the window. The distant rumbling of thunder seemed to be getting closer. Occasionally the bleak night briefly turned into day as the fingers of lightning streaked through the clouds seemingly trying to strangle one another.

Altera could think of nothing to say. Paulinas turned around quickly, and forcing a thin smile he added, "So you see, the nights are long for me as well!"

Raising her goblet, Altera said, "Then here is to long nights, Seutonius. May they someday feel shorter."

"Here is to long nights," he returned with a bow of his head, then drained the wine.

"Your supper, Sir," said Jova, a teenaged servant girl, as she stood in the doorway carrying a tray load of food.

"Set it over here, dear, if you will," said Altera, motioning toward a low, wooden table by the lounge.

"Will there be anything else, my lady?" Jova politely asked.

"It's so late already and with that storm brewing outside, I will not allow the governor to endanger his health. He will spend the night. So prepare some quarters for him and draw a hot bath. I'm sure he would appreciate it after a long day in the dust."

"That trouble won't be necessary," the governor lightly protested. He was surprised by the suggestion for a moment as he misinterpreted her intention. For a fleeting moment he thought, or hoped, she suggested this out of her own desire. But Paulinas knew her better than that. Altera simply suggested this as a caring reflex, something she would have done for a relative, a neighbor, a stranger. But still, he continued to hope...

"I am only a short distance from the city."

"Oh, come now, Seutonium. It is no trouble at all." Altera nodded toward Jova who quickly glanced at the governor, smiled, then disappeared into the hallway.

"A pretty thing, isn't she?" Paulinas commented as he began devouring the tasty beef.

"Yes, I promised her mother before she died that I would take care of Jova. Her mother had been with my family ever since she was a little girl herself."

"Speaking of families," Paulinas said finishing a mouthful of beef, "Polonius never told me why you two never had a family."

Altera raised her thin eyebrows slightly. "It has been many years since I spoke about this."

"That topic still brings you pain, even after all these years?" the governor asked concerned.

"Yes, I suppose it does." She leaned back upon the lounge and stared at the ceiling. Then she continued. "When I was carrying our first child, all was going well until very soon before the child was to come. A terrible plague spread through the province, attacking mostly the aged and the weak.

"I had the fever for several days along with the shakes, and I could not eat. My physician did not think I would live, much less the baby." Then looking at Paulinas, her voice became louder but with a slight tremble to it as she continued:

"Well, he was half right: I lived but my baby was born dead." There was a silent, awkward pause. "Perhaps my physician was right, because a part of me did die that day."

"And what of Polonius?" Paulinas asked.

"He was away at some battle, and didn't learn of what happened until several weeks had passed. I could never successfully carry another child after that..."

The fine peach coloring to her cheeks was replaced by a pale, lifeless color.

Noting her pallor, the governor said, "I should never have asked about this. It is a private matter. Please forgive me."

"Seutonium, you are like family. Do not trouble yourself. I gave this freely."

The governor could not help but pity her. In his eyes she suddenly appeared quite vulnerable and frail. Her delicate features seemed to sag with the years of pain which weighed down her spirit. Paulinas felt an almost uncontrollable urge to wrap his muscular arms around her and squeeze that burden of grief out of her. For the first time that evening, his caring gaze seemed to seize the attention of her troubled eyes, as their worlds touched and then fused together in an empathetic bond which seemed to breed an inner tranquility, stilling, if only for a moment, her sea of turbulent grief.

But the beauty of the moment passed and turned into an awkward silence. Paulinas felt torn between being afraid to release his full sensitive emotions, and wanting to be intimately close with Altera. Because she too was afraid, Altera broke the silence:

"Your bath must be ready by now, I'm sure."

"Yes," Paulinas said as he hastily got off the lounge.

Jova appeared in the doorway carrying two clean towels.

"Till later," the governor nodded to Altera.

After the governor left with Jova, Altera laid back upon the lounge with a sigh and closed her eyes. Spikes of rain seemed to be trying to drive their way through the roof. A terrible night to be outside, she thought. She remembered how as a girl she used to fear these big storms. Her father would always go into her bedroom and comfort her sobbing cries at night. The Polonius took his place, and the comforting was no longer just fatherly, but satisfying as well.

Thoughts of Polonius's muscular arms and broad shoulders during those stormy nights of love making made Altera excited, and then hopelessly depressed. Her blue eyes clouded over and cracked open just enough to allow a trickle of tears to spill forth, trying to erode deeper lines into her weathering checks.

She was still sobbing lightly when Paulinas appeared at her side. The sight of her in this condition clouded his judgment. For the first time in many years, the governor let his guard down. Scooping her up into his arms, he hugged her close, and like a child, Altera snuggled close to his chest. He tenderly stroked her flaxen hair.

Not a word was spoken as two lonely people sought and found refuge in each other, listening to the rain and the wind.

After a short while, Paulinas gently pulled Altera away from him. He carefully searched her grateful eyes for any signs of resistance to his forward gesture of affection. Her eyes gazed longingly into his. Fear of intimacy melted in the light of the building fire of their passion as each simultaneously embraced the other, cheek to cheek, and finally lips to lips.

Paulinas pushed gently away as he asked, "What about Jova?"

"She may be young, but she has been around enough to know to wait for me to call if I need something. She will not disturb us," Altera whispered as her eyes darted eagerly from his eyes to his lips.

They embraced again and fell lying on the lounge, his thick fingers smoothing her tangled hair; her frail-looking arms suddenly and strongly hugging his rippling back.

As the storm raged outside, passion raged inside. Garments separated revealing the graceful nakedness of their bodies with stimulated prizes for the stormy affair. For the first time in months, Altera clearly saw Polonius in her mind's eye. For the first time in years, Paulinas felt not alone as his genuine arousal erupted warm, satisfying pleasure that contagiously spread throughout Altera's body. The world stopped that night as loneliness, suffering, and sorrow waited impatiently for the stark light of the sunrise.

The entrance to Altera's villa opened meekly as Jova peered shyly out at the young, slender Dardanius.

"I have an urgent message for my master, the governor-general," he said with authority. His horse, tied to the hitching post, snorted and pawed the ground impatiently.

"This way, please," Jova motioned to the antechamber. She walked hurriedly down the narrow hallway, the scraping sound of her sandals softly echoing off the walls.

"My Lord," she called without stepping into the doorway. Only silence greeted her delicate-looking ears. She called again; this time louder. A stirring, and then whispering was heard as Paulinas and Altera quickly dressed.

"What is it?" the governor asked as he approached the doorway.

"Your servant is here with urgent news, he says."

Paulinas smoothed his rustled hair. His morning, ashen look revealed his many years of often hard duty. Jova led him to his servant.

"Dardanius!"

"Sir! I have grave news. Another outpost in the western province was attacked, but this time by a large force." Dardanius then lowered his eyes. "The messenger said that all were massacred."

Thos last words seemed to hang on the foggy, morning air. The governor's hands tightened into fists. An official somberness washed over his features as his eyes changed to circles of stone.

"Go to the garrison and have General Didius and the other officers summoned for an emergency meeting in my office as soon as I get back. Hurry!"

With that, Dardanius dashed out the entrance. The clopping sound of his horse galloping away hammered home the urgency of the situation. Paulinas knew that the campaign to expand the empire to the North would have to wait. And all because of Didius. The governor knew he would have to inform Emperor Nero of the general's insubordination, requesting that Didius be transferred. And if that did not work, the governor would have to take matters into his own hands, which meant military court martial and then exile or execution. But for now, the governor needed the general's knowledge of the Celtic ways and his military experience. Paulinas judged that Didius would take this opportunity to try and show off his military expertise for all including the Emperor to understand.

Chapter 7

Catus Deciamus, the short, frail-looking procurator of Britain, smugly reported to governor-general Paulinas:

"Latest gossip from Rome tells of the triumphs of an old friend of yours, I believe, a General Corbulo."

"He is no friend of mine!" said the governor as he stood by a window in his garrison office which overlooked the forum in the now active Via Praetoria, the main road in the garrison. Paulinas's arms were folded across his chest as he intently studied Deciamus's square face, watching for a hint of the procurator's true intentions. What Deciamus lacked in physical strength and stature he more than made up for it in his eagle-like eyes and his fox-like disposition.

"It seems that he has been assigned the rather hazardous task of taming the Armenians with very unseasoned troops stationed in Syria. Apparently he was all too eager to volunteer to toughen up those troops which had so long been Nero's headache and financial drain. All of Rome seems to be talking of the great Corbulo, and making constant comparisons between him and you."

Paulinas refused to give the unaristocratic procurator any satisfaction by responding to news about a rival of his. Corbulo always seemed to the governor to be an over eager self-seeker, just like the procurator, who seriously lacked tact, diplomacy, and most important to the governor, finesse or style. Paulinas had very patience for such crude, low-class, personalities. After a moment of silence, the governor responded:

"My word from Rome is of an entirely more serious nature. Rumor has it that Seneca is calling in payment on all of his loans outstanding in Britain, some forty million sesterces. How is that going to affect your new taxation system to finance my new military operations?"

"My dear governor," the procurator patronized as he stood casually admiring the silver craftsmanship of a portrait of the defied former emperor, Claudius, that hung on the wall. "Civil financial matters are the sole concern of the efficient office of the procurator. What Nero's personal tutor and philosopher does or does not do shall not affect the operations of my office and duty. The military need not worry about me doing my job, sire."

"I worry not about the job, but rather how you will do your job. We do not need to provoke the discontentment and wrath of the citizens and inhabitants of the provinces while I am away. It may not be good for your health, Catus."

"Fear not, sire," sarcastically responded the procurator. "Those barbaric prisoners and slaves you politely call 'inhabitants' are lucky Rome even allows them to retain their possessions at all. If I were emperor I would have seized all their lands and possessions and had them all executed, except for a few slaves, of course, to serve and entertain us, especially those tribal women!"

"Well, thank the gods, that you are not emperor nor even likely to be, or my job would be far worse than it already is."

Deciamus's eyes swelled with insult, as he forced a patient smile. "I'm sure the governor has more urgent matters to attend to now, and therefore, if I am no longer needed here, I humbly request your leave so that someone at least could do work today!"

The procurator bowed quickly and left the room without waiting for a formal reply from the governor. The jobs of governor and procurator were regarded in Rome as being separate but equal, so Paulinas had no immediate power over Deciamus, and the procurator knew this as well. Besides, all members of the governor's staff and of the procurator's staff knew that Paulinas regarded his job solely in military terms and personally could not be bothered with what he regarded as trivial, civil matters. Paulinas also realized, however, that Nero's first love was money.

A loud bang was heard from the door to an Icenian provincial's hut.

"Open up in there, now, or we shall break it down!" demanded a deep, gruff voice.

A young Icenian woman with dark eyes and long, dark hair trembled with fear and indecision before finally removing the door bar. Her eight month old baby boy began to cry, startled from his nap by the loud noise. Since her husband was in Camulodunum on trading business to buy supplies for their corn farm, the woman struggled to decide whether to resist by refusing entry to the impatient voices, or to submit with the hope that she could give them what they wanted and let them be gone. After all, her family paid their property taxes and corn requisition. Maybe it was another census like the one taken in the province last year, she thought.

The Icenian woman lifted the wooden beam out of its latches that guarded the door. She then opened the door just enough to show her face, and meekly asked: "What do you want?"

A stocky Roman Centurion with dusty clothes, a member of the procurator's staff, and flanked by three legionaries thrust open the door, sending the woman reeling backwards. Three Romans stood inside looking around the simple but clean room while one stood guard outside. The Centurion stood with his hands on his hips looking at the woman with lustful eyes. The woman was shabbily dressed in sack cloth.

"What do you want?" asked the woman, trying to gather her tribal courage and pride. There was a slight tremble in her voice as she positioned herself between the smiling Centurion and her still crying baby. "We paid our taxes last month."

"Well it seems the procurator has issued a new tax, customs dues, to be collected from all its provincial slaves and prisoners. After all, if we are to protect you from barbaric invaders, it is only fair that you pay for this protection which Rome provides to its conquered peoples." The Centurion began to move in closer to the woman who matched his forward steps with backward ones.

The other two soldiers began to circle behind her.

"We have no money left," the woman said as her courage began to wane.

"Well that is too bad for you," said the Centurion as his eyes darted between her fearful eyes and her well-formed breasts. The smell of lamb boiling on a crude stove at the center of the hut seemed to suffocate the woman as she suddenly turned to try to rescue her infant, only to bump directly into the chest armor of a legionnaire.

"We will be back to collect the twenty-five sesterce, so tell your husband to have the money waiting for us. The procurator is an impatient man, and that means we are also impatient." The Centurion said this as he grabbed the woman's arms and pulled her close to him. His breath smelled of tart, cheap wine.

"But to make this trip worthwhile for me, I do not like to go away - unsatisfied!" In a flash, his hands tore away her garments to reveal its two large prizes.

The woman screamed with both fear and anger as she slapped the Roman's weather-worn face as hard as she could. The legionnaire behind her seized her arms and held them behind her which made her chest stand out even more.

The Centurion nodded to the other legionnaire who scooped the crying infant out of its bed of straw and held him by his ankles upside down like a captured animal.

"A baby boy!" said the Centurion. "I should kill him now and save future Roman lives. But you might not like that, would you?" The woman stood as if frozen and unable to answer.

Then grabbing her hair hard enough to make her stare directly into his proud pox-marked face, the Centurion again demanded:

"Would you?"

"No! No!" was all the woman could gasp.

"Then you will not offer me any resistance as you offer me your body!"

The woman hesitated. The tide of fear was replaced for a moment with a tide of anger as her eyes flashed fire to his. Seeing this, the other legionnaire smiled at her spunk and held the wiggling baby, still upside down, over the steaming kettle of lamb. The woman glanced instinctively at her child as he began to scream. She quickly nodded in submission.

The Centurion smiled triumphantly as he took off his helmet and chest armor. He then began squeezing her bosoms as if testing them for ripeness. After being forced to lie down upon the dirty floor boards, the woman closed her eyes tightly, trying to squeeze out the pain and horror of the experience. She also knew that her husband would not understand what was about to happen to her since a violated woman among the Iceni would no longer be worthy of a warrior's care. She would therefore be cast out of the house and the tribe. The Centurion smiled with this knowledge as he lustfully raped the sobbing woman.

News of the new Roman customs tax and its accompanying corruption and atrocities finally reached an enraged Queen Boudicca.

"They call us barbarians!" shouted the Iceni Queen of Trinovantian descent. Her angry red face almost matched the color of her flaming hair. "Surely even Prastatagus will see the danger developing in this situation. We must tell him now!"

Boudicca and the tired Iceni warrior who brought her the news stormed through the Roman-style royal residence into what Prastatagus liked to call the "throne room," actually the greeting room of the villa.

The heavy-set Roman-appointed king emerged from the room and almost bumped into Boudicca.

"You are always bumping into me!" complained the king as he tried smoothing the wrinkles out of his food-stained purple garments. "I thought we agreed to stay in separate parts of the villa!"

"It is not by choice that I come to you now," said the Queen angrily.

"Well, let it wait then until I return. I must go to Camulodunum to discuss the terms of the next corn requisition with members of the Procurator's staff."

"Since as a woman I am not allowed to discuss such matters of state with our Roman conquerors, you had better discuss the unfairness of their new customs tax."

"What are you talking about? They never told me of any new tax at the last council meeting. They said that only the existing taxes would be raised."

"You fool!" Boudicca exclaimed in frustration. "You hear only what you want to hear, see only what you want to see, as long as it does not disturb your secure routine."

"I do not believe you." Prastatagus shook his head as he tried to brush Boudicca aside.

"It is true, my Lord," the worn warrior messenger eagerly defended. "I have seen this with my own eyes. And the people are demanding that something be done."

"The people demand?" Prastatagus questioned angrily. "I am doing all I can for them, and they are not grateful!"

"You do all you can as long as it can add to your own personal wealth!" shouted Boudicca as she shook her finger menacingly in his face.

"You forget that it also adds to your wealth as well."

Boudicca had no argument. She enjoyed her comfortable life. Never would she or her daughters have to be concerned about where her next meal would come from, as in her childhood days.

After Prastatagus had left, the messenger turned to Boudicca and asked confused, "What is to be done now, my Queen?"

Boudicca flipped her long hair over her shoulder. "It seems that the Archdruid of Mona has the right idea. The Romans must be driven from our lands. The redressing of wrongs inflicted upon our people must be continued and intensified. With Prastatagus gone for at least a few days, go out and quietly inform area chieftains to meet here tonight to discuss plans for Roman disruption."

The messenger bowed and left the room.

Cloten, Boudicca's cousin and King of the Trinovantes, galloped angrily through the streets of the capital city of his kingdom, Camulodunum. At his side was a distant relative of his, Polydore, who also was Cloten's closet advisor. These two were flanked by two bodyguards. Several people in the street waved at the King respectfully as the group galloped past. Most of the inhabitants of the city were Trinovantians. However, retired Roman army veterans, some wrinkled and deformed from years of re-inflicted combat injuries, and other assorted Roman business men and merchants, were in total control of the city's commercial and governmental operations.

As Cloten's group dismounted in front of a large wooden building in the center of town which housed the Roman administrative offices, the King of the Trinovantes sadly and silently watched as a caravan of ten wagons and assorted riders slowly moved out of town. The overloaded wagons carried about one hundred Trinovantian citizens, seemingly of their own free will, to the Roman tile quarry in the hills outside of town. This silent group was accompanied by a small contingent of Roman

legionaries to control and oversee the day's operations. The workers were not really paid for their labors, but rather the amount of their taxation was somewhat lessened on a weekly basis. They really had no choice but to perform what should have been called slave labor, since their only other alternative was debtors' prison because most could not afford the rising tax rate. And so every morning these worn-looking men sat stone-like as they rode off for a long day of quarrying, not to return until the sun had set. As the wagons passed Cloten, all eyes seemed to stare accusingly with anger at him.

Cloten's arms and fists tightened with frustrated helplessness as he watched the sad and silent parade. Finally, he wheeled around, his brown, shoulder-length hair briefly obscuring his vision, and marched through the entrance, glaring momentarily at each of the two Roman guards on either side of the entrance.

The Trinovantian delegation barged into the Roman administrator's chamber on the second floor, under protest by several attendants who tried unsuccessfully to stop them.

Clitus, a dark-looking Centurion from the Procurator's personal staff, was seated and in conference with Prastatagus, who lazily looked over at Cloten with eyes which seemed to be setting over the rim of a chalice of wine.

"Well, what are you doing here?" asked Prastatagus. "I was here first."

Refusing to even acknowledge the Icenic King, the Trinovantian leader impatiently addressed Clitus:

"You and I must talk now!"

Clitus, more of a soldier than a diplomat, curtly replied, "Can't you see that I am busy? Come back tomorrow!"

"Why have you levied a new tax without informing us first?" demanded Cloten, with blazing eyes focused on the seated Centurion administrator.

"That is really not for me to answer. Procurator Decimus sets the policy for the Province here. I merely carry out his orders, just as you must," Clitus smiled smugly.

"The Council of Tribal Affairs is always supposed to receive any new tax plans for approval first. This new tax is highly unfair and overburdening and is stressing us all to the limits of tolerance!"

"I do not see where you as a conquered people have much choice in the matter. After all, you are at the mercy and benevolence of Rome." Cloten could see that Clitus was thoroughly enjoying this.

Cloten turned in frustration toward Prastatagus, whose undignified sloppy appearance had always disgusted him.

"Surely even you, the great Roman sympathizer, must be feeling some pressure from your own people about these unjust taxes!" Cloten commented in the desperate hope of some trace of support.

"My people are more concerned about being alive and keeping their land!" Prastatagus laughed with a glance at Clitus to make sure that his comment registered positively.

"That is strange news," said Cloten in disbelief, "especially since rumor has it that these 'benevolent' Romans are inflicting harsh penalties on your people for not giving prompt payment."

"As you said, it is a rumor," said Prastatagus uneasily. "I have heard nothing of this."

"You mean you refuse to hear anything of this!" Cloten clasped his hands behind his back as he began pacing in front of Prastatagus. "Rumor also has it, as sung throughout the land by the Bards, that your wife, and I am proud to say, my cousin, has more power than you, and that she, inspired by the great Archdruid of Mona, has been instigating uprisings against the Romans. That's how satisfied your people are!"

"Rumors! Rumors!" cried the Icenian King angrily and nervously. "He is obviously trying to discredit me with malicious lies and rumors!" His fingernails began to dig into the wooden chair arms.

The Trinovantian King smiled triumphantly to see Prastatagus squirm cowardly. Clitus turned his suspicious eyes upon the Icenian King.

"I too have heard these rumors, but I am sure we can work this out and that you will be most cooperative because you certainly would not want to jeopardize our long, healthy and lucrative friendship!"

The Icenian King did not answer but looked up at Cloten with hate-filled eyes.

Polydore, who silently listened to the preceding conversation with keen interest, finally stepped forward and confronted Clitus with the all-important burning question of injustice which really motivated the purpose of the encounter:

"When will you release our people from their slavery duty at the quarry?"

Feigning indignity, Clitus replied, "How can you call it slavery? They are being paid for their work!"

"A token reduction in the tax rate is not payment!" Polydore replied angrily, clenching his large, worn fists.

Turning to look straight into Cloten's narrowed eyes, Clitus unleashed his scathing truth: "Remember that it was you and the other area chieftains who came first to us seeking a desperate settlement which quickly became a convenient way for

even you to gain a measure of profit. Your villa is just as Roman in architecture as that of Prastatagus." The coy Roman paused an awkward moment to let this lesson sink in. "Beside, I haven't heard your people complain?"

"You will!" shouted Polydore as Cloten stood dumbfounded with gaping mouth, deeply embarrassed by the revelation, especially by their conquering enemy, of his chosen blindness. Polydore repeated, "You will, soon!"

Clitus smiled with great satisfaction as the Trinovantian delegation stormed out of his office.

The Procurator Deciamus laughed heartily. "Paulinas is no problem at all!" he said to Cornelius, a wealthy Roman corn merchant and infamous moneylender. "His only interest in Britannia is in its military conquest and his own personal gain. After all, it has been fourteen years since he has had an active role in the affairs of the Empire, not to mention a leadership role. So it seems only natural that he would be so concerned with trying to recover past glory and position."

Cornelius was a sixty-three year old white haired Roman citizen who came to Britania on the heels of Claudius's conquering legions, eager to be one of the first to take advantage of this new territory. But in order for him to make such a daring start profitable, he had to have a generous loan which he was able to get from his old infamous friend in Rome, Seneca.

"Then you understand the urgency with which we must collect on all our outstanding loans as soon as possible," Cornelius said eagerly. "Only then will we be able to repay Seneca in full before his - collectors - come looking for us!"

Deciamus leaned forward in his creaking, wooden chair. "We will get our money, old friend. The Temple Tax is a swift way to legally collect what is rightfully ours without the Governor nor anyone else suspecting a thing. This way large 'donations' can be accepted from our patrons under such a respectable appearance as to the honor and deification of noble Claudius!"

Cornelius stroked his neatly shaved chin. "It seems to me that the inhabitants we squeeze this money from are already taxed beyond their financial limits."

"First of all, they are not inhabitants. They are prisoners and slaves. Second, if they are ever to become citizens, they must earn the price of their citizenship and make their contribution, either in money or labor. It makes no difference to me."

The aged Roman reflected for a moment and then added, "Of all the loans that I have distributed, the largest arrangements have been made with members of the tribal royal houses. They are far better off now than their miserable subjects, yet they

always seem to cry poverty the loudest when the monthly collection is due. How fast they learned the comforts of civilization. If there was only some way to make these people pay in full -"

"You might have something there, my friend," Decimus said as he stood up in thought. "One private loan I have made in particular could make me a rich man with all the interest that is due me. It could also satisfy my own debts to Seneca. Prastatagus, King of the Iceni, is very wealthy in terms of his estate. He claims not to have much in money, but his land and houses would be worth a lot to certain prospective wealthy retiring soldiers or businessmen who would love to come here from Rome, if there was an already established estate for them."

"But how can you just seize his land? Surely, his outstanding loan cannot be much."

"You are right," said the Procurator pacing, deep in thought. Suddenly, a sinister glimmer of enlightenment crossed his pale face, his dark eyes wide with excitement.

"Clitus sent a messenger to me yesterday with news of a rumor which may be just confirmed by Prastatagus and his own family, no less."

In aroused interest, Cornelius asked, "What was the news?"

"You have heard, of course, of the recent tribal uprisings. Well, it appears as if the wife of Prastatagus herself, Boudicca, I think, may have been the source, along with some barbaric, Druid priest."

"That would be a true crime against the state."

"Exactly! Also, before Claudius left Britannia after the conquest, he gave land as a gift to certain client kings as a reward for their cooperation in staying out of his military path. Prastatagus was one of the first such client kings. He was in fact appointed king and made husband to this Boudicca. She was at that time considered the ruler of the Iceni after their previous ruler, her former husband, died of some illness. But since she was also a relative of the royal house of the Trinovantes, enemy to Rome, Claudius felt it more appropriate to support an Iceni as ruler, especially since Prastatagus was at that time most influential and persuasive to Boudicca."

Cornelius looked confused. "I don't understand the significance of the history lesson."

The Procurator sighed deeply. "Do you not see? This land can be viewed as a conditional gift that would revert back to the government upon act of war against Rome, or the death of Prastatagus. He has no male heir; his wife is a foreigner. The setup would be perfectly legal for me to seize his land, especially since she is a rebellious instigator!"

"You seem to be forgetting one important fact, however," reminded Cornelius as he sat back in his chair. "Prastatagus is still alive."

The Procurator slowly smiled. "Life is sometimes too short and very unfair!"

Chapter 8

Petillius Cerialis, a young take-a-chance type aristocrat who was the commander of the IXth Legion at Lindum, received a dusty, weary messenger who had been riding hard most of the night.

"Commander, several large marauding bands joined forces at Margidunum last night. They demanded that the inhabitants and some of our veterans who settled there give up their grain supply and horses. When the people refused, the band slaughtered most of the residents, sacked the settlement, and then set fire to the grain supply and any buildings in their path."

Cerialis, a well-dressed, good looking man who took pride in his appearance and his ability to make sound military judgments, was not surprised by the report at all. "So they finally attacked. Now my cavalry detachments will have a solid trail to follow. We have been looking for them for a few days now after we received reports of their presence from some traveling merchants in the area. How strong are they?"

"When they joined up, about a thousand, sir."

"Who are they?"

"Catuvellauni and Iceni."

Cerialis's eyebrows raised at this news. "Both are a very long way from home." This baffled the young commander. Never before have outsiders penetrated this far into Coritani territory without meeting any resistance from the native inhabitants.

One of the commander's aides, a well-seasoned Tribune by the name of Quintus, caught the last part of the conversation as he entered the commander's spartan office. Quintus was quite knowledgeable about tribal affairs since both he and General Didus served as part of the Claudian conquest and had remained here ever since.

"It seems to me, Commander, that the Iceni and Catuvellauni must have been encouraged by the Coritani royal house to continue their mission, whatever that may be. The Coritani are fierce fighters when provoked so there must have been some consensus of agreement to allow the marauders to continue through their land."

"But why did the raiders kill some of the native inhabitants?" asked Cerialis with interest and growing concern.

"Perhaps they are trying to set an example for the local people to submit their full cooperation to the demands of the raiders, especially since they travel with royal blessing. Any refusal of cooperation with them would be viewed as a refusal against the royal house, a crime punishable by death."

"Do you think this is an attempt at an alliance of some sort?"

Quintus thought for a few moments. "Possibly."

If this were true, Cerialis realized that this could lead to the start of a general uprising in this area, not a particularly pleasant thought considering that he was but one legion to cover such a vast, isolated area. His men were already spread about as thinly as could barely be safe to allow with two-thirds of his men scattered among seven forts and outposts, while the remaining vexillation was stationed in Lindum itself.

The commander clapped his small, but strong hands together. One of his attendants appeared. "Get this man some food and drink and a place to rest."

After the attendant and messenger left, Cerialis turned to Quintus, who stood with folded arms, and said, "You better send word to your friend, General Didus and the Fourteenth Gemina over at Viroconium that trouble may soon appear, and that we may need whatever spare help he can send us from his closest outposts."

"He has his hands full already against the Brigantes and Ordovices."

The commander sighed. "I know. I will also send word to General Postumus and the Second Augusta at Glevum."

"Let us not forget Paulinas as well," said Quintus. "The Governor must be made aware of the potential problems."

"Yes, of course," Cerialis agreed distantly, already lost in his procedures and troop movements.

Quintus left hurriedly to begin his tasks. Cerialis could never really understand why Quintus had given up the chance at being Commander of the IXth Hispania. As a result, Rome sent Cerialis, son of a Senator, to take his first command after having served for only a few short, though glorious years in various campaigns in Gaul. Cerialis never understood Quintus's decision - until now...

Here was a potentially dangerous situation, one in which the Commander's brief military career could come abruptly to a halt. For what seemed an eternity, Cerialis felt panic seize him while he sat staring at a pile of official parchments strewn across the top of his squared table. Gripping the leathered arms of his chair, he finally vowed to himself to keep a cool head and not let any situation overcome him. He was a gambler, after all, he thought to himself, and life is just a gamble, anyway...

Poenius Postumus, Prefect of the IIInd Augusta, had been recently moved by Paulinas from Isca, near the Southern coast, to Glevum, at the mouth of the river Severn near the great Channel. This was done to hold the line against Arviragus and

the Silures in order to enable Agricola to lead, in Paulinas's place, the XXth Valera from Glevum to the forts in the Trent-Severn Gap. Here, Agricola, the promising young officer on the Governor's personal staff, was to wait for Paulinas to join him with several more detachments from the XXth Legion that had been stationed at the Londinium garrison. But at times, Postumus's inability to make decisive military decisions prevented him from seeing courageous opportunities which, if taken advantage of, would have enhanced his dull military career. This inability of his would later return to haunt him.

A large raiding party of five thousand blue woad-painted Silurian warriors, led by Arviragus himself, had daringly crossed the River Wye, and threatened the undermanned garrison at Magna, about thirty kilometers northwest of Glevum.

Celsus, the newly-appointed speculator with the IInd Augusta, galloped through the Via Praetoria and finally dismounted in a cloud of dust in front of the praetorium, the garrison headquarters. He was a middle-aged man who looked a lot younger than he actually was. After fifteen years of loyal and eager military service, his hard work was finally recognized with this promotion to speculator, one of ten men in the legion who possessed judicial responsibilities which included the custody and execution of prisoners as well as the carrying of important dispatches. The message he carried this day was the knock of opportunity for the legion commander, Postumus.

Seated at his table, examining granary-level reports under his jurisdiction, Postumus, visibly irritated by the interruption, sullenly read the dispatch which came from Magna. His eyes grew wide with alarm as Postumus saw his neatly laid plans for reorganization of territory troop disbursements made shortly after the move from Isca suddenly about to be disrupted.

Postumus was a planner and an organizer and took much time and effort in arranging even the most minute of details. He was a man of deep-seated patterns of habit, established in his rise through the ranks, his many years as a centurion, and finally achieving the senior post open to him in the army. Any move to disrupt any of his well-laid plans was an extremely frustrating experience for him.

Slamming his fist onto the table, Postumus bitterly remarked, "Why did this have to happen now!" Then turning to Celsus, he said in frustration, "Go tend to your personal needs and come back in a few hours. I'll have a reply for you then!" Celsus saluted, then left the commander to brood in peace.

What will I do now? Postumus thought to himself. Magna has only six hundred soldiers when it usually has twice that many. I never expected Arviragus to shift his

attention from the Northern territories to the Southern. And besides, it was not my fault the Governor needed several detachments right away...

Postumus shifted uneasily in his chair. And now with the Governor himself in the area, whatever action I take, I am sure to hear his criticism. The Master Strategist, they call him. Well, if he is such an expert, why am I in the position I am now? It is his fault!

With that, the Commander stood up and went over to the window which overlooked the garrison forum. Several platoons marched by in the pouring rain., led by a drill instructor who occasionally barked criticism of marching style at the soldiers who would soon become legionaries. There was a knock finally at the Commander's door.

Quintus, a veteran Centurion and a friend to Postumus entered and saluted saying, "I have the last of those granary reports for you, Commander."

"Very good," Postumus said looking away from the window. "Sit down for a moment, Quintus. I need your advice."

"What can I do for you, sir?"

"You spent time recently at Magna, did you not?"

"Yes, sir, I did."

"Arviragus and five thousand warriors made a surprise crossing of the Wye and is threatening Magna. Now, as I see it, the only option I have is to hope those men can defend the fort long enough so that I can send reinforcements from the Trent-Severn line and from here. Do you think the fort and the town can bear up under a direct assault?"

"Well, the men are veterans of many Silurian attacks, though not of this size. They are familiar with Silurian ways. The fortifications should hold for a first attack, but risk being overrun after that."

Postumus paced, reflecting on what he had heard. "It would be at least two days before reinforcements can arrive. Arviragus seems to know about the camp's strengths or otherwise he would not attempt this. Perhaps Magna should be evacuated until reinforcements can arrive. Then the two groups can sweep the Silurians back across the Wye."

"May I suggest an alternative course, sir?" Quintus asked as Postumus nodded. "If this heavy rain should continue for another day, Arviragus will not be able to attack because of the swampy conditions. And the river will rise which would prevent him from crossing where he did. The only other place for him to re-cross would be further

upstream. Now, what I propose is to have the garrison attack the moment the rains begin to let up."

"That would be impossible. You just said that the ground would never hold up under troop movement."

"Under a movement of five thousand, yes." Quintus smiled. But with a force of five hundred, the movement would be swifter, the surprise greater, and the Silurian line for retreat would be cut off with their backs to a rising river. This would force a draw until the reinforcements could arrive."

Postumus shook his head. "Too many risks involved. It is a good plan, but the forest is so dense there that if a Silurian advance guard spots our march, ambush would take a heavy toll of our soldiers even before we counter-attacked."

"You are missing an opportunity here, Commander. If it were any other soldiers but the veterans at Magna, I would agree -"

"Well, thank you, Quintus." Postumus cut him off. "There would be less of a risk if I kept those men within the fort until the reinforcements could be sent."

Quintus sighed, then stood saying, "As you wish, sir." He saluted and then left. The rains continued to fall heavily and steadily for many hours later, and long after Celsus departed for the Trent-Severn forts with the request for reinforcements to be sent as soon as possible to Magna.

Paulinas, who had just arrived at the Trent-Severn Gap, personally received the description of the situation from Postumus through Celsus.

"The fool should have attacked! It will be impossible for those reinforcements to even move until these rains let up!"

A day later, the rains finally did let up and Paulinas left the Trent-Severn forts with the XXth Valera, a total of almost six thousand men, cavalry, and auxiliaries, leaving behind only a thousand men between the two outposts. The Governor also sent word to his rival, General Didus and the XIVth Gemina garrisoned at Viroconium, to begin working his way to the northern border of the Silures for a possible joining of forces some months from now.

"The rain has finally stopped, sir," said a Silurian division leader to Arviragus.

"Yes, but the river has cut off our retreat," noted the Silurian King as he mounted his horse. "The only other place to cross the Wye would be several miles up river. But hopefully we will not have to be in a hurry to cross, once our job is effectively completed."

"Your plan seems to be well planned."

"With the thorough report your men supplied me about the weak numbers of Romans, and the best positions to attack their fortifications, we should be able to break through on the second charge and overrun them, scattering them throughout the forest in headlong flight!"

With that, Arviragus motioned to his mounted host of the blue-painted warriors to move ahead. The last two miles of their hunt forced them to proceed slower than the Silurian King would have liked. The ground at times was a quagmire through which ran many swollen streams. The horses had a hard time and often had to be led on foot by their frustrated riders. A few horses even suffered twisted legs and had to be abandoned. Rain droplets, accumulated on the the leaves of at times dense forest, often pelted down upon the encumbered cavalry, soaking both horse and rider, and often washing off the blue woad that covered each rider.

What should have taken an hour to cover on a dry day took most of the morning for the Silurians to reach the outpost at Magna. Gone was the intended surprise of an early morning raid which would have greatly improved their chances of overrunning the foreign foe who had dared conquer the untamed and courageous land of Britannia. As each warrior silently rode, occasionally bending low to avoid soggy branches, thoughts that mixed excitement, anxiety, and a sense of duty filled their minds.

Suddenly, their were fierce yells from the Silurian advance guard up ahead in a small clearing. One rider managed to gallop back to Arviragus and his aides.

"Sire, we have been spotted by Roman scouts," the rider shouted out of breath.

"They must have guessed we were coming, and positioned their sentries further out from their outpost," Arviragus said to one of his aides beside him. "No matter. We will just have to press the last distance to catch the outpost in the middle of its preparations."

The Silurian King then signaled the force to proceed as quickly as possible under the conditions. Upon arriving at the forest's edge, just before coming into full sight of the outpost, Arviragus sent out his scouts to check for changes in Roman strength and fortification, while the rest of the force was split into two attacking groups. One group, led by Arviragus himself, would attack the Porta Principalis Sinistra, and a half hour later the other group would attack the Porta Principalis Dextra. Both groups would then squeeze the camp's weak mid-section to the point where the Roman defenders would be forced out of their own front and back gates, right into the paths of the waiting Silurian archers. The camp would be torched as quickly as possible to help apply the necessary pressure to the Silurian thrust.

As two of the groups of scouts finally returned to Arviragus's position.

"There is no sign of reinforcements, sire, nor any defense changes. Still -" The scout stroked his long, sagging moustache.

"Well, what is it?" demanded the Silurian King.

"The outpost seems quiet, almost too quiet."

Arviragus thought for a moment. "All the signs and omens seem to be good for us so far. In fact many of the druids and bards traveling with us have noted no dramatically bad signs in the heavens at all. If the Romans are prepared for us, then it will just take us a while longer, perhaps several charges, to break through their defenses. But the gods are on our side this time!"

Then, motioning with his sword raised high to his various division chieftains spread out along the first group's attacking line, he shouted with excitement, "We go!"

The white bull horns of the division standards were hoisted high, as the first Silurian force charged in full gallop across the clearing toward the left side entrance to the outpost at Magna. The sound of thundering hooves, in spite of the mud, and fierce war cries filled the damp, mid afternoon air under a threatening midsummer sky.

As the horrid blue mass of screaming warriors flooded across the soggy clearing, not a movement could be seen from the ten foot tall earthen walls.

Suddenly, when the Silures were about three hundred meters from the left wall and gate, a flurry of arrows like a swarm of angry bees pelted the spies with such a stunning force that one-quarter of the mounted scouts crashed heavily down into the hoof-trodden mud, breaking the momentum of their lightning advance. For a moment, their seemed to be confusion as many of the riders looked frantically around for leadership.

By this point, the Silurian infantry finally arrived.

"Regroup! Regroup!" cried Arviragus to his cavalry. After a few moments of frantic orders and shuffling about, a new Silurian wave was organized. This time the infantry advanced first, while their archers lined up to pick off the Roman heads which began to appear from atop the earth and stone walls.

Within the Roman outpost, the temporary leader was a sly, seasoned Centurion by the name of Volumnius. From atop his snorting horse, he shouted, "Keep mounting your helmets along the top of the wall! Let them think there are more of us here than actually are!" As the helmets were carefully put into place, bare-headed javelin throwers stood along the catwalks, waiting coolly for the order to unleash their terrible weapons.

Of the six hundred defenders, about four hundred were amassed along the left side of the outpost. The remaining two hundred waited patiently, grim-faced, to be positioned for defense of another part of the camp.

"They are within range!" shouted a Roman lookout.

Voluminous was gambling, and he knew it. Somehow, he had to delay the inevitable overrunning of the outpost for another day. If reinforcements were on the way as he was informed, then they would arrive tomorrow, if all went well. That was the gamble. His order to hold the fort as long as possible before abandoning it, would be difficult to fulfill for any time longer than a day.

After a few moments more to allow more of the invaders to be within range, the Centurion dropped his arm as a signal for the javelin barrage to begin.

The air suddenly filled again with rain and three meter javelins, their iron heads piercing thirty meters later into the raised wood and leather Silurian shields, making them useless to be carried. As some of the invaders struggled to withdraw the Roman pilums, again Volumnius's archers swung into action, replacing the javelin throwers on the catwalks. This time the deadly arrows succeeded in breaking the spirit and backbone of this first attack, sending the remaining Silurians into a headlong scramble away from the walls.

Just as these archers were firing, the second Silurian attack began on the right side of the outpost. Volumnius, alerted by the cry of another lookout, quickly ordered the waiting two hundred defenders, "To the right side, move quickly!"

By this point, the rain suddenly became a driving downpour. Again the Romans mounted a helmet facade. Again their archers sent a deadly stream of arrows into the soaked, muddy horde of Silurian infantry and cavalry. The miserable attackers, laden with heavy, soaked garments and armor, could not move quickly enough to evade the arrowed onslaught. A Silurian chieftain, seeing what he thought were larger numbers of Romans than was anticipated, interpreted the heavy downpour of rain and arrows as a sign from the heavens to call off the attack.

"We turned them away! We turned them away!" shouted a centurion from the walls to Volumnius.

"We may have won this round but not the battle yet." The fort commander galloped through the mud to the left gate where the heaviest action had been. Casualties were lighter than expected.

Volumnius turned his head upward, catching a face full of rain that streamed through his short beard. "Jupiter be praised!" He shouted, and for an instant, he almost believed in the gods.

The Healer moved briskly from one wounded warrior to the next, looking for those in the most serious condition to be helped first. Moans and cries of pain were being drowned out by the thunderous downpour that pelted the trees and broken bodies.

Late afternoon arrived before a dejected Arviragus and his other chieftains could gather in the King's tent for a discussion of what to do next.

"I tell you, there were more Romans than there should have been!" shouted one of the older chieftains, his left forearm bandaged after being grazed by a Roman pilum.

"It is your fault for not gathering the proper information about the fort!" accused one of the younger chieftains, pointing his finger at the older chieftain. The other chieftains muttered agreement.

"What are you talking about?" asked a chieftain involved in the second attack force.

"Did you not see all the Romans peering over the wall at us while we made our attack?" shouted another.

"You fools! It was a trick! Did you see many of those helmets move? Some of my men were actually taking bets as to which ones had a Roman head and which ones had not!"

"A shell game! Very clever!" Arviragus admired as he stood up with clenched fists. "But they will make fools of us no longer!" Tomorrow we make one massive attack against their left gate and we will not stop until we overrun them and burn their grain supply and their whole outpost!" A cheer of approval arose from the battle worn group.

The Silurian King continued. "And when their reinforcements arrive, they will be forced to leave some soldiers here, further diminishing their overall numbers, spreading thin their lines of defense once again, as we continue to attack other outposts."

A weary Abaris and other druid and non-druid healers tried as best they could to comfort the injured. Healers and injured alike realized, however, that unless a warrior could move on his own, he would be left behind to the vengeance of the advancing Roman reinforcements who would show no compassion for a wounded enemy. All that Abaris and the other healers could do for these tortured, broken bodies was to make them as comfortable as possible to face their end.

Abaris gently applied a bandage soaked in a reddish liquid that came from hypericum, a small, powerful herb that helps heal deep wounds. The young warrior's feverish eyes reflected a mixture of fear, pain, and gratitude. His chest was pierced

almost completely through to the back by a Roman arrow. The dying man lost a lot of blood before Abaris attended to his wound.

"Tell me, Holy One, why should I not be afraid to die?" The man winced with pain as Abaris pressed the special bandage down into his wound.

"Our spirit is born not long to this world," explained Abaris. "Death is merely a transition between lives, a brief resting period for us to catch our breaths so that we can begin a new journey that will take us even closer to the final joining of our spirit with that of the gods."

The man was still troubled. "But I'm afraid of the final moment."

Abaris gently lifted the man's head and gave him some water from his pouch. "You must have courage and faith. When your moment comes, do not fight it. Try to feel what it must be like for a single raindrop to gently fall into a sea of cool, still water."

The Healer's blue eyes seemed as deep and as tranquil as that of the sea. The dying warrior lurched forward in one final spasm of deep pain, and then slowly relaxed as every knotted muscle seem to be slowly unwinding."

"Holy One," the man whispered, as the beads of sweat ceased their torrential movement. "My moment is here, and yet I do not feel any pain. And I do not fear...raindrops...the sea is so cool..."

Abaris smiled sadly, and the warrior weakly smiled back in gratitude until his mouth slowly gaped open, his eyes staring into infinity. The Healer sighed in sorrow and frustration as he gently closed the dead warrior's eyes. Then with his hand to his forehead, Abaris looked up into the drizzly, darkening sky and whispered, "Have mercy on this man's spirit."

"Since the rains have finally stopped, we can march all night and reach Magna just after daybreak," Paulinas said to Agricola who rode beside the Governor, near the head of the Legionary column.

"If it had not been for the weather," Agricola responded as he pulled his cloak closer to his chilled body, "we would have been there already. I just hope that we will be there in time. Volumnius is a good soldier, one we should not have to lose."

The military road was almost impassible with the mud, almost hub deep in some sections on the supply wagons. Half of the column was being used to keep the wagon train moving. Paulinas realized this would take quite a toll on the strength of his men, but the XXth Valera had proven itself before under strenuous, exhausting conditions.

"The men should be allowed to get at least some sleep," commented Agricola whose entire body seemed to be sore from riding all day. "They will not be in any condition to fight a sustained battle tomorrow."

"My men know that Magna's men are depending on us. They will do everything in their power to try to save them. Besides, once Arviragus sees our column move in, I expect him to withdraw quickly," the Governor as he thrust his chin forward. "His band would be no match against fresh, seasoned reinforcements."

Agricola nodded silently as Paulinas continued. "Within the hour, we will be past this most difficult part of our journey as we reach an open stretch before entering the next forest. At that point, I will take half the column and race ahead, while you see what magic you can make to lead the remainder toward our joining at Magna."

And so the XXth Valera struggled with its wagons and continued to slither its way to Magna.

Groups of twenty Silurian archers crept quietly, at times on hands and knees, through the early morning darkness and the three hundred meter clearing to within one hundred meters of the fort's walls. Thirty groups converged in a semi-circle around the left side and gate. These warriors were to cause confusion among the wall defenders so that the main attack force could cross the clearing unchallenged and thus begin the actual work of scaling and storming the walls. A similar mass of archers appeared on the right side as well, so as to divide the Roman attention. Miraculously the archers were not spotted by the nervous Roman sentries.

Volumnius could only sleep a total of an hour during the course of the entire night. Nervously he rode back and forth throughout the ten acre fort and town, checking sleep rotations and sentry positions. Occasionally he would lie down with the legionaries and doze for a few minutes, until someone would either drop his sword or talk out in his sleep, and therefore awaken the Tribune.

Now he stood stone-like with the sentries on the main front wall, straining his already tired eyes to the maximum in order to catch some strange movement in the darkness that the entire fort-like a burial shroud to within thirty meters of the walls. Volumnius was gambling again. He placed three hundred of his men at the main gate. Assuming that since the Silurians attacked the two sides of the fort and failed, they would naturally have to choose either the front or back. And since the back of the fort would cut off their retreat back across the river, the only logical place for them, he thought, was the front of the fort. So Volumnius waited there with his men, the rest being positioned at various intervals along the outer walls.

Twenty groups of twenty Silurian archers finally arrived at the front of the fort, again in a semi-circle about one hundred meters from the gate. The purpose of this group was to start the diversion here, forcing the Romans to converge on this side, if they were not already there. Then ten groups of twenty would be positioned similarly on the left side where they would wait about fifteen minutes after the first diversion to begin theirs. By that point, the main gate diversion would join the left gate diversion for a coordinated feint to allow the real attack to begin on the right side.

The silent twang of several hundred bowstrings signaled the beginning of the first diversion along the fort's front. The arrows were aimed high so they would fall over the walls. Many arrows found their marks as they thudded into various limb and body parts. Other arrows glanced harmlessly off helmets and shields. The gasps and cries of the victims were enough to send the alarm and awaken the restlessly sleeping defenders. A hasty scrambling and repositioning of men along the catwalks took place professionally and without panic, though with grim acceptance of purpose.

"It is too hard to see and judge distance!" cried out one sentry.

Volumnius instinctively stood up to get a better look at his defenses that were mostly in position then, just as a second whistling volley of arrows pelted the walls and catwalks. One arrow found Volumnius's right shoulder. Three sentries leaped to the aide of the groaning Tribune who waved them off shouting with twisted mouth, "I'll live! I'll live!" Then with a cry of pain he yanked the arrow out and tore off a piece of tunic from a dead sentry and pressed it firmly into his shoulder wound to stop the flow of blood. He had no time for the convenience of being injured.

Vaguely, he and the lookouts could see the movement of the attacking front toward the right. Volumnius then ordered his archers, who just got into position, to unleash their arrows toward the general area of the right-front. A few cries of pain could be heard as some of the Silurian archers fell dead.

"They are assembling on this side!" shouted a lookout from the right side of the fort. He, however, was quickly killed by the first wave of arrows from this attacking force. Again Volumnius redistributed his men, leaving just enough to cover the sporadic skirmishing at the front gate. It was now obvious that the Silurian main attack would not occur at the front gate, as he had gambled. The Roman casualties which had been light to this point in the battle, were beginning to steadily mount.

Finally the Roman archers had targets as many small fires were lit by the Silurian archers in preparation for a flaming arrow barrage. This attack seemed more ominous that it actually was since many of the flaming arrows which flew traveled such a long distance that they were extinguished in the flight over the walls. Those

that did find a mark were quickly put out by the alerted legionaries who had already formed small fire brigades in anticipation of such an action.

"This is only harassment, not the actual attack," shouted the tiring Tribune, his red tunic turning darker red at his right shoulder. Then he suddenly realized his fatal mistake. Struggling onto a horse he galloped over to the right side and shouted to his men, "To the left side! Everyone to the left side!"

But it was too late. Arviragus and three thousand Silurians rode and ran, charging the left wall with ladders, preceded by a protective blanket of five hundred arrows from within fifty meters. The scaling ladders were quickly thrown into place, and at several points along the wall, the clanging of fierce sword fighting already in progress could be heard.

Volumnius and three hundred tired but grimfaced legionaries crossed the three acres from the right wall only to be forced to make a stand before even reaching the left wall. By then, many tents and the praetorium itself were ablaze with red and yellow flames. Screams from the few remaining women and children who had refused to leave their husbands and fathers echoed and were drowned out by the roar of flames and the clanging of bare metal against metal.

"Shields up! Swords ready!" shouted Volumnius as he led his defenders forward in one last attempt to repel the flood of Silurian invaders back over the walls from where they had scaled. It was at that point when all hope seemed to die for the courageous Romans. The side gates crashed open allowing Arviragus's entire force to enter on waves of screaming triumph. Before Volumnius could order retreat, he was struck dead by three arrows that seemed to hit him in various crucial spots all at the same time. His already lifeless body crashed limply to the ground in a bloody heap, looking more like a pin cushion, only to be galloped upon by the Silurian cavalry.

Suddenly, a thunderous roar of trumpets could be heard from outside the outpost's tattered walls. Paulinas and the XXth Valera arrived in time to see the grain supply go up in flames and thick, black smoke. His advance guard was already under attack by the remnants of the Silurian rear guard which had been used to attack the right side of the fort. This group was sent to guard the back gate in order to cut off any organized Roman retreat. In effect what this group would coincidentally do would be to delay Paulinas long enough to allow Arviragus and most of his force to escape.

When Arviragus heard the trumpets, he was engaged in a sword fight with a Roman cavalry officer. Both struggling horses snorted and pawed the mud for support while their riders banged metal swords fiercely together, each trying to unseat the other. Arviragus, though older than most of his warriors, still had his strength and

intense persistence which eventually enabled him to off-balance his struggling, shorter opponent long enough for him to deeply slash the exposed right side of the Roman.

"Out the main gate! Back to the river!" the Silurian King shouted. His trumpeters within earshot sounded the retreat. He knew too well that his force would be no match for the fresh, more disciplined enemy reinforcement. He would be lucky if his men had time to cover the clearing again and reach their waiting horses to make their escape. After all, their mission had been a success. They had inflicted a stinging blow to the Roman defenses and would have completely decimated those remaining, if it were not for Paulinas.

The grim Roman governor left his advance guard to drive off the Silurian rear guard, while he had his main force split and march around the sides of the flaming outpost. His infantry was left to aide the wounded and to salvage what was left of the fort's interior by trying to control the raging, greedy flames. Paulinas led the nine hundred cavalry members, the alae, in hot pursuit of the fleeing marauders.

Once the Governor's cavalry reached the Silurian field hospital, their rapid pursuit ended as the alae took vengeance upon the helplessly wounded in order to set the traditional horrid example for those who would dare inflict such a massacre upon the great Roman Empire. Paulinas knew that the time it would take to restrain his men and prod them onward in pursuit of the fleeing foe would be too long, especially since the Silurians broke into smaller groups in order to increase the speed of their retreat to and across the swollen River Wye.

One of his six Tribunes rode over to the governor-general and asked, "Should we not continue the pursuit?"

Paulinas shook his helmeted head. "They know the country too well, and we have been riding hard all night. We will attend to matters here, rest, and then finish the conquest of the Silurians that was started by Veranius at the Talgarth Gap!"

Torchlight still partially illuminated the office of Deciamus long after midnight when one of the Procurator's staff knocked quietly and then slithered into the room. The Centurion Sextus stood stone-like before the weary Procurator. His deep sword scar across the bridge of his nose and down his right cheek was ghastly illuminated by the flickering torch. Deciamus sat back in his chair with a tired sigh. "Well?"

"One of Prastatagus's servant girls gave me some timely insight earlier this evening when we went to collect the temple tax from Prastatagus," Sextus smiled slowly.

"What do you mean, 'timely insight'?" asked Deciamus.

"As we were leaving, I flirted momentarily with her. She responded favorably, but then added some very strong negative language in description of her master." Sextus eagerly waited for this information to sink into the Procurator, to allow him to draw the appropriate conclusion about its value which the Centurion thought was monumental.

"You mean you tortured her and offered to spare her life if she gave you the information you requested. So?"

Shocked that the Procurator could see through him so quickly, Sextus answered, "So this girl, her name is Clora, may be the connection you need for your plan to discredit Prastatagus."

The Procurator's staff was sworn to secrecy regarding any and all plans Deciamus had formulated. He knew he could trust these Centurions not only because of the generous rewards they received from time to time, but also because the Procurator could make public any time the criminal records he withheld about some of his staff, most particularly, Sextus.

Deciamus leaned forward with sudden interest. The company of such men as Sextus usually turned his stomach, but their value in his plans was immeasurable.

"Finally a chance has arrived to begin my plan!" The Procurator said eagerly, forgetting his fatigue. "Only now I look not merely to discredit this pig-like king, but to remove him permanently in order to reclaim not only his lands but also the lands of all the royal house of the Icenii."

"It seems to me that you would gain not only enough to balance your stately budget and relieve your personal debts, but also enough for a handsome profit as well!"

"And you will be handsomely rewarded as well, if you can successfully complete my plan."

Deciamus stood up and walked over to the table to pour two cups of wine. He handed one to Sextus and then, holding the other, said, "The answer is here! Sometimes bad wine can upset a man's stomach!"

"And even cause death?" asked Sextus playfully.

The Procurator smiled. "But what is this servant girl's motivation for vengeance? Can she be trusted with such a treacherous plan?"

"Her life is important to her, but her future is more important," Sextus said as he gulped his drink greedily. "As we were leaving the estate, I asked one of the grooms about her. He told me that Clora was the King's plaything and was promised wealth and someday a throne next to his. But fortunes changed and the King grew bored with

her, took back his promise, and was about to sell her to one of his cousins. She was quite furious."

"I should say so!" laughed Deciamus.

"But what can we offer this Clora in performance of her sinister deed?"

"The satisfaction of revenge, her freedom, and a small fortune to help her new start in life. Would that be enough to buy her loyalty?"

"I am sure that it would, but," Sextus paused thoughtfully, "what would stop her from trying to also gain revenge upon us?"

"Well, that, sir, is a loose end which I hope you will attend to for me!"

Recovering from some intestinal virus, Prastatagus quietly reclined with a bowl of fruit just before midnight in one of his antechambers at the other end of his vast villa, away from his wife. Both had agreed to this separation though both would have preferred a more permanent arrangement, but with political pressures the way they were, the personal lives of the two Icenian rulers were no longer privately controllable. At least the expanse of the villa and estate grounds made it possible for both to retain some semblance of privacy out of view of the other.

Clora peered into the antechamber to see if the Icenian King was alone. There were only two other servant girls to attend to his needs, both of whom were friends of Clora and loyal to Boudicca. When the King and Queen separated, Prastatagus had his pick of servants and attendants. Prastatagus therefore picked the youngest and the prettiest, regardless of their personal preferences.

With her head held high, Clora entered the dimly lit chamber, firmly carrying a stone pitcher full of Falernian wine tainted with hemlock. She teasingly wore a full-length toga that was loosely fit to expose just enough of her sensuous areas. Her walnut-colored hair was piled elegantly on top of her head and fastened with a delicately carved bone pin. The proud young servant girl wanted everything to be just right for this important occasion when she would finally exact her revenge. She wanted to tease him one last time to give her the satisfaction of snubbing him. This plan would also distract Prastatagus enough from noticing the slight difference in taste of the tainted wine.

Prastatagus dropped the apple out of his hand when he saw the shapely Clora enter the room. Slowly, almost hypnotized, he spoke to her. "I thought I ordered you away from me?"

"You are still my master who once rescued me from my poverty," Clora sensuously spoke, "and remembering this, I brought you your favorite wine to help you sleep better."

The King undressed her with his eyes as he replied, "But my physician advised me to stay away from wine until this virus has run its course."

"I have heard you are much better today, but that you had trouble sleeping. You know it is because you have not had your nightly wine. We both know how it puts you to sleep, especially at the most inopportune moments!"

This last remark angrily embarrassed the King. "I know how to handle my wine!"

"Show me, then, so that maybe we can continue from where we once left off." Clora wet her lips.

With that, Prastatagus snatched his favorite silver and gold-trimmed cup off the serving tray and greedily drained its contents. His odd facial expression indicated that he noticed a difference in the wine's flavor, but he said nothing. Then, struggling to stand up, he grasped her bare shoulders with his large, rough hands, the force of which threatened to dislodge the wine tray.

Clora wrenched herself away. "See! The wine does change your disposition!" In a huff, she abruptly turned her back to him and marched out of the room with her pointed nose high in the air. The two remaining servant girls giggled, but a fiery glance from Prastatagus turned them to stone again.

He sat down to eat an apple before he retired for the evening when all of a sudden he grasped his stomach and doubled over in pain. He then lost consciousness and collapsed onto his side on his couch. The two attendants ran over to the dying King, ignorant to the plot on his life.

Clora returned from the kitchen where she dumped the pitcher's contents out of the window and refilled it partially with plain wine.

"He should not have had that wine!" scolded a loyal male attendant as he fled from the room to get some water. But it was too late for Prastatagus, the Rome-appointed king. Clora leaned against the entrance to the room triumphantly smug, enjoying what was to be her last day alive.

The death of Prastatagus caused a flurry of whispered rumors to every corner of the Iceni kingdom and onward throughout Britannia. The official word about the King's death as it was handed down from the King's own physicians and the office of the Procurator was that Prastatagus died from natural causes resulting from a stomach virus. There was no proof or suspicion of foul play or devious plots. However, the

rumors which circulated indicated that he was poisoned by a jealous servant girl who happened to mysteriously disappear the morning after his death.

Other rumors which supported the natural causes theory took sarcastic pleasure in capitalizing on the King's extravagant and gluttonous lifestyle, suggesting that his kingdom can rest easier knowing that its food produce will no longer be in danger by the insatiable appetite of their King.

But most importantly, the eyes of all tribesmen and chieftains alike throughout Britannia were on the Iceni and the Romans to see if the complimentary relationship between the two would change. And because of the Procurator's impatience with regard to his own personal greed, no one had to wait very long.

Queen Boudicca once again regained her throne, and all those nobles of the royal Iceni house who were supporters of Prastatagus and sympathetic to the wealthy price for Roman loyalty fled the kingdom. This allowed the Queen, the true people's choice, to revert the wealth and food produce back to the people rather than to those nobles or Rome herself.

One cold, damp morning two weeks after the small state funeral and flight of the nobles, the autumn sun rose red-faced and angry. Boudicca and her two teenaged daughters galloped through a misty meadow, chased by a handful of young male attendants and grooms who struggled to remain close to the frolicking royal trio. This was one of the few family activities the Queen enjoyed with her daughters since the rest of her time was often occupied with matters of state. The three tried to do this any morning they could, regardless of the weather.

"Mother!" laughed the eldest daughter as she trotted at the Queen's side. "Do you not think we should wait for the servants? You know how upset they get when they think they cannot perform their duties."

"Do not be silly!" chastised the youngest daughter at the other side of Boudicca. "The activity will keep them healthy."

"I feel free as a hawk at last!" cried the Queen as she looked up the clearing morning sky, the rush of wind, and the red glow of the dawn made her hair dance and glow redder than ever before.

The three finally stopped at the edge of the meadow to rest their horses. They straightened their hair as they caught their breath waiting for the group of attendants.

"Someone else seems to be in a hurry to join us as well," commented the youngest daughter who had red hair just like her mother's. She pointed in the direction of the advancing, galloping rider.

"Why, it is your cousin," said Boudicca with a hint of concern in her voice. She petted the chestnut mane of her Arabian steed, a gift from Prastatagus from the Romans. By this time the attendants and grooms finally joined the royal threesome.

"My Queen," panted the dark-haired cousin as he reined his snorting horse. "A cohort of Roman infantry and cavalry are marching toward the estate along the main road."

"I do not like the way that sounds," the Queen said grim-faced.

"We do not have anything to fear from them, Mother," the eldest daughter naively commented. "Besides, they even sent some of their own officials from the Procurator's personal staff to pay homage to Father."

"This blood-red dawn, I fear, brings a bad omen to this," the cousin nervously remarked. "I think the three of you should continue to ride away from here and wait in the forest until I send word to you that all is well."

"I fear no Romans!" shouted Boudicca, regretting her boldness after she spoke out. "Besides, they may only be passing through on some military exercise. It is not uncommon."

"It is in this part of our land," returned the cousin. "Most Camulodunum cohorts travel by way of the outer province road toward their outposts."

"We will return at once to the Villa," said a determined Boudicca.

"For your own safety, my Queen-

"I appreciate your concern, but again I say I fear no Roman!" And with that the group galloped on a shortcut through the woods back to the Villa.

The royal party arrived in time to be greeted by the thunderous sounds of two hundred forty marching Roman infantrymen. The fifty cavalry riders rode ahead of the advancing cohort and approached the dismounted royal party. The fearful sight and sound of the Romans sent the many attendants and farm laborers of the huge estate scurrying like squirrels for shelter. Not trusting Roman intentions, many women and children hastily boarded wagons and attempted to flee while the men grabbed knives, swords, or shovels, anything to protect themselves and their Queen.

All of this seemingly premature commotion began to alarm Boudicca and some of her assembling kinsmen and nobles.

"The fools draw guilty attention to themselves," the Queen said nervously. Just as she finished speaking, the cavalry, except for ten riders, galloped off and scattered into groups of two or three, chasing the fleeing wagons and riders as if to hunt them down. By this point also the infantry began to fan out with shields up and swords drawn.

The unarmed royal party stood frozen in statue-like astonishment with mouths open and eyes wide with horror. The group of ten riders surrounded the Queen. One rider, a Centurion and leader of the attacking force, confronted Boudicca directly.

“I am Sextus, the Procurator’s personal liaison and first Centurion of the Third Cohort of the Twentieth Valera. By ordinance of the Procurator Catus Deciamus and in Rome’s name, your land is hereby declared state’s property and shall be confiscated!”

Boudicca laughed out loud. “Oh, little man, be gone and harm not my people, or I shall have to teach you and your men a lesson. I did not hear the governor’s name mentioned. Does he know about this?”

Sextus, short in size but not in temper, drew his sword and smacked the side of the Queen’s head with the flat of his sword, knocking her unconscious to the ground.

“Take them all inside!” the blazing-eyed centurion commanded. Behind him, a rumbling train of ten wagons arrived carrying a number of slaves from the procuratorial office to take over the estate and seize whatever plunder of portable property they could get their hands onto.

All around were heard the sounds of screaming women and crying children as the soldiers invaded the many simple cottages which surrounded the vast, Roman-style villa of the Iceni King and Queen. Between some of the cottages, several groups of farmers banded together forming pockets of resistance to the legionaries who quickly and easily overwhelmed these poorly armed civilians, ruthlessly slaughtering them with raised shields and thrusting swords.

Within the large, barren meeting hall of the royal house, most of the estate personnel were kept under guard, while Sextus impatiently interrogated the bound Iceni leader.

“Where is your charter?” he demanded angrily. His twisted face grossly exaggerated the depth of its scar.

Boudicca’s green eyes burned holes into his, but she said nothing. Regaining composure, Sextus smiled fiendishly and added: “My men are searching everywhere for it. They’ll find it sooner or later, but they may find your daughters first!”

There was a brief pause of silence before Boudicca spoke. “The great General Claudius gave this land to his appointed king as a gift, a reward for his vowed loyalty to Rome, though much against my wishes.”

“Have you not heard? This was only a loan until your husband’s death. And now we have come to reclaim the loan and collect all the interest redeemable in anything - or anyone - of value we may find!”

“Your Procurator is aware of the will Prastatagus left behind naming Nero and our two daughters as co-heirs to the kingdom. It is therefore your emperor’s decision as to what may become of his portion of this kingdom and estate.”

“Since the Emperor is not here, we therefore act on his behalf, so you must surrender your charter and all else willingly. It will be easier on you and your people in the end.”

Boudicca struggled against her bindings, the twine gouging her white skin as her hands strained against it. “The Iceni fear no Roman! We will never submit to such insolent treachery by little men who lie and steal with blind ambition!”

“Enough of that!” Sextus lashed out, backhanding her across her mouth. Blood began to ooze from her broken lips. “It is time you and your daughters learned first hand the wrath Rome has for those who do not submit to her will!”

Turning to one of his men he ordered, “Bring me her eldest daughter.” Another soldier entered the room carrying a scroll with the broken seal of Claudius.

“Here is their charter!” said the man triumphantly. Boudicca hung her head in defeat.

“Excellent!” Sextus responded, taking added pleasure in seeing the helpless Queen’s reaction.

From the hallway could be heard the echoing cries of the struggling daughter of the Queen, gruffly escorted by two grinning guards.

“Put her on the couch. I want her mother to witness the collection of the interest due on this estate,” said the Centurion becoming aroused as his eyes lustfully scanned her ripe yet young body.

“No!” cried the Queen in horror. “Take me! She is just a child!”

“It will be more of a lesson for you this way, my Queen.” Sextus ripped open the toga on the slightly heavy-set sixteen year old while she lay on a couch. One guard held her thrashing arms and another held her kicking legs apart. The heavy-breathing Centurion caressed her melon-sized breasts first, then ran his hand across her open thighs. With eagerness, Sextus mounted her while the guards laughed with excitement. The girl screamed with virgin pain as the mother cried bitter curses upon the animalistic soldiers and Rome herself.

The same scene was repeated with Boudicca’s younger daughter, but this time the two guards, who were young themselves, took turns with her.

By late afternoon the Imperial Roman cohort had loaded the wagons with their booty which consisted of furniture, precious metals, armaments, and many of the estate’s personnel to be sold by the legionaries and the Procurator’s staff as slaves.

Before the soldiers left, a stake was embedded in the middle of the villa's courtyard. A dejected, disheveled, blood-stained Queen was then tied to that stake while the soldiers, many of whom were drunk with estate wine, led the remaining survivors from the meeting hall to be assembled as witnesses to the flogging of their royal ruler.

"Let this be a lesson to you of the power of Rome and the wrath it has for those who do not submit willingly to her rule," shouted a glazed Sextus, who also had his share of wine. "Let the flogging begin!"

Two soldiers with leather whips alternated their lashing blows against the exposed body of Boudicca. As they pelted her shoulders eagerly, the Iceni Queen cried out a bitter promise: "The Iceni people and fellow Britons throughout this land will rise up together and teach Rome the wrath Britons have for Roman civilization!" A cheer arose from the confined crowd. Boudicca gasped in agony as her back and shoulder muscles were exposed to the air. She then cried out one last time, "Oh, Dark Lord Biochan, pray for us for the mercy, protection, and vengeful hand of the gods above..." As she began to lose consciousness, something seemed to reach out and touch her thoughts.

"I am here," said a comforting, tranquil voice.

Boudicca opened her swollen eyes partially, and through the sweat and tears she saw the blurred image of a slender man wearing the dark-hooded robe of a druid, the robe of the Dark Lord, Biochan.

"The lord of the earth reigneth over thee in power exalted above and below, in whose hands the sun is a glittering sword of fire. He trusseth you up as the palms of my hands, and offers protection and comfort to those who have been trespassed upon and still believe in his words and promise of salvation. Come away from this house of death for he has prepared a destiny for you among the living!"

Then the image of the Archdruid repeated several times, "Vengeance and strength be unto you." A wave of relief seemed to sweep through her mind, resisting the spirit-breaking influence of the Roman whip. Her head then fell limply, passing out from the overwhelming pain...

"That's enough," ordered the Centurion. "We need her alive as testimony to the will of Rome. It is time for us to leave."

The soldiers returned to their formations and began to march away with wagons of plunder following behind them. The cavalry remained in the courtyard until the infantry disappeared from sight to prevent anyone from following them. Then they gathered what horses they could find and galloped away to join the column.

Once the Romans were gone, Boudicca's cousin and the rest of the people in the courtyard cut the Queen down and gingerly carried her unconscious body inside the villa to attend to her wounds.

Chapter 9

News of the brutal Roman reclaiming of the client-kingdom of the Iceni spread alarm throughout Britton, not only through the unconquered territories to the west and north, but most importantly to the remaining client-kingdoms within the Roman province itself - the Trinovantes, Catuvellauni, and others along the southern coast. Angry cries for a confederation of Celtic tribes were raised. But it was not until the middle of winter, while Paulinas wintered at Venta Silurum along the Silurian coast, and until Boudicca's wounds healed and plans could be made, that the displaced Iceni queen called forth representatives from any Celtic tribes that were threatened by the iron grip of Rome to a secret conference at a farmhouse outside of the town of Venta Icenorum, near the eastern coast of Britton.

The conference was ready to convene by late February, 60 A.D. Over the span of some twenty-eight nights, delegations from eight tribes gradually gathered. A makeshift village sprang up on the farmhouse land owned by Trinovantian relatives of Boudicca. These forty dwellings were thatched and dome-like, being built planks and willow supports. The outer facing was made of straw and mud. There was no particular order or arrangement to the way these houses were constructed in relation to the newly-born village setup. This haphazard style seemed to exemplify the urgency of the predicament.

At the center of the dwellings was built a large meeting hall of similar construction but with thicker walls and more wooden beams for support. It was large enough to house the one hundred sixty delegates comfortably. Along the outer perimeter of the village wooden shed housed the livestock which each tribe brought for food.

The cold, late morning drizzle did not seem to dampen the fiery spirits of the envoys who began to assemble within the meeting hall. A brisk winter wind could not penetrate the thick animal skins and hides which protected the warriors.

Once inside, the delegations grouped themselves together according to tribe and formed what would first appear as armed camps since all in attendance were heavily armed with swords, spears, and shields, as was the Celtic custom for political gatherings. Members of each tribe openly admired and boasted about the quality of their weapons and military courage they had in relation to other tribes.

A dull roar of boasting, laughter, and angry voices greeted Samoathes and the rest of the Ordovice delegation as they entered the dimly lit hall. The Ordovice

delegation was led by Herakles, a tall man with a mouth to match. His group took its place at the far northern side of the room which enabled everyone to notice him and his well-armed group as they paraded across the middle of the straw-strewn floor.

The eight tribal delegation leaders sat in a circle in front of a huge fire pit at the center of the room with andirons shaped like a bull's head made of clay covered with mica dust.

The door finally opened one last time as the Iceni delegation entered the hall led by Boudicca wearing her multicolored tunic and sagum of thick fuzzy black wool. Her angry expression and large stature for a Celtic woman was awe-inspiring to those in attendance who had never her seen her before. The hall became silent in reverent respect for her as she walked slowly through the smoke-filled room. Her daughters and ten others took their places along the outer wall of the room while the Queen and her cousin took their places of highest rank of importance, with their backs to the fire pit and seated next to Boudicca's Trinovantian cousin, Cloten.

The leader of the Trinovantes stood up and folded his arms. "We have all heard of the treacherous deeds the Romans have performed throughout the Iceni land, and most especially at the estate of their Queen, my cousin, Boudicca. The time has come, fellow Brittons, for all to unite as one, to put aside even temporarily all ancient tribal bitterness, and cast out this foreign foe from our land."

And so the tribes began to arrive in April of 60 A.D. near Venta Icenorum. The farmland surrounding the town had mushroomed into a thriving Iceni village around which sprang up other villages, one for each of the other five participating tribes: the Ordovices, Cornovii, Durotiges, and a camp which contained partisans from the Catuvellauni, Brigantes, and Duoboni.

The Iceni village was the hub of the hosting, where Boudicca, the elected commander of the Confederacy, maintained her headquarters.

The Trinovantes did not attend the Hosting. According to the Conference battle plan, they were to hold their own hosting centered around Camulodunum - an event which would begin to cut the town Roman town off from the rest of the Province. Camulodunum was destined as the first target of the new Confederacy of Brittons.

The entire hosting was assumed to take more than a month, because of the great distances some of the tribes had to cover, but most particularly because the Confederacy did not want to arouse the suspicions of the Romans too early.

Boudicca stepped outside of the Oppida, the vast meeting hall which now served as the Confederacy headquarters. The mid-morning sun was just breaking through the

low-hanging clouds. Everywhere within the Iceni village there was already great activity. Flocks of sheep and other animals were led to sheds and pastures at the other end of the village. The animal cries and dank smells could barely be noticed within the overall confines of the overcrowded village. The Iceni were the first to swarm in great numbers to the aid of their assaulted Queen. Everyday large numbers of well-armed warriors, accompanied by their livestock and families, arrived from the corners of the Iceni territory. As the people paraded past their Queen, they bowed respectfully to her.

Looking upon the activity with a great sense of pride and a growing sense of self-importance, Boudicca turned to her daughters, who seemed to be following her lately like sheep, and remarked: "Soon the Romans will fear the wrath of the peoples of Britton!" The daughters smiled in acknowledgement.

Chapter 10

Six thousand auxiliaries, primarily from the Atrebates with large detachments from the Catuvellauni and Dumnonii, joined Paulinas and the XXth Valera. Two thousand cavalry accompanied the infantry. All of those warriors were led by a detachment of one thousand infantry and cavalry from Postumus and the IInd Augusta at Glevum. This brought the governor's total force close to fifteen thousand infantry and cavalry.

"Auxiliaries reporting for duty, sir," the Tribune in charge said stiffly from his snorting horse. The sound of marching feet passed endlessly by.

"Very good Tribune," said the governor as he and some of his staff supervised the column's movements. "Have them take their position at the front of my column." The dusty Tribune saluted then rode off toward his advancing column.

A rider carrying a dispatch from Postumus at Glevum arrived at the governor's group. Paulinas broke the seal and read the document.

"Bad news, sir?" Agricola asked, noting a heavy expression falling over the governor's face.

"Postumus cries wolf too often," Paulinas said, wrinkling the parchment in his clenched fist. "He says Decimus is outlawing client kingdoms and foreclosing on what he interprets as bad land loans."

"What affect has this had?"

"He has overstepped my authority and seems to be stirring up rumors of civil unrest. Postumus claims that his position is insecure as a result and therefore requests the return of his detachment and the need for additional reinforcements upon our completion of the siege of the Silurian capital."

"Perhaps we should return his detachment now then?" Agricola suggested.

"We have bigger fish to fry here than the ghosts bred by rumors and fears. No one will alter my plans of taming this wild frontier in the name of Rome!" With that, he spurred his Arabian steed toward the front of the column.

Venta Silurum was a small Silurian village bordered by the River Usk on its eastern side. This town was the home of King Arviragus and was the largest on all of this lowland plain. It also served as a major grain distribution center for the rest of Silurian, and as such it was surrounded by some of the richest farmlands in all of southern Britton. Paulinas knew this, and realized that if he were to break the spirit of the Silurian antagonism, it would have to be here. Besides, some of this land could be

used to reward some his about to retire veterans who have campaigned for many years more out of loyalty to him than to Rome.

Arviragus was aware of the supreme military importance of the capital and of Paulinas's advance toward it. The riverfront position was fortified with earthen ramparts twelve feet high and twenty feet thick. Six two-story towers were massed along this front as well. The rest of the town was surrounded by the same wall but included a ten foot ditch in front of it as well.

The youngest of the king's three sons, a young man in his twenties who had his father's aggressive spirit but with less patience than the impatient king himself, stood quietly in front of Arviragus.

"Dejotarus, you are to take your warriors and defend the town's back gate."

"But Father, all of the action will be at the front gate!"

"You have already proven yourself to be a worthy Silurian warrior," the King smiled. He then placed his large, wrinkled hand on his son's shoulder. "Besides, I need a reliable man in charge of covering our retreat should that become necessary."

Dejotarus smiled gratefully and walked away to do his duty and his father's will.

"You really feel that could be necessary, Father?" Talamon, the King's oldest son asked. A moment of silence passed as his answer to his son's somber question. A light breeze under an overcast sky gently tossed Talamon's light brown hair. For an instant, the King saw the eight year old face of a child who always listened with captive attention to his father's stories of Silurian military heroism around the evening fire before bedtime. Putting an arm around his son, Arviragus looked up to the mid-morning sky and said:

"I have not seen many birds for the last two days and you know how the birds always seem to be most active here during this time of year. It is a bad omen." He paused and then continued. "I am depending on the two of you to successfully meet the Romans in the fields before they reach the Usk."

"Meet them! We will defeat them!" said Cairpre, the King's other son. He was the one who always tried to be the bravest or boast the most in order to receive of some type of recognition from his father. Being the middle son, it seemed he always came in last for his father's attention.

"Go now, my sons, and defend the land of Caratacus which bore you. Pray to the gods that they may smile upon you and make your swords mightier than those of the Romans!"

The two Silurian warriors departed from their misty-eyed king. Each then led about forty thousand warriors across the shallows of the River Usk on their way

through the lowlands and marshes to meet the advancing Romans who were very near the Silurian capital.

What Arviragus had not counted on was the swiftness of Paulinas's advance. The Roman governor-general broke camp long before dawn so that he could begin siege operations by early afternoon and hopefully be in position by nightfall.

Just after the last man of the two son's forces left the capital and began to cross the river, two Silurian scouts galloped breathlessly up to the King's position with their sullen report.

"My King, the Romans are here!" said the one heavy-set warrior.

"They must have broken camp early for we met their advance guard considerably sooner than we expected," gasped the other scout.

The King's face seemed to sag under the weight of this news. He knew his sons, though courageous warriors, would be caught off guard and be unable to develop an alternate plan to replace the well-laid plans they all had previously arranged together. Military strategists they were not, the King finally realized.

Paulinas's advance guard clashed with Cairpre's main force while Talaman's force fumbled with its baggage train, some of which was hopelessly mired in some of the marshes beside the Usk, delaying the crossing of the rest of his force.

When word reached Paulinas of the confusion in some of the Silurian forces, he ordered the advance guard to retreat and draw some of the Silurian forces after them which would hopefully divide the large Silurian army.

Turning to Agricola, the governor ordered, "Send the auxiliaries in to deal with the first Silurian group, while we march to take on the floundering second group. But leave three cohorts to guard the siege train."

Agricola, in full battle dress, smiled, saluted, and then galloped off to initiate the orders. Paulinas, looking like Caesar with a scarlet cloak and white Arabian steed, motioned to his Centurions and legionaries to follow him.

"The time has come to strike fear into the Roman hearts!" Cairpre shouted to his lieutenant. "Let us strike now!"

"But the others are not ready!" returned his muscular-looking officer.

"You question me?" Cairpre glared as he pointed his long sword at his lieutenant's throat. "There are so few Romans, and I want this first victory to give to my father!" He raised his sword high over his shoulder and motioned to his army as he shouted: "We go!"

An aide to Talamon cried out, "Look! Your brother deserts us to attack the Romans first!"

Talamon wheeled around on his horse. His facial expression soured as he said bitterly, "The fool! Always trying to outdo me!"

"If he advances too far, he'll run right into the bulk of the Roman column!" the aide worriedly said.

Talamon shook his head in despair. "We better leave a detachment here to finish solving this problem. We cannot delay much longer."

Cairpre's force brashly and swiftly converged toward the fleeing Roman advance guard. Two miles were covered by the time the Romans made a stand at the top of a small rise which was large enough to conceal the Roman auxiliaries who waited in ambush on the other side. When the first Silurian warriors were within javelin reach, the sound of the Roman trumpets deafened the Silurian ears while a massive volley of javelins rained down upon the attackers who instinctively put up their leather shields for protection. The javelins pierced these shields rendering them useless. Their bearers had no recourse but to cast them to the ground in wasted heaps. The trumpets and javelins abruptly halted the Silurian advance in confusion. Then a second trumpet blast signaled a second, more deadly volley of arrows which swiftly claimed the lives of hundreds of now unprotected attackers.

The native Roman auxiliaries poured down the slope like a swarm of angry ants for the Atrebatas, who made up the bulk of the auxiliaries, had many old scores to settle with their tribal Silurian rivals.

It was at this moment that Cairpre's rear guard and Talamon's unit chieftains spotted Paulinas and the XXth Valera's approach a half mile off to the right. Like a wedge, the legionaries formed a battle phalanx. With locked shields and javelins poised, the Romans trotted forward, eight abreast in a flying wedge formation. The left line of the wedge was longer and poised for a first strike against Talamon's regrouping army.

The Silurians hastily tried to form a battle line of their own. The result was more of a disorganized mass of rippling flesh than anything else. Spurred on by war cries from unit chieftains who led their local bands recruited from various locations throughout Siluria, the mass of warriors charged the Roman formation.

Once again the Romans discharged their javelins into the oncoming warrior tribal wave. Some of the javelins which missed their marks were picked up by the rapidly advancing warriors and hurled back with a vengeance at the trotting legionaries, felling some of them like trees. But whenever a Roman fell, another one immediately took his place and filled in the momentary gap so that the advancing wall of shields was never broken.

Both battle lines finally merged in a fury of clashing metals, spurting blood, and severed flesh. It was not long before Cairpre's rear guard, spurred on by the war cries and the chance to spill Roman blood, engaged in battle against the legionaries. Unfortunately for Cairpre, this succeeded in thinning his front line which might have succeeded in sweeping aside the auxiliaries by their sheer numbers. The battle raged until sunset.

At this point Paulinas, who was some distance back directing reserve reinforcement of some of the critical areas, sent his cavalry around Talamon's dwindling left flank to cut off any Silurian retreat and destroy the still-mired supply wagons as well as the small force protecting it.

King Arviragus and the rest of Venta Silurum watched helplessly from the walls of the capitol as their ill fate was being determined by the heavy losses to their mangled armies.

"Why do we not send for reinforcements?" asked a frantic chieftain next to Arviragus in one of the Capitol towers.

"The nearest fortress with enough men to help us is at the Snowdonian massif of the Ordovices, a week of travel time away," replied an angry, frustrated Silurian King. "If our stand is defeated here, there will be no stopping the Romans from overrunning the rest of our lands!"

Sunset through a clearing sky saw the death of Cairpre at the swords of three Atrebatian horsemen who encircled the struggling, wounded leader. Shortly after this, as the sky began to darken, the remains of Cairpre's army was either brutally crushed or deserted as groups of warriors fled from the battlefield toward distant villages.

Talamon's army made an attempt to re-cross the Usk in hasty retreat back to the capital. As they tried, the river turned red with their blood as Paulinas' cavalry, reinforced by the victorious auxiliaries, slashed blindly in the dark at any sword which would engage theirs. The long day of battle took a heavy toll on the strength and endurance of the frantic though courageous warriors. As a result, many simply drowned in the knee-deep water, trampled on by their own fleeing comrades.

The Roman grip was vice-like as the legion squeezed the Silurian remains into the path of the cavalry and the auxiliaries. Only a fraction of these Silurians made it back to the capital.

In one last desperate effort, Talamon began calling out to his weary warriors around him in an effort to rally them and organize a final united stand which would allow them to safely retreat to the capital. But, guided by the direction and sound of his voice, several Atrebatian auxiliaries, recognizing that voice, cornered the Silurian

king's son and slashed him apart with such a frenzy as to avenge all the atrocities inflicted upon them and their tribe by the Silurians of ages past.

The battle ended shortly after Talamon's death, partly because of the darkness, but mostly because of sheer exhaustion on both sides. The rest of the night was marked by the haunting, tortured cries and moans of the injured and dying.

Abaris was beginning to lose the dreamy veil which cloaked his blue eyes, making him seem other-worldly. But the blood squirts and smears on his priestly tunic from helping to care for the injured thousands seemed to leave a more indelible scar of realism which consumed then overwhelmed his magic and his beliefs.

"Help me, Healer!" cried a warrior with a lanced side.

The man he called the Healer knelt down and tried to dress the wound to stop the bleeding by tearing a dead warrior's tunic into strips. There was a limit to what the despairing druid's magic could do. There were too many men piled in heaps throughout the torch lit market square of the capital with outstretched arms raised to the sky, groping desperately at the air, like tall reeds in a breeze, as any figure attempted to walk past them.

After receiving some water, another torn warrior pleaded with the druid, "Cannot you at least ease some of this pain?"

With tears in his eyes, the helpless healer tried to achieve a meditative state by squeezing his tired eyes shut. He could not, however, close his ears. Gingerly placing his trembling hands on the bloody, bandaged chest of the dying warrior, Abaris called out:

*O mighty flame that burst bright
Spread your comfort to those who serve in your name
Gather them together in the safety of your healing benevolence
For they are the deathless ones who ride the whirlwinds.
Come away from the House of Death! Come away!
For I have prepared a place for you.
Move therefore, and appear.
Unveil the mysteries of your creation.
Be friendly unto me for I am your servant
The true worshipper of the flesh that liveth forever!*

The warrior seemed very tranquil beneath the Healer's troubled hands. In eager anticipation, Abaris opened his helpless, hopeful eyes only to see that the man, merely a boy, had died, taking the druid's hope with him.

For the next week, having suffered only light casualties, Paulinas surrounded Venta Silurum with his siege machines. The first project was a trench fifteen feet wide and eight feet deep which extended around the entire town. Behind this came a rampart and palisade twelve feet high. Towers were built and erected only at the front and back gates, since Paulinas figured these two locations would receive concentrated assault. Marsh lands on the two sides of the town would prevent any major combat from both armies.

The Roman's greatest weapons were their catapults for releasing heavy stones and javelins into the besieged town. Since the roofs in the towns were mostly made of thatch, these weapons proved to be quite effective.

Within the first two days, these cart-driven machines were hauled into place along the front and back gate fortifications. These machines fired slowly yet steadily night and day, concentrating first on the towers of the town's defenses. Ammunition was abundant since the Romans had access to river boulders.

Paulinas stood atop one of his towers surveying the artillery damage being inflicted when word was brought to him from one of his scouts.

"Sir, a small band of Silurian warriors continues to grow each day about two miles from the town's back gate." The Dumnonii scout stood taller than the governor.

"Is this part of an organized army?" the governor asked.

"It does not appear to be, Sir. They seem to be coming from all parts of the Silurian countryside, mostly farmers."

The little concern began to grow with the scout's first news diminished with this last statement.

"Keep me informed of this group's movements." Paulinas turned back to view the artillery action just in time to see one of the town's towers crash heavily onto what appeared to be civilian homes. A chorus of screams could be heard as the tower's collapse took the lives of several Silurian archers within the tower, and the warriors beneath it and inside the houses which served as quarters.

The Silurians made several attempts to storm the Roman fortifications, first through either of the gates, and then at night through the marshes. But each time these raids were repulsed because the Silurians were not able to concentrate enough

men into any Roman position long enough and with enough strength to overpower the Roman offensive line.

Impatient as he was, Arviragus reasoned that drastic situations called for drastic measures. The twelve thousand defenders he had before the start of the siege dwindled to eight thousand by the end of the first week. Having called a council of his remaining unit chieftains, Arviragus wearily stood at the center.

*** *unfinished...*