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A god walked among us today. He came disguised as a length of wood from the cavern in the mount. Because it came from such a sacred place, we brought it into the open and left it near the sentinel stones of the Ancients where we might examine it when Lugh's great chariot hauled the sun into the sky. At first light the wood changed. As we watched, it took the shape of a man. We knew it must be Lugh himself, transformed by the power of the fiery orb.

We fell down before him in supplication, offering prayers and praise, but he answered us not and looked upon us with fear as if we were the gods and he the mortal, nor could he speak to us in any tongue we knew.

— Stave One of Jaslon, 18th Master of Mount Eban Enclave

## Castulo, Iberia 96 B.C.

**T**he Roman soldiers working on the road had stripped to their waists as they toiled under the Iberian sun. Rhonwen imagined she could smell them, although she was barely close enough to hear their voices. The white-washed village of Castulo, and the people waiting for the medicines she bore, stood on the far side of the new road and the Romans building it.

She could avoid the togas as her mother admonished, or find a thinly manned section and scurry across. She glanced at the workers, their ranks stretching to the horizon. A detour meant a long hike in the late afternoon heat and would delay her return home until dark.

“Crow scat!” the girl muttered. “There must be some place to

cross.”

Shading her eyes, she peered across the valley. She saw only Romans and a handful of children playing at war, dodging makeshift missiles while climbing over, under, and around a battery of standing stones left by the Ancients.

Drawing herself upright, Rhonwen re-tied the cord holding her thick curly hair behind her head. Thus prepared, she walked toward the children.

She touched the pouch that held the silver druid’s token Orlan had given her. Rhonwen murmured a prayer as she strolled toward Castulo and passed the workmen.

Their catcalls brought a flush to her cheeks. When one of the men leaned on his shovel and leered at her, the centurion in command broke into heavily accented Latin. “Trajan, you ugly pig-poker, get back to work.”

Rhonwen regretted not taking a different path. A chorus of whoops and laughter made her glance over her shoulder. The one called Trajan still watched her. She retrieved the silver token and squeezed the edge into her palm for composure before slipping it back into the pouch. The man’s gaze slid over her like a serpent in a cradle.

She hurried away and did not relax until she drew closer to the children. A new battle began without warning. Dirt clods, laughter, and war whoops flew from both sides. One of the smaller boys stood when he should have stooped. A fist-sized chunk of dried mud struck his forehead, and he fell to the ground weeping. The others played on. As any five-year-old knew, battles didn’t stop because someone got hurt. The child on the ground whimpered louder when he saw her.

“You don’t need me, Arvan,” she said. “Get up and defend yourself. Where’s your spirit?”

Arvan rolled to a sitting position and probed his forehead. “I need a healer, Rhonwen.” He held out his bloody hand. “See?”

She set her basket down and knelt beside him for a look at his injury. The other children crowded around her. Rhonwen sat the boy on one of the ancient tumbled stones and examined his wound. She clucked at the smear of dirt and blood and wiped the spot clean with a handful of damp moss from her basket. “You’ll have a bruise you

can be proud of.”

His face lit up. “Will it scar?”

Rhonwen tried to frown the way her uncle Orlan did, but his heavy eyebrows and long mustaches gave him an aspect of authority she could not hope to match. “It might,” she said, “but you’ll have to keep it clean.”

He looked at her with undisguised suspicion. “Will it scar worse if I don’t?”

She wrinkled her nose at him. “If you don’t keep it clean, I’ll have my mother, Driad Baia, tend you next time.”

At the mention of the healer, Arvan drew back in apprehension and grew somber. “I’ll keep it clean. I promise.”

Rhonwen laughed. “You’re better off doing as I say.” She stood. “Now, I’ve got to be going.”

“But I’m hurt, too, Rhonwen,” one of the other children cried. He grabbed his head and swooned.

“Me, too,” said another, staggering into the first. Soon, Rhonwen and a few stones of the Ancients were the only things standing.

She tickled the nearest boy. “Your only hope is magic.”

The children stared at her for a double heartbeat and then clamored for her to show them.

Rhonwen retrieved the druid disk from the pouch at her neck. With her palm down, she rolled the silver token over the backs of her fingers. The disk skipped across her hand and sparkled in the sunlight. She snapped her fingers to draw their attention and let the disk fall into a hidden pocket in her tunic. She extended both hands, empty.

Arvan’s mouth dropped open. “Where’d it go?”

“The gods have it,” she said. “They’ll give it back whenever I need it.” She looked over the heads of the children as a pair of mercenaries trudged toward them pulling a cart. She recognized the larger man as Trajan, a brooding foreigner with a coarse beard. The men paused to rest while the other members of their detail, and the centurion who commanded them, plodded toward the encampment. A red-cloaked Roman tribune stood near the closed gate watching their approach.

Rhonwen’s pulse quickened, and she scowled at the children.

“Togas,” she whispered. “Run along now.”

The mercenaries glanced at her and bent their heads together in low conversation.

“Make the druid’s disk come back!” Arvan stood in front of her with his arms crossed. “Show us.”

Rhonwen stole a glance at the men, who continued to watch. She turned her back to them and held the silver token where only the children could see it. One side of the disk bore a design of Orlan’s: an oak tree with low-hanging branches entwined with its roots in an endless knot.

Eager to be on her way, Rhonwen hurried through a simple trick, making the disk vanish from her hand and reappear in her mouth. Delighted, the children demanded another. Then they stopped laughing and stared past her. Rhonwen’s heart thumped. She didn’t have to turn to know the mercenaries stood only a few feet away.

“What’ve you got there?” demanded Trajan.

“Nothing,” Rhonwen said, switching easily to the Roman tongue, which every druid student learned. Pretending to swap the token from one hand to the other, she drew their gaze away and dropped it in her concealed pocket. Orlan’s disk meant more to her than anything else she owned. She had no intention of surrendering it.

The man swept a hand at Arvan, grabbing him by the arm. The other children scattered and ran toward Castulo. Rhonwen followed them for a few steps but stopped at Arvan’s terrified cry. The soldier gripped the squirming boy in one scarred and dirty fist as he gestured for Rhonwen to come closer.

“Come here,” Trajan said.

Rhonwen’s mouth went dry. “Let the boy go.” If the mercenaries hurt Arvan, the Castulans were honor bound to seek revenge. If these men died, the Romans who commanded them would demand reprisals. More than one Iberian had been crucified for failing to submit to their demands.

The smaller man sidled around behind her, and she turned to keep them both in view.

Trajan shook Arvan hard enough to make him cry out in pain. “Come here, girl!”

Hot with righteous anger, Rhonwen reached for the boy. Trajan

thrust Arvan aside and seized Rhonwen's wrist. The boy scurried a few feet away and then stopped.

"Run!" Rhonwen shouted. Arvan bolted down the road, and she turned her attention to her attacker.

"Let go of me," she said through clenched teeth. Blood pounded in her ears. She tried to pull away, but he squeezed harder, twisting at the same time.

"Where's the coin?"

Gasping in pain, Rhonwen opened her empty hand. The smaller man grabbed her other wrist, but she spread her fingers wide before he could hurt her. "I have no coin."

"She lies. She's hiding it," lisped the second mercenary through missing teeth.

Trajan shoved her into the thinner man's arms. "Hold her while I look."

The second man grasped one of Rhonwen's arms and forced it up behind her back. Trajan ran his hands up and down Rhonwen's body, searching. He found the pouch and jerked it free. Trajan dug his fingers into the thin pouch and ripped it open. Angered to find it empty, he grasped the neck of Rhonwen's tunic and yanked. The linen tore easily, and he pulled it aside exposing her breasts. He pushed his face close to hers. "Where's the coin?"

Rhonwen struggled in the second soldier's grasp. These animals had no right to touch her, a free woman and someday a driad. Although she had been unclothed countless times in the company of others—in ceremonies, at work, or merely bathing—until now, she had never felt so naked.

Trajan's breath washed over her like a hot fog, and she smelled garlic and wine in his sweat. She drew herself up in defiance, her voice steady. "I have no coins."

He grunted and tore her tunic away entirely. He ran the thin material through his hands until he felt the token, and then he ripped the tunic again to remove it. He squinted at the silver disk and glowered, his face close to hers. "This is no coin."

Rhonwen rammed her forehead into his nose. It gave a satisfying crunch. "I told you that already!"

Trajan's hands flew to his face. His eyes watered, and blood dripped over his mouth. "Bitch!" He backhanded her.

Pain lanced across her cheek and released a flood of tears. She squeezed her eyes shut to keep the traitorous drops from revealing the depth of her pain.

The mercenary put the token into a leather pouch of his own. He wiped Rhonwen's blood from the crude ring on his middle finger.

"What is it?" asked his companion.

"A pretty piece of silver, Paulus, but I doubt it's worth much."

"We should make her give us something of value," Paulus said.

Rhonwen fought against the man's grip. Her grimace brought a renewed stab of pain in her cheek. "You've already taken the one thing I value."

"I doubt that," Trajan said, staring at her breasts. He grabbed a handful of her hair and forced her head back. He licked his lips and grinned at Paulus. "I think she wants me."

"What if someone sees us?" Paulus asked. "We're dead if—"

"The Iberians are cowards," Trajan said, "and there aren't any officers around."

Paulus poked at the three-armed spiral of the student's tattoo on Rhonwen's shoulder. "I think she's a priestess."

"So? It's not her prayers I'm interested in." Trajan palmed her breasts.

His hands, hot and rough on her skin, made her shiver with loathing. Spitting and kicking, she struggled to break away, but Paulus pushed her arm higher behind her back. Trajan pawed at her, leaving smears of dirt and sweat.

"Besides," he said, "as comely as this one is, I'll bet she's toppled a dozen boys. It's time she had a man, don't you think?" Paulus jerked his head toward the slabs of stone piled all around. "Let's take her behind those rocks."

Rhonwen could not stop the shaking that grew from someplace cold deep inside. She forced her voice past parched lips in a desperate bluff. "Let me go, or you won't live through the day."

Trajan snickered and turned toward the rocks. As he did, Rhonwen stamped on Paulus's toe. He bellowed in pain and relaxed his grip. She twisted to run, but Trajan blocked the way. He balled a fist and landed a blow to her wounded cheek. She hit the ground hard and struggled to open her eyes. Her vision blurred. Desperate to regain her wits, she forced herself to stare at her attackers until

she could see them clearly.

“Get her things,” Trajan said as he dragged her behind the standing stones and shoved her over a slab. The rough surface scraped her stomach. She put her hands on the cold rock to push herself upright, but Trajan knocked her down again and knelt on her calves.

Pinned, Rhonwen swung her fists wildly at the man behind her. He deflected the blows with ease.

“Grab her hands,” he growled.

From the far side of the slab, Paulus yanked her wrists until the dark stone scored the tops of her thighs. Rhonwen let out a scream of fear and rage that Paulus cut short with a jab to her ribs.

The explosion of pain left her whimpering.

“Keep her quiet,” Trajan ordered.

Paulus shoved part of her ruined tunic in her mouth and resumed his hold of her wrists, pulling her up against the rock. Her face and ribs throbbed. With the cloth packed tightly in her mouth she could barely breathe. She closed her eyes and cursed them. Ancient Goddess, may your crows eat their dead eyes before the day is done.

Trajan jabbed a calloused hand between her legs, his fingers cruel and insistent. Rhonwen snarled in impotent fury. The mercenary hiked up his short tunic.

“Get on with it,” Paulus said. “I want my turn.”

Rhonwen’s muscles strained as she willed herself to iron and prayed. She expected the pain of Trajan’s first thrust at any moment when his weight on her legs suddenly lifted.

“Sertorius!” Paulus said, his voice a terrified whisper.

Paulus released her wrists and stood. Her legs too weak to trust, Rhonwen pushed herself up, rolled back against the slab, and pulled the cloth from her mouth.

A tall, lean Roman tribune held Trajan by his hair with one hand and pressed the edge of a long knife to his neck with the other. Eyes wide, Trajan reached ineffectively toward his attacker. Rhonwen heard Paulus run, but she could not take her eyes from the men in front of her. Half a dozen legionnaires flanked the tribune. None of them moved to chase Paulus.

“I can explain, Sertorius,” Trajan said.

“There’s no need,” said the officer. His cloak swirled about him like the wings of a great red hawk.

“But, Tribune, I—” Sertorius pressed the blade tighter.

Angry shouts preceded the arrival of a dozen villagers. Arvan and the other children ran alongside them. Two village women knelt protectively on either side of Rhonwen.

“Hold!” shouted Cormac, an iron smith. He waved the tip of a spear in Sertorius’s face. The Roman soldiers behind him stepped forward as one, but the tribune motioned them back.

Four villagers stood guard over Paulus, who bled from several minor wounds. He struggled as fiercely as Rhonwen had.

Arvan dodged past the men to retrieve the rest of Rhonwen’s shredded tunic and gave it to her.

She accepted it with a trembling hand and strove to quiet her hammering heart. She covered herself as best she could with the ruined garment.

“This is Roman peace?” Cormac’s voice was flinty.

Sertorius turned a calm face toward the angry men. “You’ll see I keep my word.”

Rhonwen stared at the tribune. The villagers murmured in surprise that Sertorius spoke the local tongue, although tinged with a Roman accent.

“These are my men,” he said, “and they know my will. They’ve disobeyed my orders.”

“By being caught?” Cormac narrowed his eyes and kept the spear point poised.

Sertorius drew his knife sharply across Trajan’s throat. Cormac stepped aside to avoid the shower of blood. The dying mercenary moved his mouth soundlessly. Sertorius released him, and he staggered forward with both hands clamped to his neck. Blood pumped between his fingers and bathed him in red as bright as the tribune’s cloak.

The reek of wine and garlic wafted over Rhonwen, and she clamped her jaws in disgust. Trajan dropped to his knees in front of her and released his bowels in a final vile summation of his life. The stench shocked her into movement, and she stumbled to her feet. The village women steadied her, as a barrel maker removed his tunic and handed it to her. She slipped it on.

Wide-eyed children peeked out from behind the Castulans and stared from the dead to the living.

Sertorius turned to Paulus, still in the grip of four enraged Iberians and frowned. "I said the people were not to be harmed."

"It was all Trajan's idea!" Paulus cried.

"You disobeyed my orders."

Paulus stared at his dead comrade, then back at the tribune.

"But, they're barbarians! I'm nearly a citizen. I'm entitled to—"

"Justice," Sertorius said, "no more or less than they are." He looked first at Cormac and then caught the eye of everyone present. "Let it be known that my justice is fair and swift."

He stabbed Paulus directly under the ribcage, slanting the long blade up toward the heart. He gave the hilt an additional shove, burying the entire blade inside the mercenary's chest.

Paulus gasped and let out a bubbling wail as his blood poured onto the ground to mix with Trajan's. The Castulans released him, and he folded his arms around his ruined chest as he collapsed.

No one said a word. Rhonwen, still shaking from her ordeal, stared at the bodies with grim satisfaction. The goddess had answered her prayer with Sertorius. As far as she knew, no Roman officer had ever before punished his men for crimes against the people they governed. The men under Governor Fufidius were known for their drunken brawls and assaults on village women. Everyone assumed all Romans allowed and perhaps even encouraged such things to humiliate the people and keep them dispirited.

She stepped forward and pointed at Trajan's pouch. "He stole something from me."

Sertorius retrieved the pouch from the dead man and found the druid token.

"That's mine," Rhonwen said.

Sertorius handed it to her. "It's magnificent." He nudged a corpse with the toe of his sandal and called to the men behind him. "Drag these vermin back to the camp. Leave them where they can be seen. I'll decide later whether they're to be buried."

Sertorius stepped between Rhonwen and the retreating soldiers. He studied the skin of her face, arms, and legs, scraped raw by the rocks and stained with sweat and dirt from the mercenary's hands.

The barrel maker's tunic hung below her knees. Tatters of her own clothing lay in the fresh red mud at her feet. He scowled. "Those men had no wealth, yet I cannot let their debt to you go unpaid."

"Do what you will," Rhonwen said.

Sertorius removed his light cloak and wrapped the bright red cloth around her, then pressed her hands together until she held it closed beneath her neck.

"How badly are you hurt?" he asked, touching her cheek. To her surprise, he used her own northern language.

She put a hand on the spot where Trajan hit her, startled to find a deep cut. Unlike Arvan's wound, this one was sure to leave a scar. She dabbed at it with the sleeve of her spoiled tunic.

Sertorius took the garment from her, poured water on it from a leather bottle, and wiped the blood away.

"Where did you learn my language?" she asked.

"I served in Cisalpine Gaul before I came here. In the mountains north of Rome, I learned it's wise to understand one's enemy. Later, perhaps he'll be a better friend."

Rhonwen frowned. "Both northern Celts and southern have been Rome's enemies since the war with Carthage. Now you kill your own men for harming me. Why?"

"Because they disobeyed me." Sertorius took her elbow and directed her away from the carnage. The villagers and the children dispersed, leaving Cormac to follow at a short distance.

"I saw you fight, despite great odds, a girl against men." Sertorius said. "You must be a noble."

Rhonwen flushed. Although of the druid class, she and her family were far from what a Roman might think noble. "Oh, yes, I'm the Queen of Iberia."

The tribune bowed deeply, and the smile lightened his somber features." I am Quintus Sertorius, simple soldier, and you're the first queen I've met."

Rhonwen suddenly remembered she still had work to do and cast about for her basket. All she wanted was to go home.

"What are you looking for?" he asked. "Is there anything I can do to help?"

"I'll see she gets whatever help she needs," Cormac said, pulling the red cloak from Rhonwen's shoulders and handing it to

the Roman. He put a protective arm around her. "I'm takin' ye home, lass. I've already sent yer basket on to the village."

With a brief bow, the Roman marched away, his long legs bearing him straight toward the encampment. Rhonwen smiled at Cormac but wished Sertorius were the one to take her home.



The wind shifted and blew a gritty dust cloud past Druid Orlan's head as he turned his donkey cart toward the shade of a great elm standing beside Healer's House. Shifting winds could represent either an omen, usually ill, or the act of a capricious god. In light of the urgent message he'd received from Castulo, he assumed the worst. Orlan had abandoned his search for herbs and hurried to his sister's home to halt any efforts she might make to mount a counterattack. He pitied anyone who earned her wrath. Baia could be as fierce in her retribution as she was dedicated to her healing.

Orlan flexed his fingers to loosen the joints. He wished there was a salve to soothe his swollen knuckles, but he hadn't found one yet. He doubted ever finding a cure for his gnarled knuckles and the threads of white hair sprouting from his brows and temples.

Baia's voice reached him before he entered Healer's House, and her tone confirmed their conversation would be unpleasant. Taking a deep breath, he forced a smile and stepped through the door.

Orlan blamed Baia's implacable temper for the pale gray streaks in her once black-brown hair. Though younger than he by half a dozen years, she could have been his twin. Their flight from Roman armies in the northern mountains had been hard on her, and the hordes of Roman settlers and merchants in the south had only increased her animosity. With her mouth set grimly and her hazel eyes blazing, she looked more like a warrior than a healer.

"Where's Rhonwen?" he asked. "Is she all right?"

"Of course not," Baia snapped from across the room. "She's been raped and beaten."

Rhonwen sat on the stout low table the healers used for meals and the treatment of patients. She appeared calm if bruised and scraped from the assault. He felt his own anger flare as he saw the cut on her bruised cheek. Unlike his sister, however, he refused to

let emotions rule his head. He brushed Rhonwen's dark curls from her face, took her head in his hands, and gazed into her nut-brown eyes. "Tell me how you feel, child."

"I'll mend," she said.

"After being defiled by Roman scum?" Baia said.

"The rape failed, Mother." An errant curl fell unrestrained across her cheek. "Besides, the men who attacked me were mercenaries, not Romans."

"There's a difference?" Baia made a warding sign in the direction of Castulo.

Orlan put his arms around Rhonwen and wished the mother had more of her daughter's practicality. He gave her a light squeeze. "I thank the gods they didn't kill you."

"I thank the gods for sending the tribune who saved me."

"Who saved you?" Baia put her hands on her head. "Who do you think brought the mercenaries? If your father were still alive, he'd be riding at the head of a war party this very moment. Any toga who showed himself would be butchered like winter meat."

"Winter meat in the summer?" said a voice from the door-way.

Orlan smiled at the sound of his nephew's voice.

"Telo!" Rhonwen said, slipping off of the table. She hurried across the room to hug her brother. Though two years her junior, he stood taller by a head. Lean, like the rest of the family, Telo had only just begun to take on the bulk of manhood.

He pushed gently away from Rhonwen, his eyes intent on her wounds. "What happened?"

"Romans happened," said Baia.

"Bastards! I'll kill them," Telo yelled.

"Calm down," Rhonwen said. "There's nothing to be done. The men who attacked me are dead. The gods will deal with the Romans in their own time."

"I'm tired of waiting for the gods. We must settle this on our own."

"We could, you know," Baia said. "There are men ready now. And Telo's in training with Tarax, the Gyrisoenian warrior." She touched the scabbard at his side.

The hilt of the sword on the boy's hip brought back old memories. The last time Orlan saw it, Baia's husband held it.

“That’s one of Senin’s blades, isn’t it?” he asked. “I thought they’d all been buried with him.”

Baia pulled the weapon free of its scabbard and tested the edge with her thumb. “I saved his favorite sword for his favorite child.”

Telo winked at Rhonwen. “His favorite son, maybe.”

Rhonwen smiled back, but Orlan saw the hurt before she masked it.

“Who’s Tarax?” she asked.

“An arms master,” Telo said. “I’ve worked with him for only a fortnight, but Tarax says I’ll be ready.”

“Ready for what?” Orlan asked. Foolhardiness came easily to the young, and the Gyrisoenians made matters worse. A hot-headed clan, they continually stirred up trouble, and their efforts only resulted in more Roman soldiers being sent to the region. It would be different if the Gyrisoenians were strong enough to defeat them, but not even the armed might of Carthage could manage that.

Telo looked at Rhonwen. “Tarax says the Romans grow more insolent by the day. What we don’t give them, they steal. They eat our food and drink until they can’t even stand. We should kill them all.”

“Not all of them,” Rhonwen said.

Rhonwen’s persistence in defending the one Roman intrigued Orlan. “Tell me about him.”

Baia scowled. “He intervened, so she thinks he’s a hero.”

Rhonwen turned to her mother and took a deep breath before speaking. “He executed the men who attacked me.”

“They’re all evil, Rhonwen. How can you feel differently after what they did to you?” Telo’s eyes burned with a righteous fire.

He pointed to her cheek. Dried blood marked the ends of Baia’s thin poultice, which held the ragged edges of the wound together. “You’re lucky to be alive. Others have paid a higher price. They’ve pushed us too far, and now we’re going to do something about it.”

Telo’s bravado worried Orlan. With so few Iberians armed and trained, the Romans had little to fear. They did not tolerate rebellion.

Rhonwen stared up into Telo’s face. “What is Tarax planning?”

“What must be done.” Telo crossed his arms. “The Gyrisoenians have promised to help us drive the Romans from Castulo. I’m fighting with them.”

“No,” she cried, gripping his wrists. “You can’t!”

“I have no other honorable choice.”

“That’s not true. There are always choices, just not always easy ones.” He wrenched away, his hand on the hilt of the sword. “I’ve got to go, or I’ll be late.” He touched her cheek. “I’ll make them pay.”

His face grew solemn, and Orlan saw the warrior father in the boy.

“Telo—”

“Hush, Rhonwen,” Baia said. “Can’t you see how determined he is? Just like his father.”

“The Romans killed him for it as I recall,” Orlan said.

“Don’t try to stop me, Uncle,” Telo said, his face reddening. “There’ll be a reckoning no matter what you and Rhonwen think.” He stalked to the door, his back stiff.

Stubborn, thought Orlan, just like his parents.

“Don’t be a fool, Telo!” Rhonwen called, but he left without looking back.

Baia stared hard at her daughter. “You’d try to dissuade him? You’re the fool.”

Tears welled in the girl’s eyes, but she held herself as if Baia’s words had no bite.

Orlan took Rhonwen’s hand and led her to the door. “Walk with me. It’s too fine a day to be inside. The warm sun will comfort those bruises of yours.”

“By all means, go with him,” Baia muttered.

He guided Rhonwen through the doorway. “Wait for me outside. I’ll be along in a moment.”



Rhonwen paced outside, impatient to have someone to talk to who didn’t starve truth to feed hatred, someone whose love for one child didn’t blind her to another. Several minutes passed before Orlan emerged from the house. At the sight of the man so like her mother in looks yet so different in heart, she rushed to his side. “She makes me so—”

Orlan’s eyes twinkled and he put a finger to his lips. “Hold a

moment. If I know your mother, she's straining at the door behind me to hear every word we say."

His words rang true. Though Baia remained hidden from view, Rhonwen bit back her remarks.

Orlan walked south, and when Rhonwen hurried to keep up, he shortened his stride. "You started to say something back there." Rhonwen ached all over but refused to voice any complaint that might add fuel to her mother's fire. "It doesn't matter."

"No?" Orlan frowned. "I've spent years looking for plants that can help people, and I've found quite a few: plants for pain, plants for fever, plants to calm an angry bowel. But I've never found one that'll cure word poison."

"There's no such thing."

"Poison or cure?"

"Either."

Orlan slipped his arm around her shoulders, but when she winced he released her. "Then what are you suffering from?"

"Being attacked by mercenaries!"

He shook his head. "That hurts, of course. But I think Baia's words hurt you in places no salve can ever reach. Such wounds last longer than any bruise the Romans leave."

Rhonwen blinked to stop the tears that threatened to flow from her eyes. She gripped his hand. "Why does Mother hate me?"

Orlan looked at her with surprise. "You? No, child, it's the Romans she hates."

Rhonwen held back no longer. "How can I think otherwise? She applauds every silly thing Telo does, including this newest insanity. She suggested it's my fault those men attacked me." And it was, she thought miserably. Baia had warned her to take the longer path to avoid trouble.

"That's nonsense!" Orlan scooped up a handful of pebbles from the road. He tossed them at nothing in particular as they walked. "What can I tell you about Baia that you don't already know? She loved your father dearly, and when the Romans killed him, she nearly went out of her mind with grief. She might have attacked them herself if it weren't for the baby."

She didn't have to ask. "Telo."

"She was still nursing him, and you weren't much bigger than

an excuse.” He tossed a stone and watched it hit a tree thirty paces away. “She loved you both then just as much as she does now.”

“She has an odd way of showing it.” Baia’s pride in her son overshadowed everything Rhonwen tried to do. “No matter what, in her mind I’ll never be as good as Telo. She may have loved me once, but she’s changed.”

Orlan threw the last pebble and dusted his hands. “Could it be you’re the one who’s changing?”

She squinted at him. His remark put her on her guard. Somehow he always managed to smooth her ruffled feelings, and right now she wasn’t sure she wanted them smoothed.

“You’ve turned into a woman, Rhonwen. Though you’re still young, you’re smart and beautiful.”

She felt herself blush.

“Just as Baia was.” He stopped and made her look at him. “You think she’s jealous of me?” Rhonwen laughed. “She’s the best healer in the province, maybe in all of Iberia. People come to her every day. They don’t care if she’s pretty. They only care about her ability.”

“True enough, but I suspect when she sees you, she’s reminded that there’s more of her life behind her than ahead. And you must admit you’ve also grown hard-headed. You don’t listen to her advice as closely as you used to.”

“How does that explain what she’s doing to Telo? He’s got no business playing warrior.”

“He has every right,” Orlan said. “Just as you’ve become a woman, he’s becoming a man.”

“He’s a boy!”

They reached the well in the center of Castulo and stopped. Orlan took the cup from the hook on the post, dipped it into the water bucket, and drank. “If that is what you think, then you don’t know him as well as you suppose.”

She hated it when Orlan pointed out her blind spots. He handed her the cup, and she drank. “It appears I don’t know much of anything anymore.”

“Quit feeling sorry for yourself and recognize that there’s passion in our blood. Sometimes it makes life interesting. Sometimes it makes life hard.”

Sometimes too hard, she mused.

They walked in silence as they approached the gigantic oak Orlan had used as a model for the design on his druid token. He captured the essence of the oak's thick, intertwining branches. On the disk they formed a thread that encircled the trunk. Now, in the deep red of autumn, the tree breathed with the same fire the setting sun imbued in the silver disk.

Rhonwen slipped the token from its pouch and rolled it across her fingers. While Orlan watched, she made it appear and disappear as deftly as any druid. Of all Orlan's students, she was the only one adept enough at all her studies to receive it.

She recalled the Roman tribune who had returned it to her, Quintus Sertorius. The man had treated her as a woman, an equal, something no one had ever done before.

"What are you thinking?" Orlan asked.

"Nothing."

Orlan arched an eyebrow. "That flush to your cheek suggests otherwise."

"I was just thinking of the Roman tribune."

"Ah." He pursed his lips. "He sounds like a decent sort, but one to watch carefully. Not every hound is fit to guard a flock. Be wary of any man in a hurry to dispense justice."

Rhonwen nodded, but her thoughts remained on the Roman.

Orlan turned her around and peered at her, putting her reverie to an end. "You may think I'm old, and I don't have all the answers, but I've heard most of the important questions. You're still young, and most of your questions seem new. You trust people, and that's usually not bad, but when it comes to Romans, you can't listen to your heart."

Rhonwen forced a smile. "Don't you think I know that?"

Orlan's face remained grave. "No, I don't."



Sound carried well at night in the damp autumn air. Rhonwen heard the rider's approach long before he clattered to a halt outside Healer's House. She and her mother had just settled in front of the hearth for an evening meal of duck eggs, dark bread, and watered

wine. It was the last of the bread, and mold gave it a dusty flavor.

Baia sighed. "If the Romans trusted their own healers, we might get an evening of peace once in a while."

Rhonwen flicked a pinch of mold into the fire. "They call us demons when we tend our own. How is it we suddenly become worthy when it's their wounds that need stitching?"

Baia gave Rhonwen the ghost of a smile. "The Great Mother has made it clear I need to eat and so allows me to take their food or coin."

The Roman rider hailed the house. Without waiting for an answer, he pushed through the leather drape covering the only opening. "Governor Fufidius bids you come with me. Your skills are needed."

Rhonwen recognized Marcus Vadius, the messenger the togas always sent.

"I'm well, Vadius. Thank you for inquiring," Baia said without moving from her place by the fire.

"We've not finished our supper." Rhonwen found a greenspotted heel of bread and offered it to their visitor. "Care to join us?"

Vadius ignored her. "I've brought an extra mount. You two can ride double."

"And will we be allowed to ride back here when we're done, or will we have to walk as we did the last time?"

"That's not up to me," Vadius said.

"I see." Baia swirled the liquid in her wooden cup. "I'm getting too old to work all night and follow it with a long walk home."

Vadius pointed at Rhonwen. "Does she have your skill?"

"You aren't taking my daughter," Baia said, her eyes cold.

"It grows late. We must go."

"We're not walking home."

"I'll—"

"Explain it to Fufidius, I'm sure."

"—bring you back when you're done."

"Fine," Baia said. "We'll leave as soon as we finish eating."

Vadius stepped closer. "If we don't go now, Fufidius will have me standing guard 'til I'm an old man."

Rhonwen popped a piece of bread in her mouth. "You'd ask us to give up a meal like this? We can't work hungry."

“I’ll bring you something to eat later if you’ll just come now!”

“Meat?” Baia asked.

“If I can find some.” Vadius fidgeted with the hilt of his sword.

“Never mind. We’ll eat here.”

“Yes, meat!” he shouted.

“And wine?”

“Yes, yes, just come now.” He hurried to the door and lifted the drape.

Baia nodded and Rhonwen emptied her cup on the fire.

“How many of your men are wounded?” Baia asked.

“None.”

She glared at him. “Is it the dark sickness?”

“It’s nothing like that. The governor’s mare has broken a leg.”

Baia sat down again. “Then you’d best kill the beast. There’s nothing we can do for it.”

“Fufidius knows that, but the mare is ready to foal. She was bred with a stallion belonging to the great Sulla. Governor Fufidius commands you to save the foal.”

Baia bustled through the building gathering supplies. “Why did you waste so much time? You should have told us our patient was a horse.”

Rhonwen turned so the Roman wouldn’t see her smile.



The stable, warm and bright with the glow of a dozen lamps, smelled of fresh straw and burning olive oil.

As Rhonwen and Baia passed through the door, three stable boys barred their way. Baia, her arm a lance, struck one boy in the chest and sent him sprawling.

Angered, the two others grabbed the women. Rhonwen twisted away from one and elbowed the other in the ribs. He released Baia as if she were aflame.

“Hold, you fools!” Vadius called from the doorway. “These are the healers Fufidius summoned.”

Baia smoothed her robe. “Where’s the mare?” she asked a man holding a lamp.

He pointed toward a middle stall on the left. A cluster of men

loitered there, whispering.

The mare lay on her side, breathing heavily. Every few minutes she tried to raise herself. Unable to put weight on her injured foreleg, the animal fell back. A Roman stableman stroked the horse's nose.

"How did this happen?" Baia asked.

"Kicked by another mare."

Rhonwen understood all too well. They'd ministered many a healing potion to a cut caused by a hoof, or a deep bite on the neck of some filly who dared defy the herd's dam.

"Do you think it's the splint bone, mother?" Rhonwen asked without much hope. A broken splint could heal.

"Nay. She'd be able to stand with that bone broken. This is much worse." She rummaged in her herb sack and pulled out a handful of setwell plaits and turned to the nearest lamp bearer. "Some fire, please."

The stableman looked up at Vedius. The Roman nodded, and although apprehension etched deeper lines in his stoic face, the stableman held the lamp steady for Baia. The plant smoldered, then flamed. She let it burn brightly for a minute then blew out the flame, fanning it to generate smoke.

Baia slipped into the stall and waved the smoke toward the mare's head. At first the horse stared at her wild-eyed, but as the mare inhaled more of the smoke, she began to relax. Baia extinguished the glowing brand and sought something else in her sack. She took a few minutes to mix a mash of other herbs and potions.

This time she offered it to the horse to eat. Much to Rhonwen's surprise, the animal took what Baia offered, licking at her fingers as if relishing a sweet apple.

Baia sat back on her haunches and studied the horse. Rhonwen watched too, unsure what she was looking for. Finally Baia beckoned her closer.

"Come over here," she said, "and kneel beside her head."

Rhonwen obeyed, although the stableman beside her did not move away.

"Speak kindly to her, stroke her here, and here," Baia said, patting the horse's heavy cheek and neck. "While you do that, I'll

examine her.”

Once Rhonwen settled beside the horse and patted her as instructed, Baia moved toward the horse’s leg. She looked up at the men assembled. “Who is her handler?”

“I am,” said the man nearest the horse. “What can I do?”

“Help keep her head down while I examine her leg and belly.” The man knelt at Rhonwen’s side and added his own soothing voice and touch to hers.

Baia probed the leg, and the horse flinched only once. Sitting back on her heels Baia looked at the handler. “You know, don’t you?”

The man nodded. He hid his hands as if to keep Baia from noticing how badly they shook.

“Mother?” Rhonwen said. “What will you do?”

“I’ll hasten her death and make it painless.”

The handler balked. “You must save the foal at all costs,” he said, his voice tinged with anger. “Fufidius demands it.” He combed his fingers through the mare’s long mane. “Kill her, and you kill the foal. It’s not ready.”

“I won’t let this animal lie here with a broken long bone until her foal is born. It’s an outrage.”

The man shook his head, and something hard flashed in his eyes. “If you don’t keep her alive until she foals, more than just two horses will die here.”

Vedius pushed forward. “Spanus is right. With Sulla’s own stallion the sire, Fufidius insists on whatever it takes to keep that foal alive.”

“Fufidius is a fool!” Spanus said.

Vedius cuffed him. “He’s our governor. We do as he bids, or our lives are forfeit.”

Spanus met Vedius’ eyes and did not touch the place on his cheek where Vedius had struck him. Rhonwen’s hand went to the pink scar on her own newly healed cheek.

“There are better men than he to lead us,” Spanus said.

Vedius stamped away, and Baia furrowed her brows at Spanus.

He shrugged. “It’s wrong to let her suffer.”

Baia nodded, and for a moment Rhonwen thought here, at least, was one Roman her mother respected. Baia touched his hand. “We’ll

be swift. I promise.”

“I raised her from a newborn, taught her to accept a rider, and cared for her every day of her life. I’ll be the one to take that life from her, not you. Then, when Fufidius discovers his loss, only I will answer for it.”

Baia waited while Spanus retrieved a lance and set it against a timber. When he returned, she took him aside.

“Spanus,” she whispered, “I have an idea that might save you from the governor’s wrath.”

“Impossible.”

Baia shook her head. “I propose to deliver the foal tonight.”

“It isn’t due for almost two weeks.”

“I’ll cut open the mare’s belly and pull the foal free.”

Spanus stepped back. “How could a healer even think of such a thing?”

“Have you never heard the tale of Brosia?”

Rhonwen understood. This old story she knew well. Pulled from his mother’s womb after she’d died, Brosia lived to become a great hero. If it had been done before, then she had confidence her mother could do it now.

Spanus looked uncertain. “Brosia? The one you call the Otter?”

“Brosia the Trickster, Brosia the Bold, he’s known by many names. His birth came after his mother’s death. I propose to do the same thing. I can make the mare sleep. We’ll take the foal, and before she wakes you may send her to the Otherworld.”

“This will work?” he asked.

She shrugged. “If we take the foal this way, it has a chance to live. If we don’t try, it’ll have no chance at all.”

Either way, Rhonwen knew neither Spanus nor her mother would let the mare suffer past this night.

He consented with the barest of nods.

“No,” Vadius said, “it’s too risky. Keep the mare alive. If the foal dies, you die.”

“I’ll take that risk,” Baia said.

Vadius looked at Rhonwen. “And you’ll risk her life, too?”

Baia frowned. “Leave us, Rhonwen.”

Rhonwen crossed her arms. “I’m staying. How else will I learn?”

“It’s a bad idea,” Vadius said. A withering look from Baia smothered further objection. “Do something useful, Vadius. Get these men working on finding us clean straw and hot water, and find another mare with a new suckling.”

At her words, the men scurried away. When a bucket of water arrived, Baia stepped back and gestured to the onlookers.

“Those of you without lamps will leave us.”

Spanus didn’t move. “I stay.”

Baia spared him a tight smile. “Of course.”

Half the men left, grumbling, as her mother laid out two sharp blades. Baia’s largest and best butchering knife, sharpened to a fine edge, glittered in the lamp light.

“Timing is important,” Baia said. “We must work quickly. If the foal isn’t breathing on its own in a minute, two at the most, it will likely die.”

In the subdued light, Baia stripped out of her white tunic and laid it over the wooden barricade of the stall. In the firelight, her druid tattoos in intricate swirls reminded Rhonwen her mother was not merely a village healer but a druid as well. The men in the barn, all locals, quieted. Druids were held in great respect, and it had been years since most of them had seen a woman of Baia’s stature. She gestured for Rhonwen to disrobe.

Rhonwen glanced at the men.

Baia gave her a defiant nod. “We’re going into battle.”

Rhonwen followed her mother’s lead, wishing she had more than the one triskele tattoo she’d received at age ten when she started formal training. Without hesitation she pulled off her new tunic, the one she bought with the young tribune’s money, and delicately placed it over her mother’s. Something inside her tingled when she thought of Sertorius, and she quickly shoved the feelings aside.

In a gesture of respect for Baia and Rhonwen, Spanus also stripped out of his tunic to face the ordeal.

Baia knelt beside the mare’s belly and probed with both hands around the edges of the foal’s body. It hadn’t yet turned head down. Rhonwen guessed Baia sought one of the foal’s legs pressing on its mother’s womb as an indicator of its position.

Rhonwen trembled. Spanus sat beside her, ready to snatch the

newborn from between the folds of flesh.

“Rhonwen, take that last length of setwell and let it smoke completely in the mare’s face. She must be full asleep.”

Rhonwen covered the mare’s nose with a piece of leather to keep all of the smoke close to the horse. Then she inserted the smoldering plait beneath the leather near the mare’s nostrils. With each heavy breath, the mare’s muscles grew slack. When she was fully unconscious, Baia nodded.

“Let’s begin,” she said.

-- End, Chapter One --