

# **PATHWAYS OF THE DRUIDS**

**An adventure in other worlds**

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## CHAPTER ONE ~ A STRANGE TRADE

*We are in the parallel world of Triannaib, meeting its inhabitants.  
The Roman Empire is unknown here, and a Celtic Europe is developing.*

The dwarf slipped on the muddy ground and fell down the small hillock. He was seventy-two years old now, middle-aged for a dwarf, and was slightly overweight. His face was oval shaped with brown eyes, grey hair and a short grey beard and moustache.

His donkey looked quizzically at him and snorted as he lay sprawled on the cold ground. The day was not starting well and he still had a way to go before he could deliver his blocks of ice to the inn in the forest. This was his usual business for the time of year. He was to barter the ice in exchange for cloth and leather so that his family could make hardy clothes they could exchange, in turn, for coal and other goods with the other dwarven families who lived in the high mountains.

Metris gently picked himself up and, after quickly brushing himself down, put his leather cap back on and pulled his heavy black woollen cloak around himself to keep the cold away from his bones. Starting back up the hillock to his cart he thought to himself that life was indeed being very unfair to him, a poor kind dwarf in this land of Triannaib.

His donkey and cart were waiting. It was midday now and the sky was becoming overcast. He felt it starting to rain as well as grow colder. He took some nuts from his pocket and put them in his mouth to chew, smiling to himself as remembered the night before when he'd left his village. He had paid an old dwarf priestess to foretell his future; she'd gone into a trance and told him that a great opportunity would be offered to him, of trade and riches.

Driving the cart onwards along the track, he began to enter the forest and gently encouraged the donkey to go faster. He wanted to arrive at the inn, the One-Eyed Magpie, before the onset of twilight as he really didn't want to be out in the forest after dark.

Harbman looked out of the back door of the inn at the forest track. He was of average height, overweight and bald with a round face. His light blue eyes were dead, lacking any sign of kindness. He was innkeeper here and survived in life by using any shady opportunities that came his way. He muttered quietly to himself.

“Where are you, Metris? I can’t give my customers short measure if there’s no ice in the glass to fill it up!”

He slammed the heavy door shut and turned around, striding into the back room behind the bar. His wife was there, scolding a young slave girl who’d been left with Harbman in payment of a gambling debt. The girl’s name was Rronish, about seventeen years old; she’d been captured in a tribal raid while away from her father’s main camp. A slim girl, on her left arm was a tattoo of a boar, and on her right arm was another tattoo of a snake. Her hair fell down to her shoulders, fine and blonde, and her eyes were shades of green and brown. This, with her pale skin, made her quite attractive. She wore a dark blue dress tied at the waist by a platted leather belt and brown leather lace-up sandals.

Rronish was strong-willed. Her father had three wives and other children, so she couldn’t help thinking that she’d be missed; but the hope of rescue was beginning to fade. She was confused; she hadn’t always been a slave and hated the situation she was now in. She knew that escape was going to be difficult, and runaway slaves when caught were always hung. She stared sullenly at Harbman’s wife.

Wilda looked up at her husband as he came into the room and shouted at him:

“Fend Harbman, this girl is lazy and worthless and now she’s refusing to do any work. Even when she does work I’m sure she breaks the crockery on purpose! The stupid girl’s still making her silly claims of being a tribal chief’s daughter too.”

Harbman glowered angrily at the slave girl.

“Wilda, don’t worry about her. Pay her no mind, just leave her alone. Why don’t you go and put another log on the fire in the bar, so our guests don’t get cold?”

She slammed the door behind her as she went into the bar of the inn. To take her mind off the slave girl, she busied herself collecting some of the empty china pots and stoking the fire. It was beginning to get dark now. She placed a fresh ash log on the fire and raked over the dull embers. They glowed and quickly started to catch the new log alight so that soon the sweet smell of the burning log began to spread around the room.

Wilda took a light from the fire and went to the candles that were perched on the rough stonework of the walls. As they spluttered alight, their flickering began to push the gathering shadows back into the corners of the room. Looking around she saw that it was quiet for the time of year, with very few people visiting the inn that night. At one table there were two old men, forest cutters whose trade was cutting back the brush from the forest paths and selling what they'd cut as fuel. Aarrish, one of them, called out to her.

“Wilda, fetch me a refill, and one for my friend here, we're dry.”

“Sorry about the delay,” said Wilda, “but I'm having to do all the work round here. That slave girl is so lazy. We'll have to sell her. Aarrish, perhaps you could buy her from me?”

“I like her shape well enough,” laughed Aarrish, “but I know I can't afford her. And with my knee being no good now, I couldn't catch her anyway. Just the ale for me, if you please.”

“Coming right up. Just the ale then.”

Wilda looked further around the room. Near the fire sat a young man in dark blue and green heavy clothing; he had a bow and a quiver of arrows and she'd noticed a sword under his heavy cloak. He had a relaxed manner about him, and all he'd mentioned was that he was just travelling through the forest.

At the back of the room was a group of farmers who worked some land at the edge of the forest. They'd been here for most of the evening and were more than a little drunk as they laughed and gambled with dice. Harbman would take a percentage of the table stakes, as a charge for allowing the game.

It was getting late now, and no-one else was expected to arrive. But

just then the front door opened, and the wind blowing hard outside blew out one of the candles on the wall. Metris entered and, as the dwarf stepped onto the smooth stone floor of the inn, everybody stopped what they were doing to study the newcomer.

“Come inside whoever you are and shut the door,” Wilda called out, “and leave that cold bluster outside.”

The hot air smelling of ale washed over the dwarf as he shut the door and entered the One-Eyed Magpie. He took off his hat and untied the heavy cord from around his wet coat.

“Thanks, I will, Wilda,” he replied gruffly, “and I’d be obliged if you’d get me some hot food. And ask Harbman if he could open the gates to the yard and look after my donkey. That’s his ice on the back of my cart.”

“Of course I will,” she replied more kindly. “Sit yourself down at the table by the fire and get some warmth into your bones. I’ll bring you some food.”

Metris put his damp hat and cloak on a stand, and dragged a large wooden chair to the side of the table closest to the fire. Wilda reappeared, bustling over to the dwarf with a tray, and he was soon eating a large bowl of thin soup and some semi-stale bread. Before long, Harbman walked over with a jug of ale and a drinking pot and sat down at the table. Leaning over, he poured some ale into the pot and pushed it over to the dwarf.

“I’m pleased to see you, Metris. Were there any problems on the road?”

“No real trouble, but it’s so cold out there with the wind blowing off the mountain. It really cuts right through you.”

“Well, are you feeling refreshed now?”

“Thanks. I needed some hot food. But I’m in a hurry and I’d like to load up the cart tonight with the cloth and leather, as is our usual arrangement, so I can be off at first light. My wife Ramy doesn’t like me staying away too long.”

Fend Harbman looked sideways at Metris and lowered his voice.

“There’s a problem, my friend. The cloth hasn’t arrived yet.”

“What...?”

“But I do have something better for you. There’s a slave girl here that

I'm prepared to trade with you. I seem to remember you used to trade in slaves in the past, yes? I'm sure we can agree a price and then you could sell her on at Camulodunon.

"Of course, she's worth a lot more than the cloth and leather we agreed on. She's young, strong and pretty. The only reason I'm going to sell her is, well, Wilda is not so young now and she worries I might look at the girl... You know what I mean. But I guarantee she'll give you no trouble on the journey, because I'll give her a small potion to keep her quiet for a few days. When she finally wakes up you'll be at least half-way to Camulodunon."

"Hmm, and you don't think Ramy will ask questions too? Anyway, what sort of price are you talking about?"

"Let's say you pay me ten gold staters and seven rings of bronze to settle the deal. That's not bad money for the girl, when you've just brought some ice, Metris."

"I didn't see you going up that mountain to get the ice. It's very dangerous work collecting ice, you know. Then there's hauling it down the mountain to the cart, and there's the donkey to be fed. And ice is a delicacy, has to be delivered quickly."

The dwarf sat back in his chair.

"I'm only even considering this because you haven't got the cloth and leather you promised me. But it's a good two weeks' journey through that forest from here to the slave market, and that's only if I make good time. Then, I'll have all the trouble of looking after her, and stopping her from running off, and selling her at auction... Yes, you're right, I used to trade slaves in the past, and I know the risks involved. So I'll tell you what I think! If I like the look of the girl – only if, mind you – I'll offer seven gold staters and one ring of bronze, and you can supply all the vittles necessary for the journey."

Harbman smiled.

"Then how about playing a little game of dice for the supplies?"

Putting his hand into his pocket, he held his loaded dice over the table. Metris frowned as he saw the dice.

“No, that’s my firm offer. I don’t play games of hazard where a trade’s concerned.”

Harbman slyly put the dice away and grimaced.

“All right Metris, you drive a hard deal. I’ll send the girl over to your table with some ale. If you like her, which I’m sure you will, take a leap of faith with me and you won’t miss out on a bargain.”

He walked into the kitchen where Rronish was sitting by the table, gazing into the kitchen fire.

“Where are you, girl, there’s work to do. Put on a smile and forget that argument with Wilda. Brush your hair, be happy with the customers and life might change for you. Take some ale and hot bread over to the dwarf by the fire. And make sure you tell him that these are from me with the compliments of the house.”

“Yes of course, master, right away.”

Rronish walked over to a bucket of water in the corner, dipped a piece of cloth into it and wiped her face. Then, trying to smile, she put some food and ale onto a dark wooden tray and took them over to the dwarf. He looked up as the girl approached and watched as she started to clear away some used pots.

“Master Harbman says these are with the compliments of the house.”

“Tell master Fend that everything he offers me tonight is excellent,” said Metris.

In the morning the dwarf was in a hurry to start, so he had readied his donkey and cart as Harbman placed the unconscious young slave girl in the back. He’d given her a potion to slow her mind, mixed into her morning meal. It would make her drowsy for several days.

“I’ll call in on the way back from Camulodunon to see if that cloth and leather has arrived,” grunted Metris.



“Right,” said Harbman. “There are some provisions in the cart too, just as we agreed. Good luck and a speedy journey.”

The dwarf then drove the donkey and cart into the forest. As he went deeper, the shadows of the trees made them seem to bend downwards over the dirt track. The daylight grew dim as the trees became larger and more numerous, and the track was becoming gloomier. There were some very strange stories about these woods. But then Metris considered himself to be quite brave. Trading was his business and he would have to take the risks of the journey if he wanted to profit by the venture. And this looked like a good venture.

The first day’s travel, though cold, was quiet and uneventful and whilst it was still light he stopped the cart in a large clearing off the main track to make camp for the night. He unhitched the donkey from the cart, tethered it to a small tree and arranged its feed. Then he went to gather wood as kindling for a fire that would help to keep wolves away from the camp. He would also cook some of the food which Harbman had given him in a dark brown canvas sack.

As he lit the fire and smoke from some damp wood began to curl up through the trees on either side of the camp, the trees seemed to awaken slightly. The dryad spirits that lived in these trees had no wish to perish, and they began to take notice of the little dwarf. They mentally hissed to one another at the thought of the fire being near them.

But Metris was far too deep in his own thoughts and dreams of making easy gold at the slave market to notice the heavy anger of the woods at his behaviour. He chuckled to himself.

“Once I get to Camulodunon my worries will be over. I’ll get that girl fed and cleaned up. Then I might be able to get as much as twenty gold staters for her at auction. Fend got the wrong end of the bargain. When I return I could also buy that cloth and leather he promised me. Yes, I’ll be very rich, yes, a very rich dwarf. What a trade that will be!”

He sat back and considered his next move.

“Now, I can’t take any chances. I’ll put some of that potion Harbman gave me in the cooked rabbit for her. That should keep her nice and quiet.”

He placed some of the rabbit on a stick and wedged it so that it hung close to the fire. Next he put some vegetables around the edge of the fire to cook. Walking over to the cart, he shook the girl roughly.

“Come on, wake up, girl, get out of that cart. I’ve been busy cooking some food for you, and you’ve slept all the way here.”

Rronish looked around. She felt cold, desolate and afraid. Everything she knew had changed. Suddenly she was in the middle of a dark forest. All she could see was a small, stocky figure standing beside a fire. There was some smoke and a smell of meat cooking. She felt so very cold.

“Where am I? And who are you, what are you doing with me?” Her voice croaked with fear.

“Don’t worry. I’m Metris,” he said, “and I am a very honourable dwarf. You were sold to me so you’re now my slave. I have a deed of life ownership, with a mark from your last owner naming you. We’re going to Camulodunon, where I’ll sell you at auction. I’m sure you’ll have a much better life in a large town with a wealthy family than you could have had in that dirty old tavern. This is a very good opportunity for you to have a decent future. So eat the food I’ve taken the trouble to cook for you before it gets cold. There’s also some water left in that sack.

“And by the way,” he continued, “don’t run off. Remember you’re in a dark forest, and if you did run you wouldn’t last the night. Wolves and bears live in these woods. Don’t worry, you’ll be quite safe here by the fire. Now, I have to go and check around the camp, but I’ll be back in a short while...”

What he said nearly made Rronish faint. But she leaned on the side of the cart and stared truculently at the cruel little dwarf as he strode off. She thought to herself that she would certainly try to escape tomorrow when a good opportunity presented itself. Starting to shake from the cold, wearing only the blue dress she had had on at the inn, she leaned into the cart and picked up a filthy blanket to keep herself warm.

“I’d better eat whatever that horrible little dwarf has cooked for me,” Rronish muttered. “It might be some time before I get another meal.”

She picked at the vegetables but they were burnt and tasted bitter. That only left the rabbit for her to eat. Soon she was very drowsy and

confused, finding it difficult to concentrate and keep awake. It felt like her head was spinning. When Metris had finished checking around the camp for the night, he returned to find the girl had eaten the food he'd supplied and the potion had done its job. She'd fallen into a deep sleep.

To protect his investment, he tied her hands and feet to prevent any chance of escape. When he was satisfied that he'd done everything, Metris built the fire up higher hoping that it would keep any wolves in the area away, then bedded down for the night.

Later that night, as the wind blew the smoke from the fire up and around the tops of the trees, two female figures emerged directly from the trunks of two of the largest trees close to the camp. They were dryads, the spirits of the trees.

"Sister," hissed one of them, "I'll deal with that fire, if you could look at the cart..."

Making no noise, they slowly moved around the camp examining the dwarf, his cart and the donkey. One of them took the dwarf's knife from him as he slept and threw it into the forest. Then she waved her hand over the fire and water was slowly drawn up through the earth; it bubbled up from the ground and with a hissing sound the fire was extinguished.

The other dryad placed her hands on the wheels of one side of the cart and drew the life force out of the wood. The wheels suddenly seemed to age and they began turning into dust, breaking apart slowly as the cart collapsed onto the forest floor.

Now the spirits of the trees turned their attention to the slave girl who was in a drugged sleep, bound hand and foot.

"Sister," one dryad hissed, "hah, this one is tied up. She must be the dwarf's prisoner. He must be made to pay for these actions. We'll take her

into the forest and decide what to do with her later.” They gently picked Rronish up and carried her away.

Metris awoke with a start. Suddenly he felt very cold. He looked at the fire, which had gone out. That was very strange, he thought, because he'd banked it up high to keep the wolves away. He put his leather cap on and got up to look more closely. The fire was soaking wet, yet it hadn't been raining. He went over to the cart and was surprised to find so much damage to it. Then he realised that the slave girl was gone...

“Oh no,” he muttered under his breath, “that girl has got loose and done all this. Now she's run off and if she gets lost in the forest and dies, I'll lose my money.”

Suddenly a little scared, he reached for his knife. But the knife was missing.

He looked around him. In the deep shadows of the trees, he could just make out the outline of two figures watching him. They had bright green eyes. “They must be dryads,” he thought. He noticed they were standing between him and the girl. She was lying on the ground some distance away from him, still unconscious.

“Why are you are robbing me?” Metris challenged them, trying to feel brave. “Now, give me back my slave. I traded well for her, she's mine. I own her. She belongs to me!”

One of the dryads hissed back at him in a harsh voice.

“Dwarf, because of your clumsiness you threatened the forest and us with fire. For this we shall keep the girl as payment. Now be gone, and don't ever return to these woods, or you'll pay a far greater trade.”

Metris slowly backed away from them, then without giving the slave girl a moment's further thought he panicked, ran to the donkey and rode

back down the track the way he'd come.

“This job's too dangerous for me,” he muttered to himself. “When I get back home, I must seek justice for what's happened here tonight.”

The dryad spirits quietly watched as the little dwarf scuttled off down the track on the donkey. Then they retired back into the forest to search around the area for any more threats to themselves and the trees.

## CHAPTER TWO ~ DANGEROUS CHOICES

*Back in Britannia, the Celts are struggling to survive against the Roman onslaught.*

It was indeed a cold, bleak dawn that awoke him from a troubled sleep. The damp air had made the night cold and unpleasant. The druid Mestrathax was glad it was now morning as he threw off his wolf pelts, and went to wash and awaken his druid companions.

They were accompanying the Ordoveteii tribe. Having made an alliance with another tribe, the Bolasates, as a combined force they'd engaged an entire Roman legion, the Ninth Hispania. After a savage battle of a day and a night they had succeeded in destroying them by ambushing them in the woods. The legion's eagle and standards had been taken as war trophies by the Celtic tribes.

The Roman commander, Petilius Cerealis, had fled with what remained of his cavalry back to their entrenchments. The procurator of the province, Catus Decianus, had also fled to Gaul in panic and Rome was now being routed from Britannia.

This action had freed the northern territories from Roman rule. Another Roman legion, the Second Augusta, had just locked themselves inside their own fort to avoid battle and now waited to see the turn of events. The Ordoveteii were returning home to their own lands before continuing the war to free their island from Roman rule. The Roman plans to destroy the druids and wipe out all traces of their religion, to halt the worship of their gods and cut down their ancient sacred groves of trees, had left the druids no choice but to raise a rebellion.

Mestrathax was a short man and a little overweight, his silver flowing hair and moustache rather unkempt. His eyes were a cold light blue and they hid a great depth of knowledge. He was dressed in a grey robe bound loosely at the waist by a heavy cord. By his appearance, he didn't present an

imposing figure. But as a druid he could control many things with just his mind. Many people had had to pay a heavy price because they had foolishly underestimated him.

The war had been quite successful so far. Mestrathax stood on the hillside leaning on his staff of rowan wood. While he contemplated waking the tribal chief, his eyes quickly searched the countryside in the hope of seeing scouts returning with fresh intelligence. He studied the sky, looking for omens. The dark clouds and the flocks of circling birds looked ominous. Then a vision of flames appeared, engulfing all around him before quickly vanishing and leaving the air reeking with a dark, clinging feeling of impending danger.

He immediately decided to awaken the Celtic tribal chief, Cestrathax. He was a tall, well-built man in his early fifties, with dark brown eyes, long brown hair and a large moustache. His body was covered in tattoos of fantastic beasts, though he normally wore blue and red check trousers with brown boots. He commanded well under stress.

“Druid, what have you see in the omens?” roared Cestrathax. The tribal chief was already up and awake.

“I believe some terrible defeat has befallen our forces. I’ll order my druids to scry out their fate. You should despatch a few long-range scouts and put your entire force on order to break camp, so we can travel before Belenus climbs above us.”

“We can’t do that,” replied Cestrathax. “We must stay here. This is our first rest for days, and many are badly injured and tired. We need to rest here for some time.”

The druid looked directly at the chief and spoke in a compelling voice.

“Regrettably, time is what we do not have. You’ll have to do as I ask or all of these people may perish.” He walked over to his aide, waking him from a deep sleep. “Shosterax, are you awake? Quickly, get dressed.”

Bleary-eyed, Shosterax tried to concentrate on who was shaking him.

“Oh, it’s you, Mestrathax. I’ve been dreaming all night that I was trying to wash blood off myself.”

“We don’t have that luxury yet - you have a lot more work to do.

Before you've eaten any food, you must scry out the people of this tribe who are fighting with Boudicca and find out what's happened there. Then report to me immediately when you have some information. I'm going to tour the camp now, and I'll return shortly."

As he walked off, a tall young woman silently stepped out of the shadows and discreetly followed him. She was dressed in green trousers and a loose leather jacket. There was a small shield slung across her back, she carried a short throwing spear and a sword was strapped at her waist. Her hair was jet black, her skin pale, her eyes sharp and dark like coals. This was Rianna, a spear maiden and an instructor in the arts of war. The order of priestesses at Avalon had sent her here with just one purpose, to become Mestrathax's protector at the cost, if necessary, of her own life. Rianna would indeed go everywhere that the druid went. She was fully sworn to this sacred duty of protecting him.

As she followed him, Rianna remembered how she'd been told of this service. Summoned to a meeting with a high sister of Avalon, she had walking slowly into the stone hall where the high priestess she knew so well, and who had taught her so much, was sitting waiting for her. Frienjen's hair had once been dark brown but now was mostly grey. Her hooded robe was also a dark grey, loosely tied at the waist with a grey sash. Rianna had slowly bowed to the priestess and sat down on the chair that had been placed there for her. A low fire was smouldering in the central hearth and a sweet smell of incense lingered in the air.

"Welcome, Rianna," said Frienjen. "You have become our foremost shield maiden - you have learnt your lessons well. Now I have to tell you that the time has come for your training to be tested. Your skills in war are now needed in the wider world.

"We live in perilous times. The druids are raising a rebellion in this land and all our lives have been placed in the hands of the gods. I am sending you to the Ordoveteii tribe, where you will become the protector to an important druid who is guiding them. In the coming struggle, he is our best hope for the future. Once you've taken this charge, you should consider yourself already passed from this world and ready to walk the path of the



dead with no regrets.”

There was silence for some moments before the high priestess continued.

“All of us here will miss you, Rianna, and my thoughts will always be with you. May the Goddess always walk with you.”

The memory faded as she followed the druid, her eyes closely watching everybody’s movements around him.

As Mestrathax wandered around the camp he could see that a lot of the tribe’s people were in shock and really needed to rest. He’d read the omens, and there was a cold feeling inside him that told him death was coming here, and these people must leave or be destroyed. During the course of the battle they had incurred losses but not too many, because they’d achieved the element of surprise. Mestrathax could see that some of his younger druids were working as healers and trying to raise the morale of the tribe.

Dark smoke was blowing in the wind from several of the large funeral pyres that were alight. The druids were overseeing the cremation of those who had died of their wounds and all these souls would now be on their last journey, travelling to the Otherworld. There were other druids busy placing magical wards around the camp to stop the Roman priests from being able to discover the tribe’s location.

He needn’t have worried about moving the tribe, for Cestrathax had followed his advice. He had indeed issued orders for his people to eat only a small meal and then to break camp. They were tired and grumbling, but they were indeed moving. Mestrathax turned around and headed back to see what Shosterax had found out; hopefully some of the scouts had also returned. Then maybe they could see their way forwards and plan their next move. Rianna never spoke. She just quietly followed him back, always

thinking of what could be up ahead.

“Shosterax, what have you seen?”

Shosterax was sitting on the ground, in his lap an empty bowl the inside of which was coloured jet black. This was what he used as a scrying tool to help him in the task of obtaining information. Pictures of events that were happening now or in the future could be viewed this way. After he'd taken a drink of water, he got up and turned to face Mestrathax, his face white from the strain of the work.

“I couldn't make out too much detail,” he said. “I felt that the Roman priests were blocking me on the shadow plane. I'm just too weak at the moment to break through. Later I'll be able to do more, but I believe something terrible must have happened - it just feels like a disaster.

“However I did receive what I believe is a true image. I managed to locate a few of the force that were sent with the Iceni. What's left of them is in complete disarray, they're now prisoners and in great peril, moving on foot and as yet some miles away from us. Perhaps we could rescue them. I could go with some chariots and cavalry to help in finding them, then take them on to the Ordoveteii hill fort. When they're rescued and we arrive home, they can tell us exactly what's been happening to our allies.”

Mestrathax indicated to an aide to step forward.

“I need you to go and wake Gwydion. Bring him here immediately.”

Gwydion heard someone talking to him as he woke up from his much needed sleep, being told to report to the chief. Gwydion was a man of stocky build with long red hair and a large drooping moustache. His eyes were blue. Grandiose otherworldly tattoos of birds were on his chest and back. Cursing his lack of sleep, he got dressed quickly in green check trousers and brown boots, and went to look for his second in command. He found Tristan eating in his cousin's tent.

“I knew I'd find you eating!” said Gwydion. “Quickly, follow me.”

Tristan took a swig from a wine sack and went to pick up some meat. Some of the wine dripped from his chin and ran down onto his shirt, as he looked up and grunted.

“I'm starving. Can't it wait until I've eaten this?”

“No, it can’t wait!” Gwydion retorted. “Forget your stomach for once. I’ve been summoned, and it involves a druid. That can only mean trouble. Bring that meat and drink with you, if you must...”

On their way to the chief’s tent they could see that the whole of the tribal force was in turmoil. The smell and noise of frightened animals mixed with the odour of many people who had cooked and eaten, but had no spare time to wash before they had to pack their possessions for another march. When they arrived, the chief was already busy talking with a druid.

“Get in here, Gwydion,” Cestrathax roared. “We don’t have any time for ceremony.” Gwydion indicated to Tristan to wait outside, and as he entered the tent Cestrathax continued speaking.

“Come over here. I need to send you out on a rescue mission. There’s a druid who’ll be going with you. His name is Shosterax and he’s going to be your guide in this. You must listen to his advice closely. Then you will carry it out to the best of your ability, and as fast as you can.” Cestrathax pointed to a man at the back of the tent and slapped Gwydion on the back as he left the tent. “I’ll leave you with him, and may the gods go with you.”

The druid walked towards him.

“Hello, Gwydion. I’ve been told that you’re the man we need to lead this raid. My name’s Shosterax and I’m going with you. Please listen carefully because we don’t have much time! We believe that Boudicca may have lost the battle, and we need to get some real information.”

Gwydion breathed in with shock.

“They’ve lost? How could that be? We ourselves have beaten one Roman legion and our allies the Iceni have forces far beyond our number.”

Shosterax looked Gwydion straight in the eyes.

“Yes, the Iceni force is vast, and I myself have heard about their victories. They burned the cities of Londinium, Verulamium and Camulodunon to the ground, slaughtering all who were found there. But I’ve heard that they’ve been destroyed. Listen, I don’t want what I’ve told you repeated outside this tent! At this moment we’re not sure of anything, and I don’t want to start a panic in the tribe.

“Now, I need you to organize a fast mobile chariot and cavalry force.

With this we'll rescue some of our men who have been captured. I've seen exactly where they'll be in a short while. We must save them, and take some prisoners for interrogation.

"But Gwydion, before you go there's something I have for you."

Shosterax gestured with his left hand and guided him to a table at the far end of the tent. As Gwydion approached the table, he could see there on a cushion a solid gold torc. It was engraved at both ends with winged horses. In the early morning light of the tent, the torc appeared to be glowing with a pale blue light.

"I want you to wear this. It's been magically charged to strengthen your mind and increase your ability to command. Now, you have a lot to do so please go and organise all this quickly and I'll join you shortly. We shall leave as soon as you're ready."

Tristan was waiting as Gwydion came out of the tent.

"What's happening, Gwydion?" he asked. "If they've given you one of their torcs to wear it must be very dangerous."

"I've been given command of a war band to rescue some of our men. And yes, you're coming with me. Now, we have a lot to organise in a hurry. Luckily our ponies and horses have been rested overnight. We're taking a force of ten chariots and seventy-five cavalry. Because of the distance involved, the charioteers will have to leave their mail-shirts behind and dress only in their normal trousers, green shirts and helmet.

"We'll need a driver for each of the chariots and a fighter who can use a bow or javelin. He can take a sword and shield for close work too. That should do for the chariots. The cavalry can keep their chain mail and their personal choice of weapons. Also, Tristan, we'll hand-pick the men we're taking from volunteers. Only choose those who've done well in previous battles. So go and find me some warriors who want to taste more Roman blood. Now, give me that meat..."

A short while later, there had been many warriors who wanted to go but the men chosen were the hardest. They spoke very little and then only with determination. They'd lost both family and friends to the Romans and now stared forwards with cold eyes and hardened hearts. They'd decided not

to take their helmets, but had rinsed a lime wash in their hair to shock the enemy. They covered themselves with blue woad, for magical protection and to act as an ointment if they were injured. The heads of enemies killed previously were tied in place around the horses' tack.

Shosterax rode over to them on a grey mare.

"We shall leave by driving out right through our own camp," said Gwydion. "That should help in building up the tribe's fighting spirit. And we'll do the same when we come back as well."

The ponies and horses had sensed the general underlying panic and became more relaxed as they left the camp behind them. Their breath steamed as it hit the cold sharp air of the morning, and their hooves set into a steady trot, taking the chariots away from the camp.

Gwydion shouted at Shosterax and his comrades.

"If we live through this undertaking, it will indeed become a tale for us to tell our grandchildren around the campfire. Let us all remember both to please and honour our gods with our deeds, and if we die then we shall all meet again in the Otherworld, the Tir Na Gog land of perpetual youth."

Later that evening as it was starting to get dark, Gwydion motioned to his troop to stop and he pulled the unit into a copse of trees overlooking the track.

"Tristan, make sure the men are told to keep out of sight of the track," he said. "Post guards and issue orders that the men can eat and drink only after the horses and ponies have been looked after. No fires are to be lit and all signs of our tracks are to be hidden. The druid has told me that we shall contact the enemy early tomorrow. Let me know when everything's ready, then I'll brief the men..."

But his second-in-command suddenly motioned to him that a rider

was coming in from behind them. The Celts quickly spread into a large semicircle and hid themselves from sight, leaving just a few people and the chariots in view. A pale horse rode into sight and then without hesitating rode straight into the camp. The rider had no shield or spear but was wearing a long grey cloak and was armed only with a sword. Dismounting quickly, the rider undid a headscarf and dark red hair cascaded down around her shoulders.

"Brother, where are you?"

"Brona, what are you doing here?" said Gwydion. "You shouldn't have left the tribe. Do you think this is some childish game you're going to join us in?"

The girl was fourteen years old and very determined. She was tall, her angular facial features and her brown eyes making her quite pretty. She shouted at her brother.

"I'm of an age, I'm not a child, and I won't go back to the camp. You have no healers with you and that's what I am. You'll need me!"

"I don't need you here, Brona, but I can't spare anybody to take you back! I have no time for this now, so just see to your horse's needs and be quiet."

Later that evening, Gwydion called everybody together and spoke quietly to them.

"First - noise carries a long way at night, so don't talk. Second - at daybreak we expect a small Roman unit to pass by here. Our comrades, if they're alive, will be their prisoners. Our job is to rescue them. And it's very important that we capture some Romans alive to take back for the druids to interrogate.

"All right, Brona. Your job is to go right to the top of that hill overlooking the track. There you'll be able to see the enemy coming. You will let them go past. Then you'll see me beginning my attack. Your job then is to signal Tristan by reflecting the sun off your dagger. The sun should be bright enough for that. You'll be above the level of the ground mist, so keep yourself and your horse hidden. Do not argue or speak another word, just go and do it."

“Of course I will, brother,” said Brona, feeling very smug with herself for outsmarting her brother and being allowed to stay.

“Tristan,” continued Gwydion, “you will be leading the chariots with ten cavalry. When you see the enemy, you will appear on the hill just above the track so as to block it. Act as if you are going to engage them and make them believe there are a lot more of you. The druid is going to raise a mist to blind them. When you receive the signal from Brona that we’re beginning our attack, that’s the time you must charge and attack them. Do this on your left side of the track. At the same time, we’ll also attack behind them from out of the mist. Our charge will be on our left side of the track. This should help us spin them round and break up any defensive formation they try to make.”

Gwydion took a few long breaths before continuing to speak.

“The druid's actions in this will be crucial.”

Everybody then looked around for the druid Shosterax. They saw him standing a little way from them in a copse of trees. He had his back against a large birch tree and was gazing into the distance as though in a sort of trance. They knew that the druids could draw energy from the trees in this way, and they noticed he was now wearing a short sword and holding a staff.

“Everyone, please try to keep an eye on him to see that he doesn’t get hurt. Let us honour the gods with what we do tomorrow. Now, sleep while you can, for you will need all your wits if you are to see the day after.”

Gwydion then turned away and walked into the wood to quieten his mind and gather his thoughts for the coming morning. Some of the men laughed at the thought of keeping Romans alive, but the druid had spoken of the need for it so they would do it. A light guard was put on watch around the camp as they tried to get some sleep, but not many of them managed to rest that night.

Tristan walked over to Gwydion and said, “I might not be able to see Brona’s signal. So how long do I wait, until I’m sure...?”

“You should be able to see her signal, but in any case watch for the Romans, listen for us and use your own judgment. I’ve sent Brona up the

hill to keep her out of the way. I couldn't go home and face our mother if she was killed here."

Tibullus reined in his horse and looked back at the muddy track. It had been raining for several days and the ground was sodden. This was causing the wagon to slide slightly on the uneven ground.

The sixty prisoners were chained in two lines behind the wagon. They were exhausted and staggering along in the mud with chains linking them by their necks to the wagon. Guarding them was a mixed force of six cavalry and thirty legionaries serving with the Fourteenth Augusta Gemina Legion.

It had been dark when they had left their last campsite. The junior centurion Catullus was leading this sorry bunch of captured Celts to Lindum, to be enslaved in the service of Rome as some repayment for the insult of their rebellion.

"Optio, what are you doing?" shouted Catullus.

Optio Tibullus turned his mare and galloped up to Catullus.

"Sir, the track ahead is narrowing and I'm sending some scouts forward to check that the way's clear."

"Don't waste the men's time with that," Catullus laughed. "There are no more of the enemy left - we must have killed them all. We slaughtered over eighty thousand. So much blood was spilled the grass turned red, even if that bitch Boudicca did escape us." He turned his head to one side and spat on the ground, just as the wagon pulling the captured Celts went past.

"Tibullus, I commend you for your diligence, but our cavalry has swept this area recently. The local tribes have all sworn their allegiance to Rome. The rebellion's over. All that remains is to mop up a few pockets of resistance and then we'll exact the due tribute. That will be very large, and I can see us all getting rich.

"And there'll be a famine next year since they chose to go to war



instead of planting crops. Their stupidity means there'll be no harvest and no food and the Celts will be left to starve. Well, I say let them all starve!"

The two men rode on in silence for a few minutes, their thoughts going back to the recent successful battle. But then suddenly Optio Tibullus reined in his mare.

"Sir, this mist has appeared all of sudden, hasn't it? I don't remember it raining last night but I can't see further than a quarter of a mile now. The mist is getting thicker – isn't it a bit late in the morning for that?"

"Gods, you're right, Optio. And look over there – there's something glinting in the trees up ahead."

"Celtic chariots and cavalry, sir," came a shout from up ahead.

Catullus barked out his orders.

"Stop the wagon on the right by the woods. Place the legionaries on the left of it, a double line deep across the track and prepare to receive cavalry on our left flank." The legionaries struggled to follow the orders, stripping the wrappings from their shields and readying their spears. Then they quickly formed a solid line from the wagon across the track. In the thickening mist they heard the unnerving shrieks of the Celtic cavalry force echoing around them.

One of the legionaries was Titus. An ex-gladiator, he was thirty years old and of heavy build.

"They're slow in attacking us," he remarked, "and they've given us time to form up. Why?"

"MAKE SOME NOISE!" shouted out Optio Tibullus.

The entire unit clattered their spears against their shields and screamed as loud as they could, hoping to unsettle the Celtic steeds. But then everything seemed to happen at once. The Celtic chariots and cavalry drove straight at them from out of the mist; at the very last moment they skilfully wheeled away, some to the left and a few to the right, then turned to drive back into the mist. Archers in the chariots fired a volley of arrows that rained fiercely into the shields of the Romans. One arrow had scored the face of a soldier and he was bleeding heavily.

Catullus was riding just behind the Roman line, giving encouraging

commands to his infantry.

“On their next charge throw one spear at their horses,” he shouted.

But then the Romans could hear the heavy sound of cavalry coming from all around them. Gwydion and the war band were arriving out of the mist from behind the Romans and were charging down the track into their backs.

Optio Tibullus shouted: “ALL CAVALRY TO ME!” He gathered the small Roman cavalry unit together and lined up his men to meet the oncoming Celts. But as they appeared from out of the swirling mist he recognised that they were heavily outnumbered. There was no option. He ordered the entire mounted legionary to follow him and charged straight into the oncoming Celtic cavalry.

Brona’s hands were sweating as she flicked the polished blade of the knife against the morning sun. After signalling Tristan, she had continued watching from the hilltop. She could hear the pounding of the horses’ hooves as the Celts punched their way out of the mist. Gwydion was leading the cavalry in two lines, charging straight down the track towards the Romans. Brona could see the battle clearly as her brother’s men easily surrounded and then destroyed the small Roman cavalry unit. Then they reformed and swept down the track, onwards towards the Roman infantry. She felt sick now at the reality of what was happening around her, and knew that she should not have come here after all.

Catullus looked around and recognised the danger they were in. He began shouting more orders.

“Every second man will take two steps back and form a back line. We’re going to abandon the wagon and prisoners, cross this track and escape by withdrawing through the woods.”

Shosterax watched as the Romans made a wedge formation and started to move towards the forest where he was standing. The druid smiled and concentrated his mind into the woods to ask the spirits of the trees for their aid. He raised his staff and pointed it towards the Romans. Fear and confusion entered their minds, causing them to panic. Catullus was thrown from his horse and the Roman troops broke their formation as every man

tried to escape.

Tristan rode through the now broken enemy formation with his force of chariots and cavalry. Archers in the chariots fired into the Roman infantry as they ran for the cover of the woods. Then Gwydion and the cavalry arrived and the full force of their charge duly hammered into the other flank of the panicking Romans. The Celts rode through them, turning and riding back through them again, cutting them to pieces.

After the battle, Gwydion rode over to where his men were collecting together.

“Over here, Gwydion,” called Tristan.

“How many men have we rescued? And have you got me any prisoners to take back for the druids?” asked Gwydion.

“We’ve rescued many. Some of them are from the Rensubids tribe. They’re being freed from their chain and shackles now. And yes, I’ve got two Roman prisoners for you. One is tied up over by the wagon. The other one’s over here.”

They walked over to where some of the Roman dead were lying. A soldier at their feet was unconscious and bleeding from a deep gash in his head. Tristan lifted the head of one of the Romans with his foot. The eyelid flickered and he moaned slightly, some blood running down from his head and dripping onto Tristan’s boot. The Celt took his foot away, letting the head fall back sharply onto the ground. Taking a step back, he wiped his foot on a nearby tuft of grass.

“This one here looks like he might be a cavalry officer. He was found trapped under his horse. The horse was dead so we had some trouble pulling him out, but he’ll die soon too if he doesn’t receive healing.”

“Are you sure he’s alive?”

“Yes, I think so. Most of that blood was from the horse.”

“Brona! Where are you?” shouted Gwydion. “Come here, I have an urgent patient for you. I must have this man treated.”

“I’m coming, brother,” she called back. She’d been busy treating Celts who had been only slightly hurt in the battle. “Where’s the injured man?” She walked towards them desperately trying to control herself, feeling sick

at the sight of so much blood around her on the battlefield. Gwydion pointed towards the Roman.

“I need this man’s wounds cared for. It’s very important that he lives.”

But Brona looked down at the injured Roman and screamed at her brother.

“Kill him! He and his kind are responsible for all this. I will not treat him! Slit his throat. Then it will be one less Roman for us all to worry about. Anyway, our own people need my help.” She turned her back on them and began walking away.

“Brona...,” a voice called softly. She turned and looked directly into the eyes of Shosterax the druid. “Brona, put your worries to one side,” he continued. “The tribe needs this man alive for the information he may have. It would be the greatest help to the tribe if you would treat him. Please will you do this, as a favour to me?”

The druid’s voice seemed so smooth and echoed around inside her head, calming her mind and dulling her anger, pushing her objections swiftly to one side. Suddenly the druid’s thoughts became the only view that was important to her.

“Brother,” she said, “you must get some of your men to get that armour off him and then lift him into the wagon for me. But first I’d better tend to that head wound...” She began quietly to speak an invocation to Sulis, goddess of healing, while Gwydion motioned with his hand to a group of warriors to do as she had asked.

“Tristan,” he said, “tell the tribesmen from the Rensubids that they are welcome to join us as our honoured guests. The hospitality of our homes is theirs.”

“The gods have indeed been good to us,” said Tristan. “But look at the sky now, it’s turning grey and darkening fast. You can feel the breeze growing. Do you see? Taranis is piling one dark cloud up on top of another. I’m sure he’s making a storm.”

“We must move from here as soon as possible,” agreed Gwydion. “I’m looking forward to getting some rest and us all seeing our families again.”